

European Cooperative Programme for Crop Genetic Resources Networks (ECP/GR)

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Report on the Implementation of ECP/GR Phase VII (Mid-term Steering Committee meeting, September 2006)

1. Introduction

The first half of Phase VII of ECP/GR (2004-2008) was recently completed and the present document, prepared as a background to the 10th meeting of the ECP/GR Steering Committee (SC), is intended to mainly report on the status of implementation of Phase VII, following the decisions taken at the 9th Steering Committee meeting in Izmir, Turkey, October 2003.

From the point of view of the ECP/GR mode of operation, the main innovations characterizing Phase VII were the introduction of specific budgets assigned to each Network, the prioritization process of Working Group (WG) activities within the Networks, the introduction of new budget lines for thematic cross-cutting activities, as well as for EURISCO and for the AEGIS project. The structure of the Programme was also slightly changed, with reduction of the number of Networks from 10 to 9 and expansion of the number of Working Groups from 15 to 18. New rules were established for the participation in meetings, with a country quota system, and a mechanism for planning and prioritizing was also agreed upon. From the technical point of view, four priority issues were endorsed for action during Phase VII (characterization and evaluation; task sharing; *in situ* and on-farm conservation; and documentation).

This report is aimed at covering issues related to the implementation of Phase VII (structure, mode of operation and administration). The technical implementation (progress and future plans), which was carried out by the Networks, is reported through the "standard reports" provided by the Network Coordinators. Reporting on the outcomes of the AEGIS project (feasibility study) is also dealt with in a separate document.

Detailed technical and financial reports for the years 2004 and 2005 were provided to the Steering Committee members in 2005 and 2006, respectively.

2. Status of membership and contributions

As of the end of June 2006, a total of 32 countries have formalized their membership to Phase VII of ECP/GR. Five other countries have not signed the Letter of Agreement, but have paid annual contributions for Phase VII. In the case of France, formal membership and payment of contributions is still pending. However, this country has expressed its intention to continue being member of ECP/GR during Phase VII. Azerbaijan joined ECP/GR in 2005.

The total number of ECP/GR member countries (considering all formal and/or contributing members, and including France) is therefore currently 38.

Six potential member countries currently remain outside the membership of ECP/GR: Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Luxembourg, Moldova, Russian Federation and Ukraine. Focal points liaising with the appropriate authorities in each country have been identified and they have become familiar with the ECP/GR system. Although interest to become members has been expressed in all the above-mentioned countries, the actual steps to obtain membership have not been completed so far, mainly due to administrative or financial reasons.

3. Operational issues

Several changes in the structure and mode of operation of ECP/GR were recommended by the SC in October 2003.

A number of reference documents were prepared by the Secretariat in order to facilitate understanding and implementation of the new mode of operation.

These documents, listed below, are uploaded for convenience on the ECP/GR Web site at <http://www.ecpgr.cgiar.org/Introduction/AboutECPGR.htm>.

- **Terms of Reference for the ECP/GR operational bodies**

This working document, finalized in April 2004, describes the roles and tasks of National Coordinators, Steering Committee, Coordinating Secretariat, Network Coordinating Groups and Working Groups. The objectives of the Mid-term and Final Steering Committee meetings of each Phase are also summarized. This document is sent to all the new National Coordinators and new members of the Networks, upon their nomination.

This document is an essential reference at all levels to become familiar with the practical operation of ECP/GR. If necessary, the SC may suggest the need for additional sections in the future in order to clarify in more detail roles and responsibilities (Working Group Chairs, Vice-Chairs, Network Coordinators, Database Managers, etc.).

- **Country quotas for Phase VII**

This document explains the new mechanism for funded participation in ECP/GR meetings, based on country quota. A proposal by the ECP/GR Coordinator to reduce the originally agreed country quotas by 30% was accepted by the Steering Committee in March 2005. The reason for this reduction was related to the choice made by the Networks to spend a large quantity of the allocated funds for actions rather than for meetings.

Country quotas are applied only to the Crop Working Group meetings. A total of 21 meetings of this type are planned during Phase VII, of which seven have taken place already. The so-called Chair's quota (participation of one additional member at the discretion of the Chair) has been used in three occasions (inviting country representative (Turkey) in the Cucurbits WG, database manager (France) in the Prunus WG and country representative (Slovakia) in the Fibre Crops WG meetings).

Table 1 summarizes the use made by each country of their quotas. It is evident that a number of countries have not made substantial use of their opportunity to send participants to the Working Group meetings. However, there will be ample opportunities to do so in the second part of Phase VII.

