

Analysis of the answers to the ECPGR Questionnaire to the Working Groups' Chairs

Prepared by the ECPGR Secretariat (17 March 2022)

Introduction

In preparation for the Mid-Term Steering Committee meeting of Phase X, which will take place 7-9 June 2022 in Alnarp, Sweden, the ECPGR Executive Committee (ExCo) and Steering Committee (SC) intended to consult with the Working Groups' (WG) Chairs, organizing an online meeting with them on 5-6 April 2022. Among other things, the SC will start discussing the launch of the new ECPGR Phase XI, which should focus on the implementation of the recently published PGR Strategy. This meeting will also be an occasion to evaluate the current mode of operation of ECPGR including the Working Groups. One issue on the table will be the possible need to change/adapt the mode of operation to implement the Strategy most effectively and reconfirm or re-define what should be the role of the WGs.

In order to feed the discussion during the Chairs meeting, the ECPGR Secretariat, in consultation with the ExCo, circulated to the WG Chairs a questionnaire to get the Chairs' feedback about their past chairing experience and the effectiveness of the WGs (Section A) and about their expectations regarding the future implementation of the PGR Strategy (Section B).

The questionnaire was sent on 26 January 2022 to the Chairs of 21 Working Groups, with the exception of the Fibre Crops and Vitis WGs, at the time with a pending Chair. The deadline for replies was extended to 3 March 2022. The questionnaire was filled by 14 respondents, Chairs or Vice-Chairs of the following 14 Working Groups:

Avena, Berries, *Beta*, *Brassica*, Cucurbits, Grain legumes, Leafy vegetable, Maize, *Malus/Pyrus*, Medicinal and Aromatic Plants, *Prunus*, Solanaceae, Documentation and Information and Wild species in genetic reserves.

No replies were received from the WGs on *Allium*, Barley, Forages, Potato, Umbellifer Crops, Wheat and On-farm conservation and management.

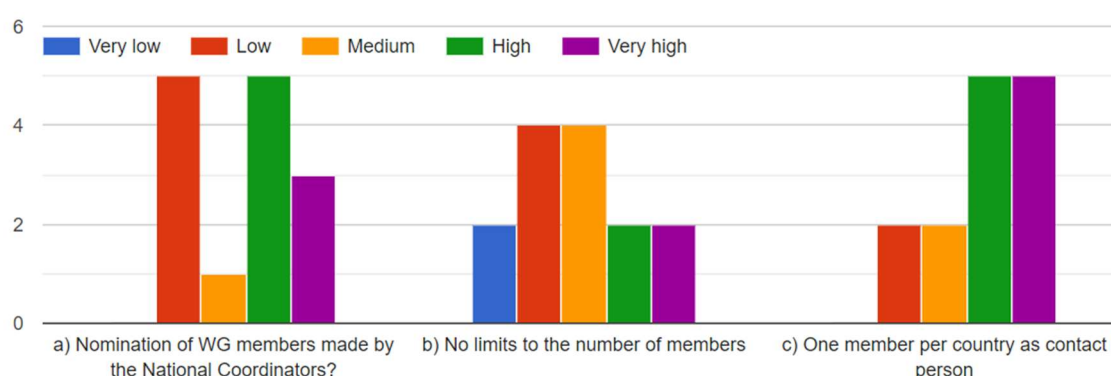
All the answers and comments are available as a separate Excel file. This document collects all the scores and the respective charts and an annotated summary of the answers prepared by the ECPGR Secretariat. For Section A (effectiveness of WGs towards the implementation of the current ECPGR objectives), the Secretariat has also prepared brief paragraphs of suggested improvements, deriving from the analysis of the answers. For Section B (Estimated effectiveness of Working Groups towards the new Plant Genetic Resources Strategy implementation) no suggestions have been elaborated.

SECTION A: Effectiveness of WGs towards the implementation of the current ECPGR objectives

Structure of the Working Groups

1. How effective is the structure of the individual Working Groups?

1. How effective is the structure of the individual Working Groups?



Average scores (1 = very low, 2 = low, 3 = medium, 4 = high, 5 = very high):

- a) **Nominations made by NC: 3.4**
- b) **No limits to the number of members: 2.9**
- c) **One member per country as contact person: 3.9**

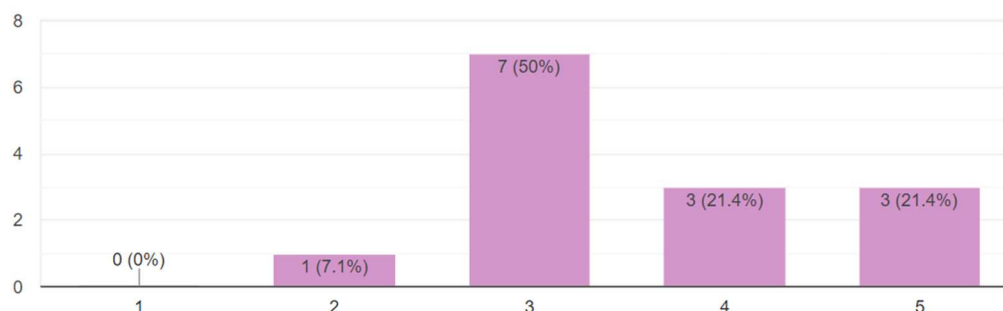
Secretariat analysis: Overall, the structure of the Working Groups is considered of medium/high effectiveness. Nominations made by the National Coordinators are rated of low effectiveness by some Chairs, mainly due to the low interest or participation shown by many nominated members. Also, NCs may not be always aware of the most suitable people to be nominated and gaps of expertise remain. There are mixed feelings regarding the unlimited number of members, the negative side being the very low responsiveness of a large part of the group, which makes it difficult to consolidate an effective group of like-minded people. Others like the flexibility and enhanced inclusiveness guaranteed by the unlimited number of members. The identification of one contact person per country is generally appreciated, also to counteract the limitations of dealing with a large group of unknown and non-responsive people. However, the effectiveness of this measure is limited by the fact that not every country has identified a contact person.

