

## How INIBAP was born

Although bananas and plantains (*Musa* spp.) are reputedly the fourth most important food staples in the world, until fairly recently these crops were largely ignored by national agricultural research institutes in developing countries. In the early 1980s, the long-established banana breeding programme in the Caribbean was dormant. Only Brazil, India, Nigeria, the Philippines and the East Caribbean had research programmes on *Musa*, albeit inadequately staffed and funded ones. Elsewhere, research on *Musa* was mainly the work of a handful of scientists working on individual research projects. The one exception was Honduras, where a private company had just handed over its breeding and pathology research programme on export bananas to the national government.

In developed countries, the *Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement* (Cirad) had the most important research programme on *Musa* with antennas in Montpellier, the Guadeloupe and French-speaking Africa. Australia had a smaller, but nevertheless important research programme.

A major reason for this relative neglect was the widespread misconception in the developed world that the banana was an export crop whose marketing and production is mainly the responsibility of large multinational companies, even though in the 1980s the proportion of the global *Musa* production that was exported as dessert bananas was, at 7%, even lower than today's. As is still the case, most of the bananas and plantains produced in the tropics are consumed locally.

Around the same time, however, scientists were cumulating achievements with the other major crops, and interest was gathering to develop, fund and coordinate actions on *Musa* at the international level. The main concerns were the narrow genetic base of the crop and the rapidly spreading black leaf streak disease, caused by the

fungus *Mycosphaerella fijiensis*, that was devastating banana fields.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, which were free of black leaf streak disease at the time, the call for international assistance originated with ACORBAT, a regional association of scientists involved in research or extension work on *Musa* and their production systems. The Government of Jamaica also raised the need for international action at a meeting of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in November 1982. In West Africa, support came from the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, which had established the West African Regional Cooperation for Research on Plantain (WARCORP) to conduct a series of collaborative projects in several countries with the aim of increasing the productivity of *Musa* in traditional farming systems. In Asia, the pressure for international action came from scientists at the University of the Philippines at Los Baños (UPLB). These *Musa* scientists had seen the impact on national programmes of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), also based at UPLB.

These regional interests directed their requests for a coordinated international approach and funding of *Musa* research to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). In the previous decade, IDRC had shown considerable interest in initiating research on smallholder crops that had no home in the international agricultural research system.

### Gathering support

IDRC responded positively and contracted a consultant to prepare a short briefing paper on the need for some form of action on *Musa* by the donor community. In November 1983, the paper was presented at the International Centres Week held in Washington. The meeting was attended by representatives from 15 donor agencies, 5 producing countries and 3 International Agricultural Research Centres. The participants agreed that the time had come for some form of international initiative to support the genetic improvement of

*Musa*. A clear preference was expressed for a research network that would link donors with national programmes rather than an international agricultural centre similar to the ones that are members of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). IDRC was asked to consult representatives of national *Musa* research programmes, *Musa* specialists, and donors, and to present a formal proposal at the meeting of the CGIAR donor group to be held in Rome in May 1984.

At the regional consultations for Africa, the participants expressed strong support for the network approach and a strong breeding component. After visiting, in early 1984, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific, where black leaf streak disease originated, scientists funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research reached the same conclusion about the need for an international *Musa* programme. At the regional consultations for Latin America and the Caribbean, which took place in Miami in April and May 1984, the participants made detailed suggestions in support of the network approach.

In addition to these regional consultations, three leading *Musa* experts were asked to advise on the broad shape of the research programme. Jean Champion, Norman Simmonds and Edmond de Langhe met at Gatwick, in the UK, in December 1983. They suggested that the main priorities were to identify and evaluate banana clones in producing countries; to gain a socio-agricultural understanding of *Musa* production systems and their utilization; and to develop an international breeding programme aimed primarily at the smallholder crop. Structurally the group foresaw the need for an international breeding programme, three regional networks and a sound governance ensured by a small secretariat supported by a scientific advisory body.

A number of meetings bringing together representatives of interested donor countries and agencies were also organized by the IDRC consultant. Most of these focused on structural matters. Of particular concern to some donors was

the localization of the central secretariat. This had also been an issue during the regional consultations, at which a number of participants had suggested their country as a suitable place to set up the headquarters of the network.

### **Working out the last details**

The briefing paper proposing the establishment of a network was presented to the donor group meeting in Rome in May 1984. The donor group approved the paper in principle and asked IDRC to undertake more consultations to obtain funding commitments from donors, determine the localization of the headquarters and the membership of the Board of Trustees and provide a list of potential Directors General in time for Centres Week in November 1984. At the meeting, the recommendation to create a network backed by a donor support group, rather than a CGIAR centre, was accepted, in light of the constraints on CGIAR funding and the number of institutions vying for CGIAR membership.

At the first meeting of the donor support group, an agreement was reached on the composition of the Board of Trustees, the appointment of Edmond de Langhe as Director and the name of the new institute, the International Network for the Improvement of Banana and Plantain (INIBAP), which was to be located in Montpellier. Some donors pledged funds for the first year of operations and IDRC agreed to be the executing agency until the institute was up and running.

The next step was the signing with the Government of France of an international treaty granting INIBAP an international status. Signed in December 1988, the treaty had to be ratified by at least four other countries. By 1990, it had been ratified by Belgium, Canada, Colombia, the Philippines and Senegal.

INIBAP operated as an autonomous and nonprofit intergovernmental organization until 1990, when it was invited to join the CGIAR system. The next turning point was 1995, when INIBAP joined the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), another member of the CGIAR.

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