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COMMISSION ON GENETIC RESOURCES FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Item 13 of the Provisional Agenda

Eighteenth Regular Session

27 September – 1 October 2021

POSSIBLE RE-ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMISSION'S FUTURE INTERSESSIONAL WORK

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Paragraphs
I. Introduction	1–3
II. Current organization of the Commission's intersessional work	4–13
III. Challenges for the Commission's intersessional work	14
IV. Options for strengthening the Commission's intersessional work	15–31
V. Next steps	32–33
VI. Guidance sought	34
<i>Appendix I:</i> Draft Terms of Reference of the National Focal Points for plant, aquatic and forest genetic resources and for biodiversity for food and agriculture and the National Coordinators for animal genetic resources	
<i>Appendix II:</i> Options for the organization of the Commission's intersessional work: financial and human resource implications	

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (Commission), at its Seventeenth Regular Session, requested the Secretary “to prepare an options paper setting out different options (and their financial implications) for the future organization of the Commission’s intersessional work, for consideration by the Intergovernmental Technical Working Groups (Working Groups) and the Commission at their next sessions, to:

- (a) address in a coherent, integrated and consistent way biodiversity for food and agriculture (BFA), including micro-organism and invertebrate genetic resources (MIGR); and
- (b) consider how to enhance coordination and communication among the Commission’s Working Groups, to raise awareness on subsectoral issues and strengthen coherence on cross-sectoral matters to effectively address the Commission’s mission and goals.”¹

2. In adopting the Work Plan for the Sustainable Use and Conservation of Micro-organism and Invertebrate Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture,² the Commission also requested FAO to present options with respect to the specifics of the Commission’s work on MIGR foreseen for its Nineteenth and Twentieth Regular Sessions, for discussion at its next session.³

3. This document gives a brief overview of the current organization of the Commission’s intersessional work. It describes the challenges the Commission’s intersessional work faces, and presents options for addressing them, including their financial, administrative and human-resource implications. The document concludes by suggesting a process that will enable the Commission to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the different options and to come to a conclusion on this matter.

II. CURRENT ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMISSION’S INTERSESSIONAL WORK

4. Since 1995 the Commission’s mandate “covers all components of biodiversity for food and agriculture.”⁴ According to its Statutes, the Commission shall have a coordinating role and shall deal with policy, sectoral and cross-sectoral matters related to the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources of relevance to food and agriculture.⁵

5. Since 1995, the work of the Commission has increasingly been shaped by: (i) its Working Groups and its other subsidiary bodies; (ii) the National Focal Points/National Coordinators; (iii) submissions from Members and observers; and (iv) the Bureau.

(i) Subsidiary bodies

6. In 1997, the Commission established two Working Groups, one for animal genetic resources for food and agriculture (AnGR) and one for plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (PGR).⁶ In 2009, the Commission established a Working Group on forest genetic resources (FGR)⁷ and in 2015 an Ad Hoc Working Group on aquatic genetic resources for food and agriculture (AqGR),⁸ which in 2019 became a regular Working Group.⁹

7. In 2011, the Commission established an Ad Hoc Technical Working Group on Access and Benefit-sharing for Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture,¹⁰ which was replaced two years later

¹ CGRFA-17/19/Report, paragraph 97.

² CGRFA-17/19/Report, *Appendix E*.

³ CGRFA-17/19/Report, paragraph 95.

⁴ FAO Conference Resolution 3/95.

⁵ Statutes of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, section 2.

⁶ CGRFA-7/97/REP, paragraph 10.

⁷ CGRFA-12/09/Report, paragraph 55.

⁸ CGRFA-15/15/Report, paragraph 63.

⁹ CGRFA-17/19/Report, paragraph 51.

