

International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture Ready to Enter into Force

On 31 March 2004, 13 countries (nine EU members, as well as Egypt, Czech Republic, Estonia and the EC) ratified or acceded to the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA), setting in motion a major step to protect the future food supply and ensure the livelihoods and food security of the next generations.

FAO estimates that throughout human history, around 10,000 species have been used as food and feed, but at present only 150 crops feed most human beings, with only 12 crops providing 80% of the world's food energy. As the breadth of food and feed crops in primary use has narrowed, the remaining plant genetic resources – primary building blocks and progenitors of food varieties and fodder – take on expanding importance, as tools for development of new varieties. At the same time, however, many factors affect the continued vitality of these critical resources. The same stresses that are causing wild species extinctions and the loss of critical habitats every year – including development, pollution, and land conversion – cause extinctions in traditional cultivars as well.

Other strains on PGRFA arise from a very different source. Much of the world's most important genetic material has been preserved by traditional agriculturalists. Commercial varieties, introduced to improve yield, disease-resistance, and resilience have quickly gained a level of acceptance that caused the preservers of traditional varieties to relinquish these important sources, even as their usefulness to modern agricultural development is increasing.

Holders of traditional varieties have also decried the fact that important and valuable new varieties have been created using traditionally developed and preserved genetic material without providing any benefit back to the sources of this material – often not even the use of the new varieties themselves.

It is clear genetic resources will only increase in importance in future. Sources of genetic material are essential to enable agricultural production to adjust to climate change, and to maximise the resilience of the food supply in the face of shortages caused by disease, catastrophe, and decreasing agricultural area. Beyond this, it is not sufficient simply to provide enough caloric intake to keep the expanding human population alive, it is essential to continue to develop a greater number of varieties, to improve diets and health.

For all of these reasons, the States Members of FAO have long been attempting to combat the loss of agricultural diversity, while ensuring that this important genetic material remains available to enable constant improvement in food staples and support to the goal of a world without hunger. Beginning in the 1970s, FAO has promoted international action to address the complex questions

surrounding the conservation and sustainability of traditional varieties and agricultural progenitors, their accessibility for the constant improvement of the food supply, sovereign rights of countries, and equitable treatment and fair access for all those whose efforts and traditions have preserved these valuable resources.

FAO's work centred around a non-binding "International Undertaking" which clarified the manner in which plant genetic resources could be used fairly for the benefit of all humans, while recognising the equitable interests of their traditional holders and developers.

Then in 1992, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was adopted, as a tool to enable international law and policy to recognise the complexity of ecological interactions. The CBD made two important contributions to the overall issue of PGRFA; it included agricultural varieties within the broad concept of "biological diversity" addressed by its framework, and it specifically noted the need for equity among nations with regard to the sharing of benefits from the use of genetic resources. These provisions created both tools and challenges for the International Undertaking, which was already in the evolutionary process that would eventually lead to its transformation into a binding instrument

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) represents the answer to that challenge. It clarifies the special role of agricultural genetic resources, arising from both their vital importance to essential issues of food security and nutrition. On the basis of this special role, it creates a unique multilateral system for the provision of access to these key resources, enabling their broad use by agricultural developers and food programmes, while at the same time broadly sharing the benefits (including private sector monetary benefits, as well as new varieties and knowledge) derived from the use of these resources.

The ITPGRFA is perhaps most important as a demonstration of the manner in which the CBD framework can be utilised in the development of modern international laws intended to address complex concerns but remain focused on their broader integration in the international network on law and institutions addressing conservation and sustainable use of biological resources. Its entry into force is a major turning point for the issues of genetic resources, sustainable development, and synergy among international instruments.