

The ECPGR operational structure: analysis and recommendations

Context

In March 2012 the Executive Committee (ExCo) of ECPGR established a Task Force Operational Structure (TF) to consider changes in the operational structure of ECPGR, enabling the Programme to more effectively function with regard to achieving its objectives, managing its resources and reporting on its activities. The TF was requested to consider effectiveness regarding

- the type and number of operational groups (i.e. Networks, Working Groups, Network Coordinating Groups, etc.)
- the type and number of managing bodies (i.e. Secretariat, Executive Secretary, Executive Committee, and Steering Committee)
- the funding mechanism for operations of these groups
- the mechanism for nomination of experts/members in these groups, and
- other details of the groups' operations.

The TF was composed of Bert Visser (NL), Külli Annamaa (EST), Gordana Djuric (BH) and Lorenzo Maggioni (*ex officio*). The TF undertook some preparatory activities (approaching Network and Working Group Chairs through a questionnaire, interacting with the Secretariat and the Chair of ExCo) and convened at Bioversity in Maccaresse, Italy at 9 – 11 May, 2012. Jan Engels (AEGIS Coordinator) participated in the meeting as well. The TF met with the DG of Bioversity International, Dr. Emile Frison.

In its meeting the TF dealt with the following topics

- goal and objectives of ECPGR,
- historical changes in ECPGR structure,
- analysis of EUFORGEN and ERFPA AnGR network structures,
- review of Networks and Working Groups in view of the ECPGR objectives,
- analysis of responses to TF questionnaire,
- pro's and con's of alternative structures for operational groups,
- review of managing bodies in view of the ECPGR objectives,
- pro's and con's of alternative structures for managing bodies, and
- budget lines devoted to the functioning of the various bodies.

On the basis of its discussions it composed this report. It took the current budget as its politically realistic point of departure, recognizing that additional funding might greatly enhance the functioning of ECPGR. The TF also noted that a consideration of the operational structures of EUFORGEN and the farm animal network ERFPA AnGR provided insufficient suggestions for a reconsideration of ECPGR's structure, due to the fact that the genetic resources and diversity in these domains are of a considerably different nature and require another organization of activities that does not fit ECPGR well.

Revisiting ECPGR's Goal and Outcomes¹

The TF considered that the ECPGR goal as formulated during the last meeting of the Steering Committee in 2010 reflects the need to strengthen conservation and utilization of PGRFA in Europe through national, sub-regional and regional programmes. In other words, the networking represents a means to an end, i.e. strengthening conservation and utilization in Europe. As a consequence, outputs contributing to increased conservation and utilization should form the major indicators of success, and participation of the members in the activities should serve that goal. The TF also considered that the participation of all member countries in one or more – but not all – ECPGR activities is to be regarded as an essential prerequisite in order to achieve a feeling of ownership over ECPGR. It was further concluded that the participation in ECPGR activities contributes to an active capacity building, not only at the regional but also at the sub-regional and national levels.

The TF recognized four substantial and two instrumental purposes/outcomes. The four substantial outcomes include (1) operationalization of AEGIS, (2) improving functionalities of EURISCO, (3) agreements on *in situ* and on-farm conservation and management concepts, and (4) strengthening relations with users. Securing commitment and regular resources, as well as an effective organizational structure and secretarial support can be seen as instrumental purposes facilitating the implementation of the four above mentioned outcomes.

An analysis of current operational structure

The current ECPGR operational structure is largely in line with the outcomes discussed above. The Network on Information and Documentation sustains the functioning and improvement of EURISCO, whereas the Network on *In situ* and On-farm Conservation and Management of PGRFA responds to the outcome of Agreement on *In situ* and On-farm Conservation and Management concepts. All the other Networks and Working Groups (WGs) are in the process of contributing to the operationalization of AEGIS.² The outcome of strengthening relations with users could be integrated in this latter group of Networks and WGs, but is so far not made very explicit neither in the agenda of most of these bodies nor in AEGIS.