Suggestions for improvement: 1) Secretariat to encourage identification of a contact person in each country that has nominated members to the WG; 2) allow the Chair to propose new members through the intermediation of the Secretariat with respective NCs; 3) discourage membership of the same person in too many groups, which reduces effectiveness.

2. How effective is the role of the WG Chair with the current Terms of Reference?

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14 responses



Average score: 3.6

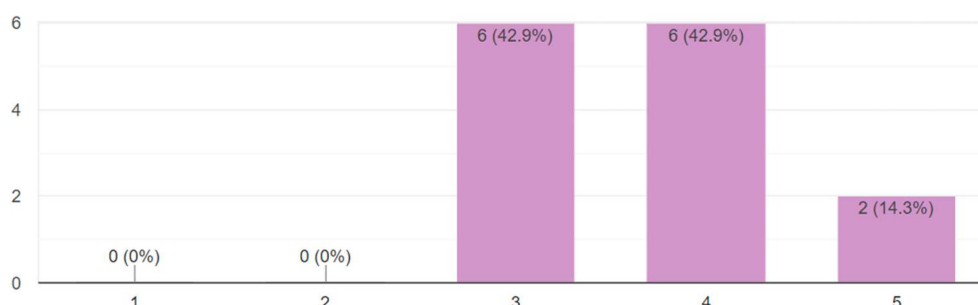
Secretariat analysis: The effectiveness of the role of the Chair is considered medium-high. However, evident limitations are the load of tasks that cannot be accomplished, especially on a voluntary basis and without active collaboration by the WG members. Some tasks in the current terms of reference are beyond the possibility of the Chair (e.g. the definition of crop-specific workplans). The role of a Vice-Chair is considered important.

Suggestions for improvement: 1) the Terms of Reference of the Chairs should be revised, reducing the expectations (i.e. AEGIS); 2) The role of the Vice-Chair has been already reintroduced in Phase X, left at the discretion of individual WGs, and its implementation should be considered by the WGs; 3) The SC might consider incentivizing the role of the Chairs and Vice-Chairs at least with a symbolic compensation for their role.

3. How appropriate are the current Terms of Reference for the WG Chair?

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14 responses



Average score: 3.7

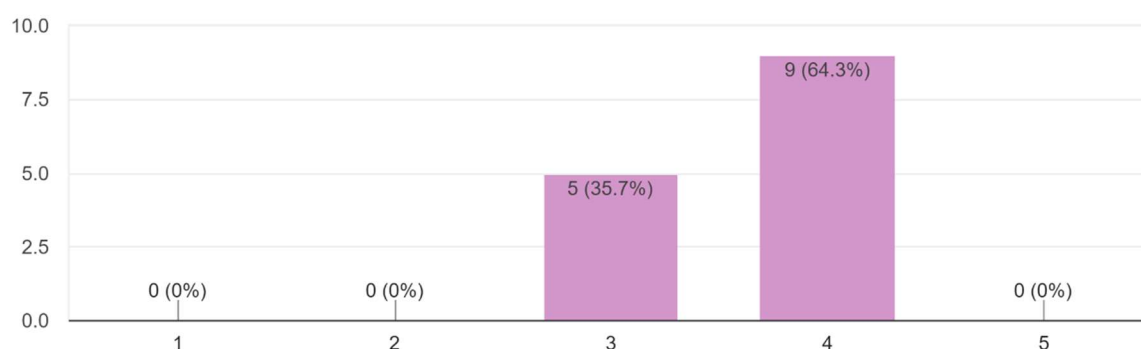
Secretariat analysis: Effectiveness of the Terms of Reference of the Chair is considered medium-high. However, as indicated above, tasks are too many for a voluntary activity and the Chair or the WG is not in condition to influence enough the build-up of the European collection as part of AEGIS.

Suggestions for improvement: see previous question.

4. How effective would you rate the current structure of ECPGR's Working Groups (20 crop and 3 thematic WGs) for the implementation of the current ECPGR objectives?

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14 responses



Average score: 3.6

Secretariat analysis: The effectiveness of the structure is considered to be medium-high. An individual comment proposes again the possibility to merge some WGs (e.g. cereals, vegetables), which has been often debated in the past (and also partially experimented with the creation of crop networks). Another individual comment calls for the need for thematic WGs more than crop WGs.

