

CGRFA 20 Highlights: Monday, 24 March 2025

How to apply recent landmark decisions from the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to the future work of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA) was the common thread of the first day of the 20th regular session of the Commission.

Opening of the Session

Welcoming delegates, CGRFA Chair Benoît Girard (Canada) said that the theme of the session, “promoting diversity for world food security and nutrition” should be understood in its broadest sense – as embracing “different priorities, needs, opportunities, and challenges” while enhancing collaboration among different stakeholders and pursuing equitable benefit sharing.

In a video message, Qu Dongyu, FAO Director-General, welcomed the upcoming launches of two State of the World (SOW) stocktaking reports, on plant and forest genetic resources, noting they highlight the importance of gene banks in addressing food- and agriculture-related challenges. Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary, CBD, reflected on the successful conclusion of the resumed 16th session of the meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 16) to the CBD “in this same room,” saying this confirms that environmental multilateralism “can work and must work.” She called for translating these achievements into action by placing the transformation of agrifood systems at the center of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs).

Kent Nnadozie, Secretary, International Treaty on Plant GRFA (ITPGRFA) described the Commission’s SOW reports as not just analyses, but calls to action to strengthen cooperation, bridge gaps, and accelerate efforts to ensure that genetic diversity is available to those who need it the most.

Manoela Pessoa de Miranda, Secretary, CGRFA, stressed the Commission views food security and nutrition as “a common good, not a privilege,” and urged delegates to think of how the CGRFA can be most effective in fulfilling this purpose.

In regional statements, LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (GRULAC) welcomed the launch of the Third SOW Report on Plant GRFA. They expressed concern over identifying new and emerging issues, calling for these to be meticulously analyzed in line with the mandate of the Commission.

SOUTHWEST PACIFIC welcomed the launch of the Second SOW Report on Forest Genetic Resource as a milestone for the region. ASIA expressed concern about the spread of pathogens such as avian influenza. NEAR EAST highlighted the threat posed by land degradation and called for stepping up technology transfer and capacity building, including for climate change adaptation.

EUROPE emphasized the opportunities created by the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) for strengthening the national implementation of the Framework for Action on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (FA BFA) and the Global Plans of Action (GPA). AFRICA said that GRFA are not only part of the region’s cultural heritage but also play a key role in addressing climate change and food insecurity.

Concluding the segment, Chair Girard reported on the Bureau’s work in the intersessional period, highlighting a global workshop on biological control agents and several regional workshops on implementing the FA BFA.

Following procedural announcements by the Secretariat, the provisional agenda was adopted.

The role of GRFA in mitigation of and adaptation to climate change

The Secretariat introduced the document (CGRFA-20/25/2), noting the associated draft baseline report (CGRFA-20/25/2/Inf.1) is based on responses from 44 national focal points. Acknowledging concerns raised during the intersessional period about the low response rate and challenges in coordinating national responses, they noted that future questionnaires could target specific sectors and sectoral focal points, with results compiled for consideration by the global multistakeholder dialogue on GRFA and climate change. They further noted that outcomes of the global multistakeholder workshop could inform a revision of the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Integration of Genetic Diversity into National Climate Change Adaptation Planning.

NEAR EAST called for increased support to integrate GRFA in national strategies and plans, including investment in breeding programs to produce climate-tolerant breeds.

Many speakers expressed concern about the limited number of responses received, and the resulting geographical imbalance.

Among proposals for strengthening future surveys, EUROPE suggested reissuing the questionnaire to national and sectoral

focal points, and to complement the study with insights from diverse sources. PERU and the PHILIPPINES also supported the use of sector-specific surveys. BRAZIL suggested amending the questionnaire deadline to increase responses and revise the draft baseline report, further calling for the global multistakeholder workshop to focus on adaptation to climate change.

EUROPE, supported by CANADA, proposed extending the invitation to use FAO tools and guidelines for NBSAPs under the CBD, and to request FAO to continue internal coordination work on climate change and the conservation and sustainable use of GRFA.

AFRICA proposed inviting FAO to provide capacity-building support for tools and guidelines, suggesting this include identifying national adaptation measures relating to biodiversity to improve baseline reports.

INDIA, supported by INDONESIA, called for further resource mobilization for the Commission's work. PERU expressed concern over the low use of the Voluntary Guidelines in national planning and called for specific financing mechanisms that consider local and ancestral knowledge. ECUADOR requested donors to support the Crop Trust Fund in its efforts to preserve GRFA.