For the implementation of the country quota rule, the Secretariat has taken some operational decisions in cases where the guidelines for interpretation were not sufficiently spelled out, as follows:

- 1) Country quota was not counted for Working Group members belonging to the host institute organizing the meeting;
- 2) When the database manager of the Group was not the official WG member for the respective country, the DB manager was invited to the meeting, without charging the country quota, upon consideration of the value of the inputs in kind of the DB manager to the Group;
- 3) Participation from the Nordic countries has been accepted without limitations, inviting all members indicated either by the Nordic Gene Bank or by the respective National Coordinators. An upper limit of participants will be applied to the Nordic countries in general rather than to the individual countries. This total will be equivalent to the sum of the country quotas of the five countries.

The Steering Committee is welcome to comment on the above-mentioned operational decisions of the Secretariat and to offer guidance should a different interpretation need to be applied.

Table 1. Country quotas for Phase VII

Country	Updated country quota	Country quota used (<June 2006)	Remaining country quota during Phase VII
Albania	7	1	6
Armenia	7	2	5
Austria	11	0	11
Azerbaijan	7	1	6
Belgium	11	1	10
Bulgaria	7	2	5
Croatia	8	0	8
Cyprus	8	0	8
Czech Republic	9	3	6
Denmark	11	1	10
Estonia	7	2	5
Finland	9	1	8
France	13	1	12
Germany	13	3	10
Georgia	7	3	4
Greece	9	1	8
Hungary	9	5	4
Iceland	8	0	8
Ireland	9	3	6
Israel	9	1	8
Italy	13	6	7
Latvia	7	3	4
Lithuania	7	4	3
Macedonia (FYR)	7	1	6
Malta	7	0	7
Netherlands	11	3	8
Norway	11	2	9
Poland	9	5	4
Portugal	9	5	4
Romania	8	4	4
Serbia/Montenegro	7	2	5
Slovakia	8	3	5
Slovenia	8	2	6
Spain	11	3	8
Sweden	11	3	8
Switzerland	11	3	8
Turkey	9	2	7
United Kingdom	13	4	9
Nordic Gene Bank		3	-3
Total	346	89	257

Nordic countries (Nordic Gene Bank)

Denmark	11	1	10
Finland	9	1	8
Iceland	8	0	8
Norway	11	2	9
Sweden	11	3	8
Nordic Gene Bank		3	-3
Total	50	10	40

Upcoming meetings for which countries can use their country quota:

Third meeting of the *Malus/Pyrus* Working Group, Georgia, October 2006
 First meeting of the Umbellifer crops Working Group, to be confirmed (2006 or 2007)
 Fourth meeting of the Grain Legumes Working Group, to be confirmed (2007)
 Cereals Network full meeting (three Working Groups) planned to take place in 2007
 Ninth meeting of the Working Group on Forages, Slovakia, planned to take place in 2007
 Vegetables and MAPs Network (7 Working Groups) planned to take place in 2007

- **Network's budget allocation for Phase VII**

This document resulted from the exercise that the Network Coordinating Groups (NCG) had to undertake for the first time at the onset of Phase VII, in order to allocate into actions the specific Network's funds assigned to them by the Steering Committee.

As mentioned in the annual reports, this exercise took considerable time during the first year of Phase VII. First of all, it was necessary to establish the composition of the NCGs and then a consultation process went on, resulting in a budget plan for each Network, which was endorsed by the SC at the end of 2004. The slow implementation of this new procedure (assignment of budgets to the Networks and subsequent choice of actions by the Networks themselves) has delayed by about one year the operational start of the implementation of Phase VII. However, the mechanism has now been internalized and adopted by the Networks; therefore, it should be much easier in the future to take decisions, such as allocating resources, monitoring and revising budgets.

The possibility offered to the Networks to make their own choices and establish priorities on how to spend their funds was received with general consensus. This has introduced a beneficial element of flexibility in the operation of the overall Programme.

Following the NCG meeting in Bonn (March 2006) and in preparation for the Mid-term Steering Committee meeting, the NCGs took the opportunity of slightly revising their budget's allocations. A new document, including the status of expenditures as of March 2006 and minor revisions of the Network's budgets is included among the background documents for the SC meeting (http://www.ecpgr.cgiar.org/SteeringCommittee/SC10/NetPhaseVII_revbuds_200706.pdf).

4. Network operations

4.1 Crop and Thematic Networks' operations

The total budget assigned for crop Networks' operations during Phase VII was 498 750 euro. Of these, the Networks have decided to use 310 700 euro for regular Working Group meetings, 117 725 for actions and 70 325 for very specific *ad hoc* meetings. This type of distribution of the funds has required a reduction of the country quota by approximately 30%, to be applied only to regular Crop WGs and full Crop Network meetings. This proposal was discussed through the Steering Committee listserv and was endorsed by the SC in February-March 2005 (see above section).