¹⁰ CGRFA-13/11/Report, paragraph 60.

by the Team of Technical and Legal Experts on Access and Benefit-sharing (ABS Expert Team), a smaller group consisting of two experts from each region.¹¹

8. Occasionally, the Commission has also sought advice from less formal groups, such as the Group of National Focal Points for Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, which was established on an ad hoc basis in 2017 to review the needs and actions identified in the course of the preparation of *The State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture* (SoW-BFA), and the Expert Group on Micro-organism and Invertebrate Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, convened in 2018 to review the draft explanatory notes to the Elements to Facilitate Domestic Implementation of Access and Benefit-Sharing for Different Subsectors of Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ABS Elements).¹²

9. The Commission's subsidiary bodies have played a key role in preparing and reviewing deliverables related to their respective mandates. Without their work, many of the Commission's achievements over the last two decades would not have been possible. Any re-organization of the Commission's intersessional work should therefore strengthen the involvement of the Working Groups. At the same time, it will be important to re-organize the Commission's intersessional work in a way that reflects the importance of cross-sectoral matters for the Commission and facilitates intersectoral dialogue on those matters.

(ii) *National Focal Points/Coordinators*

10. The National Focal Points/Coordinators for the Commission and for biodiversity and plant, animal, forest and aquatic genetic resources are nominated by governments. With the exception of the National Focal Points for the Commission, most of them were originally nominated to coordinate country reports for the sectoral *State of the World* reports, although many of them have taken on multiple additional tasks in the meantime. Notwithstanding the important role National Focal Points/Coordinators play in the work of the Commission, their contribution lacks formal recognition. Formally adopted terms of reference only exist for the National Focal Points for the Commission.¹³

(iii) *Submissions by Members and observers*

11. On various occasions, the Commission has invited Members and observers to submit, in writing, information and comments for its consideration and for consideration by its subsidiary bodies. Intersessional submissions by Members and observers have helped to inform the work of the Commission to take Members' and observers' views into consideration in the preparation of the Commission sessions. Additional ways and means of exchanging views and facilitating interactive consultations during intersessional periods could strengthen the Commission's work.

(iv) *Bureau*

12. According to the Rules of Procedure, the Commission's Bureau shall provide guidance to the Secretary with regard to the preparations for, and conduct of, sessions of the Commission.¹⁴ The Bureau therefore plays an active role, including, in particular, in between the sessions of the Commission.

III. CHALLENGES FOR THE COMMISSION'S INTERSESSIONAL WORK

13. The need to re-consider the organization of the Commission's intersessional work is due to multiple reasons. These include:

- **Lack of subsidiary bodies dedicated to BFA and MIGR**
In line with the stepwise implementation of its extended mandate, the Commission increased the number of its subsidiary bodies over the past 25 years. However, it has neither a specialized body to consider MIGR nor an intersessional forum to address the totality of BFA.

¹¹ CGRFA-14/13/Report, paragraph 40.

¹² CGRFA-16/17/Report Rev.1, paragraph 25.

¹³ CGRFA-15/15/Report, *Appendix H*.

¹⁴ Rules of Procedure of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, Rule III.5.

- **Lack of interaction between Commission’s subsidiary bodies**
While the Commission has dedicated subsidiary bodies focusing on animal, aquatic, forest and plant genetic resources and on access and benefit-sharing, interaction between these bodies is very limited.
- **Lack of (cross-sectoral) interaction between National Focal Points/Coordinators**
While the Commission has National Focal Points for the Commission itself, for biodiversity and animal, aquatic, forest and plant genetic resources, there is little cross-sectoral interaction between them, be it at national or international level, and this despite the fact that exchange of information and experiences among National Focal Points/Coordinators is essential to improve the implementation and uptake of the Commission’s instruments.
- **Need to strengthen synergies with other global policy fora**
Since the Commission’s establishment in 1983, the global biodiversity policy landscape has undergone drastic changes. In its own interest, the Commission needs to interact and coordinate more effectively with relevant global policy fora, as well as FAO’s other work on biodiversity, including on the FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors.¹⁵

IV. OPTIONS FOR STRENGTHENING THE INTERSESSIONAL WORK OF THE COMMISSION

14. As recognized by the Commission and its Working Groups, there is a need to address BFA, including MIGR, in a coherent, integrated and consistent way, and to enhance coordination and communication among the Commission’s Working Groups and National Focal Points/Coordinators in order to raise awareness on subsectoral issues and strengthen coherence on cross-sectoral matters and hence more effectively address the Commission’s mission and goals.¹⁶

15. This section contains concrete suggestions with the aim of strengthening the role of National Focal Points/Coordinators and enhancing the intersessional work of the Commission by holding informal virtual and hybrid expert meetings. The section also presents a set of options for establishing new subsidiary bodies and re-organizing the work of existing subsidiary bodies of the Commission.