VENEZUELA highlighted their country's seed law, noting it recognizes the role of sustainable agricultural practices in promoting genetic diversity, and urged increased multilateral support for such initiatives. SOUTH SUDAN noted the importance of integrated approaches, such as creating awareness on the interlinkages of fisheries and climate change.

Chair Girard said he would convene consultations on the best way forward.

Access and benefit-sharing (ABS) for GRFA

Report of the Seventh Session of the Team of Technical and Legal Experts on ABS: Expert Team Co-Chair Lamis Chalak (Lebanon) introduced the report of the seventh session (CGRFA-20/25/3.1). She highlighted the low response rate to the survey and a potential bias towards the negative effects of ABS measures in the literature. She also echoed the report's recommendation for the Secretariat to continue monitoring relevant developments in other fora and consider further work on the development and monitoring of indicators for ABS for GRFA, particularly for non-monetary benefit-sharing.

AFRICA requested modifying a reference to "de-coupling" benefit-sharing from access under the Multilateral System of the ITPGRFA to reflect ongoing negotiations by the ITPGRFA's Open-Ended Working Group. Chair Girard said the Bureau would consider the views expressed and propose a way forward.

Implementation of ABS country measures: Brad Sherman, University of Queensland, introduced the draft report (CGRFA-20/25/3.2/Inf.1). In addition to a low survey response rate, he noted a literature bias towards plant genetic resources, and insufficient information about traditional and local knowledge.

EUROPE, opposed by GRULAC and BRAZIL, supported finalizing and publishing the report. GRULAC and KENYA

recommended reviewing and repeating the survey, in addition to other data collection strategies such as expert interviews and case studies. CAMEROON, GERMANY, and INDIA suggested publishing the report as a working draft.

The CBD Secretariat pointed to progress on indicators for monetary and non-monetary benefits deriving from ABS instruments, while recognizing challenges in this "new and important area of work." CANADA, EUROPE, and MEXICO called for an analysis of all questionnaires issued by the Commission in view of consistently low response rates.

The PHILIPPINES welcomed the focus on Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs), while stressing the need to raise awareness of farmers' rights. Supporting continued work on indicators, they highlighted non-monetary benefit-sharing, and called for the next study to address digital sequence information (DSI). Describing work on DSI as premature, the REPUBLIC OF KOREA and the US called for an iteration of the report.

MEXICO stressed that information on national measures and the impact of ABS measures should be sourced from user and provider experiences rather than desk-based analyses. SOUTH AFRICA underlined challenges arising from incomplete or out-of-date information held in the ABS Clearing-House.

INDIA encouraged the CGRFA to work closely with other fora, in addition to monitoring and reporting on ABS developments elsewhere. ITPGRFA highlighted the methodology structure available under the Treaty for the use and exchange of monetary and non-monetary benefit sharing, stating it is broadly aligned with the Commission's own assessment of ABS instruments and measures.

In their response, the CGRFA Secretariat said it would be difficult and speculative to explore reasons for the low response rate, noting the question would be better directed to national focal points. They suggested that with the support of the ABS Expert Team, the survey could be simplified.

DSI and genetic resources for food and agriculture

The Secretariat introduced the report (CGRFA-20/25/4), noting it draws on ongoing monitoring of developments regarding DSI in other fora. They highlighted the establishment of a multilateral mechanism on benefit-sharing in CBD Decision 16/2 on DSI, with an invitation to the governing bodies of international ABS instruments to collaborate and streamline processes. The Secretariat further noted submissions by three members on domestic ABS measures applying to DSI on GRFA, contained in document CGRFA-20/25/4/Inf.1.

Many delegates welcomed [CBD Decision 16/2](#) and the establishment of the Cali Fund. NEAR EAST, the PHILIPPINES, and COLOMBIA emphasized the need for a mechanism that guarantees the rights of providers in the use of DSI. ECUADOR requested clarifying the relationship between the Cali Fund and related multilateral mechanisms. SOUTH SUDAN said the CBD decision will improve accuracy, transparency, and accountability. The PHILIPPINES further called for work to develop a clear definition and scope of DSI, cautioning against potential regulatory challenges.

EUROPE requested further submissions on national ABS measures applying to DSI, while CAMEROON stressed the importance of harmonizing regulations in this area. AFRICA and the REPUBLIC OF KOREA proposed deleting the relevant provision.

