



**Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations**



The International Treaty
**ON PLANT GENETIC RESOURCES
FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE**

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Item 6.2 of the Provisional Agenda

NINTH SESSION OF THE GOVERNING BODY

New Delhi, India, 19–24 September 2022

Report on the Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Implementation of the International Treaty

Executive Summary

This document informs the Governing Body of the activities that the Secretary undertook in the biennium in response to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in order to monitor and manage, to the extent possible, the impact of the pandemic on the implementation of the International Treaty. The document highlights a number of initiatives that the Secretary promoted in partnership with other organizations and technical institutions.

Guidance Sought

The Governing Body is invited to take note of the COVID-19 response activities in the biennium and provide the guidance it considers appropriate for addressing current impacts and responding to any future impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the International Treaty.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. This document provides information to the Governing Body on the activities that the Secretary undertook during the past biennium in response to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak to monitor and manage, to the extent possible, the impact of the pandemic on the implementation of the International Treaty.
2. The spectrum of activities is broad and includes surveys and online webinars, the monitoring of International Treaty systems and operations, as well as follow up initiatives that the Secretary promoted through partnerships.
3. The document is intended to constitute the basis for guidance by the Governing Body on implementing the International Treaty in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

II. INITIAL AND MID-TERM ACTIVITIES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

4. The first response to the COVID-19 outbreak by the Secretary consisted of two surveys, respectively, on the implementation of the International Treaty and the operation of Benefit-sharing Fund (BSF) projects. The Secretary conducted the two surveys in between June and August 2020.
5. The two surveys were followed by an online International Panel that the Secretary convened in September 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of the International Treaty, with the support of the Kingdom of Morocco and in collaboration with the Global Crop Diversity Trust.¹
6. At the webinar, the Secretary presented the results and analysis of the two surveys. He noted that a level of resilience of the national PGR systems was detectable, at least in the short term, with the highest level of resilience recorded within seed systems. The Secretary also noted a significant variation in the impacts experienced, both geographically and in technical areas, thus requiring a diversified response. Critical areas of interventions emerged from respondents in the GRULAC and Africa regions in relation to on-farm systems and the availability, supply and distribution of quality seeds for the cropping season. Significant disruptions to capacity building and technical cooperation, particularly in Asia, GRULAC and Africa, were also noted. With regard to BSF projects, implementation appeared to be relatively stable in the short term, but some delay and significant, additional project transaction costs were foreseen.
7. Panel findings included the effects of COVID-19 restrictions on the operations of international genebanks and the fundamental role that genebanks play in restoring seed systems. Measures such as cryopreservation of field crop samples were found to be effective but particularly at risk and, therefore, in need of support on a wider scale. The panel also highlighted the need for robust contingency plans. Positive experiences were reported with digital solutions to handling genebank operations and delivering continuous services. The limitations of those solutions were also noted for field activities, where human intervention, including by field workers of agricultural research centers and local farmers, is essential.
8. The panel appraised the reports by representatives of the seed industry and non-governmental organizations operating in the field, who presented COVID-19 restrictions to movement/transport, seed production and local markets, and government certification as being impactful on both commercial and subsistence farmers. The panel expressed appreciation for the decision of many countries to designate agriculture, and the seed sector in particular, as an essential service and therefore entitled to exemption from certain restrictions.
9. The panel also appraised the COVID-19 impacts on seed availability, where a modest change in the balance between formal and informal systems was reported. A more significant impact occurred at the level of access to seeds and, in particular, demand in developing countries, which was brought about by lower-income and weaker support programmes (e.g. subsidies, financial services, extension, insurance).
10. The panel noted that the various assessments gave an overall picture of resilient systems of conservation, use and exchange of crop germplasm within the International Treaty. However, they

¹ www.fao.org/plant-treaty/overview/partnerships/expert-panel

remarked how resilience has limitations and needs to be sustained in the long-term through complementary interventions by all actors, i.e. genebanks, researchers and breeders, farmers, and seed companies, within the framework and the existing normative processes of the International Treaty.