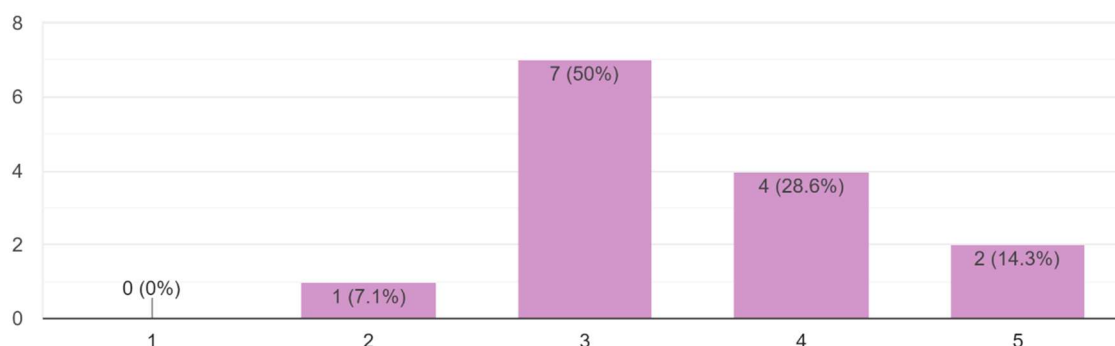
Suggestions for improvement: for discussion within the framework of Phase XI objectives

● *Mode of Operation/Tools*

5. How effective is the presence of 'country quotas' to ensure a balanced participation of countries in activities/meetings?

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14 responses



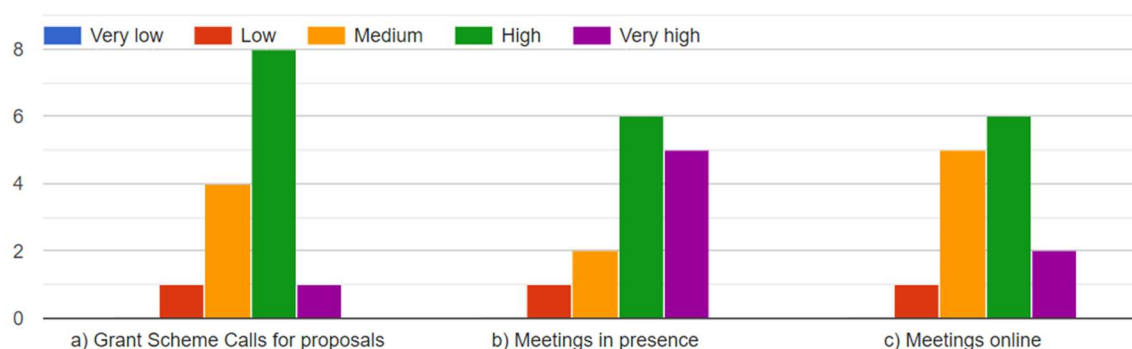
Average score: 3.5

Secretariat analysis: the effectiveness of 'country quotas' is considered medium-high. The country quota system has not entered into effect in Phase X, due to absence of meetings. However, the majority of Chairs express appreciation for a mechanism that can balance participation in meetings. At the same time, the balancing effect of the quotas is probably overestimated, since the current mechanism mainly ensures more slots to the countries that pay more. Quotas are also not influencing the representation in specific WGs, which only depends on the decisions of the NCs to nominate (unlimited) members. One Chair correctly points out that the quota system may become a limitation to the participation of valuable persons in WG meetings.

Suggestions for improvement: the Secretariat has always recommended the elimination of the quota system, which generates an overload of bureaucracy to monitor and manage the mechanism. Balanced participation might be guaranteed by common sense and monitoring the situation on a case-by-case basis, without the definition of too many rules.

6. How would you rate the efficiency of ECPGR tools to support activities that contribute to the achievement of ECPGR objectives, namely the:

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Average scores:

- a) Grant Scheme Calls for proposals: 3.6
- b) Meetings in presence: 4.1
- c) Meetings online: 3.6

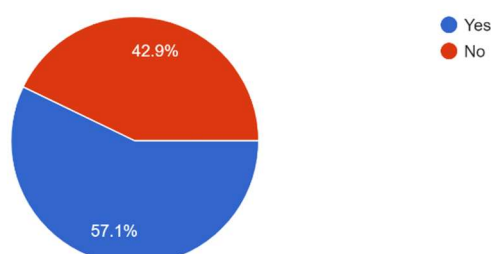
Secretariat analysis: The efficiency of ECPGR tools (Grant scheme and meetings) is considered medium-high, with high appreciation especially for meetings in presence. The Grant Scheme, despite having been used less than expected, is considered a useful tool, with a clear limitation related to the little funds that it provides. Meetings in presence are considered essential, confirming the recommendations made during Phase IX. The experience made by some groups with online meetings seems to have trained the groups to also appreciate this type of tool and make better use of it in the future to keep in touch.

Suggestions for improvement: It seems that a balanced use of the Grant Scheme, online and physical meetings is the preferred scenario by the Chairs, possibly with more significant budgets made available for the Grant Scheme. This combination of tools is what has been proposed for Phase 10, only the covid pandemic has not allowed a full implementation of the physical meetings. Within the current structure and mode of operation, no changes are considered necessary.

7. Do you think it would be interesting to consider other types of tools?

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14 responses

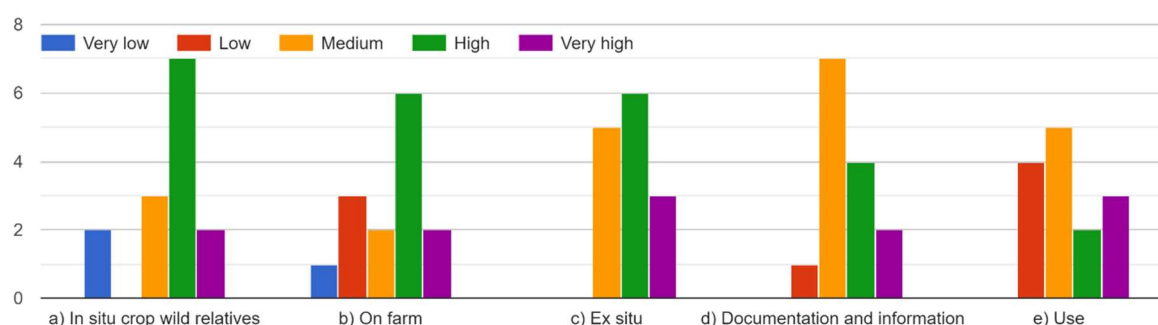


Secretariat analysis: 57% of respondents think that other types of tools should be considered. Suggestions made include participation in calls for project proposals, set up of task forces, regular meetings, interactions with other consortia and associations, study visits, creation of newsletters and crop portals. Any of these items is within the current possibilities of the Working Groups, although usually these have been implemented with their own resources.

