

CGRFA 19 Highlights: Monday, 17 July 2023

The nineteenth session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA 19) opened at the Headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN in Rome, Italy. The day's discussions featured cross-sectoral matters including the review of the work on biodiversity, nutrition and human health, the role of genetic resources for food and agriculture (GRFA) in climate change adaptation and mitigation, and access and benefit-sharing (ABS) for GRFA and digital sequence information (DSI).

Opening

CGRFA 19 Chair Deidré Januarie (Namibia) opened the session. Qu Dongyu, Director-General, FAO, spoke of the importance of turning talk into action and interconnecting environment and agriculture sectors. He highlighted the strong political signals sent from the recently endorsed Framework of Action on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (Framework of Action on BFA), the Commission's Global Plans of Action (GPAs), and the recently adopted Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF).

David Cooper, Acting Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), highlighted interlinkages between work under CBD and CGRFA, stressing that nothing is more important for biodiversity than how we manage agriculture production. He underscored that the GBF is founded on a human rights-based and a whole-of-society approach, emphasizing the need for full engagement across sector and ministries, especially with small-holder farmers and fisher folk, as custodians of genetic diversity.

Kent Nnadozie, Secretary, International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), said that conserving plant genetic resources is at the heart of achieving the GBF. He encouraged parties to embrace technology, science and traditional knowledge in order to harness the immense potential of GRFA, and address climate change and biodiversity loss.

In general statements, NORTH AMERICA expressed optimism that the Commission will play a significant role in implementing the GBF. LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (GRULAC) affirmed interest in collaborating to implement the GBF with focus on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the FAO four betters: better production, better nutrition, a better environment and a better life for all, leaving no one behind. She further called for enhanced financial and technical support to improve data collection. AFRICA reminded delegates of the differential needs and capacities across CGRFA members and emphasized that implementing the GBF and the Framework of Action on BFA may, "save us from imminent tragedy."

The NEAR EAST stressed the importance of sustainability and viability of food systems, biodiversity, nutrition and human health, noting that its region faces famine and challenges due to migration. The SOUTHWEST PACIFIC noted that island

populations are impacted, among others, by overharvesting of marine resources. ASIA said it attaches great importance to protection of microorganisms and DSI and urged avoiding duplication of ongoing efforts on genetic resources. EUROPE recalled the evolution of the Commission's work over the years and urged cooperation with other international instruments and organizations.

Organizational Matters

Delegates adopted the meeting's agenda and provisional timetable (CGRFA-19/23/1 and 1/Add.1/Rev.1).

Cross-Sectoral Matters

Review of work on Biodiversity, Nutrition and Human Health: The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CGRFA-19/23/2) providing an overview of FAO activities on BFA and GRFA, especially in relation to nutrition and human health.

EUROPE noted insufficient recognition of GRFA in the One Health approach and suggested that FAO collaborate with relevant organizations on sustainable healthy diets. NORTH AMERICA opposed, and an agreement was reached to refer to healthy diets from sustainable food systems.

AFRICA underlined that diversity is crucial at the genetic, as well as species level, and called for including biodiversity conservation in the promotion of food security, nutrition and the One Health approach. MOROCCO called for a rapid and holistic approach to the implementation of voluntary guidelines, programs, and national and regional plans of action. AUSTRALIA highlighted the importance of considering knowledge and perspectives of Indigenous Peoples.

Role of GRFA in Mitigation of and Adaptation to Climate Change: The Secretariat presented the relevant document (CGRFA-19/23/3), including a background document on FAO's work on climate change (CGRFA-19/23/3/Inf.1).

Regarding the draft questionnaires on GRFA and climate change, AFRICA, EUROPE, US and JAPAN urged speedy finalization and circulation to CGRFA members. GRULAC lamented that the questionnaires are long and complex. She opposed the current separation into two questionnaires – one aimed at information on countries' activities related to the impacts of climate change on GRFA, and a second one focussing on countries' animal, aquatic, forest and plant sectors. BRAZIL requested deletion of some questions, including on the climate impacts on GRFA, the integration of GRFA into the climate change planning processes, and the implementation of climate change policies, programmes and projects.

NEAR EAST requested concrete examples and underlined the importance of mapping wild crop varieties.

AFRICA and JAPAN supported convening a multi-stakeholder workshop on the topic of GRFA and climate change to facilitate knowledge exchange, with US suggesting addressing climate resilience in addition to mitigation and adaptation. Some delegates

also called for swift revision of the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Integration of Genetic Diversity into National Climate Change Adaptation Planning. EUROPE suggested that the review of the guidelines be postponed to CGRFA 21. EUROPE also recommended that convening a global workshop on the topic await the completion and compilation of responses to the questionnaire.

The PHILIPPINES requested that differential national capacities and circumstances be reflected in the guidance recommending the use of FAO tools when developing or updating National Adaptation Plans and Nationally Determined Contributions.

Chair Januarie forwarded the agenda item to an informal group with the mandate of simplifying the questionnaires. The group will report back to Plenary on Tuesday.

