

CGRFA 19 Highlights: Thursday, 20 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 report back from the open-ended contact group on the future organization of intersessional work.

Delegates also discussed the Strategic Plan for the CGRFA and reviewed progress on its implementation. They further considered reports on CGRFA's cooperation with international instruments and organizations, including with the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA).

The Commission's Mode of Operation

Future organization of intersessional work: In the morning, Canada reported on behalf of the Co-Chairs of the open-ended contact group on intersessional work, which took place on Wednesday evening. He noted that there was strong convergence on the option proposing establishment of an Intergovernmental Technical Working Group (ITWG) on microorganism and invertebrate genetic resources (MIGR) and an expert team on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (BFA), although consensus could not be reached. He also said that more information was required, including on the proposed work mandates for these bodies. Parties were invited to submit their proposals to the Secretariat for compilation. Chair Deidré Januaire requested delegates to meet in their regional groups to discuss their preferences.

In the afternoon, most delegates endorsed the proposals for an ITWG on microorganisms and an expert team on BFA, and expressed optimism that this agreement could form the basis of intersessional work. ASIA suggested that more time be dedicated to clarifying the role of an expert team on BFA in relation to existing ITWGs, in order to avoid overlap. Some regions stressed that further internal consultations are required in order to confirm regional preferences. Taking note of these interventions, Chair Januaire requested the contact group to continue consultations.

Strategic Plan for the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

Progress report and review: The Secretariat introduced the document on the review and update of the CGRFA Strategic Plan (CGRFA-19/23/12). The document also contains the draft Strategic Plan 2023-2031, and the Multi-Year Programme of Work. Many regions and countries welcomed the revisions to the Strategic Plan.

EUROPE requested, and delegates agreed, to postpone the review of the Framework for Action on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (FA BFA) and the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Integration of Genetic Diversity into National Climate Change Adaptation Planning to CGRFA 21. The multi-stakeholder workshop on climate change would also be postponed accordingly.

Delegates also agreed to consider the update on digital sequence information (DSI) discussions in other fora at CGRFA 20.

Following a remark by NORWAY that intersessional work would be required if the review of the FA BFA is delayed, delegates agreed to keep the issue open until the conclusion of discussions on intersessional work.

NORTH AMERICA stressed that any new and emerging issues need to meet the CGRFA mandate and be member driven.

Urging to keep CGRFA work focused on GRFA, BRAZIL proposed, and delegates agreed, changing the order of priorities in the Strategic Plan as follows:

- State of the World reports;
- strategic priority areas, long-term goals and targets of the Global Plans of Action;
- FA BFA; and
- other instruments such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF).

ECUADOR proposed, and delegates agreed, retaining work on health and nutrition as a permanent topic and to review it at CGRFA 21.

AFRICA urged that the global information system for aquatic genetic resources – AquaGRIS – be finalized and informed by the data from regions for consideration at CGRFA 20. They also recommended that the work on pollinators continue, due to their

crucial role for agriculture. The Secretariat indicated that they would provide an update on the International Pollinator Initiative during each session.

ARGENTINA called for more donor support to meet the ambitious work proposed. The INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT (IFAD) called for including collaboration with investment and development banks, and for collaboration with the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to avoid duplication.

Cooperation with International Instruments and Organizations

The Secretariat introduced the document on partnerships and cooperation with international instruments and organizations (CGRFA-19/23/14.1) and referred to a second document containing submissions from international instruments and organizations (CGRFA-19/23/14.1/Inf.1).

Kent Nnadozie, Secretary, International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, presented the document on the Commission's cooperation with the Treaty (CGRFA-19/23/14.2), which highlights areas of cooperation in PGRFA.

CGIAR highlighted the work of its relevant centers, whose efforts are pertinent for work under the Commission's agenda items. The NORDIC GENETIC RESOURCE CENTRE (NORDGEN) highlighted its work in the daily operation of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, which provides a safety net for the international conservation of plant genetic resources. They announced that this year the number of deposited seed samples in the Global Seed Vault has surpassed 1.3 million, stressing that these seeds remain the property of the depositing seed banks.

The INTERNATIONAL SEED FEDERATION presented activities in relation to the conservation and sustainable use of GRFA, underlining the importance of ensuring that breeders require facilitation in order to access seed varieties.

IFAD highlighted collaboration with seed banks, and support for genetic diversity for climate adaptation, and climate resilient crops. She underlined that more effort is required at national level to align actions with national policies.

CBD noted that the Commission, since its establishment, has been at the vanguard of providing information on GRFA, covering topics in which farmers, including small-scale and family farmers play a significant role. She highlighted that cooperation between the CBD, the Commission and FAO has spearheaded new areas of work and underlined the crucial role of the Commission in providing technical and scientific information for implementing the GBF.

EUROPE welcomed cooperation with other bodies and organizations, and requested the Secretariat to strengthen its coordination and collaboration with the ITPGRFA for promoting

coherence, development and implementation of its respective programs of work. NORTH AMERICA and ECUADOR welcomed coordination and collaboration with the ITPGRFA, underlining the importance of avoiding duplication of work. NORTH AMERICA underlined that the Commission should focus on technical aspects, stating that the Treaty is better placed to consider policy-related issues.

MALAWI, UGANDA and KENYA acknowledged with appreciation the cooperation with other international instruments and organizations.

Other Matters

Date and place GCRFA 20: The Secretariat announced that CGRFA 20 was tentatively scheduled for 24-28 March 2025 at FAO Headquarters in Rome, Italy.

Election of Chairperson, Vice-Chairpersons and Rapporteur: Benoit Girard (Canada) was elected Chair of CGRFA 20. Vice-Chairs from each region were elected by acclamation, and delegates agreed that Mariana Marshall Parra (Brazil) would serve as Bureau Rapporteur. They also elected members of the ITWGs.

In the Corridors

It was with great foresight that CGRFA Chair Januaire and the Bureau brought forward the discussion of future intersessional work to Tuesday, allowing parties several days to carve out an agreement on what is proving to be CGRFA 19's most challenging issue. Although delegates took note that the informal consultation had identified a "common landing ground," things were blown wide open in plenary on Wednesday.

In addition to preexisting options for establishing new bodies on MIGR and/or BFA, two entirely new options – an *ad hoc* group on MIGR and a non-option – were tabled. Delegates were promptly sent back to negotiations, this time in a more formal contact group. In the evening, regional groups showed the spirit of compromise called for and got close to a common landing ground. Agreement was however not found, and during Thursday's plenary, Chair Januaire sent the contact group back to hammer out the details and reach compromise, suggesting they "have some fun panel-beating this document."

Fun was nowhere to be found, however during the afternoon session, when some felt there was some backtracking on previous commitments. With the discussion being the last outstanding issue, parties had reason to hope that they could escape late-night sessions. Whether this hope can be fulfilled is up to parties' ability to "massage" – as one delegate put it – the submissions on the table into a compromise text.

The *Earth Negotiations Bulletin* summary and analysis of CGRFA 19 will be available on Monday, 24 July 2023 at enb.iisd.org/un-fao-commission-genetic-resources-food-agriculture-19