

Reflecting on twenty years of achievements

It is a special pleasure to bring you this 20th Anniversary edition of the INIBAP annual report – and, with it, to have the opportunity to reflect a little on what has changed and what has remained the same over these two decades of networking for banana and plantain research.

In line with our philosophy as a learning organization – to hold on to what is good, but always be ready to evolve – this Annual Report has a similar 'look and feel' to the last three. It has four articles which explore different subjects in some depth, followed by an institutional summary of our current research agenda, governance and finances. It will be available in all three of our working languages: Spanish, French and English. We also complete our artistic tour of the regions with a cover from Africa. However, the content of the articles are rather different in that, instead of looking at a particular project experience, we have tried to draw together a reflection on the current 'state of the art' in each of our main areas of concern: conserving *Musa* diversity, understanding that diversity (especially through molecular studies), using both genetic diversity itself and our knowledge of diversity in crop breeding, and managing diversity for more sustainable production and more profitable post-harvest market links.

For the core of each article, we are indebted to four specialists who came together to offer the keynote addresses at a special "Symposium on the Conservation and Use of *Musa* Diversity for Improving Livelihoods" that we convened in Leuven, Belgium, as part of our 20th Anniversary celebrations. Rony Swennen of the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* (the institution that hosts our international genebank) addressed the subject of conservation; Pat Heslop-Harrison of the University of Leicester explained some of the mysteries of genomics;

Michael Pillay of IITA highlighted the challenges of breeding bananas; and Franklin Rosales, INIBAP's Regional Coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean, reviewed our work, with partners, on the ecology of production systems and post-production. Our science writer and editor, Anne Vézina, while preserving the substance of the original presentations, has given them a coherent voice and enriched them with additional insights of her own.

So, what have we learned in these twenty years of often frenetic effort? The founding Director of INIBAP, Prof. Edmond De Langhe, wrote in the introduction to the first INIBAP Annual Report that "the main thrust of INIBAP's mission in this first phase, as the network establishes its presence throughout the developing regions, is to interact with as many concerned people and institutions as possible. It is by forging harmonious links, at human and institutional levels, that we will evolve successfully toward the creation of a dynamic research network...". Banana researchers are perhaps not the scattered and beleaguered band that



they were twenty years ago. And perhaps INIBAP can take some of the credit for linking them together into a more potent force for constructive change. Certainly, promoting constructive exchanges between *Musa* researchers remains at the heart of our business and the Pre*Musa* Working Group convenors (who are drawn from partner organizations, not from INIBAP's staff) recognized this as one of the most appreciated achievements of the network, when they assembled in Montpellier in May 2005 to discuss the way ahead.

INIBAP's second Director, Nicolas Mateo, reflecting on the issues confronting the network some ten years ago, identified:

- The challenge of explaining, especially to donors, the concept and the implications of network economics. How could we convince skeptics that a networking approach to germplasm maintenance, cleaning, testing and distribution represented a more cost-effective instrument than investing in new and costly infrastructure?
- The promise of biotechnology (perhaps initially over-sold) as the key tool to solve most challenges in *Musa* production and in particular those of pests and diseases; and



Dr Denis Kyetere, Chair of the INIBAP Support Group, opens the itinerant exhibition No end to the banana as part of the 20th anniversary celebration in Leuven.

• The need and the expectation of achieving impact at the level of farmers and consumers, in order to increase competitiveness, reduce rural poverty and contribute to the proper management of natural resources.

Certainly we still struggle to convince some research planners that our peer-networking approach offers a more effective solution than linear technology-development-and-transfer models; we still wrestle with decisions about how much to invest in the latest biotechnology advances and how much in the more down-to-earth technologies, like composting; and our latest major project funded by Belgium's Directorate General of Development Cooperation operates along the whole length of the impact pathway, from basic research into mechanisms of stress tolerance, through evaluation and deployment of productive varieties, to process and market links.

One vital ingredient that has not changed is the commitment of our staff. Dr. Mateo noted that "facing the above challenges was possible and bear-

The directors of INIBAP, from left to right: Edmond De Langhe, Nicolas Mateo, Emile Frison and Richard Markham. Prof. De Langhe is still a very active member of the INIBAP family, participating in the Taxonomy Advisory Group and still helping us to round up new germplasm for the genebank, especially from the Congo basin. Dr. Mateo is now Executive Secretary of the Regional Fund for Agricultural Technology (FONTAGRO) of the Inter-American Development Bank, an organization that is an important partner of INIBAP's network for Latin America and the Caribbean, MUSALAC.



able due to a most important factor: a small group of individuals at INIBAP with a strong dedication and a clear sense of purpose!" Though INIBAP's staff has grown from just a half-dozen at the beginning to almost 40 in 2005, this still feels like a small group to tackle the many activities in our ever-broader agenda and all are prepared to 'go the extra mile' to fulfill our mission.

In the midst of so much continuity, what has changed? Certainly the threats from many of the same major pests and diseases continue to make the headlines (though sometimes with new recruits joining the battle, such as the bacterial wilt that is now decimating bananas in Central Africa). We still emphasize new varieties as an important part of the solution to many of these problems. However, if we seek to identify an over-arching theme it is perhaps that, with a growing appreciation of the complexity of the world in which the smallholder farmer must operate, we no longer expect to solve problems by providing a single new technology. We seek to offer farmers a range of options from which to choose. On the conceptual side, these are unified by a paradigm of managing diversity in the production system at various levels and for various positive outcomes.

Dr Frison, who presided over the period of most active growth in INIBAP's history, is now Director General of IPGRI where he has led the development of the new strategy Diversity for Well-being. Dr Markham is seeking to integrate our work on banana with that on cacao and coconut within IPGRI's Commodities for Livelihood programme. Background image: INIBAP's budget growth, from 1987 to 2005, from US\$ 0.5 to US\$ 6.8 million.

We increasingly emphasize the importance of the various human dimensions involved in technology adaptation and adoption, including the market forces and policy environment that affect us all.

Above all, however, we continue to work with people. The INIBAP network has always been concerned with building human capital, through training and information dissemination, and has done its best to bring people in the banana research-and-development community together. As our agenda evolves, we increasingly emphasize the people who are the intended end-users of our innovations: the smallholder banana farmers and their communities in developing countries. It is fitting therefore that we enter this next phase of our development guided by the new strategy, *Diversity for well-being*, of our parent organization, IPGRI, that focuses explicitly on meeting the needs of people.

In December 2006, not long after this Annual Report is published, IPGRI and INIBAP will take a further important step by changing the name of the combined organizations to Bioversity International. The full implications of this change remain to be worked out as this report goes to press. However, when Bioversity releases its new logo, we shall take this opportunity to drop the use of a separate logo for INIBAP. For historical reasons and to benefit from the recognition of our 'brand' with donors and other partners, we shall retain the name of INIBAP but we shall apply it more strictly to the genetic resources networking that was our original 'core business'. And we shall recognize this step as symbolizing the completion of the process of integrating INIBAP and IPGRI.

Until such time as the French government concludes an establishment agreement with IPGRI, allowing for the legal winding up of INIBAP as a separate organization in France, we shall continue to publish separate accounts and an annual report. However, in future this is likely to be a much more modest and formal document. We shall, however, reallocate the resources that were previously tied up in this publication and use them to reinforce our efforts to serve the banana research and development community by providing other kinds of 'knowledge products' – published on paper and on the Internet. We therefore urge our readers to sign up for one or more of the ProMusa Working Groups and to monitor our website more frequently for the latest development in networking banana and plantain research for the benefit of people.

Emile Frison

Richard Markham