(i) Strengthening the role of National Focal Points/Coordinators

16. Adopting uniform Terms of Reference for the National Focal Points/Coordinators may help to clarify and strengthen their roles in the Commission’s work. Noting the need to enhance coordination and communication among National Focal Points/Coordinators within and across sectors and countries, the Working Groups welcomed the initiative to harmonize the expected core tasks of National Focal Points/Coordinators.¹⁷ Draft Terms of Reference of the National Focal Points for plant, aquatic and forest genetic resources and for biodiversity for food and agriculture and the National Coordinators for animal genetic resources, intended to define and strengthen their roles in the Commission’s work, including in the implementation and monitoring of the Commission’s instruments, are contained in *Appendix I* to this document.

(ii) Enhancing the Commission’s intersessional work through informal virtual and hybrid expert meetings

17. Based on experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, holding informal virtual/hybrid consultations workshops or expert meetings, including briefings convened in preparation for formal meetings, could enhance the Commission’s intersessional work. Informal virtual or hybrid meetings, including of National Focal Points/Coordinators, could facilitate information sharing and capacity development. The Working Groups welcomed the possibility of holding virtual and hybrid webinars, consultations or regional workshops, taking into account the need for inclusiveness and equal

¹⁵ CL 163/REP, paragraph 10g; FAO. 2020. *FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors*. Rome. (also available at <http://www.fao.org/3/ca7722en/CA7722EN.pdf>).

¹⁶ CGRFA-17/19/Report, paragraph 97; CGRFA-18/21/8.2, paragraph 46; CGRFA-18/21/9.1, paragraph 44; CGRFA-18/21/10.1, paragraph 46; CGRFA-18/21/12.1, paragraph 66.

¹⁷ CGRFA-18/21/9.1, paragraph 50; CGRFA-18/21/10.1 para 50; CGRFA-18/21/12.1 para 67

participation.¹⁸ The Commission could also consider convening sessions of its subsidiary bodies as hybrid meetings allowing a higher number of participants to attend these sessions.

(iii) *Governance model options for the re-organization of the Commission's intersessional work*

18. This subsection briefly presents different model options for the re-organization of the future work of the Commission's subsidiary bodies. These options are provided in order to inspire discussion and do not indicate any preferences for specific options on the part of the Organization or of the Commission Secretariat. Obviously, elements of the different options may be combined with other options.

19. The Working Groups recommended that the Commission consider, in its deliberations on the re-organization of its intersessional work, the limited resources available to countries and the Secretariat.¹⁹ An overview of the financial and human-resource implications of each option is given in *Appendix II* to this document.

**OPTION A:
STATUS QUO**

20. Given the cross-sectoral nature of BFA and the fact that MIGR play an important role in the management of all the GRFA already covered by existing Working Groups, the Commission could address BFA and MIGR during the intersessional period through its existing Working Groups. BFA and MIGR would thus be treated akin to the cross-sectoral matters on which the Commission often consults its Working Groups. On MIGR-related matters the Commission could decide on a case-by-case basis to consult only relevant Working Groups.

**OPTION B:
ADDITIONAL WORKING GROUP(S) FOR
BIODIVERSITY FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE/
MICRO-ORGANISM AND INVERTEBRATE GENETIC RESOURCES**

21. In order to address matters related to BFA and MIGR, the Commission could create a new Working Group for each of these topics (Option B.1) or one new Working Group responsible for both (Option B.2).

