

CGRFA 19 Highlights: Wednesday, 19 July 2023

Deliberations at the nineteenth session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA 19) resumed at FAO Headquarters in Rome, Italy, with a morning report back from small group discussions on issues carried over from the previous day. Delegates considered a Chair's proposal on the linkages between the Framework for Action on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (FA BFA) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). They also discussed a contact group's compromise text on a concept note on the impact of seed policies, laws and regulations on farmers' ability to access seeds and planting materials. Throughout the rest of the day, delegates tackled topics on:

- Microorganism and Invertebrate Genetic Resources (MIGR);
- Animal Genetic Resources (AnGR);
- Aquatic Genetic Resources (AqGR); and
- the future organization of the Commission's intersessional work.

Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture

FA BFA: Delegates considered the Chair's text on this topic, based on submissions received on linkages between the FA BFA and Global Plans of Action (GPAs) to the GBF (CGRFA-19/23/6.1). EUROPE, supported by the US, called for integrating the FA BFA and sectoral GPAs into National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans.

EUROPE, opposed by the US, requested deleting a provision suggesting that no further amendments to the FA BFA are required.

On funding, EUROPE suggested, and the US opposed, including a recommendation requesting the FAO Council to allocate additional resources for BFA. Agreement was reached to "request the FAO Council to take into account the Commission's decisions when developing budget allocations."

Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

Plant Genetic Resources: Effects of seed policies, laws and regulations: Contact group co-chairs, NORWAY and KENYA, reported back from discussions on the concept note on further research on the impact of seed policies, laws and regulations on farmers' ability to access seeds and planting materials, noting agreement on the concept note with minor amendments to the proposed methodology.

MIGR: Bioremediation and nutrient cycling soil microorganisms and invertebrates: The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CGRFA-19/23/9.1), together with a draft study on the sustainable use and conservation of MIGR that contribute to bioremediation of agricultural pollutants and soil nutrient cycling (CGRFA-19/23/9.1/Inf.1). Angela Sessitsch, Austrian Institute of Technology, presented the findings, pointing out core functions of the soil and its microorganisms, and noted that successful conservation of soil organisms requires a combination of *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation approaches.

Several regions and countries commended the study and recommended it be finalized and circulated, including to the Global Soil Partnership (GSP).

On guidance sought from CGRFA 19, EUROPE proposed inviting members to communicate benefits of sustainable farming practices and noting the role of microorganisms for climate change mitigation and adaptation, with the US recommending adding resilience.

NORTH AMERICA called for coordination among researchers to address knowledge gaps on soil microorganisms.

AFRICA urged cooperation and capacity building. The DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC) suggested including cooperation with treaties and international bodies addressing related issues.

ECUADOR raised concerns regarding impacts from irrigation practices and overuse of chemical fertilizers. BRAZIL said soil health is more important than soil biodiversity and that soil management can be better addressed by the GSP. ARGENTINA urged considering the connection to plant and animal health, pointing to the phytosanitary functions of microorganisms.

The SOUTH-WEST PACIFIC recommended further research on the role of microorganisms regarding soil fertility. INDIA urged specific research on microorganisms at the regional level. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) pointed to its Conference of the Parties (COP) Decision 15/28 on agricultural biodiversity, which invites FAO to support implementation and monitoring of GBF soil related targets.

Microorganisms relevant to ruminant digestion: The Secretariat introduced the relevant document (CGRFA-19/23/9.2) and a revised draft study on the topic (CGRFA-19/23/9.2/Inf.1). Chris Creevey, Queen's University Belfast, provided an overview of the draft study.

Regarding treatments for reducing methane emissions, EUROPE underlined the need for a better understanding of potential impacts of these on animal diversity and health, and its effect on animal husbandry. On the guidance sought, they also suggested that the finalized study should emphasize research gaps. ARGENTINA and DRC highlighted specific research gaps, proposing that the study assess the geographic context of different microbes. ARGENTINA stressed the need to collect microbiomes in national and local gene banks to ensure their use is in line with local conditions.