On the role of IPLCs and references to other key stakeholders, including “foresters” and “fishers,” some cautioned against diverging from agreed CBD language. BRAZIL noted precedence set under the CBD on referring to the role of farmers in biodiversity goals. CANADA proposed deleting guidance on capacity-building for key stakeholders regarding DSI mechanisms, noting this is beyond the Commission’s mandate. BRAZIL opposed, stressing, with AFRICA, the importance of capacity-building of key stakeholders for informing decision-making and supporting the effective implementation of DSI mechanisms. EUROPE requested FAO to assist countries upon request to build capacities on the use of DSI in research and development for food and agriculture. The REPUBLIC OF KOREA, among other textual edits, suggested deleting “access to” benefits, opposed by CONGO, NIGER, and NORWAY, who argued that access and benefit-sharing go together. In response, the REPUBLIC OF KOREA proposed specifying “free” access to benefits.

Numerous delegates invited the Commission to continue monitoring developments regarding DSI in other fora. Various representatives welcomed, though CANADA opposed, co-convening a joint workshop with the Secretariats of the CBD and the ITPGRFA. NIGER proposed the participation of key stakeholders, including IPLCs. GRULAC requested the workshop take place in hybrid format, while CANADA preferred virtual modalities.

The CBD Secretariat summarized Decision 16/2 and stressed that the Cali Fund was fully operational and ready to receive contributions from DSI users. The ITPGRFA Secretariat reported ongoing negotiations under the Open-Ended Working Group to Enhance the Functioning of the Multilateral System and underlined their interest in organizing the joint workshop.

Chair Girard said he would circulate a Chair’s proposal on Tuesday.

Biodiversity

Report of the First Session of the Ad Hoc Expert Team on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture

Expert Team Co-Chair Desterio Nyamongo (Kenya) introduced the report of the first session (CGRFA-20/25/5.1 and CGRFA-20/25/5.1/Inf.1). Recognizing the challenges of data collection, he emphasized the need for streamlining, rather than adding indicators. He noted, however, that the Expert Team recommended developing a limited number of process indicators, primarily addressing Strategic Priority Area 3 of the FA BFA (institutional frameworks for BFA).

Implementation of the Framework for Action on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture

The Secretariat introduced CGRFA-20/25/5.2 and elements of the draft voluntary guidelines for the implementation of the FA

BFA (CGRFA-20/25/5.2/Inf.1), as well as the draft questionnaire on the implementation of the FA BFA (CGRFA-20/25/5.2, Annex).

EUROPE and CANADA said that necessary funding should be ensured to support countries in their coherent implementation of the FA BFA, GPAs, and GBF. The PHILIPPINES and ECUADOR reiterated that the voluntary nature of the guidelines should be explicit. NEAR EAST supported mainstreaming biodiversity across agricultural sectors and stressed the need for annual campaigns on the important role of biodiversity, as well as capacity-building work on monitoring sustainable use of biodiversity. URUGUAY and COLOMBIA emphasized the importance of coordination to avoid duplication of efforts under various processes.

The CBD Secretariat highlighted the FAO Biodiversity Knowledge Hub as an effective and user-friendly platform that is aligned with the GBF.

With the US and BRAZIL reserving comments until written interventions are submitted, Chair Girard noted the Secretariat would prepare an updated document for consideration.

Preparation of the Second SOW Report on Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture

The Secretariat presented document CGRFA-20/25/5.3, noting the high impact and successful outcomes of the First SOW Report published in 2019 and pointing to the evolving policy landscape and increased awareness on biodiversity since then. They outlined proposed guidance, *inter alia*: to recommend the Second Report focus on coherent implementation of relevant frameworks; to prepare a simplified draft country reporting questionnaire for review by the Expert Team; and to agree to consider a draft Second Report at the Commission’s 23rd regular session.

In the Corridors

With plants blossoming under a warming spring sun, Rome’s biodiversity was on full display while delegates inside FAO headquarters kicked off discussions on the critical role of genetic resources for our food systems. As one speaker emphasized: “biodiversity is the foundation of life on earth. But more than that, biodiversity is us. We exist because of biodiversity. We eat biodiversity, we sleep biodiversity, we breathe biodiversity. We are biodiversity.”

As Chair Girard explained, the meeting’s official theme, “promoting diversity for world food security and nutrition” could also be understood as lauding the diversity of knowledges and viewpoints. One observer could not help but comment that “too much diversity of the latter type may make agreement on the former a lot harder.” Indeed, divergent views quickly emerged over the role of ABS for food-related genetic resources – a notoriously challenging matter that intersects with cognate multilateral processes. DSI once again lived up to its status as the “bête noire of biodiversity negotiations,” according to a seasoned delegate, with disagreements on the Commission’s role within the fragmented governance landscape delaying progress.

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