

FACTS ABOUT THE IBPGR



International Board for Plant Genetic Resources

What is the Board's purpose?

The basic function is to promote the collection, conservation, evaluation, utilization and exchange of plant genetic resources.

The heritable diversity of the world's plants is being lost at an alarming rate as old varieties of crop plants are discarded in favour of new ones and plant habitats are destroyed by changes in land use.

International endeavour to conserve plant genetic diversity is considered imperative to provide for successful plant improvement in the future.

What is the origin of the IBPGR?

The Board is an international entity established in 1974 by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The CGIAR, which is co-sponsored by FAO, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, is an informal group of donor governments, international organizations and foundations organized to support international agricultural research for the improvement of food production in developing countries. The CGIAR has 47 members and is now providing about US \$160 million annually to 12 international research centres and the IBPGR.

Who serves on the Board?

The Board consists of 17 members: a Chairman, 13 members elected by the CGIAR upon the recommendation of the IBPGR, one

representative designated by FAO, one by UNEP, and an Executive Secretary. The elected members serve in an individual capacity, not as government representatives. The Chairman is elected by the members in consultation with the Director General of FAO. At least four of the members must be from developing countries; currently there are seven.

What is the period of service?

Elected members of the Board serve for three years but two consecutive terms of office are allowed. Vacancies among the elected members are filled by the CGIAR on the recommendation of the Board.

How does the Board work?

The Board meets once a year at FAO and the Executive Committee, with authority to act for the Board, meets three times a year. The present Executive Committee consists of the Chairman, the Vice Chairman, four Board members, the FAO representative on the Board, and the Executive Secretary.

The Board has a full-time Secretariat with responsibility for administering, or supervising the administration of the programmes and projects approved by the Board and for providing scientific and technical advice. Crop Advisory Committees report to the Board on subjects of direct concern to its programmes. Senior scientists are engaged as consultants for special topics.

The Crop Genetic Resources Centre of FAO provides the Secretariat for the Board. The Secretariat consists of the Executive Secretary

and 13 other full-time professional staff members, of whom six are outposted in regions of the world of particular significance for genetic resource activities. Professional staff are supported by 16 members of general service staff – 11 at FAO Headquarters and five in the field.

What are the sources of the Board's funds?

The Board has a central fund, held in trust by FAO, which is replenished annually by contributions from governments, foundations and international organizations that are members of the CGIAR. The fund is about US \$3.8 million annually.

The IBPGR uses its funds to help finance the many programmes which the Board has either initiated or approved and to meet those administrative costs that are not met by FAO.

What plant germplasm is included in the IBPGR programme?

The Board is mainly concerned with endangered material including traditional cultivars (varieties), landraces and wild relatives of cultivated plants.

Using criteria such as threatened loss, economic and social importance, and research needs, Crop Advisory Committees and *ad hoc* Working Groups established by the IBPGR have helped the Board to select from the vast array of plants in need of attention, those that merit special priority. Initially the Board focused on major cereals (wheat, maize, rice, sorghum and millets) and pulses. It then phased in root, tuber and vegetable crops, minor cereals and minor pulses

and has now progressed to some fruit crops, industrial plants, forage grasses and legumes and trees for special purposes.

What are the obligations that must be met by a genebank in the Board's global network?

Apart from meeting certain technical conservation requirements, the host government and/or genebank undertakes by Letter of Agreement to ensure that:

- i) adequate operating funds and personnel are available to maintain the collection;
- ii) FAO/IBPGR is informed immediately if continued maintenance of the collection is threatened;
- iii) samples of the materials in the collection, and information about those materials, are made freely available on request to plant scientists; and
- iv) arrangements are made to duplicate the collection for safety.

What are the main objectives of the programme?

The Board's main objectives are as follows:

- to stimulate, guide and co-ordinate global activities on plant genetic resources;
- to obtain and collate information about existing collections in order to judge their value for breeding programmes;

- to support collecting missions in order to acquire comprehensive samples of the genetic diversity of each species;
- to encourage the development of a world-wide network of genebanks where plant genetic diversity is safely stored;
- to compile and distribute standard information on plant collections;
- to encourage the unrestricted exchange of plant genetic resources for the advancement of agriculture.

What has the Board accomplished so far?

The Board has:

- gained world-wide recognition for co-ordinating plant genetic resources activities on a global scale. Currently, research centres and agricultural scientists in almost 100 countries are collaborating with the Board;
- developed excellent working relations with the International Agricultural Research Centres and with national institutions dealing with plant genetic resources;
- arranged and helped to finance some 250 collecting missions in more than 70 countries;
- provided basic equipment for national genebanks in 20 developing countries, and financial support in four countries for the establishment of collections of crops propagated by vegetative means;
- designated 38 centres in 29 countries for the long-term storage (base collections) of 30 crops or groups of crops that produce seeds. Of these centres, 23 are located in 18

developing countries. Attention is now turning to the designation of centres for medium-term seed storage (active collections) and for the maintenance of collections of vegetatively propagated crops;

- published directories of extant collections of genetic resources of rice, wheat, barley, sorghum, millets, maize, food legumes, root crops, some cash crops and vegetables;
- given financial support towards the characterization and evaluation of plant collections in 26 countries;
- issued descriptor lists for over 37 crop plants, designed to enable information about different samples to be catalogued in a standard way (45 more are in course of preparation);
- organized and financed more than 30 Advisory Committees and Working Groups on major crop plants and technical subjects;
- arranged and/or given financial assistance to regional inter-governmental consultative meetings on plant genetic resources;
- arranged and/or given financial assistance for training courses; for example, 160 trainees have attended a specialized graduate-level course on the conservation and utilization of plant genetic resources at the University of Birmingham, England, for which the Board provides financial support. In addition, 450 trainees from developing countries have attended short technical courses in Birmingham and at numerous agricultural research institutes, many of which have been organized by the Board itself;
- financed applied research on aspects of seed physiology and tissue culture that relate directly to the development of safe and cost-effective techniques for the storage of plant material;
- sponsored more than 130 publications on topics related to plant genetic resources: descriptor lists, surveys of the

variability of crop plants, analytical pamphlets on the problems of plant quarantine, seed physiology and tissue culture, a quarterly newsletter and regional newsletters;

encouraged and assisted in the development of appropriate documentation and information retrieval systems to facilitate exchange of information and plant materials among the genetic resources centres in the Board's international network. In the last five years, computer hardware, software, training and advice have been given to 23 institutes in developing countries; 12 or more have received microcomputers.

What of the Board's future?

It is essential that the Board evolves to meet future needs.

Its present aim is to have by the end of the decade, representative seed samples of all plants of major economic significance stored as base collections; and during the same period to complete the designation of a global network of genebanks for them. Collections of certain selected crop plants that are propagated vegetatively will also be established.

Evaluation of plant genetic resources is likely to emerge as a major activity. Regeneration, multiplication and documentation must continue as important functions.

It will be essential to develop a network to facilitate a wide dissemination of information necessary for the fullest utilization of plant genetic resources in crop improvement programmes.