Support is being provided by the Secretariat, whereas the Steering Committee and (since December 2010) the Executive Committee (ExCo) provide strategic and managerial oversight.

In line with its mandate, the TF considered to which extent the current structure is optimal to attain ECPGR's goal and outcomes, or whether alternative arrangements might better facilitate efforts towards reaching the goal and outcomes. Below, the functioning of the different bodies, their relevance and possibly improved role are discussed. As a context for its discussion, the TF first considered (1) the strengths and weaknesses of the current operational structure vis-a-vis the revised ECPGR goal and objectives, (2) changes to be considered to improve ECPGR's functioning, (3) potential disadvantages of proposed changes and countermeasures to prevent such disadvantages.

The TF considered as strengths of the current operational structure:

- Clear and elaborated operational structure
- Bundled European genetic resources expertise
- Capacity building forum

¹ See Annex I – Log frame of ECPGR at <http://www.ecpgr.cgiar.org/fileadmin/www.ecpgr.cgiar.org/EXCO/ExCo2finalWeb.pdf>

² A full overview of Networks, working Groups and its members can be found at the ECPGR website.

- Facilitating information exchange, including on activities of national programmes, and implementation of the WG work plans through physical meetings
- Facilitating the development of project proposals
- Joint analysis and consensus building on genetic resources issues
- Authority of WG outputs across the region

In addition, it identified the following weaknesses of the current operational structure:

- ECPGR is not used as a forum for innovation
- Unequal activity levels within/between WGs
- Poor engagement of users of conserved genetic resources
- Lack of capacity in WGs, commitment to and engagement in WG activities, due to the voluntary nature of individual contributions and/or heavy domestic duties of WG members
- Complexity of the two-layered operational structure with Networks co-ordinating WGs
- Formal representation in meetings and consequently large size of some of the meetings

The TF recognized that some properties of the operational structure might have pro's and con's simultaneously, e.g. the structure itself is both clear and complex to work with and the formal representation is helpful whenever regional consensus needs to be reached, while it can reduce flexibility when technical expertise is the major requirement.

Considerations for a new operational structure

Based on this initial analysis the TF then considered the following aspects as important in elaborating options for an alternative operational structure:

- Smaller and more dedicated meetings should contribute to more focussed outputs
- The replacement of the country quota policy and representation principle by an expertise-driven and output-oriented approach, simultaneously addressing the need for capacity building
- The need to create more flexibility in activities
- Guaranteeing that an alternative structure would maintain ownership over and promote commitment to ECPGR activities.

As potential weaknesses of this approach, the TF recognized the following risks:

- Underrepresentation of countries with a less developed genetic resources programme
- Loss of the capacity building function of ECPGR as the result of an exclusive focus on maximizing activity outputs
- Lesser ownership over results reached in WGs by and/or in countries not represented in a specific activity

The TF considered the following countermeasures:

- Explicit attention for capacity building aspects in the performance of activities
- Ensuring geographic representation in ECPGR activities, overall.
- Communication of any outputs and decisions of a WG by the Chair of that WG with non-represented countries (through the Secretariat).

The TF also considered, but remained divided on the need for:

- Involvement of the entire WG (through the Secretariat) in decision making, whenever consensus building is necessary to achieve strong results

Networks and Working Groups

The Networks were introduced by the Steering Committee (SC) at the start of the previous phase to more effectively manage the increasing number of WGs (now 20) and to economize on the performance of certain functions that could be coordinated between WGs on related crops. In particular, WGs not prioritized for the organization of meetings in a particular phase could have benefited from activities at the Network level. In the view of the TF, Networks created an extra management layer without offering substantial added value. A number of responses to the TF questionnaire explicitly indicated that the continuation of WGs was considered essential, whereas less importance was attached to the role of the Networks.

Recommendation 1. To maintain all the existing WGs, to continue the Network on Documentation and Information as a Working Group, and to dissolve the other Networks.

