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UN-backed meeting on plant genetic resources opens in Rome



Around the world samples of plant genetic material are being collected and saved for use in research and cultivation

8 December 2010 – Representatives from more than 60 countries gathered in Rome today for a United Nations-backed meeting to promote the international treaty considered essential for the conservation and use of the world’s threatened plant genetic resources.

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources was adopted by the Conference of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) in 2001 to facilitate international cooperation and the fair exchange of genetic resources.

The treaty’s Benefit-sharing Fund (BSF) was created to support poor farmers in developing countries to conserve and adapt to climate change the most important food crops.

Opening the meeting, Giancarlo Galan, Italy’s Agriculture Minister, [urged](#) other governments to use the treaty “to overcome the ancient and harmful clash between peasant agriculture and modernity.”

He said that since the agreement took effect in 2004, there have been more than 800 daily transfers of seeds and other plant material from a pool of more than 1.3 million samples.

“This high-level forum has made more evident that the Treaty is able to address simultaneously several challenges, including biodiversity loss, global food crises, climate change adaptation and

poverty alleviation, and agricultural development,” said Shakeel Bhatti, the Secretary of the Treaty.

The Benefit-sharing Fund has been accepted as a key international instrument for adaptation to climate change by the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), while the treaty has been recognized one of the four pillars of the new international regime on access and benefit-sharing for genetic resources.

The Fund is so far supporting 11 high-impact projects for small-scale farmers in four regions of the world. In Peru, six indigenous communities have responded to climate change by re-introducing old native varieties of potatoes, and adapting them to higher altitude mountain terrains.

In the next three months, \$10 million will be devoted to helping ensure sustainable food security by assisting farmers to adapt to climate change. Delegates at the meeting stressed the need to work towards raising \$116 million for the fund by 2014.

FAO estimates that 75 per cent of crop diversity was lost between 1900 and 2000. A recent study predicted that as much as 22 per cent of the wild relatives of important food crops such as peanut, potato and beans could disappear by 2055 because of a changing climate.

Awareness of the problem has, however, been growing rapidly. There are now some 1,750 gene banks worldwide, which together hold more than seven million samples.

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