Agrobiodiversity management by adoption of the international treaty on plant genetic resources for food and agriculture

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Seven years of often difficult negotiations bore fruit on 3 November 2001 when the 180-nation FAO Conference adopted an International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. Hailed by FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf as "a milestone", the Treaty represents global agreement on a critical issue: management of the worldis agricultural biodiversity. Food security has always depended on the open exchange of crops and crop germplasm, which farmers throughout the world have built up over 10,000 years. Since agriculture began, more than 7,000 species have been used as food or animal feed and 30 crops now provide 95% of our food energy (wheat, rice and maize alone provide more than 50%). Most of these plant genetic resources cannot survive in the wild and are maintained, literally, in farmersi fields, mainly in developing countries. But the widespread adoption of a small number of modern cultivars has led to the rapid erosion of diversity. In an attempt to save it, large-scale ex situ genebanks have been established worldwide: the CGIARis International Agricultural Research Centers, for example, now hold more than 600,000 crop samples. For its part, FAO adopted in 1983 an International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, a voluntary agreement adhered to by 113 countries and aimed at promoting "international harmony in matters regarding access" to plant agrobiodiversity.