

Comments from the ECPGR Secretariat on the section “The Secretariat” of the document prepared by the Task Force on the ECPGR operational structure.

As indicated in the Task Force document, the Secretariat did not contribute to final drafting of the section on “The Secretariat”, owing to a possible conflict of interest. The Secretariat was however offered by the Chair of the Task Force to provide any other views and comments as a separate document and these are listed below:

- The Secretariat is currently formally composed of an equivalent of 3 full time positions, with the following roles and responsibilities:
 - a) ECPGR Coordinator (1): overall responsibility on implementation of the Programme, financial management, coordination of all technical activities, linking with other stakeholders and donors, supporting new projects’ formulation, reporting and disseminating information.
 - b) AEGIS Coordinator (½): coordinating the establishment and implementation of AEGIS.
 - c) Programme Specialist (½): manage the publication processes for ECPGR documents and provide support to the Working Groups in the follow-up of their workplans.
 - d) Programme Assistant (1): provide administrative and secretarial support, including day to day financial administrative management, correspondence with ECPGR members, logistical arrangements for meetings and maintenance of ECPGR and AEGIS Web site.
 - e) In addition, it should be noted that Bioversity International has provided for a half-time EURISCO Coordinator position, dedicated to coordinating the technical development and maintenance of the database, maintaining a helpdesk function and supporting the network of national focal points.

The Secretariat is of the opinion that none of the current functions/responsibilities should be dropped in order to effectively serve the proposed new operational structure. We also believe that these functions are strongly interrelated and complementary, and therefore they require being integral parts of the Secretariat. Additionally, we believe that ensuring the international independency of its staff remains an important asset of the Secretariat, to continue maintaining an honest brokering role for the development of a regional approach to conservation of PGRFA.

- It has been argued that some of the support to the functioning of the WGs can be absorbed by the WGs themselves, in particular by the Chairs. This seems to be unrealistic, based on our current experiences and given the fact that WG members (including Chairs) offer their services to ECPGR as inputs in kind and it is unlikely that the level of voluntary commitment can be increased. We would see the supporting function of the Secretariat as a critically important one in order to ensure timely and effective functioning of the WGs, especially considering that the virtual approach (to a large extent) of the new Working Groups will make them weaker entities in terms of internal and external coordination and of sense of belonging. It should be kept in mind that WGs would never meet in their entirety and would no longer be coordinated at Network level by the Network Coordinating Groups. Therefore, an effective new structure would in fact require a stronger Secretariat, with an increased presence and visibility in meetings and activities of WGs in order to ensure linkages, coordination and dissemination of information within and across Working Groups.

- Physical presence of the Secretariat staff in ECPGR meetings might be seen as an expensive mode of operation where savings could be made. However, even though the Secretariat does not necessarily have to be present in all meetings, it is our experience that the Secretariat can raise the effectiveness of meetings, ensuring that the ECPGR objectives are kept on track and that the meeting results are duly reported and followed up on. On the other hand, “self-managed” WG meetings have offered examples of missing reports and of not disseminated results.
- With respect to the recognized need to build capacity in countries and institutes as part of specific activities that will be implemented by the WGs and for which the capacity is limited, it is expected that the Secretariat can provide assistance to the Chairs and WGs at large.
- Based on the discussions during the Task Force meeting, we see the ‘strengthening of the relationship with the European Commission and lobbying to encourage the EC to financially support the ECPGR activities/operation’ as possibly the main new function that might require additional attention. We argue that, in a budget neutral situation, this function should be carried out by the ExCo and the National Coordinators, with an increased supporting role of the Secretariat’s staff. We do not believe that a new “fundraiser” position should replace and therefore reduce the coordinating and supporting functions that are currently implemented by scientific staff in the Secretariat.
- Establishing the position of Executive Director and this to be combined with the Chair of the ExCo in the form suggested by the Task Force does not seem to be realistic or desirable for the following reasons: a) If the Executive Director/ExCo Chair position is selected on the basis of the economic strength of the offer, rather than on personal merit, this approach would introduce a strong limitation to the possibility for the SC to freely select their ExCo candidates of choice. b) If the Executive Director/ExCo Chair is selected on the basis of merit, the proposed requirement that the respective member country should provide that position as an in-kind contribution makes it likely that many countries would have to decline to provide that position.

Recommendations

- 1) To maintain the current functions and responsibilities of the Secretariat, but giving more emphasis to the joint effort with the ExCo and the SC for a lobbying and fund raising function, without reducing the supporting function for the WG activities.
- 2) To revise the ToRs of the Executive Director/ExCo Chair, i.e. strengthening the ambassadorial function of this position, and to provide an operational budget line to support travel and lobbying activity.

Lorenzo Maggioni and Jan Engels, on behalf of the ECPGR Secretariat.

Maccarese, 5 July 2012