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UN-backed treaty meeting seeks to boost conservation of world's plant varieties



The Multilateral System forms a gene pool of over 1.3 million unique crop samples

14 March 2011 – The governing body of a United Nations-backed treaty considered vital for the preservation and use of the world's threatened plant genetic resources met in Bali, Indonesia, today to map out a future course in the face of food insecurity and climate change.

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, adopted at the Conference of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) in 2001 and backed by 127 members, creates a multilateral system through which member countries share the genetic material of 64 of the most important crops for food security – crops that account for more than 80 per cent of our plant-sourced food.

No country is self-sufficient in plant genetic resources, and international cooperation and exchange of genetic resources are thus pivotal for food security. Through the Treaty, countries have agreed to establish a multilateral system to facilitate access to key plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, and to share the benefits derived from that access in a fair and equitable way.

“The more efficiently crops are protected under the Treaty, the better humankind will be able to conserve and share crop genetic resources to meet the enormous food security challenges of the present and future generations,” Treaty Secretary Shakeel Bhatti [said](#).

The five-day meeting will consider the full spectrum of plant genetic diversity and the role it can play in providing or cross-breeding varieties that can meet ever changing environmental conditions to provide food for the world's surging multi-billion population.

Today, the multilateral system forms a gene pool of over 1.3 million unique crop samples. The Treaty also has a benefit sharing fund by which farmers are supported in the conservation and use of genetic diversity on their own farms.

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.

The Treaty recognizes the enormous contribution that farmers and their communities have made and continue to make to the conservation and development of plant genetic resources. This is the basis for farmers' rights, which include the protection of traditional knowledge, and the right to participate equitably in benefit-sharing and in national decision-making about plant genetic resources. It gives governments the responsibility for implementing these rights.

Agriculture ministers and senior officials from more than 100 countries gathered in Bali last week in preparation for this week's meeting and urged those nations who have not yet signed the treaty to do so as soon as possible.

They recognized that climate change poses a serious risk to plant genetic resources that are essential as a raw material for crop genetic improvement, whether by farmer selection, classical plant breeding or modern biotechnologies, as well as in adapting to unpredictable environmental changes.

Most of the world's food comes from four main crops – rice, wheat, maize and potatoes, but local crops, not among these, are a major food source for hundreds of millions of people and have potential to provide nutrition to countless others. The Treaty helps maximize the use and breeding of all crops and promotes development and maintenance of diverse farming systems.

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[UN-backed meeting on plant genetic resources opens in Rome](#)