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The increase of the number of Working Groups has previously resulted in the introduction of the principle of country quota regarding the participation of member countries in the activities of the Networks and WGs. Country quota served to secure the participation of all member countries in the activities. The quota system was designed in such a way that larger countries contributing more to ECPGR's budget would obtain more country quota to be represented in the various bodies and activities. An unforeseen effect of the introduction of this mechanism is that once National Coordinators had indicated their choice regarding participation in WG activities, this participation in some cases tended to become a goal in itself (i.e. the travel and attendance of the meetings), whereas the sharing of expertise in a certain activity area and the commitment to contribute to the benefit of the Network or Working Group were no longer the only real drivers for participation. This general observation points towards the need for an improved communication between National Coordinators and WG members. This may well have negatively affected the effectiveness of the work of some of the WGS, as some members have been unable to sufficiently and effectively participate in the meetings. The TF feels that effectiveness of operations should be the major criterion in organizing the work of the WGs, and therefore expertise in an activity area and commitment to invest in the activities should be the driving criteria to determine the membership in a WG.

Partly as a result of the country quota system, some WG meetings and activities have acquired an unwieldy high membership, not allowing all members to play an active role in the meetings and other activities of the WG. Representation rather than achieving outputs has partially driven the membership in some WGs. The TF considers it important to organise the WGs around output-oriented, expertise-driven activities rather than on a balanced representation basis. The TF has also considered the capacity building role of the meetings and other activities of some WGs. It is of the opinion that due to its importance this capacity building function should remain secured in a new arrangement. It is the task of the SC, and in inter-sessional periods the ExCo with support from the Secretariat, to secure that all countries have the opportunity to participate in some of the WG activities.

Recommendation 2. To abolish the country quota system and to establish pools of experts per Working Group, from which members can be drawn to organize and implement specified activities.

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The TF considers that ECPGR would benefit if it was to organize the work of the WG on the basis of initiatives for agreed activities, rather than on the basis of the mere existence of a WG. Therefore, it

proposes the following approach. For each crop or cross-cutting activity, each National Coordinator (NC) should identify experts in that area or those persons that should develop such experience and expertise. WG Chairs can propose additional members of a WG. This process will result in a virtual pool of expertise (administered by the Secretariat) from which members can be selected once concrete activities are undertaken. Different members can be selected for different activities at different occasions, based on their expertise, their interest and their commitment (see below). In order for the WGs to function in an effective output-oriented way, it is also proposed to limit the membership of an activity group, membership being determined on the basis of expertise and the need for capacity building.

Recommendation 3. To revise the way of operation of the WGs. The work of the WGs will be conducted by having the WGs taking the initiative for certain activities they have prioritized for their own WG work plan, in addition to requests to the WGs to undertake activities from the part of the SC. To limit participation to 12 members per activity. To select, for each activity, 4 members on the basis of the importance of capacity building in those countries that lack such capacity yet.

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The TF considered that an activity of a certain WG can be requested by the SC, e.g. as part of its five-year programme of work, or can be proposed by ExCo or by the WG itself, or in any combination thereof. Any activity would have:

- to contribute to the ECPGR goal
- to contribute to one or more of the outcomes and purposes listed by the SC
- to be geared towards a measurable output
- to provide evidence-based results
- to be of regional or sub-regional interest.

In addition, the Chairs of the WGs new style will take on an important new role. The Chairs of each WG are expected to collaborate with the Secretariat in the selection of the activity members, based on “expressions of interest” and in agreement with NCs (steps are described in the attached appendix). Those countries not represented in a given activity should be consulted through the respective members of the WG if the work of the group requires obtaining certain information or engaging in a discussion with stakeholders in non-represented countries, as well as in the case that regional consensus is required to complete the activity.

