

Editor's note:

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IPGRI's influence on the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

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Introduction

Although it is often assumed that international organizations are politically influential, the extent of their influence is seldom assessed. This study evaluated the political influence exerted by the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) in relation to international negotiations on the revision of the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources (1996–2001). The latter was the first international agreement governing the conservation and use of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture. Originally formulated in 1983, the agreement subsequently underwent considerable revision, particularly after the adoption of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1994. After 7 years of negotiations, the revised International Undertaking was finally adopted on 3 November 2001, when it became known as the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture. IPGRI was involved in all stages of the negotiations, and this study assessed the level of IPGRI's influence on the negotiations and examined the ways in which that influence was exerted.

Methods

The methodology used for this study, known as the 'EAR' method, was developed specifically to assess political influence in complex decision-making processes. The method involves collecting data from three perspectives: the ego-perspective (E), the alter-perspective (A), and the researcher's perspective (R). In this study, the ego-perspective was obtained by interviewing the IPGRI staff who had been involved in the negotiations. Their perceptions of their own influence were then cross-referenced with those of representatives from the Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA) and others involved in the negotiations. Finally, the validity of these perceptions was tested against various types of documentary evidence, including the Earth Negotiations Bulletin and other official documents. The first priority was to verify that IPGRI had achieved its policy goals (either fully or partially). If a particular goal had been achieved, 'counterfactual analysis' was used to assess whether the outcome would have been achieved even if IPGRI had not participated in the negotiations. In cases in which specific goals were not achieved, it was assumed that IPGRI had exerted no influence.

Results and conclusions

The study found that IPGRI achieved most of its main policy goals in the negotiations, and exerted most influence in three particular areas, namely ensuring access to plant genetic resources for conservation, securing a multilateral system of germplasm exchange and broadening the scope of the treaty to include most of the crops covered by the mandate of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The final version of the treaty thus ensures that the germplasm collections maintained by the CGIAR will continue to be considered international public goods and remain freely accessible for research and conservation. However, although most of the crops covered by the CGIAR mandate are included in the treaty, IPGRI failed to achieve its initial objective of having all of these crops included.

Both the ego- and alter-perspectives confirmed IPGRI's role in promoting access to plant germplasm for conservation purposes. However, in other instances there were some differences between the views of IPGRI staff and those providing the alter-perspective. For example, most respondents within IPGRI assumed that the institute had been one of the main proponents of the multilateral system of access and benefit sharing. Certainly the adoption of such a system had always been IPGRI's primary policy objective. However, the alter-perspective of IPGRI's role in this regard was quite different to that of IPGRI staff: IPGRI was viewed neither as the initiator of the idea nor as being solely responsible for its inclusion in the treaty. Ultimately, such differences had to be resolved by further analysis and reference to other sources.

Although there were some differences between the ego- and alter-respondents in their perceptions of the main issues influenced by IPGRI, they generally agreed that the institute

exerted most influence through the provision of scientific and technical information. The alter-respondents considered such information to be particularly valuable, since it facilitated decision-making by clarifying policy alternatives and technical questions that were not fully understood by some delegates. In this respect, the content and timeliness of IPGRI's contributions—as well as the organization's political neutrality and reliability—were all considered particularly important with regard to IPGRI's ability to influence the negotiations.

However, although IPGRI's scientific contributions were considered influential, the organization was much less successful when attempting to address the political merits of different policy options. This was particularly true where matters of benefit distribution were concerned (for example, in relation to the intellectual property provisions of the agreement). IPGRI's lack of influence in this sphere can be at least partially explained by the fact that it had no formal voting rights and hence had much less decision-making authority and responsibility compared to national delegations.

According to one alter-respondent, IPGRI was perceived to have gone through three phases during the course of the negotiations. The first was an exploration or discovery phase in which the institute sought to identify the best way in which to contribute. In the second phase, IPGRI became involved in the bargaining process and began to propose ways in which various issues could be resolved. On the whole, it would appear that IPGRI's attempts in this regard were not well received, since the institute's proposals were perceived by some delegates as favouring some participants over others. In the third and last phase, IPGRI focused on providing timely and relevant information—a role in which, ultimately, it was considered to have been most influential.

Overall, this study confirmed that it is possible for an international organization such as IPGRI to exert influence on international negotiations, particularly by providing specialist knowledge and technical information.



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