The actions proposed by the Networks included collecting missions, laboratory analysis (fingerprinting), printing of publications, etc.

In one exceptional case, the Sugar, Starch and Fibre Crops Network is planning to use 38 800 euro to employ a scientist to work for the development of a model database, i.e. the International Flax Database. All the Networks' budgets were approved by the Steering Committee in December 2004. However the proposal on the Flax Database has been subsequently prepared in more detail and it may require re-confirmation of approval by the Steering Committee.

This proposal is supported by a project outline, which was developed by the NCG and is submitted to the attention of the SC for possible endorsement (see background documents at <http://www.ecpgr.cgiar.org/SteeringCommittee/SC10/StandRep/IFDB-pp.pdf>).

The status of progress in the implementation of Networks' operations is documented by the standard reports provided by the Networks (see background documents). From the budgetary point of view, it is apparent that adjustments will be necessary, since the cost of meetings and actions will eventually result overestimated in some cases and underestimated in others. The Secretariat would need a guideline from the SC, whether budgetary adjustments should only be allowed within the Networks or across Networks as well. In the first case, unspent funds from one Network could be assigned to a different Network. In the second case, each Network would be responsible for its own budget. The Secretariat tends to prefer limiting the transfer of funds across Networks only to exceptional cases.

The SC is invited to give a guideline on the management of Network's budgets.

4.2 Lower priority Working Groups

Following the decision of the SC to prioritize 12 out of 18 Working Groups during Phase VII, the following WGs were considered lower priority, as a result of within-Networks deliberations: Barley, *Vitis*, Potato, *Allium*, *Brassica* and Solanaceae.

Consequently, regular meetings of these WGs were not planned during Phase VII. However, a budget of about 7300 euro for each of these WGs was allocated by the SC, to promote continued contact among WG members. These funds were dedicated to small meetings or participation of members in other Networks' activities, in the case of Barley, Potato, *Allium* and *Brassica*. The Solanaceae WG has so far used part of its funds to facilitate the transfer and installation of the Pepper database software by the Dutch developer to the database manager institute in Turkey. The *Vitis* WG intends to use its funds for the adaptation of the *Vitis* database to the EURISCO format and to develop a new system allowing direct on-line uploading of data.

Overall, the Networks were reluctant to establish a differential priority setting for the various WGs. This is also reflected in the standard reports and proposals for the future. In some cases, the Networks have planned full Network meetings (Cereals; Vegetables and MAPs), with the aim to also involve the lower priority WGs. In this way, the lower priority WGs will benefit from a larger share of funds than originally foreseen by the SC.

