

Foreword

By the year 2025, according to the latest estimates from the United Nations, roughly four fifths of the projected global population of 7.9 billion will be living in developing countries. Yet it is uncertain that the growing demands for food and other agricultural commodities for the world's population will be met, especially given existing global structures, resources and technologies.

Agricultural research and production systems depend on genetic resources for food and agriculture. The conservation, exchange and use of plant genetic resources are critical to food security, poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability, but threats to the security of these resources continue to grow. Many existing genebanks are inadequate and, in some instances, the loss of plant genetic diversity in genebanks may be as important as it is in the field. National programmes to conserve, develop and use genetic diversity are often underfunded and under-staffed.

Developments in international and national law and policy over the past 15 years have changed the working environment for those in charge of managing and making decisions about genetic resources. Former 'routine' collecting missions cannot now be carried out without understanding the legal environment, and in particular access legislation; research cannot be undertaken without understanding the legal environment, and in particular intellectual property rights. In short, today genetic resource managers need to understand the legal and policy environment in order to do their jobs effectively.

The task of understanding all the issues of relevance to the conservation and management of plant genetic resources is extremely complex. This learning module attempts to provide a thorough plan to develop knowledge and skills on the most significant policy and legal agreements relevant to plant genetic resources. This will allow professionals to do their job, knowing that they have considered all the necessary policy and legal issues for effective work and confident that they are not going to inadvertently set off a political firestorm. This learning module contains practical exercises to reinforce an understanding of the impact and working of treaty law and policy in the types of situations that plant genetic resource professionals can expect to face.

The development of this learning module was initiated and sponsored by the CGIAR Systemwide Genetic Resources Programme. It was prepared under the leadership of our two institutes and brought together our complementary expertise on policy and education concerning plant genetic resources and programme management. We acknowledge the substantive contributions of Susan Bragdon, Cary Fowler and Zenete Peixoto França, and the overall direction of Elizabeth Goldberg and Jane Toll in the preparation of this learning plan. We would like to congratulate and thank them for their efforts. We trust the module will prove useful for the intended purpose.

Geoffrey Hawtin
Director-General, IPGRI
Programme Leader, SGRP

Stein Bie
Director-General, ISNAR

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