

CGRFA Special Event: Connecting the Dots: Saturday, 15 July 2023

On the occasion of its 40th anniversary and in the follow-up to the landmark Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) adopted by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2022, the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA) convened a Special Event on Saturday 15 July 2023, ahead of its nineteenth regular session in Rome, Italy (CGRFA 19). The event convened under the theme, “Connecting the Dots,” discussed, among others, potential entry points for connecting dots and accelerating implementation of UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) technical work on fisheries and aquaculture, forestry, plant production and protection, animal production and health and nutrition.

Opening Remarks

During the Special Event opening, Maria Helena Semedo, Deputy Director-General, FAO, said the sustainable use of genetic resources for food and agriculture is now more relevant than ever for planetary health, human wellbeing and global food security. She highlighted the important role of all biodiversity including pollinators and microbial soil organisms to the agriculture sector and emphasized the need for an integrated approach in implementing the GBF. She called for concerted efforts in ensuring sustainable biodiversity for food and agriculture (BFA), and quoted the speech of Qu Dongyu, Director-General, FAO, at the 2023 G20 Agriculture Ministers’ Meeting, “agrifood systems must be part of the solution to the loss of biodiversity and the climate crisis facing our planet.”

Session 1: Kunming-Montreal, Rome

Kaveh Zahedi, Director, Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment, FAO, facilitated this session, which focused on the GBF and its contributions and linkages to genetic resources and BFA.

The Role of Food and Agriculture in the GBF: David Cooper, Acting Executive Secretary, CBD, noted that the CGRFA has over the past 40 years played an important role in mainstreaming biodiversity across the agricultural sector. The GBF, he said, provides a major opportunity to enhance sustainable use of biodiversity to increase agricultural production. He discussed the goals and targets of the Framework noting that Goal C on Sharing Genetic Resources is instrumental to progress the

work on benefit-sharing of genetic resources including discussions on digital sequence information.

He highlighted Target 4 on maintaining and restoring genetic resources, Target 13 on ensuring fair and equitable sharing of benefits, and Target 10 on opportunities for better use of biodiversity to increase the resilience and long-term efficiency and productivity of food and agriculture systems. These targets, he noted, have synergies with FAO’s “four betters”, which are organizing principles in its 2021 Strategic Framework adopted to support the 2030 Agenda through more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems: better production; better nutrition; a better environment; and a better life, leaving no one behind.

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA): Yasmina El Bahloul, Chairperson, ITPGRFA Governing Body, highlighted the Treaty’s role in joining the dots to link nature and agriculture to tackle the challenges of food insecurity, climate change, biodiversity loss and species extinction. She reported that the tenth session of the Governing Body of the ITPGRFA to be held in November 2023 will discuss the GBF and its contributions to PGRFA. She emphasized the relevance of GBF Target 13 on access and benefit sharing (ABS), noting that the Treaty is currently the most advanced and operational ABS instrument that has so far facilitated the exchange of over 6.4 million samples through international gene banks. She noted the need to ensure funding for sustainable use of biodiversity through synchronized global efforts in all sectors, and highlighted the project portfolio of the Benefit-Sharing Fund of the Treaty, which supports farmers’ access to plant genetic material.

The Framework for Action on BFA: Jens Weibull, Senior Officer, Swedish Board of Agriculture, Sweden, presenting also on behalf of Desterio Nyamongo, Director, Genetic Research Institute, Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization, stressed the Framework’s contribution to spurring coherent and consistent action on BFA. The Framework, he said, was adopted in 2021 in response to the State of the World’s (SoW) BFA report and lays out three strategic priority areas: characterization, assessment and monitoring; sustainable use and conservation; and institutional frameworks.

The FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors: Julie Bélanger, Natural Resources

Officer, Biodiversity Mainstreaming Unit, FAO, presented on the Strategy, which was adopted in 2019 with the aim of embedding biodiversity in the policies, strategies, and practices of public and private stakeholders across different agricultural sectors. Bélanger reported that the Strategy's current Action Plan 2021-2023 consists of 182 deliverables, which are on track with almost 50% completed and others to be completed by the end of the year. She stressed that the Action Plan 2024-2027 will be discussed at CGRFA 19.

Biodiversity, Food and Agriculture – A Private Sector Perspective: Niels Louwaars, Managing Director, Plantum, Netherlands, brought the viewpoints of breeders to the conversation. Referring to the importance of biodiversity for developing new seeds, he remarked that, “diversity in means diversity out.” He voiced concern over the impact of climate change on both *in situ* and *ex situ* conservation strategies. On ABS, he highlighted the importance of an efficient and effective multilateral system to support breeding activities in light of changing food systems, as exemplified by the arrival of vegan substitutes as well as insect- or algae-based food products.

