

Speech to the
Opening Ceremony
Eight Session of the Governing Body
International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

Monday, 11 November 2019, 10:00 am
FAO Headquarters, Rome, Italy

on behalf of the
International Seed Federation
Michael Keller, Secretary General
Grace Gitu, Seed Technology Expert, African Seed Trade Association

Ladies, Gentlemen and Distinguished Guests:

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture is facing a critical time as it celebrates its 15th anniversary.

The International Treaty is amongst the first instruments that were able to gather many countries and organizations behind a common aim, “ensuring that plant genetic resources of economic and/or social interest, particularly for agriculture, will be explored, preserved, evaluated and made available for plant breeding and scientific purposes” as it was announced 36 years ago in the First Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources. The seed sector, aware of its responsibility as a provider of a critical input in sustainable agricultural production, has been involved as an active participant since the very beginning of the discussions in the 80’s.

The seed sector, both public and private, has always seen the conservation and use of genetic resources as highly critical. Genetic resources which will not circulate broadly will be not only underused but they will be the ones which will be the risk of being lost. Using broadly genetic resources is the best way to conserve them. And together, we continue to work to sustain crop diversity and to breed improved varieties that address the nutritional and agronomic challenges of current and future generations.

The seed sector exists because we collaborate and serve the needs of farmers by offering farmers value-adding choices. We continue to invest in the development of diverse seed options for farmers so that farmers have varieties that best suit their needs. In this very regional and local way, we all collaborate in our shared global objective of food security and sustainable agriculture.

You have many important topics to discuss this week including farmers' rights, sustainable use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, the Funding Strategy, and enhancing the multilateral system of access and benefit sharing. Over the last six years including the last biennium, the private sector has been an acting contributor to all these discussions. We made submissions to serve the many and not the few. Two years ago during GB7 we presented a declaration of commitment to the Treaty signed by more than 40 companies. The commitment of the seed sector to make the International Treaty work remains as strong today as it has always been. Let's use this week's negotiations as an opportunity to move forward together taking into account the diversity of users from private and public sector and the needs of the world's farmers.

I would like to give the floor now to Mrs Grace Gitu, Seed Technology Expert, AFSTA, who is in contact everyday with the farmers and food producers of Africa.

Yes indeed, farmers are the key to produce quality and enough food in Africa. However they need the right tools to do it. One of the main tools at the basis of every harvest is for them to get quality seed. There is no good harvest without quality seed. It has always been in the roots of farmers, and especially in Africa, to solve issues together. Africa is reported very wealthy on genetic resources, estimated at over 25% of the global genetic resources. These resources are given to us by Mother Nature to identify their value for our present use and ensure their availability to future generations. The resources were not given to us to be kept secretly from each other. It is our pride to solve issues somewhere else on the continent or even somewhere else in the world, with species that we have on our land, e.g Maize (*Zea mays*) is an important food crop in Africa and is reported to have originated from Mexico. Sugar cane (*Saccharum officinarum*), the sweetener of mankind food, is reported to have originated from New guinea. Beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris*), a

solution for *'hidden hunger'* is reported to have originated from Peru. Of course we have to get back a fair benefit sharing to reward the years spent on conserving these resources. But the ultimate goal is to share what was freely given to us and we have to make sure that this sharing can still take place in the years to come.

Michael Keller conclusion:

This week you have important decisions to make because they will impact the future of the Treaty. The seed sector will remain by your side to support. As was stated 15 years ago, "People are at the core of multilateralism. And it is this kind of collective and cooperative action, oriented towards the attainment of common goals, that the global crisis facing the 21st century requires". Finally, I would like to finish with a quote from Simon Groot, World Food Prize of this year: "A farmer is emotionally tied to his seed supplier because that determines the quality of his crop". Let us all collaborate and step forward together in

a more trustful relationship like so many farmers and seed suppliers are doing it on the ground on a day to day basis.

Thanks a lot for your attention.