

CGRFA 19 Highlights: Tuesday, 18 July 2023

The nineteenth session of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA 19) resumed deliberations at FAO Headquarters in Rome, Italy. The morning kicked off with the report back from Monday's informal deliberations on cross-sectoral items, including the role of genetic resources for food and agriculture (GRFA) in climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as access and benefit-sharing (ABS) for GRFA and digital sequence information (DSI). Delegates spent the rest of the day discussing Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (BFA), Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (PGRFA) and Forest Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (FGRFA).

Cross-Sectoral Matters

In the morning, delegates heard reports from Monday's informal consultations on pending issues relating to ABS for GRFA, and DSI.

On ABS for GRFA, they noted agreement on requesting the Secretariat to contribute to developing indicators to monitor monetary and non-monetary benefits in the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), while ensuring that the distinctive features of GRFA are taken into account.

Regarding DSI, the US withdrew a request to delete the invitation for members to submit information on domestic ABS measures relating to DSI, so long as it takes note of, and builds on, previous work, to avoid duplication of efforts.

CGRFA 19 Chair Deidre Januaire consequently closed discussions on these agenda items.

After the lunch break, NORTH AMERICA reported agreement from a drafting group tasked to merge two questionnaires on the role of GRFA in climate change adaptation and mitigation. Chair Januaire further explained that the Secretariat would prepare a summary of responses to the questionnaire for consideration at CGRFA 20. She further confirmed the plan to convene a multi-stakeholder workshop to exchange information and experiences. A revision of the Voluntary Guidelines to support the integration of genetic diversity into national climate change adaptation planning was postponed to CGRFA 21.

Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture

Framework for Action on BFA (FA BFA): Delegates considered two documents on this topic. The document on FA BFA and the GBF (CGRFA-19/23/6.1) summarizes key features of the FA BFA and maps it against the GBF, explores the extent to which the two instruments are mutually supportive and proposes a draft resolution to be considered by the FAO Council at its next meeting.

GRULAC called for active involvement of national focal points when reviewing the FA BFA against the GBF, whereas NORWAY considered national involvement at the follow-up stage sufficient. GRULAC, supported by NORTH AMERICA, further opposed the

development of new FAO indicators and targets for implementing the GBF.

EUROPE encouraged making use of financial and other means of implementation. BRAZIL proposed, NORWAY and SWITZERLAND supported, and the US opposed, adding a reference to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and the International Plant Protection Convention. ASIA, supported by NORTH AMERICA, opined that no amendments to the FA BFA were necessary.

The Convention on Biological Diversity acknowledged that FAO's efforts in implementing the GBF are crucial to involve national agriculture, fisheries, and forestry ministries in a whole-of-government approach.

In light of several proposals on the table illustrating linkages between the FA BFA and GPAs to the GBF, Chair Januaire invited delegates to make written submissions in order to prepare a compromise text for further consideration.

Progress Report on the Implementation of the FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors (the Mainstreaming Strategy): Delegates took note of progress summarized in this document (CGRFA-19/23/6.2), and provided comments and inputs to a proposed Action Plan 2024-27.

Many regions and countries applauded the successful implementation of the 2021-23 Action Plan, with AFRICA noting that, "97% of deliverables being on track is no minimal achievement." EUROPE, supported by NORWAY and SWITZERLAND, but opposed by the US, called on the FAO to secure a bigger share of net budgetary appropriation to implement the FA BFA and the Mainstreaming Strategy.

AFRICA called on the Commission to move beyond capacity-building and awareness-raising to take concrete steps towards conserving BFA. BRAZIL welcomed the involvement of the GEF and stressed that bioeconomy is critical to address loss of biodiversity while supporting the livelihoods of local communities. ECUADOR stressed the importance of leaving no-one behind.

Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

Plant Genetic Resources (PGR): Report of the Eleventh Session of the Intergovernmental Technical Working Group (ITWG) on PGRFA: Imke Thormann (Germany), Chair, 11th session of the ITWG on PGRFA presented the report of the meeting (CGRFA-19/23/7.1).

EUROPE endorsed the report and urged sufficient time be provided for discussions on PGRFA. CANADA stressed that gene bank standards are voluntary, suggesting that the Global Crop Diversity Trust would be better suited than the CGRFA to comment on the technical operation of gene banks.

AFRICA proposed a call to donors to support the attendance of delegates from developing countries.

The Third Report on the State of the World's (SOW) PGR: The Secretariat introduced the document on the preparation of the third SOW-PGR (CGRFA-19/23/7.2) and the current draft report (CGRFA-19/23/7.2/Inf.1).

EUROPE took note of the progress made on the draft report, while expressing concern that the thematic background studies

are still not available. CANADA questioned whether the timelines for finalization of the report can be met while the thematic background studies have not yet been released.

EUROPE remarked on the low number of countries that provided data. The Secretariat explained limitations as the reports relied on the limited PGRFA component of Sustainable Development Goal reporting.

CAMEROON requested publication of the the third report in all official languages, rather than just brief versions. The Secretariat pointed to budgetary limitations, noting that extra-budgetary donations would be welcome.

The EUROPEAN COORDINATION LET'S LIBERATE DIVERSITY underscored the importance of involving stakeholders that work with farmers to contribute to the SOW-PGR. CANADA and ECUADOR supported inclusiveness of farmers' voices. MOROCCO called for FAO support to assess effectiveness of national seed systems, in order to strengthen community-based seed systems. He further called for technical capacity and innovation sharing on rapid development of resilient seed varieties.

GRULAC and AFRICA urged circulating the draft third report to the ITPGRFA for input and to avoid duplication of work. ITPGRA welcomed this recommendation, noting they could provide input during their upcoming governing body session.

