

Background

Introduction

While controversies over the ownership, control and exchange of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (PGRFA) are old, modern-day management of these resources is more complicated than ever before. Those in charge of the physical care of PGRFA could be forgiven for complaining that they need degrees in politics, law and genetics just to survive. And those who participate in policy-making face an equally bewildering environment. Trade relations, intellectual property rights, biosafety, indigenous communities and public–private sector relations are just a few of the topics that are always on the table. In addition, everyone faces the prospect of dealing with numerous laws, regulations, guidelines and policies and following events in multiple fora, from those at the national level to the international: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Convention on Biological Diversity, World Trade Organization, World Intellectual Property Rights Organization, etc.

The complexity and contentiousness of the new biopolitical environment is reflected in new language that did not exist 25 years ago: Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), biopiracy, Farmers' Rights, Frankenstein Foods and more. The consequences of not being up to date and knowledgeable about all these matters and fora can be costly, both personally and institutionally. One misstep and you can end up reading about yourself in the morning newspaper.

Different political and scientific interests compete for what they want or think is right. And yet, at the end of the day it is clear that nations and people are interdependent for plant genetic resources. This simple fact dictates that we cooperate to ensure the conservation of PGRFA and its orderly management, including the facilitation of access and fair benefit sharing.

This learning module is intended primarily for those who have practical management and/or policy-making responsibilities for plant genetic resources. It is intended to help them navigate through the policy environment in such a way as to promote the sound and scientific management of PGRFA, whether in their role as custodians and developers of this resource or as policy-makers. This audience's interest in the subject is not 'academic'. It is practical. The learning module and its associated workshops are not intended to be a political forum where policies and viewpoints are debated. Thus, we have focused not so much on the political issues that underlie existing laws, agreements and policies, as on how these can be understood, implemented and shaped.

The module includes an extensive section on the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, as well as a section on the Convention on Biological Diversity. Both agreements have implications for how genebanks and breeding programmes manage collections/materials, as well as for the laws, policies and regulations that countries adopt to promote implementation. We assume that users of this learning module will be interested in understanding these legal agreements because of a practical need to make sure that their governments or institutions are meeting legal requirements and taking actions appropriate for the implementation of the agreements. The average user will probably not need to know everything about the agreements. More complete academic analyses of the Treaty and the Convention are or will shortly be available. Instead, users of this learning module will need, and will want, to focus on the areas that have immediate practical implications for their work. The learning module—and the associated training course—approach the Treaty and the Convention from this perspective.

We hope that the use of this learning module will help people become more knowledgeable, confident, sensitive and effective actors in the field of plant genetic resources.

Background Information

The 15 Future Harvest Centres of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) share a mission to contribute to food security and poverty eradication in developing countries through research, partnerships, capacity building and policy support, promoting sustainable agricultural development based on the environmentally sound management of natural resources. The conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources is central in this mission. Through the System-wide Genetic Resources Programme (SGRP), the Centres collaborate in the areas of policy, awareness, information, knowledge and technology and capacity building in support of the development of genetic resources programme at national, regional and global levels.

The Centres have extensive experience in human resources and institutional development for genetic resource conservation and use in their specialist areas, including crop, livestock, forest and aquatic genetic resources. By working together in the SGRP, the Centres aim to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of their learning and institution-strengthening efforts. Underpinning genetic resource conservation and use efforts globally, are national and regional programme whose effectiveness and sustainability depend in large part on the management and leadership abilities of the scientists responsible for their day-to-day operations.

A survey of existing learning opportunities and resources within the CGIAR and an assessment of learning needs conducted by ISNAR for the SGRP among 200 national genetic resource programme managers and scientists from 121 countries worldwide, identified national policy and programme development for genetic resource conservation and use as the highest priorities for training.¹ Based on these findings, SGRP is focusing its support on the development of learning events for leaders of genetic resource programmes on aspects of programme leadership, particularly issues of policy and of research management that have received relatively less attention than the technical topics in the Centres' capacity-building activities on genetic resources. Such events aim to equip programme leaders with the knowledge and skills they need to improve their performance, communicate with other scientists and handle policy, managerial and technical responsibilities.

This learning module, sponsored by SGRP and developed by IPGRI and ISNAR, is focused on law and policy of relevance to the management of plant genetic resources. Policy research and support to national programmes is a major element of IPGRI's programme and the institute plays a leading role within the CGIAR System in plant genetic resources policy representation and development. Capacity building was a major area of ISNAR's work and, prior to becoming a division of the International Food Policy Research Institute on 1 April 2004, ISNAR had developed specific learning and capacity-building approaches tailored to institutional innovation and strengthening for agricultural research.

Target Audience of the Module

This learning module is aimed mainly at those who have practical management and/or policymaking responsibilities for plant genetic resources. It is intended to be used as resource material to promote learning among genetic resource managers and scientists and increase their awareness and understanding of the impact of international agreements, laws and policies on the day-to-day operation of plant genetic resource programmes.