Suggestions for improvement: Access to funds to implement alternative tools or actions could be made more flexible for the Working Groups, provided actions and tools are justified towards the accomplishment of specific ECPGR objectives.

8. How suitable would you rate the current modus operandi to contribute to the current ECPGR objectives, within these five operational areas?

8. How suitable would you rate the current modus operandi to contribute to the current ECPGR objectives, within these five operational areas?



Average scores:

- a) *In situ* crop wild relatives: 3.5
- b) On farm: 3.4
- c) *Ex situ*: 3.9
- d) Documentation and information: 3.5
- e) Use: 3.3

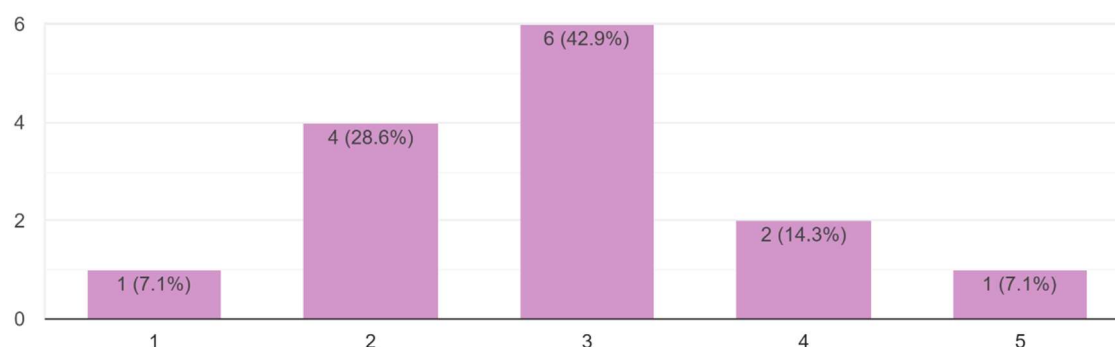
Secretariat analysis: the current modus operandi is considered of medium/high suitability to contribute to the ECPGR objectives. While the modus operandi is almost unanimously considered of at least medium suitability for 'ex situ' and 'documentation', for the other objectives the opinions are more contrasting, with indications of lower suitability, especially for 'use' and 'on-farm'. The comments do not elaborate sufficiently on the reasons for inadequacy.

Suggestions for improvement: Since the current modus operandi of the Working Groups is less adequate to deal with the objectives of 'on-farm' and 'use', discussion with the WG Chairs and the SC should possibly reflect on possible ways to deal more adequately with these objectives.

● **Internal communication and interactions with other ECPGR components/bodies that may also contribute to the achievement of ECPGR objectives**

9. How intense and effective has been the communication within your Working Group?

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14 responses



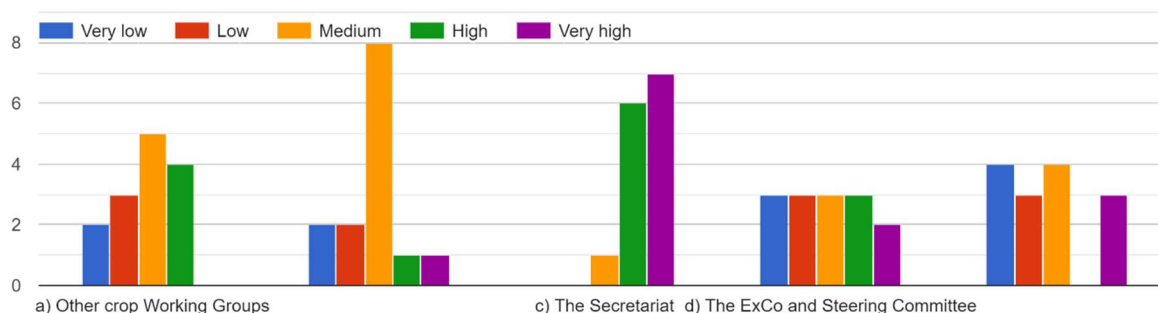
Average score: 2.9

Secretariat analysis: Communication within the WGs has been on average medium/low. Not surprisingly, communication is more frequent when there are ongoing activities, such as related to EVA, Horizon or Grant Scheme. The reduction of meetings or activities during the Covid period has slowed down interactions. Responsiveness limited to just a few members is a common problem.

Suggestions for improvement: It would be important that motivated members are nominated in the Working Groups, ideally with a specific national mandate to contribute to the objectives. Nomination of national contact persons, as currently suggested, can also be helpful.