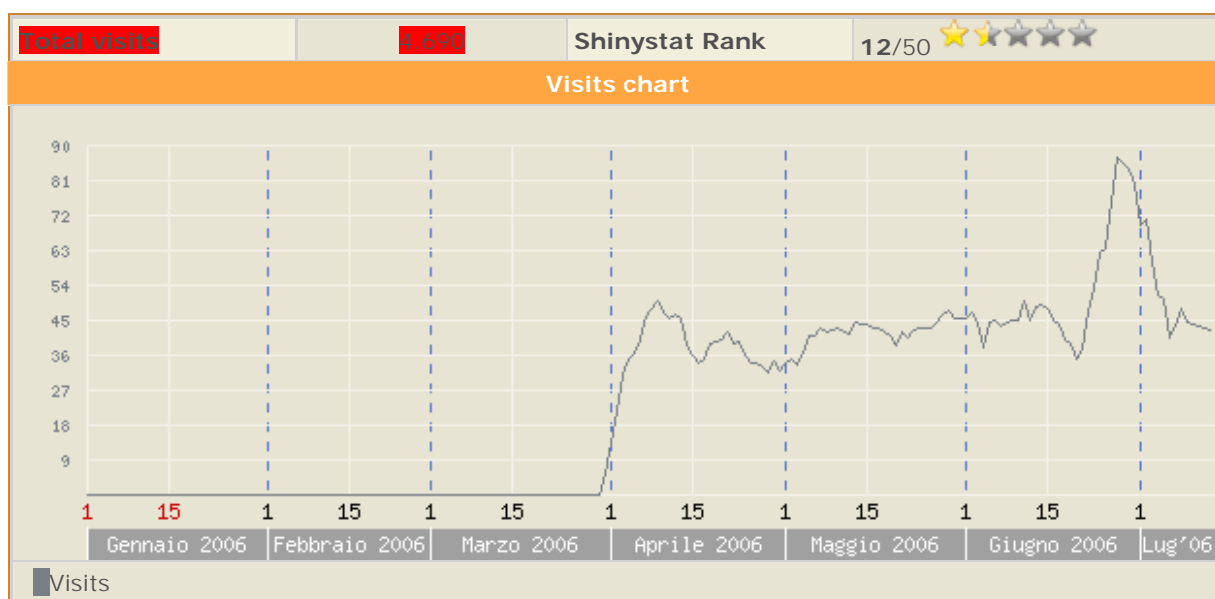
4.3 Public awareness tools / actions

Public awareness activities during Phase VII included the production of the following tools and products aiming at disseminating and raising awareness on the ECP/GR objectives and activities:

- A technical brochure illustrating the structure, activities and objectives of the Programme, which was mainly addressed to the scientific partners;
- Pens made with the Programme logo colours and a printed ECP/GR logo and Web address were produced to be distributed at international *fora* and during public events;
- A special logo was designed on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of ECP/GR, and used for all publications printed in 2005;
- CD-ROMs were compiled, incorporating information related to meetings (i.e. PowerPoint presentations, scientific papers, summary reports). The CD-ROMs had a dedicated cover and were distributed to all participants after the meetings and other interested persons;
- An ECP/GR brochure addressed to the wider public was prepared in collaboration with European NGOs, and in close contact with Pro Specie Rara, Switzerland. The brochure aims at raising awareness on the importance of agro-biodiversity conservation and conservation through use.

Provided endorsement of the brochure, to be circulated in a pre-final version during the SC meeting in Riga, a package containing full elements of the brochure will be made available to SC members for possible translation into local languages.
- The ECP/GR Web site was constantly updated, providing full information related to meetings, publications, members' contact details, as well as newly agreed workplans and other meetings' outcomes.

A Web impact assessment of the ECP/GR Web site was carried out between April and mid-July 2006. A graphical representation of the results is given below:



Main constraints of public awareness activities relate to the difficulty to monitor and assess its impact, especially when limited actions are carried out by the ECP/GR Secretariat in a large geographical area. The “language factor” is also probably a critical element in awareness raising activities directed to the wider public.

4.4 Thematic cross cutting issues

A budget line (32 810 euro) was dedicated to thematic actions of cross-cutting interest for several Networks, such as in the area of *in situ*/on-farm conservation and management and overall policies for *ex situ* conservation. Proposals for specific actions could be raised by the NCGs and submitted to the Steering Committee for approval. Table 2 summarizes the current detailed allocation of these funds. In particular, part of these funds was included in the *In situ* and On-farm Conservation Network’s budget, following a proposal by the respective NCG, in order to enhance the impact of *in situ* activities, which are by default of cross-cutting interest.

Table 2. Budget allocation for thematic cross-cutting issues (total = 32 810 euro)

Thematic cross-cutting issue	Budget (euro)	Expenses (euro)		Balance Phase VII
		2004	2005	
PGR genebank representatives to attend Crop Wild Relative Conference	5400	0	3503	1897
NGO and PGR networking meeting	5000	0	0	5000
Meeting on genebanks and genomics (to be confirmed)	5000	0	0	5000
Boreal project (GR of Northern Europe)	10000	0	0	10000
Publication of AEGIS Strategic Framework paper (2000 euro, to be confirmed)	2000	0	0	2000
Available	5410	0	0	5410
Total	32810	0	3503	29307

Another portion of these funds was allocated to the organization of a workshop on genetic resources in the northern part of Europe. The proposal was made by a Finnish scientist, with support from Nordic countries’ institutions. The outcome of this meeting, planned for September 2006, should be the establishment of an expert group that will initiate the review of the present state of plant genetic resources of northern Europe and make strategic plans for their conservation upon

consideration of the risk of climatic change. The workshop should also address the remark that climate change issues are not only relevant to the northern part of Europe and that this workshop should possibly offer a model for similar actions in other parts of Europe, as well as indications on the opportunity and relevance for ECP/GR to invest funds in this area in the future.

Other proposals on the use of remaining cross-cutting issues funds (meeting on “genebanks and genomics”, publication of the AEGIS Strategic framework paper, and other activities to be defined) need to be further developed.

In the original plans, the NCGs were expected to be the bodies proposing cross-cutting activities. In practice, the NCGs have not played a very pro-active role so far in developing this type of proposals. It has been questioned that the workshop on climate change in the Boreal areas was not proposed by NCGs, but rather by individuals and institutions in the member countries. In this occasion, recognizing the relevance of the topic as well as absence of competing proposals, the Secretariat has nonetheless accepted to submit the proposal to the Steering Committee.

