



Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)

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Free Exchange of Plant Genetic Material Boosts Global Efforts to Reduce Hunger and Malnutrition

WASHINGTON, DC, November 12, 2001 – At a time when concerns about food security are rising, agricultural researchers in developing countries now have a much better chance at developing new plants with improved traits and fighting hunger and malnutrition, states the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

After protracted negotiations, the eagerly-awaited International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture was agreed upon last week by 116 nations, with two abstentions. The Treaty must now be ratified by at least 40 countries before it comes into force.

“Plant genetic diversity, the result of a combination of farmers’ selection over millennia, natural evolution, and plant breeding is a foundation of agricultural development,” says Ian Johnson, World Bank Vice President and CGIAR Chairman. “Plant breeders all over the world rely on existing diversity to create new varieties of plants with higher yields and increased resistance to pests and diseases, while for many small farmers in developing countries, diversity is the basis of food security and income,” Johnson underscored.

The CGIAR supports a network of 16 international agricultural research Centers, 11 of which hold the world’s largest collection of over 600,000 samples of crop diversity. A recent CGIAR study showed that of the more than one million samples exchanged over the past 10 years, a majority went to research organizations in developing countries, the vast majority (80 percent and more) went to universities and national agricultural research systems working to develop new varieties of plants with improved traits.

“We have watched and supported the negotiations that led to the Treaty with great interest, and are satisfied that the Treaty will help us to better fulfill our mandate to use plant diversity for development,” says Geoffrey Hawtin, Director General of the CGIAR-supported International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI). IPGRI is dedicated to the conservation, management and use of crop diversity.

The CGIAR collections are held in-trust for humanity under agreements signed in 1994 with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The agreements guarantee that the CGIAR-supported Centers will maintain the collections in perpetuity, and make material and information freely available to all. The Treaty specifically calls on the CGIAR Centers to sign new agreements that incorporate the provisions of the newly-approved Treaty.

“Using diversity is critical for increasing agricultural productivity, which in turn is essential for reducing poverty and hunger,” says Francisco Reifschneider, CGIAR Director. “I am confident that the Centers will be able to conclude these new agreements quickly for the ultimate benefit of poor farming communities worldwide.”

The Treaty establishes a funding strategy, but support for the genebanks of the world remains a problem. “The Treaty calls on countries and CGIAR-supported Centers to maintain genetic resources in perpetuity,” adds Geoffrey Hawtin of IPGRI. “The challenge is to mobilize financial resources and create an endowment to ensure these precious resources are kept in viable form well into the future.”

The CGIAR is an association of 58 public and private members who support a system of 16 international agricultural research centers. Eleven of the Centers maintain *ex-situ* collections (those that are kept in genebanks away from their source, as opposed to *in situ* conservation in farmers’ fields or in the wild) of crop diversity in trust for humanity. Aggregated, these collections represent 40 percent of unique samples of the world’s major food crops, a vital resource for scientists and researchers working to increase crop yields, reduce losses caused by pests and diseases, and promote improved management of natural resources. The results of CGIAR research are ‘public goods,’ that are freely available to all.

The CGIAR is co-sponsored by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank. More than 8,500 CGIAR scientists and scientific staff work in more than 100 countries around the world, harnessing the best of cutting-edge science to increase food security, reduce poverty, and protect the global environment.

More information on the CGIAR available at www.cgiar.org

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