Implementation and Review of the Second Global Plan of Action (GPA) for PGRFA: The Secretariat presented the relevant document (CGRFA-19/23/7.3), summarizing the ongoing implementation and review of the second GPA-PGR. While recognizing the Commission's important activities in this area, GRULAC queried the recommendation that FAO revise the second GPA. NORTH AMERICA welcomed holding future events on PGRFA virtually to allow broad participation, whereas ECUADOR insisted on in-person regional meetings. For future working group activities, EUROPE, supported by NORWAY and JORDAN, and opposed by NORTH AMERICA, suggested addressing *in situ* conservation of crop wild relatives and on-farm management of landraces and farmers varieties separately. She also expressed concern over the feasibility of reviewing the second GPA within the envisaged timeframe, recommending that FAO simplify the reporting tool to increase participation.

AFRICA stressed the importance of resource mobilization for implementing the GPA as well as assisting countries in strengthening the use of underutilized crops. JORDAN reiterated that *in situ* conservation of crop wild relatives is a priority. ARGENTINA recommended facilitating smallholder farmers' access to underutilized crops.

Noting that projects were still catching up on setbacks incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, SOUTH AFRICA recommended lending support to community seedbanks.

Effects of seed policies, laws and regulations: The Secretariat introduced the relevant document on further research on the impact of seed policies, laws and regulations (CGRFA-19/23/7.4) with the appended draft concept note. GRULAC welcomed continued work on the basis of the concept note, including how policies and laws impact which seeds small-scale farmers can have access to.

EUROPE welcomed further research including on issues with registering local varieties, considering best practices and gender-dimensions, and asked to include farmers and their organizations in the multi-stakeholder group.

Many indicated that this work should be undertaken in cooperation with the ITPGRFA, with Cameroon suggesting including farmers' rights.

AFRICA welcomed the ongoing work and, with INDIA, urged including value chains. KENYA recommended having an online questionnaire. The DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO urged collaboration with other relevant international organizations, including the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV). The EUROPEAN COORDINATION LET'S LIBERATE DIVERSITY underlined that this research would bring significant insights to the elaboration of fair seed policies and laws over the coming decades. She suggested that the research should collect proposals from local farmers organizations

and networks, community seed banks and organizations committed to agroecology, and underlined that interviews must be carried out in an accessible and understandable manner.

Highlighting two previous studies which concluded that policies and laws have not significantly impacted farmers' access to seeds, NORTH AMERICA, opposed by EUROPE, urged considering the work completed and not conducting a further study. He still provided comments on the draft concept note in case the work continued.

Noting a clear majority in favor of continuing the study, Chair Januarie proposed that parties meet in a contact group, co-chaired by Norway and Kenya, with the mandate to address North America's comments on the concept note.

Forest Genetic Resources (FGR): Report of the Seventh Session of the ITWG on Forest Genetic Resources: Mari Rusanen (Finland) presented the relevant report of the ITWG's seventh session (CGRFA-19/23/8.1), and the relevant statutes to be considered by the Commission (CGRFA-19/23/8.1 Inf.1), and parties agreed to endorse it.

The Second Report on the SOW Forest Genetic Resources: The Secretariat presented on the preparation of the second report (CGRFA-19/23/8.2), which includes preliminary findings, and underlined that the draft report (CGRFA-19/23/8.2 Inf. Rev.1) will be updated in light of additional responses from parties.

GRULAC drew attention to the perspectives and contributions of Indigenous Peoples in conserving FGR. EUROPE lamented that few countries submitted national reports and recommended the reporting format to be reconsidered for the third report. BRAZIL complained that few of the examples mentioned in the report drew from developing countries and expressed her wish for a more regionally balanced report. AFRICA called for FAO to develop international forest inventory standards, which CANADA opposed as overly prescriptive. AFRICA agreed to a proposal by Chair Januarie that the issue be taken up by the Secretariat at the national level.

Implementation and review of the Global Plan of Action for the Conservation, Sustainable Use and Development of Forest Genetic Resources: The Secretariat introduced the relevant documentation on implementation and review of the GPA for the Conservation, Sustainable Use and Development of FGR (CGRFA-19/23/8.3) and the second report on its implementation (CGRFA-19/23/8.3/Inf.1).

EUROPE welcomed the development of the information system to monitor GPA implementation, noted low participation in the second report, urged simplifying the reporting format, and proposed text inviting donors to support GPA implementation. He suggested including regional networks in related consultation processes. NORTH AMERICA appreciated efforts in awareness raising and supported the guidance with the proposed additions.

In the Corridors

After Monday's protracted discussions on contentious cross-sectoral issues, Tuesday started with a pat on the back as delegates indulged in the sweet memories of the historic breakthrough achieved at Montreal in December 2022 – the GBF. One delegate noted that “satisfaction” was the right word to capture the prevailing sentiment. When it came to finding common ground on how to square the GBF with the FA BFA and FAO's Biodiversity Mainstreaming Strategy, though, the festive mood quickly vanished. Some regions stressed the GBF's broad ambit and contrasted it with the Commission's specific mandate in implementing the FA BFA. There were also adamant calls for reallocating FAO budget to biodiversity mainstreaming, which were met with equally adamant opposition.

The afternoon session took a technical turn as discussions shifted to sectoral work streams on plant and forest genetic resources. With Rome experiencing it's hottest day on record, participants seemed content with drawn-out discussions within the comforts of FAO's air-conditioned halls. Delegates appeared favorable to Chair Januarie's invitation to develop an “amazing” concept note for the research on seed policies, laws and regulations over an evening consultation.