WHO BENEFITS FROM CGIAR GERMPLASM?

Washington, D.C., October 25--The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) holds some 500,000 samples of plant germplasm at 12 of its 17 research Centers. These samples -- held in public trust for the benefit of all humanity -- are an invaluable resource for crop improvement work in and for developing countries. The germplasm has been assembled by a collaborative collecting program involving national research institutes in 120 countries, including donations by these countries.

The collections -- native varieties, wild relatives of crops as well as improved varieties -- provide the basis for CGIAR's research that benefits the world's poor, most of whom live in developing countries.

For example, wheats developed at a CGIAR Center in Mexico, CIMMYT, have contributed to varieties grown on 55 million hectares, more than two-thirds of the wheat area in developing countries. The estimated contribution of CIMMYT's genetic improvement work to the total value of developing country wheat production is $825 million per year.

The CGIAR-improved varieties of rice, the most important staple food in the world's poor countries, provided similar benefits. More than two-thirds of all rice grown in developing countries contains germplasm developed with inputs from CGIAR Centers.

The CGIAR has also contributed to the improvement of other food crops such as maize, sorghum, millet, cassava, potato and legumes, widely grown in developing countries and consumed largely by the poor.

National programs in developing countries use CGIAR germplasm in their crop improvement work. The CGIAR has strengthened national programs by training more than 30,000 scientists and disseminating information on plant genetic resources. Every year the CGIAR distributes more than 600,000 samples free of charge, mainly to developing countries.
The CGIAR’s genebanks also serve as a safety net for national collections by replacing invaluable national and local foodcrop varieties lost due to natural and man-made disasters in countries such as Cambodia, Somalia and more recently, Rwanda.

The reliance of nations on genetic resources originating outside of their borders is a fact of life, and requires the continued global flow of germplasm. For example, maize, one of Africa’s most important crops, originated in Central America. Potatoes, native to the Andean region, are now grown in more than 100 developed and developing countries. There is an inherent spinoff from such exchanges. CGIAR research on crops critical to the food needs of developing countries also benefits developed countries. For example, genetic material from the CGIAR is also being used in foodcrop varieties grown in the North. The total contribution of CGIAR germplasm to the wheat production of developed countries, for instance, has an annual estimated value of $375 million.

The CGIAR’s collection of publicly-held germplasm is a unique and irreplaceable resource necessary to support research that will feed the world’s growing population. The CGIAR is committed to its role as a responsible trustee of these precious genetic resources. This commitment will be further strengthened tomorrow when it signs an agreement with the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) regarding the future trusteeship role of the CGIAR Centers in keeping with the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Under the CGIAR-FAO agreement, the Centers confirm that they will not allow any intellectual property protection on the germplasm but will ensure that it remains available for the benefit of present and future generations.

* * *