Guidance is expected from the SC on whether a different approach should be applied in the future (i.e. whether only proposals made by NCGs should be considered).

4.5 EURISCO

During Phase VII, ECP/GR is contributing 10 000 euro per year towards the cost of development of the EURISCO catalogue.

A first evaluation of the progress of EURISCO was made in April 2005, during a meeting of the EURISCO Advisory Group in Bonn, Germany. At that time, it was evident that the catalogue, since its launching in September 2003, had made less progress than expected. The EURISCO Advisory Group, during its meeting in April 2005, indicated a prioritized list of actions, including status review of the catalogue, Web site development, dissemination activities and other priorities. It was also concluded that the ECP/GR Secretariat was expected to spend the available funds in order to accomplish progress in the actions recommended by the EURISCO Advisory Group. During the current Phase it would not be asked to specify the EURISCO budget and work programme in more detail, but this may be requested in the future.

Following the recommendations made by the EURISCO Advisory Group at its meeting in April 2005, several of the recommended actions were accomplished, while others are ongoing, as described in detail in Table 3.

The main developments include: effective day-to-day management of the catalogue; increase of the number of National Inventories (data from 34 National Inventories are available); increase of the number of accessions included in the catalogue, which has nearly reached one million, i.e. a 22% increase since the catalogue was launched; production of two fact sheets and a poster (2005 and 2006); “download data option”, allowing to download data sets from EURISCO (March 2006), thereby increasing the available information in the ECCDBs; assessment of the use of EURISCO and the status of National Inventories (May 2006); production of a EURISCO e-bulletin (May 2006); several presentations in international fora; monitoring surveys and deployment of the EURISCO model to other regions. Management and maintenance of the catalogue and helpdesk support are an ongoing service, responding to various requests, ranging from clarifications on the use of EURISCO to providing specific datasets to National Focal Points (NFPs), ECCDB managers and other users. Routine technical maintenance, updating and problem solving are also ongoing.

The next priority developments will include improvement of the Web interface and its user-friendliness, taking into consideration future inclusion of the *in situ* component (crop wild relatives and landraces).

Training of National Inventory Focal Points and further technical developments of the catalogue, including extension to *in situ* data, are planned in the context of project proposals submitted to the European Commission (EC) under AGRI GEN RES Regulation 870/2004 (see section 5 below).

Table 3. Status of progress of EURISCO development, based on the prioritized list of actions suggested by the EURISCO Advisory Group in Bonn, Germany, April 2005 (priority level: H = High; M = Medium; L = Low)

Status review	Achievement
H - Review National Focal Point (NFP) status: status of National Inventory, ability and timing of uploads (through bilateral communications + questionnaire and surveys), follow-up actions to achieve the necessary momentum	Done
L - Provide status reports to NFPs (e.g. statistics, error reports) => Newsletter (minimum 4 per year but also when relevant)	Done (one issue of the newsletter)
L - Monitor data quality and availability	On going
Website	
H - Review, improve, and update, also including new search/download possibilities	Update done
H - Make downloads easier	Done
M - Monitor visitors (also what they do, where they go)	Done
L - Get feedback from end-users and respond to it	Ongoing
L - Promote links with other relevant databases	Done
Dissemination	
H - Public awareness materials (including Newsletter)	Done
M - Capacity Building (Training for NFP staff, on-line tutorials, manual, etc.)	Postponed
L - Look for linkages with other relevant databases	Done
L - Compile Frequently Asked Questions (problem solving)	Not yet
Other priorities	
- Organize workshops, seminars	Not yet
- Representation in international fora	Done
- EURISCO News (<i>Newsletter</i>)	Done
- Release frequent data analysis and feedback to NFPs	Done
- Provide advice on updates and uploads	Done
- Improved alert system	On going
- Statistics available	Not yet

4.6 AEGIS project

At the last Steering Committee meeting, a project on sharing of responsibilities as a possible model of "a European Genebank Integrated System (AEGIS)" was approved for funding under the ECP/GR budget. The budget was built with funds remaining from Phase VI (US\$ 52 250) and specific funds from Phase VII (78 750 euro). Additional funds were also provided by Germany (15 000 euro) and The Netherlands (5000 euro).