10. How valuable has been your interaction with:

10. How valuable has been your interaction with:



- a) **Average scores:**
- b) **Other Working Groups: 2.8**
- c) **Other thematic Working Groups: 2.8**
- d) **ECPGR Secretariat: 4.4**
- e) **ExCo and Steering Committee: 2.9**
- f) **EVA Networks: 2.6**

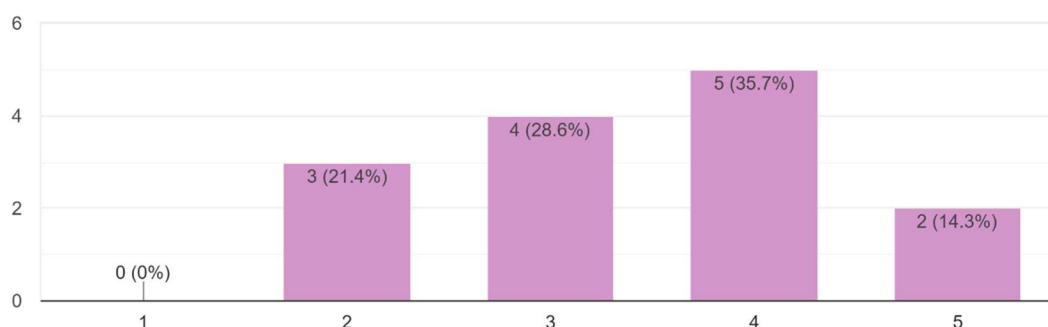
Secretariat analysis: Interactions of Working Groups with other bodies of the ECPGR structure are in general of medium-low level, with the exception of a unanimous high level of interaction with the Secretariat. Interaction across Working Groups seems good for the fruit trees WGs, but much less developed in other cases, with only punctual exceptions. In the comments, the aspiration is expressed to better communicate with the documentation and information WG and to get involved in the EVA network.

Suggestions for improvement: Opportunities for interaction exist (Chairs list server, joint Grant Scheme applications, information on website, meetings of the Chairs) and can be effective when needs arise. The Secretariat can play a role to help establishing specific interactions requested by the WGs.

11. How valuable has been the interaction with other networks such as Eucarpia, ISHS, etc?

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14 responses



Average score: 3.4

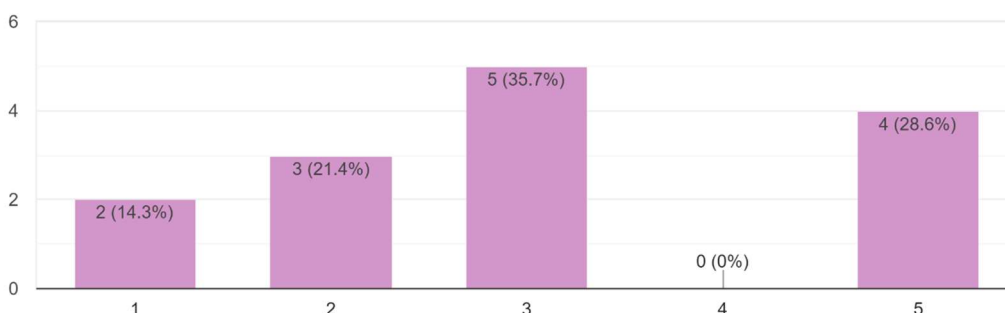
Secretariat analysis: A medium/high level of interaction is reported, with good examples quoted by the Grain legumes, Leafy vegetables, Maize, *Prunus* and Solanaceae WGs. Activities consist in joint projects or workshops and exchange of information.

Suggestions for improvement: Interactions with ISHS, EUCARPIA, EUFRIN and others should be kept in mind by the Chairs and the Secretariat for the opportunity to join forces in projects and exchange information in joint workshops.

12. How valuable has the WG been as a framework to lobby for fundraising (EU or other)?

12. How valuable has the WG been as a framework to lobby for fundraising (EU or other)?

14 responses



Average score: 3.1

Secretariat analysis: The WGs as frameworks for fundraising are considered of medium value. There are clear exceptions where the value has been very high and other cases where the value was considered low due to unsuccessful project submissions.

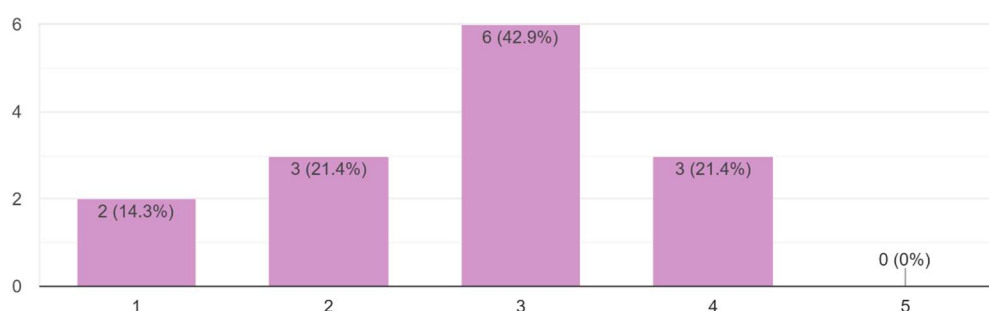
Suggestions for improvement: Since the potential value of the WG as a framework for fundraising remains significant in a number of cases, it will be worth to continue using the existing framework.