Recommendation 4. To establish an additional function for the Chair of a Working Group, i.e. the Chair to propose, after consultation of the Secretariat, members of the WG for a specified activity, taking into account the available expertise and the need for capacity building. On behalf of the Chair, the Secretariat will consult the NCs and seek their endorsement of the proposed membership. The ExCo will take a decision if no agreement can be reached.

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The TF also considered that it is advisable to develop Terms of Reference for the members of the WGs, for Chairs and for the participants engaging in WG activities. These Terms of Reference should include the need for continued commitment to activities in which a member will engage and to accountability regarding the contributions that a member to an activity group will pledge to make.

Recommendation 5. To request the WG members to formulate an “expression of interest”, pledging their commitment and enabling accountability regarding the performance of an activity to which they can be or have been selected. Terms of Reference for WG members should be approved by the SC, taking into account each type of agreed activity.

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Current practice of the SC leads to the agreement of a detailed work plan at the start of a phase that the operational bodies of ECPGR are then requested to carry out. This approach was taken in an attempt to adhere to clear pre-set priorities, to harmonize operations and to render operations more output-oriented. An unforeseen outcome of this approach has been that WGs have limited freedom to operate and can mainly perform tasks defined and harmonised at the SC level. As a result, a fixed format in which each WG plans to meet at least once every phase in order to exchange information and agree on certain standards has become the dominating activity pattern. Only a limited part of the budget (25%) has been set apart for project-oriented activities. This has resulted in an undesirable overall level of rigidity of performance. The TF considers that self-organization and taking initiatives 'bottom-up' for new activities recognized by the WGs, within a broad priority setting that responds to the agreed outcomes, should be promoted. The next budget and five-year work plan might accommodate such bottom-up initiatives responding to the four set outcomes, in addition to activities requested by the SC.

Recommendation 6. To facilitate bottom-up WG initiatives to undertake activities responding to the ECPGR outcomes throughout phase implementation by reserving part of the ECPGR budget for such activities, in addition to activities requested by the SC.

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The TF explicitly considered the need to equitably involve participants of all countries and all available expertise in the activities. It is indeed proposed to use "geographical distribution" as one of the selection criteria of the group of experts for each given activity. The TF is of the opinion that it is the responsibility of the ExCo and the SC to secure such participation at the overall European Network level. To that purpose ExCo may pro-actively approach WG Chairs in the preparation of specific activities if they feel that the balance in participation needs to be re-addressed.

The TF is of the opinion that through the proposals above, expertise-driven and output-oriented WG activities as well as equitable participation by persons from all member countries can be achieved, and that such approach will better serve the ECPGR goal and outcomes. Each member country will benefit from more focused ECPGR outputs that will be shared by the activity groups, and from capacity building in the framework of ECPGR.

Another issue that the TF addressed is the technical/scientific background of the members proposed for the activity groups selected from the WG membership pool as well as for the performance of activities. In the questionnaire, most WGs called for the representation of users in WG activities, including breeders, researchers and other experts. Such suggestion is in line with one of the agreed ECPGR outcomes, i.e. to improve relationships with users of genetic resources in Europe. In this context, it should be realised that not all activities might be interesting for users to participate in, and that if users are included in the performance of activities the agenda of the work of an activity group should make optimal use of the background and expertise of users. For example, users might be more interested in the development of research proposals or joint evaluation activities, and feel less connected to the establishment of the AEGIS collections as this serves a management goal that is mainly of interest to collection holders.

Recommendation 7. To invite NCs to nominate representatives of the user community for the WG pools, and to request WG Chairs to take the representation of users in WG initiatives into consideration.

Recommendation 8. The SC is suggested to consider the establishment of a Task Force that considers how the engagement of users in ECPGR activities can be enhanced.

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The Steering Committee

The ECPGR Programme needs a managing body that is overseeing its activities, monitoring the effectiveness of its operations and evaluating the contribution of the outputs and outcomes to the ECPGR goal. In this managing body all the ECPGR members should be represented. The Steering Committee fulfils that role. The following remark only addresses the way in which the SC has recently fulfilled this task.