11. As a further response to some of the highlighted COVID-19 priorities and under the guidance of the Bureau, the Secretary convened two other webinars in collaboration with the Global Crop Diversity Trust, respectively on fruit and vegetable genetic diversity in February 2021 with the sponsorship of the Government of Italy, and cryopreservation in June 2021 with the sponsorship of the Government of Belgium. Discussions at the fruit and vegetable webinar included the impact of COVID-19 on conservation, exchange and use of genetic diversity and highlighted the need to strengthen the resilience of genetic resources systems.² At the cryopreservation webinar, participants discussed cryopreservation as an effective, long-term conservation strategy in both COVID and post-COVID realities.³

12. A concomitant response activity consisted of a research project that the Government of Italy funded and the Secretary coordinated to explore the post-COVID 19 implications on genomics research, innovation and genetic diversity. More information on the project and its outcomes is available contained in document, IT/GB-9/22/16.4, *Report on Cooperation with International Bodies and Organizations*.⁴

13. Further activities by the Secretary related to the organization and running of on-line meetings of subsidiary bodies and the First Special Session of the Governing Body. The Secretary has reviewed such activities in document, IT/GB-9/22/17.3, *Review of Subsidiary Bodies and Intersessional Processes*.⁵

III. INTERNATIONAL TREATY SYSTEMS

14. This document section provides information on the performance of existing systems of the International Treaty during the COVID-19 pandemic. The information is selected from the full reports on operations of the different systems, which are available in the respective working documents for this Ninth Session.

Global Information System

15. DOI registrations in the year 2020 amounted to 225 796, including the registration of approximately 140 000 DOIs by IPK Gatersleben.⁶ Besides the figures for 2017 and 2018, when CGIAR Centers registered international collections in bulk, similar to what IPK did in 2020, the figures for 2020 – subtracting IPK’s registrations – showed a significant increase compared to years 2019 (78 171) and 2021 (63 099). The figures demonstrate the system’s substantial stability and upper trend in the year of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak.

² www.fao.org/plant-treaty/overview/partnerships/international-panel/en/

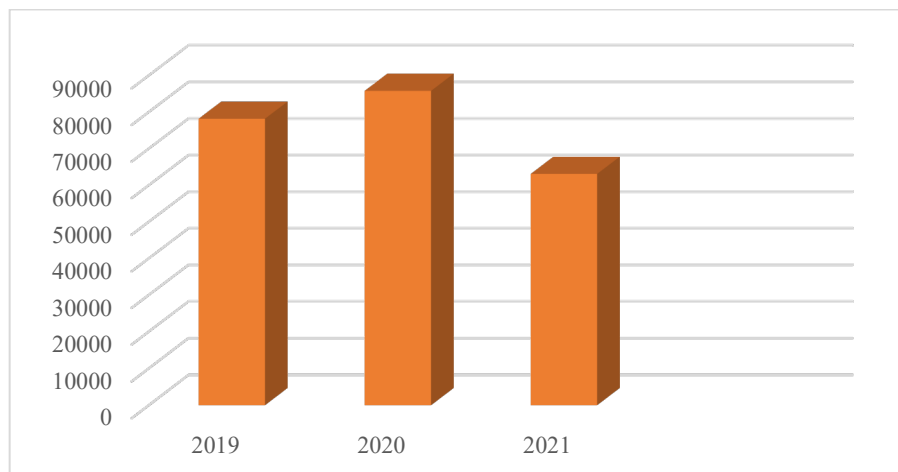
³ www.fao.org/plant-treaty/overview/partnerships/international-expert-panel

⁴ www.fao.org/3/ni850en/ni850en.pdf

⁵ www.fao.org/3/ni858en/ni858en.pdf

⁶ The Leibniz Institute of Plant Genetics and Crop Plant Research

Figure 1: DOIs by year



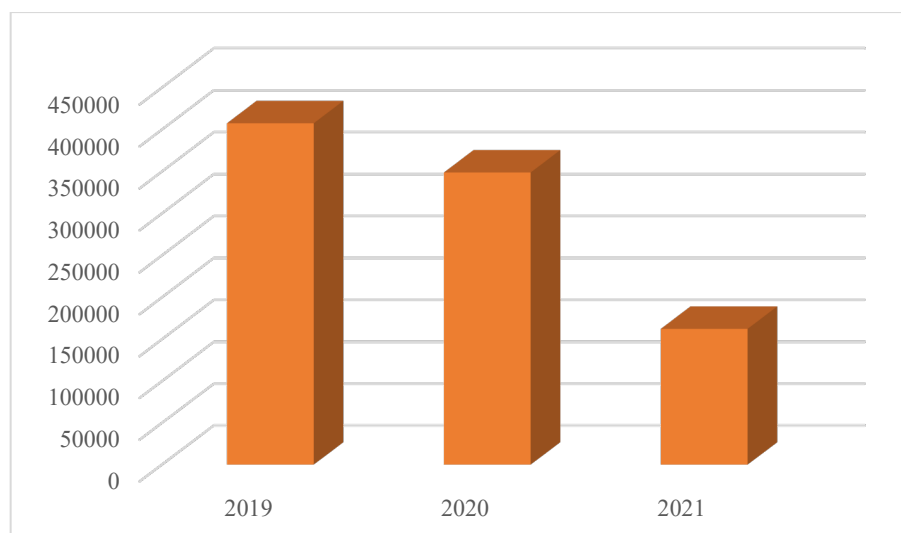
Source: Secretariat of the International Treaty

Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing

16. Since the establishment of the Multilateral System, user support has enabled the Secretariat to establish working relations and continuous exchange of information with entities managing germplasm collections worldwide. Beginning from April 2020, in the course of such interactions, the Secretary received several informal communications on how COVID-19 measures affected the operation of genebanks, e.g. the closing of facilities due to lockdowns and community quarantine or the designation of skeleton staff to guarantee the functioning of cold rooms and field infrastructure to conserve materials. The communications conveyed that conservation was the priority while distribution was paused.