● **Achievements**

13. How effective has the WG been towards proposing activities for the Grant Scheme?

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14 responses



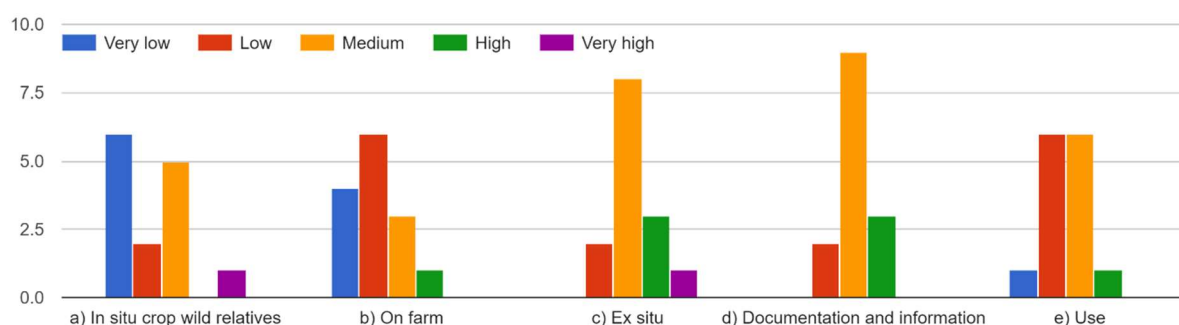
Average score: 2.7

Secretariat analysis: The average effectiveness in proposing activities has been medium-low. This score is somewhat contrasting with the rating of the Grant Scheme as a tool of medium-high value (Question 6a). However, the feelings of the Chairs are rather mixed, with both cases of success and unsucccess reported and mostly referring to the experience of the previous Phase IX. The problem of low reactivity within some Working Groups, expressed in previous answers, is reflected here as well.

Suggestions for improvement: Target objectives for the Grant Scheme proposals could be made more focused, accompanied by more significant budgets, to facilitate and incentivize the submission of proposals.

14. What is the level of achievement that you think you have reached in terms of ECPGR objectives implementation, within the respective operational areas?

14. What is the level of achievement that you think you have reached in terms of ECPGR objectives implementation, within the respective operational areas?



Average scores:

- a) In situ CWR 2.1
- b) On- farm 2.1
- c) Ex situ 3.2
- d) Documentation 3.1
- e) Use 2.5

Secretariat analysis: the average level of achievement is considered medium for the ‘*ex situ*’ and ‘documentation’ objectives and low for the others. This reflects the higher suitability of the modus operandi to address these objectives, as indicated by answers to Question 8. The few comments received do not add much to enable a better analysis. However, the indication is that the Chairs do not feel that the WGs have been very effective towards the implementation of the ECPGR objectives.

Suggestions for improvement: either the potential effectiveness of the WGs should be better empowered (see improvements suggested above) or the current mode of operation through Working Groups should be revised to better direct the focus of the network towards the implementation of more specific objectives.

Brief summary of the main pros and cons identified in the WGs during the last Phases IX and X

Secretariat analysis: Almost every Chair who contributed a final comment for this section, is focusing on cons rather than pros. Constraints were due to the restraints of the covid lockdown, absence of physical meetings, low responsiveness of Working Group members and the inability of the Chair to be proactive due to excessive workload.

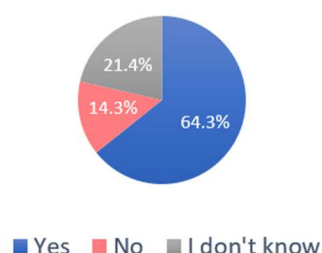
Suggestions for improvement: see suggestions in previous question 14.

● **SECTION B. Estimated effectiveness of Working Groups towards the new Plant Genetic Resources Strategy implementation**

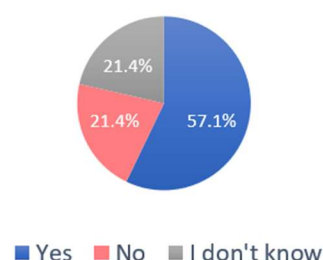
● **1. To what extent the WGs (either crop or thematic) would be the appropriate bodies to support the approaches described under the “Objectives by 2030” in the new PGR Strategy (with the current or adapted mode of operation)? Please respond to *questions 1a) to 1f)*, which list the approaches.**

1a) Expanding in situ conservation of crop wild relatives (CWR) and wild food plants (WFP)

i. Surveying and inventorying CWR and other wild PGRFA

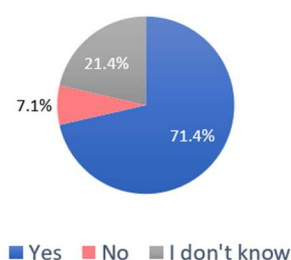


ii. Strengthening in situ conservation and management of CWR and WFP

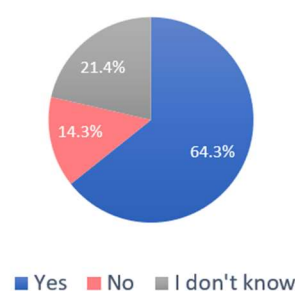


1b) Promoting on-farm plant genetic resources conservation and management

i. Surveying and inventorying on-farm plant genetic resources for food and agriculture