Access and Benefit-Sharing for GRFA: Report of the Sixth Session of the Team of Technical and Legal Experts on Access and Benefit-Sharing: Marliese von den Driesch (Germany) presented the report (CGRFA-19/23/4.1) of the sixth session, which she co-chaired with María Laura Villamayor (Argentina), noting that the team reviewed and revised the typology of country measures appended to the report. ASIA said the typology of measures is useful for countries as they develop their national measures, and highlighted the relevance of DSI to this work. AFRICA stressed that future work on DSI should ensure consistency.

ABS country measures: The Secretariat introduced three documents: on ABS for GRFA (CGRFA-19/23/4.2) providing an overview of relevant developments under other international agreements and instruments since CGRFA 18; a draft typology of ABS country measures (CGRFA-19/23/4.2/Inf.1); and a draft online questionnaire for the preparation of a study on the effects of ABS measures (CGRFA-19/23/4.2/Inf.2).

GRULAC urged making the document on ABS for GRFA a living document to facilitate regular updates. CANADA said the document should take into account GBF implementation and be updated at every CGFRA meeting.

On the draft typology of ABS country measures, INDIA suggested regular updates, stating that this would guide countries in implementation and facilitate sharing of knowledge and experiences. It was agreed that the Secretariat would update the typology as needed.

EUROPE suggested taking note of the draft typology, and endorsing the draft questionnaire. She also proposed two additional paragraphs: one, supported by the US, calling for the Secretariat to continue following up on developments of ABS in other fora; another recommending the Secretariat contribute to the development of indicators for the GBF on ABS. The US and BRAZIL disagreed to the latter, questioning the Commission's mandate on the development of GBF indicators. Chair Januarie established an informal group to discuss this informally and report to Plenary on Tuesday.

Digital Sequence Information and GRFA: The Secretariat presented the relevant document (CGRFA-19/23/5). David Smith, Centre for Agriculture and Biosciences International (CABI), presented a draft study on the role of DSI for the conservation and sustainable use of GRFA (CGRFA-19/23/5/Inf.1).

EUROPE recommended finalizing the document and sharing it with the CBD Ad-Hoc Technical Expert Group on DSI and the ITPGRFA. She also proposed that FAO assist countries build the necessary capacities to use DSI in research and development. Many delegates agreed that the Secretariat should continue

monitoring developments on DSI in other fora, and that CGRFA participate where relevant.

Stressing the need for a global regulatory regime for fair and equitable benefit-sharing from DSI, AFRICA requested additions to the guidance to engage with the CBD and other fora to develop a multilateral mechanism for benefit-sharing from DSI. SOUTH AFRICA welcomed the provision for coordination, stressing its importance especially at the national level between different ministries.

Concerning the definition of DSI, MOROCCO argued for a holistic conceptualisation that includes traditional knowledge, while INDIA considered DSI a misnomer and proposed 'digital information resource' as an alternative concept that encompasses micro-molecules in addition to protein sequences. Reiterating that there is no internationally agreed definition of DSI, US noted that each organization working on DSI has a different understanding based on the issues they are dealing with.

REPUBLIC OF KOREA suggested that further monitoring of DSI developments should be limited to solutions, the US opposed. GRULAC reminded delegates that the purpose of the Commission's activities in this regard is to monitor GRFA more specifically, and cautioned against duplication with work undertaken in other fora. She also reiterated her view that any benefits accruing from DSI must be subject to fair and equitable benefit-sharing. AUSTRALIA presented the opposing view that DSI is not equivalent to a genetic resource and does therefore not trigger any benefit-sharing obligations.

The PHILIPPINES expressed concern over the conversation's focus on monetary benefits and suggested exploring ways that DSI can empower smallholder farmers and local communities. KENYA stated that the Commission can no longer afford focus only on monitoring of developments in DSI but must also become part of developing solutions.

ITPGRFA reiterated its willingness to host future workshops on DSI in collaboration with the Commission and drew attention to its open-ended working group on DSI, which is currently conducting a survey on DSI capacity. CBD reminded parties of the agreement reached on DSI in the GBF, including a time-bound process to develop a multilateral benefit-sharing mechanism.

Chair Januarie suggested an informal group to resolve this item to report to the Plenary on Tuesday.

In the Corridors

With Rome facing sweltering heat, congruent with the continent's record temperatures and health warnings, the issue of climate change hit home for many delegates arriving for the CGRFA 19. The agenda item on the role of GRFA in climate change adaptation and mitigation proved divisive nonetheless, with opinions diverging over next steps.

The theme of Saturday's celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Commission, "connecting the dots," re-emerged in many of the cross-sectoral discussions on CGRFA's linkages to biodiversity, nutrition, health, climate change and DSI. As many noted, similar discussions are also unfolding in other international fora. While the GBF was regularly referred to as a common horizon for bridging food and agriculture on the one hand and biodiversity – including genetic diversity – on the other, the risk of overlap and duplication remained a serious concern in the minds of many. What's certain is that discussion-points are widespread across the Agenda. By the end of the day's deliberations three informal groups had already been set up – on the agenda items on climate change, ABS and DSI, a clear indicator of the need for Parties to put their heads down, directing all efforts to successful outcomes at the finish line.