



Item 3 of the Agenda

COMMISSION ON PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES

Third Session

Rome, 17-21 April 1989

REPORT BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE WORKING GROUP ON ITS THIRD SESSION



The Third Session of the Working Group was held under my chairmanship on 13 and 14 April 1989. This Third Session of the Working Group was attended by representatives of the following countries: Cape Verde, the Congo, Egypt, El Salvador, Ethiopia, India, Italy, Kenya, Madagascar, Mexico, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Spain, Thailand, Tunisia and Venezuela. Australia, Indonesia, Libya, Peru, Sweden and Yugoslavia were unable to attend despite the fact that they are member countries of this Working Group. The Assistant Director-General, Agriculture Department, Dr Bonte-Friedheim, again welcomed participants and highlighted the items of interest on the Agenda of the Commission, also reporting the decision of the International Board for Plant Genetic Resources to change its headquarters from FAO in Rome to Copenhagen, Denmark. The Working Group decided to concentrate its discussions on Agenda Items 6 and 4, in that order, and also to study the situation arising out of the decision by IBPGR to leave FAO Headquarters. The Working Group's debates took place in a very positive and particularly cordial atmosphere of harmony and cooperation, concerned above all with constructiveness and compromise. I give below a summary of the Working Group's discussions and conclusions, confident that these will facilitate the work of the Commission.

The Working Group considered that the document CPGR/89/5, "Overall Review of FAO's Activities in Plant Genetic Resources and Progress Report on the Establishment of the International Fund for Plant Genetic Resources", was of fundamental importance, since it provided extremely valuable information on the historical and legal background to FAO activities and the functions of the Commission on Plant Genetic Resources and identified the elements needed to streamline the future work of this Commission. The Working Group appreciated FAO's pioneering work since 1947 and considered that the Organization had in recent years developed a unique and irreplaceable global system for plant genetic resources, which included: i) a legal framework, the International Undertaking, intended to ensure the preservation, use and availability of these resources; ii) a genuine inter-governmental forum, the Commission, which included representatives of countries donating germ-plasm and also those donating funds and technology, and where discussions could be held and a consensus reached on subjects of global interest. The main function of the Commission was to keep under constant review the general situation of world plant genetic resources and to supervise progress in attaining the objectives of the Undertaking; iii) a financial mechanism, the International Fund, to apply the principles of the Undertaking within a system of mutual and equitable benefits, to which some countries contributed with germ-plasm and others with funds and technology.

The Working Group recommends that the Commission adopt the report CPGR/89/5 and support the streamlining proposed in the work of this Commission, as reflected in paragraphs 22 to 44 of this document. To this end, it considers necessary: i) the presentation to the Commission of periodical reports on the activities, programmes and policies of FAO as regards plant genetic resources; ii) the periodical preparation for presentation to the Commission of a report on the world status of plant genetic resources; iii) development of a global system of information and early warning as foreseen in Article 7 of the International Undertaking.

The information system will provide the basis for the preparation of the report on the world status of plant genetic resources; iv) development of an International Network of Plant Genetic Resource Centres, and in particular a network of base collections under the auspices and/or jurisdiction of FAO, already envisaged in Article 7 of the Undertaking. This subject will be discussed by the Commission under Agenda Items 5 and 8; v) the preparation of a Plan of Action that will, on the basis of the information provided in the report on the world state of plant genetic resources, identify periodically existing lacunae and facilitate coordination and the according of priority to the necessary activities. This Plan of Action could have characteristics and organization similar to the Tropical Forestry Action Plan.

The Working Group is fully aware that the activities set out in points ii) to v) above have to be conducted in close collaboration with other regional, international and non-governmental organizations involved in this subject: UNEP, CGIAR, CARFIT, IBPGR, IUCN, WWF, etc., and therefore recommends setting up a mechanism for dialogue to establish this cooperation in a systematic way, possibly through an Advisory Committee, provided this is not a financial burden on FAO's Regular Programme.

