

ITPGRFA GB 10 Highlights:

Monday, 20 November 2023

Following an opening session, the tenth session of the Governing Body (GB 10) of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA or Treaty) initiated deliberations on a range of organizational and implementation-related matters. Discussions also commenced on one of the meeting's core items, the negotiation process for enhancing the functioning of the Treaty's Multilateral System (MLS) of access and benefit-sharing.

Opening Session

Via video message, Qu Dongyu, Director-General of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO), highlighted that the meeting is critical to ensuring inclusive, sustainable, secure, and resilient food and agriculture systems. Kaveh Zahedi, Director, FAO Office of Climate Change, Biodiversity and Environment, speaking for Maria Helena Semedo, FAO Deputy Director-General, noted the Treaty's contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), and the Paris Agreement on climate change.

David Cooper, Acting Executive Secretary of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), highlighted the common objectives of the CBD and the Treaty, and drew attention to the GBF's ambitious goals, and its human rights-based approach.

Sonja Vermeulen, CGIAR, called for assessments of the status of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (PGRFA), and support for low- and mid-income countries to utilize digital sequence information (DSI). Catherine Bertini, Global Crop Diversity Trust, presented key findings from the Global Crop Diversity Summit (14 November 2023, Berlin, Germany), highlighting the importance of genebanks in boosting biodiversity and crop resilience.

Michael Keller, International Seed Federation, urged governments to move towards a single mechanism that can address benefit-sharing from both physical plant genetic resources and DSI, to provide regulatory certainty for the private sector. Digraious Kansly Mugasho, a Ugandan farmer, talked of improvements in sorghum productivity and resilience, achieved through the support of the Treaty's Benefit-Sharing Fund. Sophie Healy Thow, Global Youth Campaigns Coordinator, Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, drew attention to the undervalued links between culinary heritage and seeds, and underscored the importance of the Treaty in safeguarding crop diversity for future generations.

Underlining the related discussions in the CBD, World Health Organization, and the agreement on marine biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction, Dan Leskien, Acting Secretary of the FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA), emphasized the leading position of the Treaty's MLS as a "role model, a best seller in international policy." ITPGRFA Secretary Kent Nnadozie, stressed the importance of adhering to the Treaty's core principles of cooperation and shared responsibility, and of leveraging the momentum of the GBF to advance discussions this week.

Statements

Canada, for NORTH AMERICA, reaffirmed their strong commitment to the Treaty, and noted its important role for GBF implementation. Serbia, for the EUROPEAN REGIONAL GROUP (ERG), underscored the key role of the Treaty in addressing the global challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and shifting agricultural landscapes. Uganda, for AFRICA, drew attention to food security challenges experienced in sub-Saharan Africa due to climate change impacts from cyclones, and called for international cooperation.

Nepal, for ASIA, urged in-depth discussion on the MLS, DSI, and farmers' rights. Lebanon, for NEAR EAST, asked for bold measures to address inequities in benefit-sharing, and called for improving finance flows and technology transfer to developing countries to utilize DSI. Argentina, for the LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN GROUP (GRULAC), called for focus on the enhancement of the MLS, farmers' rights, and sustainable use of PGRFA. Kiribati, for SOUTHWEST PACIFIC, highlighted the region's active participation in the MLS, as well as the key role of the Pacific Community's Centre for Pacific Crops and Trees to PGRFA conservation.

The INTERNATIONAL PLANNING COMMITTEE FOR FOOD SOVEREIGNTY (IPC) expressed concern about the difficulty of obtaining visa, preventing their representative from attending, and noted that members of the global South are increasingly facing visa-related challenges for participation in Treaty meetings.

Organizational Matters

Delegates adopted the agenda and timetable (IT/GB-10/23/1 Rev.1 and 1.2 Rev.2); approved the list of observers (IT/GB-10/23/1.3); and welcomed Nigeria and Somalia as new parties to the Treaty. They accepted the nomination of Milena Savic Ivanov (Serbia) as rapporteur; and established a credentials committee.

