



**Report from the ExCo
on progress made during Phase IX
including recommendations for Phase X**

Prepared by the ECPGR Executive Committee for the Fifteenth Steering Committee meeting, May 2018

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The following report is based on responses from National Coordinators (NCs) to a questionnaire on progress made during Phase IX, matters brought up during the WG Chairs meeting¹ and the analysis made by the Secretariat. It is also an update of the ExCo's mid-term report from 2016.

A number of recommendations were presented to the SC during the ECPGR mid-term meeting in 2016. Many of those recommendations are still relevant and remain but have not been repeated in this report.

The picture of the current situation based on the NCs' responses is somewhat more reliable compared to what it was at the time of the ECPGR mid-term meeting since this time 29 NCs completed the questionnaire compared to only 17 in 2016.

Outcome 1 – AEGIS is operational. Accessions in AEGIS are characterized and evaluated

Output 1.1 – Membership agreements signed

At the end of Phase IX, there are still gaps in the membership of AEGIS. One would have expected that all ECPGR member countries could have signed the MoU and thereby contribute to the growing European Collection. However, this is not the case but there are still some months left to prepare for the signing of the MoU.

It is, however, encouraging to observe that the number of Associate Members (AMs) have increased during the current Phase and in fact covers most of the collections of the AEGIS member countries, with a few exceptions. If the number of AEGIS members will be equal to the number of ECPGR members, it could be expected to cover almost all collections in Europe.

Recommendations

- The ECPGR members not yet members of AEGIS are urged to prepare for the signing of the MoU before the end of December 2018.
- Additional AEGIS members are encouraged to complete Associate Member Agreements with relevant institutions within their countries before the end of December 2018.

Output 1.2 – AEGIS collections established

The number of accessions in the European Collection is steadily increasing, however, at a rather slow rate, currently totalling 34 333 accessions. Compared to the number of accessions included in EURISCO it is remarkably low. Members of the ECPGR Working Groups have also indicated this as a problem. The assumption from the Secretariat that 35% of the EURISCO accessions (455 000 accessions) could be eligible for inclusion means that there are still 92.5% missing

¹ For the replies from the ExCo to the Chairs' recommendations, see the [Minutes of the 10th ECPGR Executive Committee meeting, 19-20 October 2017, Ljubljana, Slovenia.](#)

accessions. A large number of candidate accessions have so far been identified by the WGs through their Activities but it has been expressed by several WG Chairs that the further process of flagging has not been working satisfactorily. Therefore, a number of measures need to be taken by all the National Focal Points, who according to the AEGIS establishment process are responsible for the flagging of accessions in EURISCO.

One would also have hoped that the AEGIS principles should have been adopted by all AMs during Phase IX. However, this has unfortunately not happened and a further pressure from NCs will therefore be necessary as emphasized already during the ECPGR mid-term meeting.

Recommendations

- The National Focal Points should be encouraged to report the reasons for not flagging accessions which have been proposed as AEGIS candidates by the WGs.
- A target of 35% of the EURISCO accessions to be included in the European Collection should be settled. The target could be divided into at least 7% accomplishment each year during Phase X. The 35% target should be applied to each collection of AMs. A consequence of this will be that the number of newly identified accessions will vary greatly both between and within countries.

Output 1.3 – AQUAS quality system developed and operationalized

The AQUAS system is a basis for the management of the European Collection and a prerequisite for consolidating trust among the AEGIS members. It is expected that every genebank is operating according to specific standards and routines and a first step is actually to describe these. However, still only very few AMs have completed their genebank manuals. A problem could be that the manuals are not written in the English language and the translation might be an obstacle.

Half of the WGs have so far developed crop-specific standards, but it will be very important for the operation of the system that the rest of the WGs develop these standards in the near future.

If the system will be fully operated, which of course is expected by all members, increased efforts will be of utmost importance at all levels of the system. In order to be sustainable all elements of the system should be fully adopted and implemented by all partners and actors.

A peer/mentorship-review for the operation of collections proposed by the Centre for Genetic Resources (CGN), the Netherlands would hopefully be realized in the near future. This could most certainly be of great help for the implementation of satisfactory management principles and of help to improve the management of collections. A consequence of such a peer/mentorship-review system will most likely lead to the need for capacity building in several cases. However, the funding of this is still a problem and upgrading of systems will most likely have to be done with funding from national sources. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that in-kind contributions would still be a possibility when it comes to training and capacity building needs.

Recommendations

- In those cases where the language is an obstacle for finalization of the genebank manuals of AMs, members of AEGIS having a common language are encouraged to support each other with translation into the English language.