17. For the year 2020, the total number of PGRFA samples distributed from the Multilateral System and reported to the Governing Body was 348 796. Compared to 407 513 samples for the year 2019, there was a decrease of approximately fourteen per cent in distribution.⁷

Figure 2: MLS samples by year



Source: Secretariat of the International Treaty

⁷ At the date of this document, the provisional figure for the year 2021 is 162 402, but the relevance is limited as the biennial reporting cycle is not complete yet.

18. Additional information of relevance to conservation and distribution of PGRFA in the Multilateral System is available from the 2020 Annual Report of the CGIAR Genebank Platform.⁸ Reportedly, the focus of all CGIAR genebanks during lockdowns, aside from keeping staff safe, was on sustaining sufficient staff in the laboratories, screenhouses and fields to carry out critical operations to avoid the loss of accessions. Genebanks continued to respond to requests for germplasm, with more than ninety per cent of requests fulfilled.

19. Large tissue culture collections (>5000 accessions) were the most vulnerable to lockdown measures since they require continuous monitoring and subculturing by trained staff working in relatively small spaces. Inevitably, some samples were lost but replaced by safety duplicates. Germplasm collecting and research work on seed quality management, cryopreservation, gap analysis and sub-setting were set back.

Benefit-sharing Fund

20. With a view to further assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the implementation of projects funded in the Fourth Call for Proposals of the Benefit-Sharing Fund (BSF-4), and as requested by the Standing Funding Committee, the Secretary conducted a second BSF survey in January 2021.

21. At the execution level, the survey indicated that projects conducted a minimum set of activities and suspended some planned activities without any cancellation. The majority of projects needed the extension of the timeframe to enable the full delivery, without any substantive revision of project targets and outcomes.

22. The Secretary also updated BSF project reporting and monitoring tools to include specific sections on the impact of COVID-19. By way of summary, the BSF executing entities reported that the project activities most affected by COVID-19 restrictions were: vulnerability assessments and key informants interviews; collecting missions; field days for participatory selection and evaluation, harvesting, training and capacity building.

23. Most BSF executing entities put mitigation measures and contingency plans in place. Examples of those measures and plans included: government acquisition/procurement plans for quality seeds from farmer-producers and distribution; logistical support for seed delivery and distribution to remote areas and vulnerable farming communities; local crop diversification strategies; regular and timely dissemination of information and guidance on COVID-19.

24. Reports indicated positive implications of the COVID-19 pandemic: local communities becoming more self-sufficient in seed production and sourcing through different mechanisms; increased digitalization of training and capacity building activities and use of innovative training tools.

25. Once available and processed, the entire data and information from the project reports will be compiled in a final report of the execution of the BSF-4 project portfolio.

Funding Strategy

26. At its first meeting of July 2020, the Standing Funding Committee discussed the challenges and opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in taking forward the work on implementing the Funding Strategy and its overall target.

27. At subsequent meetings, the Committee organized its work on the agreed milestones and activities of the three focus areas (Resource Mobilization, Benefit-sharing Fund Operations and Monitoring and Review). The analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on BSF-4 led to amendments to the Operational Plan to adjust the concluding dates of the BSF-4 program from 2023 to 2025. In preparing the Fifth Call for Proposals, considerations related to recovery from the impacts of COVID-19 were made.

28. At its most recent meeting of February 2022, the Standing Funding Committee continued working on the Operational Plan 2020-2025 and noted that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected and will continue affecting the global policy, fiscal and operational environment of relevance to the Funding Strategy. Therefore, it would be necessary for the Committee to consider the