A proposal for the selection of model crops, project partners, AEGIS Steering Committee members and terms of reference for the project manager was formulated by the ECP/GR Secretariat and approved by the SC. Birgitte Lund was appointed at IPGRI as project manager; she was responsible for the project from August 2004 to April 2006. A Web site of the project was launched in May 2004. The AEGIS Steering Committee formally met in two occasions and two project partners meetings were organized (kick-off and mid-term meetings). Additional occasions for meetings of the model crop sub-groups were created in the context of ECP/GR Network meetings. On the other hand, the expected final project meeting was not held, due to the departure of B. Lund to a new job and the need to focus on EC AGRI GEN RES project proposals preparation in June 2006.

The results of the AEGIS project and recommendations for the future are included and discussed in separate background documents, in particular the final report of the AEGIS project (including financial report).

4.7 Publications and Newsletter

In the first two years of Phase VII, eight reports of ECP/GR meetings were printed by IPGRI (most of them related to Phase VI events) and 15 electronic reports were uploaded on the Web. Due to the long backlog of reports left to be published at the end of Phase VI and to the very limited staff time available (50% of a full-time position), printed reports are currently published with considerable delay (ca. 2 years after the date of the meeting). The processing chain of ECP/GR reports preparation includes several successive steps. A draft is usually prepared by the Secretariat for endorsement at the meeting. This document is subsequently edited, proof-read and circulated to the participants for additional comments, before being uploaded on the Web (as "Part I, Discussion and

Recommendations”), usually within three months after the meeting. Subsequently, a full report is prepared for publication, including all the papers presented at the meeting and additional relevant contributions. This second step requires lengthy interactions with the out-contracted English editor and the authors and a final quality product is eventually printed, uploaded on the Web, and distributed to National Coordinators, Working Group members and other interested partners.

At the present pace, and given the currently available staff resources, the ECP/GR Secretariat can print no more than four reports per year. On the basis of the requests made by the Networks (and their budgets), the Secretariat is expected to print 11 quality hard copy reports during Phase VII and to prepare electronic products for over 30 meetings. With these planned numbers, it is foreseen that, by the end of Phase VII, the backlog and the delays of the publications will be considerably reduced.

As of July 2006, five issues of the IPGRI Newsletter for Europe have been published during Phase VII of ECP/GR, which is produced with a partial contribution of ECP/GR funds. Two issues of this newsletter are produced each year and they include accounts of all ECP/GR activities; there is also room for news from partners from the member countries.

4.8. Network Coordinating Group meeting

The Network Coordinating Groups (NCGs) had the opportunity to meet in Bonn, Germany, on 29-31 March 2006, to review progress, readjust the Networks’ plans and budgets for Phase VII of ECP/GR and to start looking into plans for the future Phase VIII.

The meeting, hosted by the Federal Agency for Agriculture and Food (BLE), was attended by 37 representatives of the ECP/GR Networks, who had the chance to discuss inter-Network cross-cutting issues and to strengthen joint activities. Several IPGRI staff and observers from the European Seed Association and the Global Crop Diversity Trust were also attending.

During the first part of the meeting, several presentations made the point on recent changes occurred in the operating environment. The audience was updated on the status of the International Treaty on PGRFA, with its Governing Body meeting for the first time in June 2006 and aiming at the endorsement of the standard Material Transfer Agreement for the exchange of germplasm within the Multilateral System. An update was also given on the strategies of and opportunities for collaboration with the Global Crop Diversity Trust, an independent fund with the goal of supporting the conservation of key crop diversity collections on the long-term. Possible scenarios for the implementation of a European Genebank Integrated System (AEGIS) were presented in a three-role play, pretending to imagine the ideal situation in Europe in the year 2015. All the presentations are available from each Network’s Web site (see <http://www.ecpgr.cgiar.org/Introduction/Networks.htm>).

An important session of the meeting consisted in the presentation of the Thematic Networks’ activities by the respective Network coordinators. This was the occasion for the Crop Networks’ representatives to get a clear picture of the Thematic Networks’ activities and to strengthen collaboration. Each Network produced a progress report and made specific plans for the future. These are included in the report of the meeting, which is available at: http://hq31/ecpgr/Networks/NCG_March06/NCG_Bonn_revdraft_070806.pdf.

In the end, the meeting endorsed a number of general recommendations which were addressed to the SC. Among these, the concept of AEGIS received a broad appreciation and it was recommended to support its broad implementation. It was considered important to support global initiatives on PGR conservation. It was encouraged to strengthen inter-network relationships with other regions. EURISCO was appreciated as a central documentation platform, which in future will cover *ex situ*, *in situ* and on-farm data on PGR. It was recommended that the Steering Committee consider broadening the range of crops taken care of by the Networks (including for example rice, cotton, currant, strawberry, etc.). It was suggested to increase communication with the relevant European Commission services. Finally, it was recommended that the SC would not only maintain the current budget level, but also consider an increase along the priorities outlined above, for Phase VIII. A certain amount of funds was recommended to be reserved to targeted *ad hoc* actions and attention to a fund-raising role was also recommended.