The Working Group also viewed with concern the proliferation of initiatives referred to in paragraphs 26 and 27 of the document, which could lead to unnecessary duplication and therefore less efficiency. It considered that the Commission had a fundamental role to play here, harmonizing these initiatives and proposing systematic cooperation between the groups involved. The dialogue mechanism (Advisory Committee) referred to above could contribute decisively to achieving this objective.

The Group considered that one important function to be performed by the Commission was the preparation of international agreements on the preservation and use of plant genetic resources, such as: a code of conduct for international germ-plasm collectors, setting out uniform minimum standards for the storage of germplasm in base collections, a code of conduct on the application of biotechnology to plant genetic resources, regulation of trials with modified organisms through genetic engineering and their releasing into the environment, and also agreements on systematic financing of the preservation of plant genetic resources.

The last point made by the Working Group on this item was that it considered as an essential function of the Commission the promoting of national and regional cooperation structures and of cooperation with non-governmental organizations.

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The Group then started to debate Item 4, "Progress Report on the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources". This item follows a mandate from the Second Session of the Commission to this Working Group to negotiate "an agreed interpretation of the International Undertaking". The main recommendation of the Working Group to the Commission on this item is the simultaneous and parallel recognition of the rights of the breeder and the farmer and the use of the FAO International Fund for Plant Genetic Resources as a channel through which these rights may benefit the farmer, supporting preservation activities and the use of plant genetic resources in

developing countries. I shall provide further details on the Working Group's discussions and conclusions on this item, which is of cardinal importance, under the relevant point in the agenda, which I shall have the honour to introduce.

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The last item analysed by the Working Group was the information provided by Dr Bonte-Friedheim with regard to the decision of the International Board for Plant Genetic Resources to leave FAO Headquarters. The Working Group decided not to study this item in depth, since it considered that the many questions and concerns aroused should be discussed in the presence of the IBPGR and during the debates of the Commission, allowing an opportunity to IBPGR representatives to reply to them. The Working Group nevertheless expressed its surprise and concern that a decision of this nature should have been taken without previous consultation and discussion with FAO and despite the fact that this Organization has hosted IBPGR and provided it with technical, economic, operational and administrative facilities and above all political and legal cover since its creation 1.5 years ago. The surprise of the Working Group increased when they heard from countries financing IBPGR and present at the meeting that they had not been previously consulted either, or even officially informed of such an important decision. Some delegates questioned the value of a decision taken by members of IBPGR who were there in their personal capacity and did not represent any country. The Working Group considered that the IBPGR decision concerned both countries donating funds and those donating germplasm and that the implications of this decision should be discussed in the Commission.

The Group expressed its concern over the possible negative effects that the IBPGR decision could have on the climate of growing harmony and cooperation so necessary to ensure security and free access to germplasm. Many members of the Working Group also asked questions about the financial, administrative and legal consequences that the decision could have for FAO and for staff with FAO contracts at present working in IBPGR, and expressed its concern as to the fate of the files, data banks, documents and publications that were the fruit of so many years of cooperation between FAO and IBPGR. In this connection they stressed the additional complication because of the lack of legal staff on IBPGR.

As Chairman of the Working Group I consider that we should avoid any unilateral decision by IBPGR that might disturb the good relations between FAO and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, and I should like to make the point that this decision has not yet been endorsed by the Consultative Group.

Lastly, the Working Group discussed whether Agenda Item 7, which is a technical item on IBPGR, should be presented to the Commission before or after it had studied the item of the physical separation of IBPGR. Although not all members were in agreement, it appeared desirable to advise the Commission that IBPGR activities should be discussed first so that the type and extension of these activities could be objectively evaluated, thus obtaining the necessary elements to analyse the importance of relations with FAO to those activities and the implications that a separation could have,

before making appropriate recommendations. Although some of you may justifiably feel tempted to request an inversion in the order of discussion, I should like to make an appeal that it be maintained in accordance with the recommendation of the Working Group so that, on an item as important as the one which now concerns us, rationality and objectivity may predominate over emotional positions which, however justified they may be, will not help us in our discussions.