- NCs are encouraged to promote for the implementation of a peer/mentorship-review system of operations of AM collections.
- Where possible, countries should offer in-kind contributions to others when training and capacity building needs have been identified through the anticipated peer/mentorship-review system.
- The WGs should be given a deadline for the finalization of the crop-specific standards.

Output 1.4 – Funds mobilized to help Associate Members to implement AQUAS

Services for e.g. regeneration/multiplication, characterization, etc. have been offered by some countries but so far very little have been accepted and provided. This should be taken seriously because one reason for not being willing/able to flag accessions for AEGIS, which appeared through a questionnaire sent out by one of the WGs, was the lack of funding for regeneration. It would therefore be useful to get a full picture of specific obstacles, which hamper the flagging of AEGIS accessions by individual AMs.

Recommendations

- To investigate needs and obstacles among AMs hampering the flagging of AEGIS accessions.
- To prepare a register of AMs offering services to others.

Output 1.5 – Other capacity building schemes for Associate Members operational

If a potential peer/mentorship-review system will be realized, a number of problems are expected to become visible. This will show the need for training and capacity building among other things. Again, in-kind services would be helpful in order to help AMs to reach an equal standard of operation.

Recommendation

- An inventory of training and capacity building needs should be prepared based on the results from the anticipated peer review.

Outcome 2 – Quantity and quality of data in EURISCO, including *in situ* and on-farm data, have been increased. Functionality of EURISCO meets users' expectations

Output 2.1 – All National Focal Points (NFPs) update national inventories effectively and timely

As opposed to the development of the European Collection, the progress of EURISCO is satisfactory. Most likely, the trainings which have taken place during the Phase have contributed to the smooth and steady ongoing updating process.

Output 2.2 – C&E data in EURISCO included, with high quality and wide coverage

EURISCO is now ready to receive C&E data and the process has started. The training carried out has been instrumental for this. However, although EURISCO is fully developed for receiving

C&E data, it seems that the uploading process is still not working satisfactorily. The problems are obviously not of technical nature, but rather due to communication problems between WG members and National Focal Points.

Recommendation

- The WG members should be requested to actively contact their respective NFP when C&E data are ready to be uploaded into EURISCO.

Output 2.4 – Users’ expectations explored and functionalities of EURISCO increased

A survey of the user communities’ expectations of EURISCO has been carried out. A number of useful comments were received that were helpful for the further development of EURISCO. It was also obvious from the responses that the users were in general very satisfied with EURISCO.

Further development of EURISCO was made possible with an extra contribution from Germany. Thanks to this, taxonomic functionalities have been improved and in addition, the web search function will be upgraded with regard to taxon search.

Outcome 3 – *In situ* conservation of priority crop wild relative (CWR) and landrace (LR) populations are implemented throughout Europe. Mechanisms are in place for more effective utilization of the conserved germplasm

Output 3.1 – National CWR conservation strategies produced

National activities on CWR vary a great deal throughout the region from a high activity level in a few countries to low or none at all in most of the countries. The most common activity is the production of CWR checklists, whereas national inventories, diversity and gap analysis of CWRs have been produced in rather few countries only.

Output 3.2 – Regional (European) CWR conservation strategy produced

For the region, there is now a CWR inventory ready to be taken into use and thanks to the granting of the EU project Farmer’s Pride the work could be started. Lists of MAWPs (Most Appropriate Crop Wild Relative Populations) have been prepared and will eventually form the basis for an *in situ* network. Conservation management and actions will be monitored via Farmer’s Pride project. Thanks to the EU project, the work on CWRs can be carried out on a level which would not have been possible within the ECPGR regular budget.

Output 3.3 – Integrated European strategy for CWR conservation produced

This is expected to be carried out within the Farmer’s Pride project.

Output 3.4 – European MAWP Network established

This is expected to be carried out within the Farmer’s Pride project.

Output 3.5 – Integrated regional (European) CWR conservation strategy operational

This is expected to be carried out within the Farmer's Pride project.

Output 3.6 – MAWP network germplasm effectively utilized

Activities will be dependent on the establishment of the MAWP network.

Outcome 4 – Commitment and regular resources of national governments are sustained or increased, and commitments and resources of the European Commission (EC) as well as other potential donors towards ECPGR are increased

Output 4.1 – Relationship between ECPGR and EC/EU and responsible national ministries strengthened and sustainable funding of ECPGR secured

At the very end of the current Phase there will probably still be member countries, which have not contributed financially to ECPGR. In some cases, this is due to national administrative problems rather than unwillingness to participate in the Programme. One would have hoped that those problems could be sorted out before the entering into the new Phase.