Community-based Conservation, Development and Sustainable Use of BFA: Normita Ignacio, Executive Director, Southeast Regional Initiatives for Community Empowerment (SEARICE), underlined that small-holder farmers have historically been the main stewards of agricultural biodiversity. She singled out small-holder farmers whose choice of seed varieties is dictated not only by marketability, but also influenced by cultural and environmental factors. To strengthen BFA, she urged that farmers' rights be put at the center of policy programs, as mandated by the ITPGRFA, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Session 2: Sectoral Solutions and Accelerators for Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

This session facilitated by Deidré Januarie, Chair, CGRFA, discussed the linkages between different FAO divisions and the Commission's work. Panelists also considered BFA-relevant aspects of the GBF and addressed how FAO supports countries in implementing the various Global Plans of Action (GPAs).

Zhimin Wu, Director, Forestry Division, FAO, noted that sustainable forest management depends on the conservation of forest species' genetic diversity. He noted that out of the 58,000 known tree species, only 2400 are well managed, and highlighted challenges due to deforestation, tree pests and diseases and wild forest fires. He reported on the Global Plan of Action for the Conservation, Sustainable Use and Development of Forest Genetic Resources (GPA-FGR), which identifies 27 strategic priorities for improving the management of FGR. He noted that the Division would present the second SoW-FGR report to CGRFA 19. He underlined FAO support to countries for data collection, and legal and institutional frameworks to implement the GPA-FGR.

Lynnette Marie Neufeld, Director, Food and Nutrition Division, FAO, observed that, “we can fill bellies and feed the world but we can never nourish the world without biodiversity.” She

emphasized that a healthy diet should adequately provide all nutrients, be balanced in sources of energies, ensure moderate consumption of unhealthy components of food, and be diverse to meet nutritional requirements. She further noted that reports reviewing the work on biodiversity, nutrition and human health would be discussed at CGRFA 19. Moreover, she bemoaned the lack of a nutrition-specific target in the GBF, reminding participants that 3.1 billion people currently cannot afford a healthy diet.

Bonnie Furman, Agricultural Officer, Plant Production and Protection Division, FAO, said her division is the host of the Intergovernmental Technical Working Group on PGRFA (ITWG-PGRFA), which supports the Commission's role in supporting conservation and sustainable use of PGRFA. She reported on the eleventh session of the ITWG-PGRFA held in April 2023, which reviewed, among others, the draft of the third SoW-PGR report, which will be presented to CGRFA 19. She further encouraged countries to nominate national focal points and develop national strategies and plans, including in setting up gene banks to ensure that genetic resources are well documented, maintained and accessible.

Thanawat Tiensin, Director, Animal Production and Health Division, FAO, noted the interconnectivity of all agricultural sectors, highlighting that the diversity of the animal sector relies on diversity in the plant sector in order to provide a diversity of nutritious food such as meat, eggs and milk. His division, he added, is charged with providing guidance for the sustainable use and conservation of animal genetic resources for food and agriculture (AnGR). He further pointed to the GPA-AnGR adopted in Interlaken, Switzerland in 2007 and expressed hope that a new SoW and GPA could be produced by 2027.

Lifeng Li, Director, Land and Water Division, FAO, noted that soil and land erosion are a global challenge impacting food production, adding that soils are home to 40% of terrestrial biodiversity. He reported on the International Network on Soil Biodiversity established in 2021 to promote the sustainable use and conservation of soil biodiversity and contribute to the implementation of the Global Soil Biodiversity Observatory. Li further affirmed the relevance of biodiversity in maintaining and improving soil fertility. He stressed the role of tenure rights and land-use planning in safeguarding the health of soil and water. He also reported on work to support water efficiency in agriculture, including through nature-based solutions.

Xinhua Yuan, Fisheries and Aquaculture Division, FAO, explained the crucial need for more data to reap the benefits of aquatic genetic resources (AqGR) for food security and coastal development. He also mentioned FAO's knowledge- and capacity-building work under the GPA-AqGR adopted in 2021.

Closing Remarks

Kaveh Zahedi concluded the special event by reiterating FAO's commitment to mainstreaming biodiversity across agricultural sectors and implementing the diversity of treaties, strategies, and frameworks dealing with BFA.