22. Under this option, the new Working Group(s) would follow the composition of the Commission's existing Working Groups, with the same number of Members, the same geographical balance²⁰ and the mandate to review the situation and issues related to BFA/MIGR, to advise and make recommendations to the Commission on these matters and to consider the progress made in implementing the Commission's programme of work, as well as any other matters referred to them by the Commission.

Option B.1: Separate Working Groups for MIGR and BFA

23. Following previous practice, the Commission could establish two new Working Groups, one to deal with BFA and one to deal with MIGR.

Option B.2: One Working Group for BFA and MIGR

24. The Commission could also establish one Working Group for both, BFA and MIGR.

**OPTION C:
SUBSIDIARY BODY FOR INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT OF
BIODIVERSITY FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE**

¹⁸ CGRFA-18/21/8.2, paragraph 47; CGRFA-18/21/9.1, paragraph 46; CGRFA-18/21/10.1, paragraph 47; CGRFA-18/21/12.1, paragraph 70.

¹⁹ CGRFA-18/21/9.1 paragraph 45; CGRFA-18/21/12.1 paragraph 65; CGRFA-18/21/10.1 paragraph 48.

²⁰ The Working Groups are composed of 28 Member Nations from the following regions: 5 from Africa; 5 from Europe; 5 from Asia; 5 from Latin America and the Caribbean; 4 from the Near East; 2 from North America; 2 from Southwest Pacific.

25. Rather than addressing BFA and MIGR through existing Working Groups (Option A) or creating one or two new Working Groups for them (Option B), the Commission could consider establishing a new Subsidiary Body for Integrated Management of BFA (SIM BFA), which would address the integration across all components of BFA, including PGR, AnGR, FGR, AqGR and MIGR, as well as consider the progress made in implementing the Commission's programme of work on BFA and MIGR (Option C.1). In addition, a small expert group could be established to support the SIM BFA on MIGR (Option C.2).

*Option C.1: Subsidiary Body for Integrated Management of Biodiversity
for Food and Agriculture*

26. The SIM BFA would be responsible for monitoring the implementation of the policy response to the SoW-BFA and would focus on integrated approaches that favour sustainable use and conservation of BFA, taking into account the contributions and limitations of each sector of GRFA.

27. To reflect its cross-sectoral mandate, the Subsidiary Body could be composed of, for example, one representative per region from each of the Commission's existing Working Groups and one representative per region with specific knowledge on integrated management of BFA. The SIM BFA would follow the basic idea of the workshop on access and benefit-sharing held in 2018.²¹

28. The SIM BFA could also be established as an expert group comparable to the ABS Expert Team, which currently consists of two representatives per region "each of whom has expertise in access and benefit-sharing and preferably in genetic resources for food and agriculture".²²

*Option C.2: Subsidiary Body for Integrated Management of Biodiversity
for Food and Agriculture and MIGR Expert Panel*

29. As Option C.1 does not provide a dedicated solution for MIGR, the SIM BFA could be assisted by a regionally representative MIGR Expert Panel consisting, for example, of one MIGR expert per region. Nominations of experts by the regions could be based on the functional group(s) of MIGR the Expert Panel would have to address.

OPTION D: JOINT SUBSIDIARY BODY

30. Rather than addressing BFA and MIGR through existing Working Groups (Option A), creating one or two new Working Groups for them (Option B), or creating a SIM BFA composed of one representative per region from each of the Commission's Working Groups in a new, separate body (Option C.1) (and, in addition, an expert group for MIGR (Option C.2), the Commission could also decide to establish a Joint Subsidiary Body for Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture (JSB BFA) consisting of *all* the Members of its Working Groups. In addition to the Members of the Commission's Working Groups, the JSB BFA could also include, for example, one additional Member per region with knowledge on integrated management of BFA. In this case, the Working Groups could meet in parallel for two days and, on the third day, the JSB BFA be convened to consider cross-sectoral matters, including BFA and MIGR. On day four, each Working Group could consider and adopt its meeting report in the morning; the JSB BFA would consider its report in the afternoon.

