



Minutes of the 30th ECPGR Executive Committee meeting

7 June 2024 (9:00-12:00)
Online (Teams)

Present:

Marianne Lefort (Chair)
Birgitte Lund (Denmark)
Petra Engel (Italy)
Pavol Hauptvogel (Slovakia)
Imke Thormann (Germany)
Lorenzo Maggioni (ECPGR Secretariat)
Jens Weibull (invited guest)
Sandra Goritschnig (invited guest)

1. Opening of the meeting

The ExCo Chair opened the meeting and welcomed guests Jens Weibull, who will be taking the position of ExCo Chair, starting next 8 September, and Sandra Goritschnig, who is leading Work Package 5 in the PRO-GRACE project.

2. Update on Pro-GRACE

S. Goritschnig presented the activities and progress made by the PRO-GRACE project, clarifying its objective of preparing a concept for a new European Research Infrastructure (GRACE-RI) for plant genetic resources. The various Work Packages with their already achieved deliverables were described and in particular Work Package 5, which is led by ECPGR and has the task, among others, of designing the governance structure and financial plan of the RI. All the ExCo members were invited to a policy symposium and phenotyping workshop, organized by Pro-GRACE and EMPHASIS (the European Infrastructure for Plant Phenotyping) in Brussels on 27-28 June 2024. This will be the occasion to inform policymakers and relevant stakeholders about the need and ambition to include GRACE-RI in the next ESFRI (European Strategy Forum for Research Infrastructures) roadmap. It will also be an opportunity for J. Weibull to present ECPGR as a well-functioning network that can form the basis for GRACE-RI. The presentation is in preparation with the help of the ECPGR Secretariat. The role expected from the ExCo members in the policy symposium is to communicate support for the GRACE-RI initiative in general, to prepare a statement for the interactive session to outline ECPGR's position on GRACE-RI and to interact with other participants, especially policymakers.

The update offered by S. Goritschnig was appreciated by the ExCo members as very useful since most of them were very little aware of the objectives and activities of this project. A few clarifications were given, such as on the role of EURISCO, which remains central in the prospected GRACE-RI.

A general feeling was expressed by all about the current absence of a clear idea about the structure, mode of operation and consequent governance of the future GRACE-RI, including the position of ECPGR within it. This makes it difficult at this stage to promote the infrastructure with policymakers at national or regional level. Also, the risk was mentioned that funding bodies may not be able to distinguish the different and complementary roles of ECPGR vis-à-vis GRACE-RI.

The ExCo agreed that the workshop in Brussels can be used to reinforce the visibility of ECPGR as a solid and reliable PGR network. ECPGR remains the unavoidable platform for

the consolidation of the PGR conservation, documentation and evaluation infrastructure. This is the basis to enable research aimed at the exploitation of genetic diversity to address climate change and food security challenges. A statement by the ExCo in this regard should be prepared for the Brussels workshop, with a first draft organized by the Secretariat and the ExCo Chair.

3. The Genebank Managers Network and AEGIS progress

L. Maggioni gave an account of his recent activity dedicated to revitalizing the coordination of AEGIS. In the last few months, interactions went on with National Coordinators, with the purpose of confirming/updating the details and commitments taken by the countries with the signature of the AEGIS MoU and the Associate Membership Agreements. Encouragements were also made to complete the genebank operation manuals and to designate accessions as part of AEGIS.

An estimate was made of the percentage of accessions of national origin included by each country in the AEGIS European Collection, based on data available from EURISCO. Accessions of national origin conserved by each country were used as a proxy number of unique accessions. This estimation can give a very rough idea of the coverage of AEGIS. The calculation indicated that 22% of the 'unique' accessions registered in EURISCO by the AEGIS member countries is part of AEGIS (and 16% of those registered by all countries).

The Secretary received 18 positive replies from NCs, followed by some immediate actions, including drafting and uploading of new operational genebank manuals, 900 new accessions included in AEGIS by three countries, and expressions of good intention made to proceed with the AEGIS implementation. In a couple of cases, this is not considered a priority or bureaucratic difficulties have been overwhelming. Where progress is too slow, the reasons are insufficient funds and lack of staff resources.

