

# Meridian Institute’s Informal Work on Digital Sequence Information (DSI)

## *Project Overview*

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### Background and Context

Digital sequence information on genetic resources (DSI) refers to the digital data derived from biological material, including plants, animals, and viruses. DSI, sometimes called “genetic sequence data” (GSD), is a cornerstone of modern biological research and is used to create commercial biotech, pharmaceutical, and food products. Governance of access to and benefit-sharing from the use of DSI is an issue of international importance and is an ongoing topic of negotiation in various international instruments.

Issues related to DSI are governed by at least five major international instruments, including: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD); the Food and Agriculture Organization’s International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA); the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) Oceans Treaty; and two instruments at the World Health Organization (WHO). In addition, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) may also take on discussions of DSI. Many of these instruments are currently negotiating how to capture and share the benefits – monetary and non-monetary – from the use of DSI. Recent decisions, such as the agreement at the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the CBD to establish a multilateral mechanism for DSI, have paved the way for international negotiations on DSI.

Effective international coordination to ensure access to DSI and robust benefit-sharing from its use has the potential to help address some of the world’s greatest challenges, including biodiversity loss, food security, and global health. For instance, the use of DSI has enabled recent technological and scientific breakthroughs such as the SARS-COV-2 vaccine and the development of stress-resistant crops. Ever greater innovation is likely as the number of digital records expands and technology for utilizing DSI continues to evolve. The current landscape of international instruments governing DSI is highly complex and the lack of a coherent, transparent, and equitable system for DSI access and benefit-sharing (ABS) threatens to impede scientific innovation. [Decision 15/9](#) at the CBD in 2022 created an opportunity to establish a multilateral ABS mechanism that includes a permanent, self-sustaining fund based on contributions from the largest private sector users of DSI – the pharmaceutical, biotech, and food and agriculture sectors. Monetary benefit-sharing from the use of DSI could contribute to meeting the overall funding goals of the [Global Biodiversity Framework](#), which outlines an ambitious plan to achieve a global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050.

[Meridian Institute](#) (Meridian) is a nonprofit consultancy with a 25-year history of bringing diverse stakeholders together to develop and implement solutions to complicated public policy issues, including convening informal processes that run alongside and complement formal UN proceedings. Meridian’s experience in the field of genetic resources spans decades, from work in the early 1990s on plant genetic resources to a significant 2022 convening on DSI at the Bellagio Center, which some CBD negotiators cite as a key reason for the DSI decision

reached at COP15, as well as additional convenings on the topic in 2023. Seeing an opportunity to support formal negotiations by helping parties, stakeholders, and rightsholders navigate the complex web of actors and issues associated with DSI, Meridian received funding from the Government of Norway and the Bezos Earth Fund to design and manage a broad informal stakeholder engagement process on the issue.

Meridian recognizes that formal negotiations in these international bodies are high-pressure affairs in which time constraints, differing levels of subject matter expertise, and formal discussion structures limit the ability of negotiators to engage openly and creatively. As such, Meridian will create and support informal processes, which run alongside the formal processes, in which parties and other stakeholders (e.g., scientific experts, industry actors, Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs)) can explore potential solution pathways. Meridian will design these informal sessions in partnership with parties, stakeholders, and rightsholders in an effort to foster vigorous examination of substantive questions and to build trusted personal relationships that can enable progress in the formal negotiation processes.

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## Planned Activities

Building on previous experience, Meridian will pursue the following three workstreams as part of its informal work on DSI.

- I. **Support the CBD DSI process:** Support parties and stakeholders in the intersessional period between CBD COP15 and COP16 by convening informal dialogues aimed at providing input to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Open-ended Working Group meeting in August 2024 and COP16 slated for 21 October to 1 November 2024.
- II. **Support other formal DSI-related processes, including the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture and the World Health Organization negotiation processes:** Conduct research, outreach, and informal meetings in support of decision-making processes associated with the other respective international instruments that influence how DSI is governed, including ITPGRFA and WHO.
- III. **Foster the interconnectivity of the formal DSI-related processes:** Support the secretariats, parties, stakeholders, and rightsholders across relevant international instruments in anticipating the challenges and opportunities of aligning approaches to benefit-sharing by facilitating informal conversations and information sharing, as deemed useful by the interested players.

Meridian recognizes that this informal work on DSI will require coalition building and a great deal of coordination with other actors. Given the crucial importance of understanding and responding to the needs of the negotiators as well as other stakeholders and rightsholders with strong interests in the governance of DSI, Meridian will consult regularly with actors across the landscape and adjust its planned activities as appropriate.

For more information about Meridian's ongoing informal work on DSI, please contact Brad Spangler ([bspangler@merid.org](mailto:bspangler@merid.org)) or Julian Portilla ([jportilla@merid.org](mailto:jportilla@merid.org)).