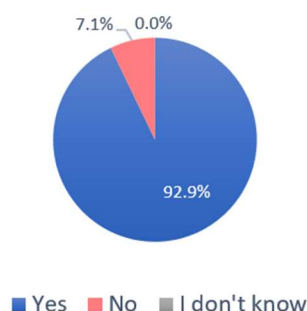


ii. Supporting on-farm plant genetic resources conservation and management



1c) Consolidating and sustaining *ex situ* conservation

i. Strengthening *ex situ* coordinated conservation capacities in Europe

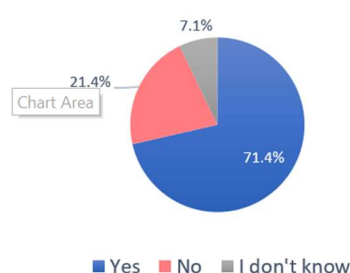


ii. Expanding the coverage of genetic diversity in European genebanks

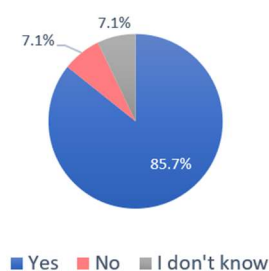


1d) Promoting sustainable use of PGR

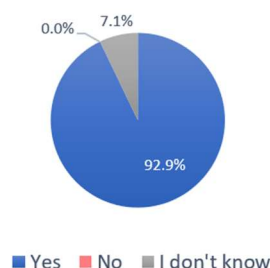
i. Facilitate availability to all stakeholders of genetic diversity from European *ex situ* and in situ conservation sites



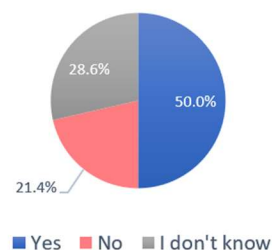
ii. Facilitate access to information about plant genetic resources targeted to specific user-groups



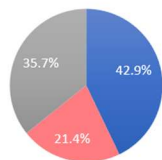
iii. Expanding phenotyping and genotyping characterization and evaluation of European PGR



iv. Supporting use of CWR genetic resources in pre-breeding and in research for discovering useful traits

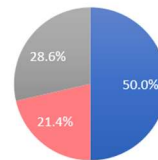


v. Supporting use of PGR in participatory and decentralized breeding efforts for the development of innovative locally adapted populations



■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know

vi. Promoting diversification of crop production for sustainable and resilient agri-food systems through a revised regulatory framework



■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know

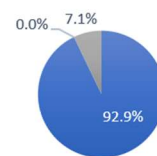
1e) Strengthening a comprehensive information system for plant genetic resources for food and agriculture

i. Strengthen and support EURISCO and its National Focal Points network to ensure the provision of passport data for all accessions of National Collections



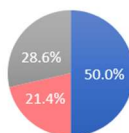
■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know

ii. Increase availability of reliable phenotypic data via EURISCO and the community of National Focal Points



■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know

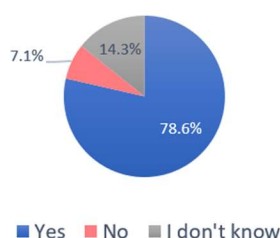
iii. Assure interoperability of EURISCO with other information systems by adopting FAIR principles



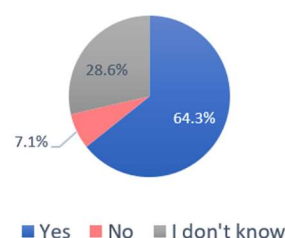
■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know

1f) Developing a system to monitor European conservation and sustainable use of PGR

i. Defining and implementing relevant sets of indicators for monitoring genetic diversity conservation and sustainable use



ii. Establishing a system to ensure the effective transfer and the analysis of relevant information from local to European levels



Secretariat analysis: Fourteen Chairs replied to all the sections of this question. The majority of Chairs believe that the Working Groups remain the appropriate bodies to support the approaches proposed to reach all the 2030 Objectives identified by the PGR Strategy. This conviction is almost unanimous (>90%) in the case of the following areas of action:

- *Ex situ* – (1.c1) Strengthening *ex situ* coordinated conservation capacities in Europe
- *Ex situ* – (1.c2) Expanding the coverage of genetic diversity in European genebanks
- Use – (1.d3) Expanding phenotyping and genotyping characterization and evaluation of European PGR
- Documentation – (1.e1) Strengthen and support EURISCO and its National Focal Points network to ensure the provision of passport data for all accessions of National Collections
- Documentation – (1.e2) Increase availability of reliable phenotypic data via EURISCO and the community of National Focal Points

The following areas of action are considered appropriate for the Working Groups, by a large majority of Chairs, ranging between 86% and 57%, in the following descending order:

- Use – (1.d2) Facilitate access to information about plant genetic resources targeted to specific user-groups (86%)
- Monitoring – (1.f1) Defining and implementing relevant sets of indicators for monitoring genetic diversity conservation and sustainable use (79%)
- On-farm – (1.b1) Surveying and inventorying on-farm plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (71%)
- Use – (1.d1) Facilitate availability to all stakeholders of genetic diversity from European *ex situ* and *in situ* conservation sites (71%)
- On-farm – (1.b2) Supporting on-farm plant genetic resources conservation and management (64%)
- *In situ* – (1.a1) Surveying and inventorying CWR and other wild PGRFA (64%)
- Monitoring – (1.f2) Establishing a system to ensure the effective transfer and the analysis of relevant information from local to European levels (64%)
- *In situ* – (1.a2) Strengthening *in situ* conservation and management of CWR and WFP (57%)

Fewer Chairs (50%) are convinced about the appropriateness of the Working Groups to deal with the following areas of action:

- Use – (1.d4) Supporting use of CWR genetic resources in pre-breeding and in research for discovering useful traits
- Use – (1.d6) Promoting diversification of crop production for sustainable and resilient agri-food systems through a revised regulatory framework

A minority of Chairs (43%) is convinced that the WGs could be effective regarding the following area of action:

- Use – (1.d5) Supporting use of PGR in participatory and decentralized breeding efforts for the development of innovative locally adapted populations

The indications offered by the answers received is that Working Groups could operate in most if not all areas identified by the PGR Strategy. However, they feel more solid and could be the most effective in *ex situ* management and adding value to the collections through genotyping and phenotyping and provision of these data to the public via EURISCO. This perception might be considered biased by the fact that most WGs are focused on specific crops and the tendency is to prioritize *ex situ* and documentation objectives, as part of a longer tradition in ECPGR.