Work Programme and Budget

The Secretariat introduced the draft work programme and budget for 2024-25 (IT/GB-10/23/18 Rev.2), noting that the costs of the Working Group to enhance the MLS could be offset by savings from the 2022-23 biennium.

Parties agreed to establish a budget committee and regions nominated participants. The Czech Republic, for the ERG, regretted that only 57% of the parties have contributed to the budget, urging contributions from the rest.

Report of the Chairperson

Plenary took note of the Chairperson's report (IT/GB-10/23/5) outlining intersessional work of the Bureau, preparations for GB 10, and updates on partnerships, including support for the relocation of a collection from eastern Ukraine. GB 10 Chair Yasmina El-Bahloul (Morocco) highlighted the renewed opportunity to enhance the MLS. Delegates commended her work and leadership, despite challenging circumstances over the past four years.

Report of the Secretary

Secretary Nnadozie presented his report (IT/GB-10/23/6 Rev.1.), noting intense intersessional activity and highlighting efforts to increase participation with the goal of transforming the

Treaty into a universal agreement. In light of the GBF's recent adoption, he proposed deferring finalization of the capacity development strategy and action plan to GB 11.

Delegates expressed appreciation for the intersessional work. The ERG congratulated Nigeria and Somalia for joining the Treaty, noting that the number of parties will soon reach 152. ECUADOR drew focus to the importance of continuing to increase the Treaty's visibility and of timely financial contributions. Noting the GBF's ambitious goals, BRAZIL said responsibility for implementation falls mainly on developing countries, which host most of the world's biodiversity, and called for meeting financial goals and supporting implementation. Sri Lanka, on behalf of ASIA, urged filling of gaps and needs in capacity development, access to information, DSI, and farmer's rights.

Draft Capacity Development Strategy

The Secretariat presented the draft capacity development strategy (IT/GB-10/23/6.1), the report on implementation of the Communication Strategy (IT/GB-10/23/6/Inf.1), and the results of the survey on capacity development initiatives, gaps, and needs (IT/GB-10/23/6/Inf.2).

NORTH AMERICA emphasized that capacity development is critical for effective implementation of the Treaty and called for complementarity with the CBD long-term strategic framework for capacity-building and development. NEAR EAST urged cooperation to avoid duplication and supported considering the strategy at GB 11. GRULAC urged alignment of the strategy with the results of the survey on capacity development initiatives, gaps and needs. AFRICA drew attention to institutional gaps identified by the survey and called for emphasis on building developing countries' capacity to contribute to the MLS.

On the outline of the action plan, ERG suggested that parties be consulted before further development. ECUADOR supported including a chapter on financial resources.

CGIAR underscored that the strategy will provide guidance for more targeted capacity building. The INTERNATIONAL COCONUT COMMUNITY mentioned its collaborative platform for knowledge sharing of research findings, and enhanced germplasm exchange. CGRFA drew attention to the report on the State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, which includes a chapter on the state of human and institutional capacity.

From Seeds to Innovative Solutions, Safeguarding our Future

The Secretariat introduced the document on the role of PGRFA within the GBF (IT/GB-10/23/7). Regions broadly supported the draft resolution and some proposed specific amendments. ERG proposed welcoming the Bern process on biodiversity conventions' cooperation for GBF implementation. SOUTHWEST PACIFIC called for guidance on strategies for encouraging non-parties to join the Treaty. GRULAC and others preferred that the resolution does not single out specific targets.

The CBD welcomed exploration of the links between the GBF and the Treaty and identified relevant GBF targets. IPC stressed implementing farmers' rights within indigenous seed systems and prioritizing on-farm conservation systems, and called for measures to prohibit claiming of intellectual property on PGRFA-related DSI. ACADEMIA noted that a human rights-based approach is necessary for PGRFA conservation and sustainable use. A revised draft resolution will be prepared.