V. NEXT STEPS

31. The Commission, according to its Statutes, may establish intergovernmental technical sectoral working groups ("Sectoral Working Groups"), to assist it in the areas of plant, animal, forestry and fisheries genetic resources.²³ In addition, the Commission may establish other subsidiary bodies as it may deem necessary for the effective discharge of its functions.²⁴

32. The establishment of any sectoral Working Group or other subsidiary body shall be subject to the determination by the Director-General that the necessary funds are available in the relevant chapter of the budget of the Organization or from extra-budgetary sources and, before taking any decision

²¹ See above, paragraph 22.

²² CGRFA-14/13/Report, paragraph 40 (xiii).

²³ Statutes of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, section 3.

²⁴ Statutes of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, section 5.

involving expenditure in connection with the establishment of sectoral working groups or subsidiary bodies, the Commission shall have before it a report from the Director-General on the programme, the administrative and financial implications thereof.²⁵ Thus, should the Commission wish to establish an additional subsidiary body, it would have to follow these steps.

33. The Working Groups recommended that the options contained in the document be further analysed and discussed before a decision is made.²⁶ It is therefore suggested to agree on a process that will allow Members to identify relevant options, their advantages and disadvantages and agree on the re-organization of its intersessional work.

VI. GUIDANCE SOUGHT

34. The Commission may wish to:

- i. review and revise, as appropriate, the Terms of Reference for the National Focal Points/Coordinators contained in *Appendix I* to this document;
- ii. welcome the possibility of holding virtual and hybrid webinars, consultations or regional workshops, taking into account the need for inclusiveness and equal participation; and
- iii. mandate its Bureau to conduct informal open-ended consultations with the aim to:
 - develop, in a first step, criteria against which the different options for the re-organization of the Commission's intersessional work should be assessed;
 - review and revise, as appropriate, the options contained in the present document, with a view to establish a set of options that reflects all views Members and the Working Groups hold with regard to the re-organization of the Commission's work; and
 - assess the set of consolidated options against the criteria identified, with a view to agree on recommendations for the re-organization of the Commission's intersessional work, for consideration by the Commission at its Nineteenth Regular Session.

²⁵ Statutes of the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, section 6.

²⁶ CGRFA-18/21/10.1 paragraph 49; CGRFA-18/21/9.1.

APPENDIX I

DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE OF THE NATIONAL FOCAL POINTS FOR PLANT, AQUATIC AND FOREST GENETIC RESOURCES AND FOR BIODIVERSITY FOR FOOD AND AGRICULTURE AND THE NATIONAL COORDINATORS FOR ANIMAL GENETIC RESOURCES

The National Focal Points for plant, aquatic and forest genetic resources and for biodiversity for food and agriculture and the National Coordinators for animal genetic resources serve as national contact persons for communication with FAO and its Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (Commission) with regard to work on the respective genetic resources or components of biodiversity. They play a coordinating role at national level, including with regard to the preparation of inputs to the Commission's global assessments and, as appropriate, the implementation and monitoring of global plans of action and other relevant instruments. In the execution/deployment of their function, National Focal Points/ Coordinators may delegate to their alternates or other stakeholders.

The tasks of National Focal Points and National Coordinators may include:

