At the time of the establishment of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) in 1971, the new high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice were beginning to spread widely, especially in Asia, and the Green Revolution was starting to make an impact on increasing food production. Feeding the burgeoning human population was a major preoccupation of agricultural scientists throughout the world and the genetic improvement of food crops, especially through the development of input-responsive varieties, was receiving increased attention. Concurrently, national and international institutions, both public and private, began to assemble collections of genetic resources for use in breeding.

Initially the establishment of these collections was largely driven by the need for readily accessible sources of genetic diversity for use in breeding programs; however, with the dawning realization that much of the diversity contained in landraces and farmers' varieties was under threat, not least from their replacement by the new varieties, scientists increasingly focused their attention on the conservation of this diversity as a resource for the future. Collecting missions were mounted throughout the world, particularly in regions of high genetic diversity. The missions resulted in the development of large germplasm collections, especially at the international agricultural research centers (IARCs), that were widely considered to be the Common Heritage of Mankind.

At the time, much crop improvement work was carried out by public sector institutions. Although the International Union for the Protection of New