● **2. In *questions 2a) to 2c)*, please provide ideas on how to modify and improve the current Working Groups structure and mode of operation.**

● **2a) What changes/improvements would you suggest to the WGs Structure?**

i. Number and scope of WGs

Secretariat analysis: A balanced number among the 9 respondents believe that the number of WGs is adequate or rather that it should be reduced by merging some WGs. The scope is proposed to be broadened or at least better linkages should be created across WGs to facilitate cross-cutting activities.

ii. Rules of WG membership

Secretariat analysis: Some comments made by the eight respondents reiterate the need to have proactive members in the WG and to incentivize their work.

iii. ToRs and selection of the WG Chair

Secretariat analysis: Among the nine comments received, there is an indication that the nomination of the WG Chair should be made with more participation of the WG members and that limits to the duration of the Chair's term could be introduced.

iv. Other

The three responses touch the points of the re-introduction of the Vice-Chair (see comments above) and the need for WG members to confirm their interest and commitment. A proposal is made to make the Chairs part of the Steering Committee or getting them involved in it.

● 2b) What changes/improvements would you suggest to the mode of operation/tools that could be partly funded by the ECPGR budget?

i. Calls for proposals for targeted/non-targeted topics

Secretariat analysis: Indications from the ten respondents show a preference for targeted calls, open calls without deadline, increased budgets and encouragement for joint action across networks, as well as the use of funds to aggregate partners to existing projects and attention to balanced participation.

ii. WG meetings - in presence (frequency, scope, etc.)

Secretariat analysis: The 11 respondents reiterate the importance of physical meetings that should take place at least once or twice per Phase. They are necessary to know each other, to strengthen the WG, coordinate implementation of objectives and exchange ideas. They could be limited to contact persons.

iii. WG meetings - online (frequency, scope, etc.)

Secretariat analysis: The 11 respondents indicate that online meetings could be more frequent, up to once per year or whenever necessary and could either be used by small task forces to work on specific tasks, or to be extended to enable larger participation than in physical meetings and ensure continuity of the WG commitment between physical meetings. They seem to be considered a flexible instrument that can be usefully adapted to many situations.

iv. Other ideas

Secretariat analysis: The proposed idea is to organize webinars/workshops for sharing experiences and expertise on important topics, such as on-farm conservation, participatory plant breeding, direct use, organic field collection management, pre-breeding & breeding, quality management, safe conservation strategies, etc.

● 2c) What changes/improvements would you suggest in the interactions with other operational components/bodies inside and outside ECPGR, that may also contribute to the achievement of ECPGR objectives?

i. Other WGs

Secretariat analysis: The main indication coming from the six respondents is that better communication across WGs can be facilitated by (periodical) meetings of the Chairs and more specifically to discuss collaboration between Crop and Thematic WGs.

ii. EVA networks

Secretariat analysis: The large majority of the seven respondents indicate that EVA is a very valuable initiative that should be extended in time and scope to more crops.

iii. ECPGR Secretariat

Secretariat analysis: No changes are suggested. Useful help of the Secretariat for online meetings is stressed.

iv. ExCo/Steering Committee

Secretariat analysis: A more regular discussion with the WG Chairs is recommended by three respondents.

v. Relationship with EUCARPIA/ISHS

Secretariat analysis: Seven respondents recommend continued or strengthened relationship, especially with EUCARPIA, also to organize joint sessions.

vi. Other bodies/institutions inside or outside ECPGR

Secretariat analysis: Five respondents indicate the need to improve the relationship with vegetable networks, biodiversity and genetic diversity partners, as well as ministries and funding bodies and to raise awareness of PGR with policymakers and the wider public.

3. Please provide a brief summary of the main improvements you suggest in the ECPGR structure and modus operandi to reach the objectives by 2030, as identified in the new PGR Strategy.

Secretariat analysis: A summary of the main improvements proposed by the 14 respondents:

- Ensure that WGs are composed of motivated members, with a clear mandate to carry out the necessary tasks and that they can regularly meet in person and online and address both crop-specific and thematic (*in situ/on-farm*) actions.
- Reduce the bureaucracy.
- Involve the expertise of the WG Chairs in the Steering Committee and facilitate more interactions among the Chairs.
- Improve collaboration between ECPGR and national authorities and strengthen collaboration at all levels.
- Work at country level to define the national collection, then promote collaboration on a sub-regional base, based on the AEGIS concept and improve genetic characterization; identify gaps in the collection and make necessary links between *ex situ*, *in situ* and on farm; promote direct use and public-private partnerships, pre-breeding and breeding. Locally and broadly advertise the need for national and European coordination and stable funding for the implementation of the European PGR strategy.
- Increase all cooperation channels to inventory genetic resources, make them visible and available, also trying to develop major networks for a research infrastructure to bring under the ECPGR umbrella all relevant EU projects, to exchange know-how, maximize impact and speed up the transfer of knowledge to beneficiaries.