



ISF Position on Access to Plant Genetic Resources for Research and Breeding (Oct 2008)

Plant genetic resources are used for very diverse purposes such as pharmaceutical products, cosmetics and plant breeding. Consequently, any regime on access and benefit sharing (ABS) for such plant genetic resources must take into account the specificity of each sector of users.

Since the beginning of agriculture and horticulture farmers have selected cultivars from the genetic diversity available to them. Over centuries they moulded these genetic resources through phenotypic selection, facilitated genetic exchange between cultivars and their weedy relatives, and transported their cultivars from one region of the globe to another. By incorporating and recombining genetic diversity available worldwide into new varieties, modern plant breeding has created, and continues to create, more variation in crops than has ever been available to growers and consumers.

All countries are strongly dependent on each other for plant genetic resources. Each country grows or imports numerous crops whose centres of diversity lie outside its national boundary making it inherently dependent on multiple foreign genetic resources. The widespread use of plant genetic resources, historically based on open access, is evident in the ancestry of individual varieties.

Access to genetic resources used in plant breeding is best facilitated through a multilateral approach that recognises and takes into consideration this dependency between countries. Public research institutions and small breeding companies in developing countries, those who access an overwhelming majority of plant genetic resources from gene banks, are particularly at risk of being unable to negotiate bilateral agreements. A multilateral system and standard terms of access would also encourage the sustainable use and conservation of plant genetic resources.

The CBD is debating a certificate of origin, source or legal provenance that would be required to guarantee benefit sharing once genetic resources had left the provider country. ISF is not in favour of such a certificate, as neither its need nor true value has been demonstrated. The complex parentage of genetic resources used for plant breeding and the continuous recombination of genes render its implementation impractical.

ISF believes that the Multilateral System (MLS) of the FAO International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (the "Treaty") is the right approach for ABS of genetic resources used in plant breeding programs. ISF strongly recommends that all plant genetic resources used regularly in plant breeding programs be brought into the MLS of the Treaty.

For plant genetic resources used in plant breeding that are not in the MLS of the Treaty, ISF supports a sectoral approach in CBD's International Regime on ABS. They should be accessed through an MLS-like system using a standard Material Transfer Agreement. Benefit sharing provisions should take into consideration the specificities of the plant-breeding sector.