

13th meeting of the ECPGR Steering Committee Summary

The 13th meeting of the ECPGR Steering Committee (SC) took place 4-7 December 2012 in Vienna, Austria, hosted by the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management.

This meeting had the ambitious objective of making important decisions for the transition of ECPGR from its Phase VIII (2009-2013) to a new Phase IX (2014-2018), defining a new operational structure, mode of operation, objectives, hosting arrangements and external visibility of ECPGR. The proposed changes were triggered by the External Independent Review of ECPGR undertaken in 2010 and resulted from the process that was set in motion during the 12th Steering Committee meeting in Bratislava (December 2010).

The Secretary of the International Treaty on PGRFA, Mr Shakeel Bhatti, honored the meeting with his presence, updated the SC on the latest developments and offered answers and clarification on numerous questions.

An account of activities carried out during Phase VIII of ECPGR was presented by the Secretariat, illustrating the major achievements obtained in each of the four priority areas, including the developments of AEGIS and EURISCO. This Phase has seen the entering into force of AEGIS, with 33 members and the launching of the European Collection. Its quality system for conservation (AQUAS) is also under progress. EURISCO has reached over 1.1 million accession data and is playing a key role as one of the data providers of the global information system. Nine Networks and twenty Working Groups have been in operation, mobilizing resources for a joint European effort of conservation and use of plant genetic resources.

A new operational structure has been defined for Phase IX, consisting of only Working Groups (number to be defined between 15 and 20), composed of pools of experts that will carry out activities in small groups, generally not larger than 12 selected persons. A number of activities will be selected among those proposed by the WGs and/or decided by the SC, based on a selection process and on expressions of interest and commitment made by the individual WG members. All activities will need to contribute to the implementation of the Phase IX logframe objectives of ECPGR.

The objectives of ECPGR have been re-affirmed along six outcomes:

1. Aegis is operational and accessions in AEGIS are characterized and evaluated.
2. The functionality of EURISCO meets users' expectations and quantity and quality of data in EURISCO have been increased, including in situ and on-farm data.
3. *In situ* and on-farm conservation and management concepts are agreed.

4. Commitment and regular resources of national governments is sustained or increased and commitments and resources of the EC, as well as of other potential donors towards ECPGR are increased.
5. Relations with users of germplasm are strengthened.
6. Organizational structure and secretarial support are adequate to effectively sustain the operations of ECPGR.

Specific outputs and activities will be defined in the course of 2013 .

Based on the good experience over the last two years, the Executive Committee (ExCo) of ECPGR was reconfirmed, with new Terms of Reference, involving four National Coordinators from the West, East, North and South sub-regions of Europe and with a Chair selected on the basis of his/her personal capacity. For the next two years, Mr Gert Kleijer will continue in his role as Chair of ExCo. New rules of procedure for ECPGR have also been agreed, in order to better regulate, among others, membership to the ECPGR Programme and the decision-making procedures.

Among others, it was recommended by the External Independent Review that ECPGR should enhance its visibility and possibly acquire its own legal status. However, owing to the complexity of the necessary steps to reach such legal status and to the expectation that ECPGR will remain hosted by an international organization offering its legal umbrella, the conclusion was that ECPGR will not seek to obtain its own legal status for the moment. On the other hand, a new arrangement should be established with the host institution to increase the independency and visibility of the ECPGR Secretariat.

A request to tender for the hosting of the ECPGR Secretariat and EURISCO had been launched by the ExCo in October 2012, with the expectation to reach a decision at the SC meeting in Vienna. Two bids (Global Crop Diversity Trust and Bioversity) were received for hosting the Secretariat and three bids for hosting EURISCO (Global Crop Diversity Trust, Bioversity and Leibniz Institute of Plant Genetics and Crop Plant Research (IPK)). The evaluation by ExCo, based on the requested requirements and the detailed offer items, showed the high quality of all the bids and highlighted the differences between them, and that the overall scoring resulted in negligible differences. However, the SC felt that they lacked sufficient information about the bids for hosting the Secretariat to take a final decision during this meeting. Following a transparent process to obtain additional information from the bidders to complement the earlier bids submitted, the ExCo was mandated by the SC to take the final decision by the end of March 2013 after consultation with the SC members.

A strategy paper on the relationship between ECPGR and the EC/EU had been prepared by a Task Force of the SC. This document was adopted by the SC, including a number of recommendations that will need to be pursued in the following months to increase the impact that ECPGR can have on the involvement of the EU with plant genetic resources.

Owing to the current unfavorable economic situation in Europe, the National Coordinators could not agree to increase the budget of ECPGR, including an inflationary adjustment over the past five years. The budget was actually set at a reduced level (Euro 510,000 per year) compared to Phase VIII (Euro 552,000 per year). This decision, coupled with the increased costs that are foreseen whatever hosting arrangement scenario will be concluded in March 2013, means that additional funds will need to be raised through voluntary contributions or other sources. The transition towards Phase IX and the continuation of a solid collaborative Programme will therefore be critically affected by the need to reconfirm the ECPGR financial sustainability.

The excellent organization of the meeting arrangements and friendly atmosphere that the SC experienced during its stay in Vienna helped to make this meeting a milestone for future collaboration on PGRFA in Europe.