In the view of the TF, also based on feedback on the questionnaire from some of the WGs, the SC's decisions have become rather prescriptive for the work of the WGs and have discouraged the WGs to take additional initiatives. At occasions, WGs have felt disconnected. It has also been noted that in a number of countries NCs had given little explanation and guidance to the WG membership in the country on how to contribute to the implementation of decisions of the SC. Whereas the SC has a role to provide guidance to the activities in ECPGR, more space for initiatives from the WGs should be created by not allocating the entire budget available for activities in an early stage of the phase or by creating options to fill in certain activity areas identified by the SC by proposals being submitted by the WGs. In its call for proposals and in its evaluation of such proposals the SC may wish to take into account the need to promote capacity building at all levels and across the gamma of activities of the Programme. It might provide assistance, e.g. through the Secretariat, to those WGs at their request that are eager to undertake initiatives but that lack a certain level of expertise in developing such proposals.

In addition, the TF is of the opinion that the connectedness of some NCs with the genetic resources community in their countries is sub-optimal. Not all stakeholders at the national level are well-informed about ECPGR activities, and not all NCs are familiar with the capacity and expertise or the lack thereof in their country.

Recommendation 9. To increase efforts on the part of the SC members to communicate with the stakeholders in their country about optimal engagement of the country in ECPGR activities and about the use or application of outputs produced by ECPGR activities (to be reflected in revised ToRs of NCs).

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The Executive Committee

The establishment of the ExCo is of very recent date. However, the TF feels that the establishment of ExCo is a major improvement of ECPGR's structure, since it enables ECPGR to respond more actively to any developments between two sessions of the SC, and since it greatly facilitates the functioning of the Secretariat. The TF has currently no recommendations to adapt the functioning of ExCo.

The Secretariat³

As mentioned above, the Secretariat has benefited from the establishment of the ExCo. The Secretary interacts with the Chair of ExCo at a regular basis, and the latter can take responsibility for operational decisions made by the Secretary.

The TF considered the size and composition of the Secretariat in the light of the share of Secretariat costs in the total ECPGR budget. It also considered the status of the Secretary and the suggestion made by the External Review team to elevate the profile of the Secretary to that of Executive Secretary in order to boost the representational role of the Secretariat. It balanced this option against an alternative option to strengthen the position of the Chair of ExCo to Executive Director.

The TF was of the opinion that the current size of the Secretariat of three full-time staff positions should be maintained. However, it also considered that the functions of the Secretariat might be revised in order to lend more priority to fund raising, a need that was spontaneously recognized in the responses to the questionnaire. The TF considered that the three positions might include a Secretary, a fundraiser and an assistant. Some tasks in the Secretariat supporting the functioning of the WGs might be absorbed by the WGs. Other options for the mandate and composition of the Secretariat may be considered, but should take into account the need for increased fund raising.

It also considered that the Chair of ExCo was in a better position to represent the ECPGR Programme externally than the Secretary, since the Chair is chosen from and represents the member countries. In the position of Executive Director, the chair of ExCo might especially focus on strengthening the relationships with the EU Commission and on committing the EU Commission to financial support of ECPGR activities. As a consequence, the member country providing the Executive Director would have to agree on an in-kind contribution to the functioning of ECPGR by making the person taking the role of (part-time) Executive Director available at no cost.

Rec 10. To maintain the current size of the Secretariat but to change the functions of the staff, giving priority to fund raising as one of the activities to which the Secretariat should contribute.

Rec 11. To keep the position of the Secretary as it is, and to establish the position of Executive Director for the Chair of ExCo.

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The hosting organization

Although a review of the hosting organization was not part of the TF's mandate, the TF discussed the issue recognizing its strong interrelations with the operational structure.