BRAZIL, CANADA and the US, seeing no need for future work on the topic, opposed the drafting of recommendations for further consideration at CGRFA 20, suggesting instead that the Secretariat continue monitoring developments. AFRICA opposed, underlining the importance of such recommendations. Parties agreed to return to this issue following discussion on the future organization of intersessional work.

Pollinators and biological control agents and bio-stimulants: Follow-up: The Secretariat presented documents exploring the need for, and potential modalities of, a global pollinator platform (CGRFA-19/23/9.3.1) as well as on the conservation and sustainable use of biological control agents (BCAs) and bio-stimulants (CGRFA-19/23/9.3.2).

Various delegations lamented the dire state of pollinators across regions and invited countries to implement the International Initiative for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Pollinators. EUROPE, supported by AFRICA, ECUADOR, ARGENTINA, DRC and the CBD, welcomed the Commission continuing exploring the

modalities of a global pollinator platform to streamline existing initiatives. BRAZIL said there is no need for immediate action to develop such tools at CGRFA, and NORTH AMERICA remarked that the role of the Commission in building the global pollinator platform should be clarified.

Regarding BCAs and bio-stimulants, members widely agreed with the Commission's plan to organize an open-ended workshop on the topic, although CANADA recommended reviewing relevant literature before organizing such a workshop. BRAZIL noted that bio-stimulant microorganisms were underrepresented in the Secretariat's Background Study Paper on the topic.

Expressing concern about the introduction of non-native species, EUROPE suggested that FAO develop "internationally harmonized environmental risk assessments" and also recommended addressing this issue at a proposed open-ended workshop on BCAs and bio-stimulants. The US objected, and EUROPE agreed to shorten the reference as, "environmental risk assessments".

AnGR: Report of the Twelfth Session of the ITWG on AnGR: Working Group Vice-Chair Samuel Rezende Paiva (Brazil) gave an overview of the Report (CGRFA-19/23/10.1), which included recommendations on, amongst others, the status of implementation of the relevant GPA-AnGR, monitoring the diversity of AnGR for food and agriculture, and preparation for the third report on the State of the World's (SOW) AnGR. The parties endorsed the report.

Implementation of the GPA-AnGR: Paul Boettcher, Animal Production Officer, FAO, presented on the review of implementation of the GPA (CGRFA-19/23/10.2), in line with its four priority areas: characterization, inventory and monitoring of trends and associated risks; sustainable use and development; conservation; and policies, institutions and capacity building.

AFRICA, Group of Latin America and the Caribbean (GRULAC), and others stressed the importance of FAO offering support for implementation, including to build capacity at the national level. AFRICA also said that it is indisputable that indigenous breeds are indispensable resources for farmers, and said that the Commission should increase attention to conservation and use of species. GRULAC, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, and MALAWI offered insights on national and regional measures and activities, underlining that more support is needed to ensure full implementation of the GPA.

ASIA underlined the need for practical guidance that can be linked to international standards for gene banks.

The Preparation of the Third Report on the SOW-AnGR: Paul Boettcher, Animal Production Officer, FAO, presented documents relating to the preparation of the third SOW-AnGR (CGRFA-19/23/10.3 and /10.2/Inf.1), noting that preparations are well under way for the report to be approved at CGRFA 21, but that gaps in funding persist.

GRULAC, supported by EUROPE, welcomed adjustments to the questionnaire and asked FAO to increase efforts to close funding gaps. CANADA proposed to dedicate a separate section to the involvement of women, youth, indigenous communities and non-governmental organizations in the management of AnGR. AFRICA requested financial and technical support to assist countries with reporting. EUROPE proposed that FAO "appeal to" and "urge" rather than "invite" members to provide information and resources for the preparation of the third SOW AnGR. After the US voiced doubts, agreement on the term "encourage" was reached. The report was endorsed.