Proposal for an Amendment of the International Treaty

SWITZERLAND reaffirmed support of their proposal to amend Annex I to cover all PGRFA (IT/GB-10/23/8) and, with CANADA and ERG, to consider it jointly with the enhancement of the MLS. AFRICA and NEAR EAST stressed that the enhancement of the MLS to serve parties' needs must be considered first. ASIA agreed to discuss it as part of a package. CIVIL SOCIETY cautioned that expansion of Annex I to cover all PGRFA can undermine national sovereignty and alter the basis of the Treaty, stressing that any expansion must be linked to effective governance and transparency.

Implementation and Operations of the MLS

The Secretariat introduced documents on MLS implementation (IT/GB-10/23/9.1 and Add.1, and 9.1.2). ERG urged a systematic analysis of what prevents parties placing materials in the MLS. NORTH AMERICA noted gaps in the accessions available in the MLS, due to exclusion of genebanks from US and Canada.

AFRICA supported voluntary use of digital object identifiers for material available in the MLS. NEAR EAST noted that while more than 6.6 million PGRFA had been transferred and reported, the sharing of benefits from MLS remains low.

Delegates debated whether to convene a focus group on possible measures to encourage natural and legal persons to make PGRFA available in the MLS, with NORWAY supporting it and GRULAC opposing.

Enhancement of the MLS

Michael Ryan (Australia), Co-Chair of the Working Group to enhance the MLS, introduced the Co-Chairs' checkpoint report (IT/GB-10/23/9.2), suggesting: building on the draft package of measures developed in June 2019; prioritizing the three "hotspots" on DSI/Genetic Sequence Data (GSD), amendment of Annex I, and payment structure/rates; and a timeline leading to GB 11.

ASIA noted the timeline would depend on progress. GRULAC requested an information document compiling the 2019 draft package and the documents that led to it. ERG suggested amendments to the draft resolution, including that the approach would be open and inclusive, involving consultations with regions and stakeholders on a regular basis.

NORTH AMERICA stressed the need for a DSI/GSD definition, and said that monetary benefit-sharing under the Treaty relates to exchange of material only, while DSI/GSD should be made available as part of non-monetary benefit-sharing. He suggested waiting for the outcome of the CBD process on DSI, adding that the Working Group should halt the process if no consensus is reached at its 12th meeting. CANADA supported expanding use of MLS material to non-food and feed uses.

Special event: From Seeds to Innovative Solutions, Safeguarding our Future

In the evening, a special event brought together key stakeholders for agricultural biodiversity management. Facilitated by Dan Saladino, BBC journalist and author of "Eating to Extinction," the event featured a keynote address by David Cooper on the linkages and synergies between the Treaty and the GBF, followed by an interactive discussion. Panelists highlighted, among other issues, links between cultural identity and crop diversity, and the importance of public awareness in shaping demand for food diversity. The panel also shared insights on mobilizing financial flows to improve biodiversity outcomes, and advocated bringing traditional knowledge and science together to achieve new perspectives. Shared experiences and practices included:

- the Ghana food kitchen, which supports farmers and youth reconnect with traditional food ingredients;
- youth-led campaigns to create awareness and value for local and indigenous foods; and
- establishment of community gardens with indigenous vegetables in the Philippines.

In The Corridors

Confronted with a packed agenda on the inaugural day's deliberations, delegates delved into the interconnections between the Treaty and the GBF. Heightened acknowledgment of the Treaty's role as a critical partner in GBF implementation came through during the opening session, when it was described as "the best friend of all biodiversity-related conventions." In addition, many GB delegates came straight from a CBD Working Group session developing a multilateral mechanism for benefit-sharing from the use of DSI - a topic the Treaty is also grappling with. "It still remains to be seen whether and how synergies will evolve to suit both instruments," one participant observed, expecting "long and challenging" negotiations on enhancing the functioning of the Treaty's MLS, "especially on DSI."