- responding to requests from the Commission and suggestions by the Commission's subsidiary bodies and FAO, including, as appropriate, by coordinating joint responses from relevant stakeholders at national level;
- coordinating the preparation of national inputs to the Commission's global assessments (country reports);
- supporting and facilitating national implementation of global plans of action and other relevant instruments, as appropriate, at technical and policy level, including, as appropriate, the development or review of national strategy and action plans and other relevant sectoral and cross-sectoral policies and programmes and the establishment or strengthening of national stakeholder networks;
- coordinating the preparation of national inputs to the monitoring of the implementation of global plans of action and other relevant instruments, as appropriate;
- coordinating, as appropriate, the collection and management of national data on relevant genetic resources and components of biodiversity (including data relevant to the monitoring of relevant Sustainable Development Goal targets) and the reporting and management of these data at global level via appropriate information systems;
- coordinating national preparation for meetings of relevant subsidiary bodies of the Commission, as appropriate, including by ensuring that relevant stakeholders (ministry officials, technical experts, producers' organizations, indigenous peoples and local communities, etc.) are informed in good time of the dates and agendas of these meetings, that relevant inputs are obtained from these stakeholders and that any necessary stakeholder consultations are organized;
- coordinating, as appropriate, the identification of experts and stakeholders to participate in meetings, consultations and assessment processes initiated by the Commission, its subsidiary bodies or FAO;
- providing support to the Bureaus of relevant subsidiary bodies of the Commission to ensure effective two-way communication between national and the regional levels;
- strengthening links with the country's national focal point for the Commission and other national focal points/national coordinators to promote interagency and cross-sectoral communication and collaboration;
- collaborating, as appropriate, with national focal points and national coordinators in other countries, and regional focal points and networks where established, to facilitate sectoral and

cross-sectoral work, including particularly the work of the Commission and the implementation of instruments developed by the Commission; and

- supporting and facilitating, as appropriate, the preparation of communication materials on relevant genetic resources and components of biodiversity and their contributions to food security and rural development, for relevant stakeholders, including government officials, producers, the media and the general public.

APPENDIX II

**OPTIONS FOR THE ORGANIZATION OF THE COMMISSION'S INTERSESSIONAL
WORK: FINANCIAL AND HUMAN RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

MEETING COSTS (UNITS)

	Option A	Option B.1	Option B.2	Option C.1	Option C.2	Option D
Groups	No new body	2 new WGs (BFA/ MIGR)	1 new WG- (BFA& MIGR)	1 new body (SIM BFA)	1 new body(SIM BFA) & MIGR Experts	1 new body (JSB BFA)
No of <i>all</i> sessions with interpretation	20 (4*5)	30 (6*5)	25 (5*5)	25 (WG: 4*5 SIM:1*5)	25 (WG: 4*5 SIM:1*5)	23 (WG: 4*5 JSB: 1*3)
Duration	4*2.5 days	6*2.5 days	5*2.5 days	5*2.5 days	5*2.5 days	4*2.5 days 1*1.5 days
Translation		Every new body will require the preparation of additional documents and an additional report.				

HUMAN RESOURCES (units)

	Option A	Option B.1	Option B.2	Option C.1	Option C.2	Option D
Groups	No new body	2 WG-style new bodies (BFA/ MIGR)	1 new WG (BFA & MIGR)	1 new body (SIM BFA)	1 new body (SIM BFA) & MIGR Experts	1 new body (JSB BFA)
Secretariat (P-4/ biennium)	-	1 new post	1 new post	1 new post	1 new post	1 new post

NUMBER OF MEMBERS

	Option A	Option B.1	Option B.2	Option C.1	Option C.2	Option D	
Groups	Working Group	No new body: 4 WGs	2 new WGs (BFA/ MIGR)	1 new WG (BFA & MIGR)	1 new body (SIM BFA)	1 new body (SIM BFA) & MIGR Experts	1 new body (JSB BFA) & BFA experts
Number of groups	1	4	6	5	5	5	5
Number of members of new group(s)			56	28	35 (7 per WG +7 BFA)	42 (35 + 7 MIGR)	117 (28 per WG + 7 BFA)
Total number of group members, incl. of existing WGs	28	112	168	140	147 (112+35)	154 (112+42)	231 (112+112 +7)

Note: For the purpose of the above tables, it is assumed that the SIM BFA (Option C.1 & C.2) is composed of one representative per region from each of the Commission's existing Working Groups and one representative per region with specific knowledge on integrated management of BFA. The MIGR expert team (Option C.2) is considered to consist of one expert per region. The JSB BFA (Option D) is considered to be composed of all members of the Commission's Working Groups and one expert per region with specific knowledge on integrated management of BFA.