Since its establishment, the secretariat of ECPGR has been hosted by Bioversity International and its predecessors, IPGRI and IBPGR. Over time, this agreement has benefited ECPGR, since Bioversity could offer extensive expertise in genetic resources management, and since Bioversity made some services available without financial compensation. However, in the last SC meeting, the DG of Bioversity, Dr. Frison indicated that this situation was bound to change. Due to the reform of the CGIAR system, to which Bioversity belongs, the institute will have to operate on a full-cost recovery basis. This means that it can no longer provide services and facilities for free, but will have to be compensated for all its inputs. Furthermore, the objectives and activities of Bioversity have changed,

³ This chapter is the sole responsibility of Bert Visser, Külli Annamaa and Gordana Djuric, as it addresses the functioning of the fourth member of the TF, Lorenzo Maggioni. The ECPGR Secretariat may separately comment on the analysis and recommendations provided in this chapter.

with more emphasis on food security and smallholder farming communities in developing countries, meaning that in particular expertise in *ex situ* genetic resources management has decreased substantially. As a result, the European Regional Office has been dissolved, and the current staff working for ECPGR has been attached to another unit in Bioversity. It can be concluded that many of the initial advantages of Bioversity as a hosting institute for the ECPGR secretariat have therefore disappeared or lost most of its value. Without prejudice to the decision on the hosting arrangement that has to be made by the SC, the TF is of the opinion that the newly arisen situation warrants a call for a tender to host the ECPGR Secretariat to any organization in Europe. This action should be undertaken in a timely manner in order to provide the SC with more options to choose from before the end of the current ECPGR phase. A timely initiative should prevent a situation in which the SC can no longer take an unbiased decision, due to time pressure.

Recommendation 12. To timely prepare, through ExCo, a tender procedure in which Bioversity and other organizations in Europe can offer to host the ECPGR Secretariat in the next phase, through a well-defined process.

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Concluding remark

The TF has undertaken its work in full harmony. It hopes that its considerations and recommendations are considered meaningful and that this output will contribute to the enhanced functioning of ECPGR.

June, 2012

Appendix

The new proposed operating structure consists of:

- **Steering Committee** (one NC per country + observers)
- **Executive Committee** (composed of 5 NCs with sub-regional representation – the leader of the ExCo takes the role of Executive Director and “ECPGR Ambassador” as input-in-kind)
- **Secretariat**
- **Working Groups (21)**
 - WGs are composed of pools of experts proposed by the NCs and by the Chairs, on the basis of their expertise and/or interest. ToRs for WG members to carry out specific activities of the work plan should be approved by the SC or ExCo, taking into account each type of agreed activity.
 - WGs carry out activities mandated by the SC or proposed by the WG and approved by the SC (or ExCo).
 - Activities (as defined in the text above) are carried out with a budget that normally should not exceed € 25 000 per activity and that can be used for various activities including meetings (not involving more than 12 persons).
 - Participants in an activity are selected on the basis of an “expression of interest”, where the potential participants indicate their commitment and/or need to build capacity. Four out of twelve participants are selected on the basis of capacity building needs.
 - Selection of the participants for an activity is made by the WG Chair from the established WG pools, after consultation of the Secretariat and in collaboration with the NCs that are consulted for endorsement. In case of objections by a NC, the ExCo will take final decisions.
 - Proposals for activities will be evaluated and approved every 6 months by ExCo. Proposals should indicate objectives, outputs, budget and active partners with their roles.
 - Normally each WG cannot carry out more than 1 activity per year, i.e. not spend more than € 25.000 per year.
 - Activities can also be carried out jointly by more than one WG.
 - Outputs of activities are circulated to the entire relevant WG(s) for information and comments.
 - The TF also considered, but remained divided on:
 - Outputs of activities are circulated to the entire relevant WG(s) for approval in those cases where a consensus decision needs to be taken, since all stakeholders would be affected.
- **Collegium of the Working Group Chairs** (composed of the WG Chairs, who are members of a dedicated list server and may be invited to meet electronically, or physically immediately before the SC meetings).