Also thanks to a considerable voluntary financial contribution from Germany, the outstanding contributions have not caused a negative cash flow. WG members have complained about the small amount of funding available for activities, therefore it could be adequate for more countries to consider the possibility of voluntary funding in order to support their own and other WG members to carry out activities to a larger extent.

Currently ECPGR is partner in a proposal submitted to Horizon 2020 together with the other European GR networks. A positive outcome would of course add funds to the budget and would help to carry out some of the planned activities which otherwise will have to be put on ice.

A suggestion from one of the WGs was that ECPGR should investigate the possibilities of becoming a European Research Infrastructures (ERIC). Since the research infrastructure of EU has focus on e-infrastructure it could perhaps also be relevant for ECPGR where the European Collection could then constitute a European research infrastructure. Becoming an ERIC means that the EU member states are expected to guarantee a stable funding. There are usually very good possibilities for substantial funding when reaching an ERIC status. However, the process is very long and demanding and requires a lot of work but also has potential for a secured and long-term status as a research infrastructure leading to national anchoring and funding.

Recommendations

- NCs are encouraged to search all opportunities for voluntary contributions to ECPGR. Even the smallest contribution will be of value, e.g. increase of the travel budget for ECPGR meetings or a contribution for a specific activity.
- NCs are requested to consider whether it would be likely for ECPGR to become an ERIC and if so, how the process should be carried out.

Output 4.2 – Increased awareness of the value of PGRFA amongst policy-makers at national and regional level

Funding from EC has so far been difficult to achieve for ECPGR core activities and according to the responses from NCs there has not been very much contacts between NCs and the EC, at least when it comes to ECPGR matters. The responses suggest that there is good and regular communication between NCs and their respective national ministries. These contacts could perhaps be used for promotion of increased ECPGR activities, especially during the planning of the new Phase of the Programme.

Output 4.3 – Increased collaboration between ECPGR and the International Treaty for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA)

The MoU between ECPGR and the Treaty has opened up further possibilities for collaboration at the international level. This might also help highlighting the European activities on PGRFA on the international arena and put ECPGR on the international agenda as an important PGRFA player.

Output 4.4 – Increased awareness of the value of PGRFA amongst users and the wider public

The importance of public awareness has been proved in many cases. Therefore, the ECPGR communication strategy, which lies on the table for discussion during the current meeting and for endorsement in the near future, will be important to raise awareness for PGRFA at many levels. It will also increase the visibility of ECPGR if used in a broader context.

Recommendations

- Request the Task Force to finalize the communication strategy in line with the proposed revisions from the SC.
- Endorse the communication strategy after discussion and revisions made accordingly.

Outcome 5 – Relations with users of germplasm are strengthened

Output 5.1 – Good knowledge of which C&E data are of high relevance to potential users

The communication between collection holders and users seems still to be limited to the transfer of requested material. Very little direct collaboration with few exceptions exists. Hopefully the newly established PPP will change this situation. The work, which is planned to start within the European Evaluation Network, will be of importance to raise the status of genebanks and collections; however, it is important to realize that it is a long-term work and should not be considered a short-term project. Therefore, it will need stability in funding. Thanks to Germany, this has been made possible for the time being but more countries should try to support this initiative.

Recommendation

- NCs should promote the continuation of the European Evaluation Network and search for additional funding. Even if it is intended to be self-funded to a large extent there will be need for additional money, which will contribute to ensure a long-term activity.

Outcome 6 – Organizational structure and secretarial support are adequate to effectively sustain the operations of ECPGR

Output 6.5 – Effective operation of the Secretariat

The ECPGR secretariat has carried out its duties very efficiently and timely as the comprehensive list of activities clearly shows. Lorenzo, Lidwina, Elinor, Jan and Imke deserve many thanks for their work during Phase IX.

Achievements of Grant Scheme and coverage

Thanks to the Grant Scheme, a quite substantial amount of work has been done during Phase IX. As mentioned before there is a strong will from WG members to do the work on a regional level which is often more rational than doing it on a national level. However, the budget for more activities is a limiting factor and an increase in this part of the budget would both strengthen the Programme and lead to further development of PGRFA in Europe, i.e. improvement of the collections and increased use of the material.

WG Chairs

During the WG Chairs meeting a number of constraints were revealed. One of them was the slow progress of AEGIS for different reasons. Communication problems at the national level were one example. Another serious obstacle was problems with funding of the collection, which could lead to hesitance to flag accessions. However, sharing of services could be one solution to some of the problems and therefore it is about time that partners start to accept each other's services, based on what is being offered.

A skewed participation of some professions in the WGs was also mentioned; therefore NCs should carefully revise their list of WG members and see if especially the users/breeders could get a more prominent role in the WGs. This could change the direction of activities of the WGs in the future more towards the needs of the users.