The full set of recommendations is included in Annex I of this report. The SC is invited to take these into consideration for all discussions during the SC meeting.

5. Link with other Networks and initiatives

The main interactions between ECP/GR and other Networks and initiatives during the first part of Phase VII are listed below:

- **SEEDNet**

The ECP/GR Coordinator was invited as permanent observer in the Regional Steering Committee meetings of the Sida-funded South East Europe Development Network on Plant Genetic Resources (SEEDNet). SEEDNet currently involves partners from the entire territory of former Yugoslavia, plus Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary and Romania.

It was agreed that SEEDNet representatives should be invited to participate in ECP/GR bodies and initiatives (Documentation and Information NCG, AEGIS project) and events were jointly organized (MAP meeting in Strumica, Macedonia FYR). The close connection between SEEDNet and ECP/GR allows for harmonization of objectives and for synergies.

By supporting the development of national programmes in the Balkan area and beyond, SEEDNet has the possibility to facilitate implementation in this geographical area of several ECP/GR recommendations and initiatives, such as development of National Inventories, management of ECP/GR Central Crop Databases and, in the future, participation in the AEGIS initiative.

- **Global Crop Diversity Trust**

Close interaction with the Trust is being maintained and developed, in particular in the context of AEGIS. AEGIS and the Trust agreed to share information, experiences and lessons learnt for the process of the regional and global crop strategies. The ECP/GR Secretariat has provided a point of contact for the Trust, whenever there was the need to find crop experts who could contribute to the Trust crop strategies.

- **Council Regulation (EC) No. 870/2004**

This Regulation was published in April 2004, establishing a Community Programme on the conservation, characterization, collection and utilization of genetic resources in agriculture. Project proposals were submitted to two calls (September 2005 and June 2006). The ECP/GR Secretariat provided general support to the Working Groups involved in the preparation of project proposals, offering information, ideas and suggestions for partnership. The Secretariat was also directly involved, as IPGRI partner, in the preparation of three proposals submitted under the first call (EPGRIS 2, ONFARMSAFE, and AEGIS concerted action) and four proposals submitted under the second call (EGRISI, EPGRIS 2 (resubmitted), ONFARMSAFE (resubmitted), and AEGIS targeted action). Of the first three proposals, submitted under the first call, only AEGIS reached all evaluation thresholds, but was nonetheless not considered for co-funding under the regulation due to limited Community funds. The results of the proposals submitted under the second call are expected by the end of the year 2006.

6. Other issues

- **Steering Committee composition and collaboration with other organizations**

Currently the SC is composed of the National Coordinators of the member countries and a number of observers. These are EuroMAB, the European Seed Association (ESA), the European association for research on plant breeding (EUCARPIA), FAO, IPGRI, the Nordic Gene Bank (NGB), and one NGO representative. The European Commission was invited to become a full member of the ECP/GR.

The EC (F. Steenhoff) was a member of the AEGIS Steering Committee. However, following the departure of F. Steenhoff from the EC in October 2004, no replacement was identified as a focal person for ECP/GR.

ESA (G. von Essen), FAO (B. Fraleigh) and NGOs (B. Bartha) have also been members of the AEGIS Steering Committee. This condition has allowed maintaining an open channel for exchange of views and information with these organizations. ESA is now a partner in the AEGIS project proposal submitted for funding under the second call of the EC AGRI GEN RES Regulation. The NGOs will also be participating in this project as invited observers.

After the departure of B. Fraleigh from FAO in June 2006, a request was made to FAO to identify a new focal person for ECP/GR matters.

ESA, FAO and the NGOs have been invited to all the regular WG meetings during Phase VII. However, they have not taken advantage of this opportunity, except for the participation of an NGO representative in the seventh *Prunus* WG meeting.

The NGB has been an important partner for ECP/GR activities in Phase VII, with the participation of several of its staff members in the WG meetings. NGB has also participated as a project partner in the AEGIS project and it hosted its kick-off meeting in November 2004. It is also a partner in the above-mentioned AEGIS project proposal.

EUCARPIA was invited for the first time to attend the SC meeting in 2006. This will be an opportunity to explore possible links with research on plant breeding in Europe.

Interactions with EuroMAB during Phase VII were limited to the organization of the meeting of the Task Force on on-farm conservation and management, which was hosted by the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve of Schorfheide-Chorin, Germany.