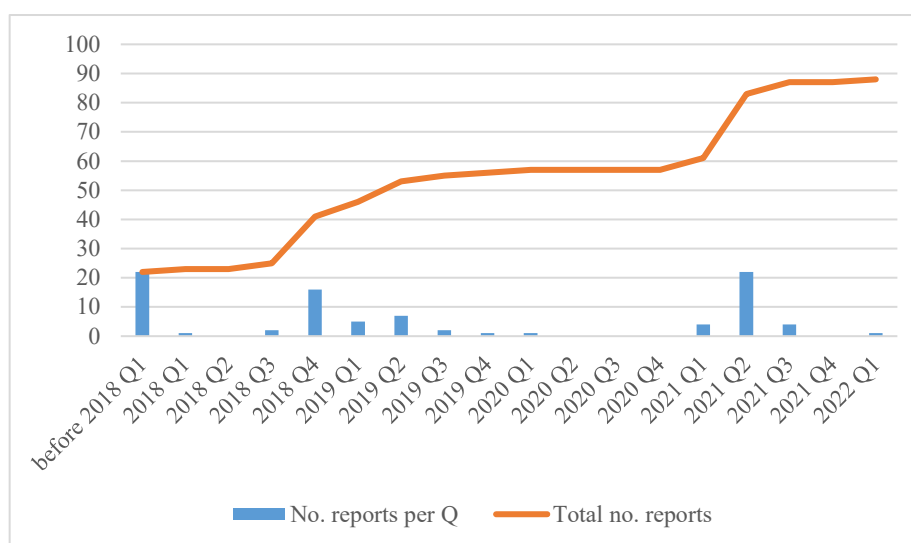
⁸ www.genebanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/2020-Genebank-Platform-Annual-Report.pdf.

impacts, challenges and opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in taking forward its work on Resource Mobilization and the Operational Plan. Along the same lines, the Committee considered that it might be necessary to consider the impacts, challenges and opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic in taking forward its work on BSF Operations.

Compliance

29. During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of national reports received under the compliance mechanism of the International Treaty significantly dropped. One report was received in early February 2020, shortly before the outbreak of COVID-19 as a global pandemic. No other report was received during 2020. In 2021, the Compliance Committee noted the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and made several recommendations to promote national reporting, including several capacity development measures.⁹ Following the implementation of these recommendations by the Secretary, the flow of national reports increased again during 2021.

Figure 3: National compliance reports received 2018–2022



Source: Secretariat of the International Treaty

30. When submitting their national reports in 2021, several Contracting Parties explicitly referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as having created substantive challenges to the reporting process, due to confinements, lack of access to information, and difficulties in connecting with relevant stakeholders.

Sustainable Use

31. The on-line toolbox on sustainable use hosts a database facilitating access to a selection of resources that are classified according to thematic and subject areas. Since May 2020, the database has been populated with resources on COVID-19. At the date of this document, 37 items on COVID-19 are available in the database, covering issues such as the strengthening of seed systems, the promotion of local crop diversity, the enhancement of crop diversity for local needs, and policy development.

IV. FOLLOW UP INITIATIVES

32. The analysis of COVID-19 impacts on the implementation of the International Treaty and the resulting mobilization of technical institutions led to two major follow-up initiatives in the biennium.

33. The Secretary, jointly with the Global Crop Diversity Trust, established and launched the Emergency Reserve for Germplasm Collections at Risk. The scope of the Reserve includes field

⁹ [IT/GB-9/CC-4/21/Record](#), paras. 6-7.

collections, which were found to be particularly at risk during COVID-19 restrictions. The Bureau and the Standing Funding Committee received progress reports on the initiative throughout the biennium. The document, IT/GB-9/22/16.2.3, *Report on the Emergency Reserve for Germplasm Collections at Risk*, contains information on the establishment of the Reserve, its operational framework and activities so far.¹⁰

34. As the vulnerability of clonal crop collections in the field or tissue culture was exposed during the pandemic, the Secretary informed the Bureau of the rising strategic priority of cryopreservation, which led to the organization of the webinar in June 2021. Following the webinar, CIP, Bioversity, IITA and CIAT collaborated with the Global Crop Diversity Trust and, in the framework of One-CGIAR to develop a Global Plant Cryopreservation Initiative through a network of three regional cryopreservation facilities. The document, IT/GB-9/22/16.4.2, *Reports from Institutions that have Concluded Agreements with the Governing Body under Article 15 of the International Treaty*, contains further information on the status of the initiative.¹¹

V. GUIDANCE SOUGHT

35. The Governing Body is invited to:

- Take note of the activities undertaken in the biennium in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and review the information collected on the impacts of the pandemic on the implementation of the International Treaty systems;
- Thank intersessional bodies, in particular, the Bureau and the Standing Funding Committee, for the advice and guidance they provided the Secretary to structure activities and initiatives in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and;
- Provide the guidance it considers appropriate in taking forward the International Treaty, including monitoring and assessing the long-term impacts, challenges and opportunities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

¹⁰ www.fao.org/3/ni848en/ni848en.pdf

¹¹ www.fao.org/3/ni851en/ni851en.pdf