A presentation on AEGIS was offered by the ECPGR Secretary at the first in-person meeting of the Genebank Managers Network, held in Braga, Portugal, on 14-15 May 2024. ECPGR contributed its support to this meeting by offering a social dinner and covering the cost of participation of the delegate from Georgia.

During this meeting, attended by genebank managers from 18 countries, it was reaffirmed that one of the main aspects should be learning from each other, knowledge exchange and getting to know each other better.

Even though the discussion on AEGIS was not rated among the top interests of the genebank managers, AEGIS was appreciated as an important basis for collaborative action. However, some genebank managers feel that AEGIS was not built with sufficient involvement of their constituency and thus its benefits are not always crystal clear. The importance of elevating the professionalism and quality of genebank operations was stressed by Th. van Hintum, and various examples and experiences were reported about setting up a quality system and operating with it. The ongoing process, as part of PRO-GRACE, to define a blueprint for a certification system and a capacity-building framework, was also explained. The Secretariat staff of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture were connected remotely and offered online clarifications and support about the use of the SMTA.

The ECPGR Secretary confirmed his intention to closely follow the activities of the Genebank Managers Network and participate in its future meetings, *inter alia* promoting the AEGIS system.

A continued follow-up on the AEGIS implementation is also planned, particularly thanks to a new opportunity to receive funds through a new bilateral agreement with the German Ministry for Food and Agriculture. As agreed with the donor, the Secretariat will prepare a new project to be implemented in the next six months, setting the ground for a second project that may enable multiplication and safety-duplication of AEGIS accessions in 2025.

I. Thormann informed that IPK, Gatersleben has assigned many new accessions to AEGIS and now Germany contributes more than 84,000 accessions to the European Collection.

4. Financial situation of ECPGR with its carry-over now defined and to be allocated

L. Maggioni described the financial situation of ECPGR, commenting on the ECPGR Financial Report 2023 that was distributed to the ExCo members. There is a substantial carry-over from Phase X. After taking into consideration what is already committed for expenses decided in Phase X, the amount (net of overheads) of ca. €474,000 is available to be used for Phase XI. This generous carry-over was mainly accumulated during Phase X, since a considerable amount of staff costs were covered by external sources (EC and German-funded projects), but was also due to lower travel and meeting expenditures during the COVID-19 period, and to lower costs needed for EURISCO. This carry-over amount will enable ECPGR to cover almost entirely the missing funds of Phase XI budget, related to the years 2027 and 2028. It is expected that also in Phase XI there will be additional funds obtained through the participation of the Secretariat to successful EC or bilateral projects. Naturally, this positive scenario is based on the assumption that all the countries enlisted in the table of expected contributions for Phase XI will honour their annual payments.

The ExCo suggested that the carry-over funds be maintained in a separate budget line for the time being, so that their specific allocation can remain flexible, based on arising needs and opportunities. It also suggested that the use of carry-over could be discussed during the next Steering Committee meeting, since the missing funds affect the budget years 2027 and 2028.

5. Preliminary planning for Secretary recruitment in 2026

M. Lefort gave details of a draft table summarizing the necessary steps towards the recruitment of a new Secretary before the end of 2026. Preparatory work needs to start in 2025 with the drafting of the job profile and the definition of a selection panel. In early 2026, an international call should be drafted and launched with the help of the Bioversity International human resources office. Interviews and selection of the best candidate should take place in September/October, with the appointment concluded not later than November 2026, to enable a period of overlap with the outgoing Secretary.

The ExCo members thanked for the very useful preparatory schedule and thought that this task could be followed up by the ExCo, in consultation with other advisors, if needed, and with regular inputs from the entire Steering Committee. However, it was thought not necessary to appoint a specific Task Force.

M. Lefort reminded that this might be her last ExCo meeting, and she was looking forward to meeting the ExCo members in Brussels in a couple of weeks. Everyone thanked Marianne for her several years of dedicated commitment as Chair of the ExCo and was looking forward to greeting her in person at the next occasion.