Aquatic Genetic Resources: Report of the Fourth Session of the ITWG on Aquatic Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture: Shauna Baillie (Canada), Chair of the ITWG on AqGR presented the report of the groups fourth session (CGRFA-19/23/11.1). She noted progress on the development of a global information system for AqGR dubbed "AquaGRIS", and stressed its crucial role for implementation. She further reported the ITWG's work on linkages with cross-sectoral matters, most notably in the fields of climate change, access and benefit-sharing and digital sequence information.

Implementation of the GPA-AqGR: The Secretariat introduced the respective document (CGRFA-19/23/11.2.1) and a further document on monitoring the implementation of GPA-AqGR (CGRFA-19/23/11.2.2). Regarding implementation, many

countries welcomed implementation of the GPA-AqGR and recognized the central role AquaGRIS plays, stressing the need for Secretariat assistance and capacity building regarding its use.

EUROPE asked to include language in the guidance that many focal points are not familiar with AquaGRIS and that FAO will need to provide support, and that further training and awareness raising will be needed before new terminology will be broadly used. NORTH AMERICA encouraged the development of the full version of the AquaGRIS platform and many asked to ensure long-term funding for it.

Regarding monitoring, many welcomed the draft indicators and the timeline for their finalization, and the use of AquaGRIS in data collection. JAPAN urged ensuring feasibility of data collection and no additional work burdens. EUROPE asked for guidelines on data entry. Noting broad consensus and agreement with the guidance, Chair Januarie closed discussions on the agenda item.

The Commission's Mode of Operation

Future Organization of Intersessional Work: The Secretariat introduced the relevant documentation (CGRFA-19/23/13), which provides six options for the establishment of additional bodies to conduct intersessional work:

- an expert team on MIGR;
- ITWG on MIGR;
- ITWG BFA;
- ITWG on MIGR and ITWG on BFA;
- ITWG on BFA and expert team on MIGR; or
- ITWG on MIGR and an expert team on BFA.

Appended to the document was a report from the FAO Director-General indicating that any intersessional work before CGRFA 20 would have to be covered from extrabudgetary funds, with the Secretariat indicating that such funds have been received for at least one ITWG meeting.

EUROPE proposed another option: to establish an ad-hoc group on BFA to initially develop recommendations on the FA BFA and the GPAs in light of the GBF; and a MIGR expert team. AFRICA, ASIA and NORTH AMERICA urged establishment of an ITWG on MIGR to ensure the issue is given the necessary attention.

BRAZIL suggested not establishing any new group to avoid overlap with existing ITWGs and additional work and reporting burden, especially for developing countries. The NEAR EAST, ECUADOR, CHILE and CUBA supported establishing an ITWG on BFA and a MIGR expert team. The NEAR EAST indicated openness to the option proposed by Europe.

Noting the diverse options, Chair Januarie established an open-ended contact group, chaired by Canada and Brazil, to discuss the options and find an acceptable solution.

In the Corridors

Wednesday started on a conciliatory note, as delegates swiftly settled outstanding disagreements on the FA BFA and reported agreement from the contact group dealing with the effects of seed policies, laws and regulations on farmers' access to seeds. The collaborative spirit carried over to subsequent agenda items. One delegate reported very "fruitful" regional coordination.

Today's discussions allowed delegates to steer away from the political minefield of earlier agenda items, such as access and benefit sharing and digital sequence information, and dig into scientific turf instead. It was noticeable that delegates were entering their comfort zones, with discussions showcasing the extensive expertise in biological and agricultural sciences in the room. Topics such as MIGR, AnGR and AqGR gave the Commission an opportunity to shine and justify its added value as the only permanent intergovernmental body focused on conserving all types of biodiversity for food and agriculture. Parties flew through the substantive agenda items without much controversy, and in approaching the final substantive item on the agenda, Deidré Januarie, Chair, CGRFA 19, cheerfully called on delegates to "keep the spirit strong, we are almost there!" It can only be hoped that the contact group on intersessional work registers her rallying cry in confronting CGRFA 19's most controversial pending issue – whether and which new bodies to establish on MIGR and/or BFA.