

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF GENETIC RESOURCES
IN ENSURING FOOD SECURITY IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Nordic Council of Ministers' luncheon event
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Welcome and concluding remarks by
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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers, I am pleased to welcome you all to our lunchtime event on "the crucial role of genetic resources in ensuring food security in a changing climate". In the Nordic group of countries we take turns at presiding over the Council of Ministers one year at a time. This time around that honour has been conferred on my country, Iceland.

As you may know, the five Nordic countries, Finland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, are all substantial food producers. They have also developed mutual, close cooperation among themselves in the areas of land-use, fisheries and food production, as well as in environmental affairs.

As part of that cooperation, the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources has come to play a prominent role over the past thirty years. Moreover, development cooperation in this area has been extended to other parts of the world, especially in Africa. Later this afternoon, we will learn more about Nordic cooperation projects with countries in this particular region.

Climate change is currently high on the Nordic countries' agenda (as elsewhere, I might add), especially in the run-up to COP15 in Copenhagen later this year. In the Nordic countries, we have taken the view that our own regional cooperation on genetic resources can be a useful fountain of experience for others as we work to adapt our food production to new climatic circumstances.

Looking further afield, the Nordic countries would welcome more attention being given to the interrelationship between climate change, genetic resources and food security at the global level, which is one major reason why the Nordic Council of Ministers has taken the initiative in organizing today's event on the margin of the CSD.

I hope that you will find the agenda we have put together for you both timely and relevant, particularly in the context of the CSD's current biennial work programme.

CONCLUDING REMARKS (as delivered)

The presentations as well as the subsequent discussion we have heard today have been an eye opener for many of us.

One thing that has been born out clearly is the complex relationship that exists between genetic resources, food security and climate change. We live at a time when the ecosystem is coming under increasing strain, owing to the imperative need to feed a growing world population; a time when accelerating climate change is also causing the loss of biological diversity and creating greater uncertainty about future food security, especially, of course, in the drylands that a third of humanity calls home. Today, we have heard some pretty sobering projections from one of the speakers regarding the impact of rising temperatures on crop productivity in Southern Africa.

It is under circumstances like this that we need to think more than ever in terms of creative, progressive solutions. Obviously, the way we study and use genetic resources – and apply them to food production – has a great deal to do with how we adapt our societies to meet the impacts of climate change.

We have heard some success stories today, including on the global seed vault in Svalbard. This must be featured as “exhibit number one” when it comes to possible future avenues for working together in this field. I noted that the project was warmly applauded in the room. One speaker informed us of the Nordic-African project in the area of plant genetic resources, which has been most effective in building up infrastructure and developing human capacities.

But we have also learned something about the problems and obstacles that attach to the sustainable use of genetic resources. These include the chronic lack of financial resources devoted to agricultural research and development. We are all concerned that the current global financial and economic situation could make a bad situation worse. One speaker talked about the need to improve the utilization of conserved genetic resources in the Southern African region. Last but not least, I was struck by the information shared with us by another speaker, who pointed out that a third of all existing animal breeds in the world are coming under threat from unsustainable breeding practices, which obviously raises a number of red flags.

Despite such challenges, I think the overall message from today’s event has been one of encouragement and hope, in terms of the great potential that awaits us in the area of genetic resources, especially in a North/South context, provided we can muster the necessary financial resources and will to pursue these opportunities. For this to happen, we must find a suitable mechanism for linking genetic resources to the ongoing climate change talks, as one of the speakers observed.

On behalf of the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers I want to thank our moderator for conducting our proceedings today, the presenters for their excellent contributions and all of you, our guests for joining us on this occasion and for taking part in our discussion today. Last but not least, I want to thank the secretariat of the Nordic Council of Ministers for making our event possible. I hope it has been worth your while.