An occasion for collaboration with Botanic Gardens took place through the organization of the third joint meeting of the *Beta* WG and the World *Beta* Network. This meeting was hosted by the Botanic Garden "La Orotava" in Tenerife, Spain.

Focal points from non-ECP/GR member countries are always invited to attend the SC meetings. During Phase VII, it has also been possible for IPGRI to invite experts from the Russian Federation and Ukraine to attend the second Medicinal and Aromatic Plant WG meeting and the second Wheat WG meeting.

- **Listservers**

The SC listserver has been kindly maintained free of charge by the NGB also during Phase VII. An additional listserver was also created to serve the Chairs and Vice-Chairs of the WGs.

National Coordinators, Chairs and Vice-Chairs are currently manually subscribed in these electronic lists by the list manager at NGB, in consultation with the Secretariat. In this way, it is quicker and easier to ensure that the lists are constantly kept up-to-date and that all eligible members are involved.

These tools are still considered very useful for exchange of information and for decision-making.

The SC is welcome to raise comments and give feed-back on the usefulness and effectiveness of these lists and on their appropriate use.

- **ECP/GR acronym**

The Secretariat received from one SC member the proposal that the acronym of ECP/GR could be changed into ECPGR, eliminating the "slash" (/).

The argument in favour of this change is the simplification in writing a word that is repeated several times in documents and reports.

An argument against this change refers to the difficult legibility of a long acronym that has no vowels and no interruptions.

Arguments such as "tradition" versus "modernization" can also be considered in this context.

The Secretariat is inclined to prefer the traditional acronym.

The SC is invited to take the final decision.

7. Financial status

The last available official figures relate to December 2005. These were included in the respective financial report.

The status of total outstanding contributions at the end of 2005 was rather critical, amounting to 283 000 euro. However, most of these contributions have been received in the meantime, with the significant exception of France. Pledges for imminent payments were made by France.

Voluntary contributions were received from Germany (15 000 euro) and the Netherlands (5000 euro) and were used to support the AEGIS project (see above, section 4.5).

As documented in the financial report of 2005, the status of expenditures was affected by a delay in the implementation of the Networks' activities. This was mainly due to the need to adjust the system to the new mode of operation, as explained in section 3 above. The level of operations (and expenditures) in 2005 was much higher than in 2004. Following the Network Coordinating Group meetings held in March 2006, the Networks are expected to function with even better coordination

and to be able to implement all the activities that they have budgeted. Of course, moving the organization of more actions than foreseen to the second part of the Phase will also have impact on the Secretariat, which will need to dilute its support for more actions taking place in a shorter time than originally planned.

The negative balance registered at the end of 2005 on some staff salary budget lines is not expected to increase in the subsequent three years, since staff reductions were completed during 2005 (see section 8). However, it may also be difficult to significantly reduce this deficit. Should this remain at the end of Phase VII, it will then be necessary to cover it with carry-over from Phase VI. This carry-over currently amounts to an estimate of US\$ 46 000, provided the last outstanding Phase VI contributions from France and Macedonia FYR are received.

The possible deficit for the AEGIS project, which was foreseen in the financial report 2005, will in the end be very limited, since the final project meeting was eventually not organized.

8. Coordinating Secretariat and IPGRI

The following staff members are currently working as part of the ECP/GR Secretariat at IPGRI (ECP/GR personnel budget): Lidwina Koop (as half-time ECP/GR Programme Assistant); Elinor Lipman (as half-time Scientific Assistant, based in Montpellier, France, involved in the compilation and layout of ECP/GR publications and other support tasks to the Secretariat); Aixa Del Greco (as half-time Scientific Assistant involved in the support to the Crop Networks, revision of descriptors, Web development and public awareness). Staff reductions were made compared to Phase VI. These relate to the following staff: Elinor Lipman, reduced from 75% to 50% as of January 2004; Aixa Del Greco, reduced from 100% to 50% as of April 2005; and Olga Spellman, working at 50% as Programme Assistant until 31 March 2004.

Birgitte Lund has worked as AEGIS project manager at IPGRI from August 2004 to April 2006.

The contribution of other IPGRI colleagues to the work of ECP/GR should also be gratefully acknowledged, in particular Sónia Dias, Programme Specialist, dedicates 50% of her time to EURISCO and documentation-related activities in Europe; Samy Gaiji, Dag Terje Endresen and Milko Skofic dedicate part of their time to the maintenance and development of EURISCO; Ehsan Dulloo, Jan Engels and Jozef Turok actively contributed as members of the local AEGIS Task Force; Adriana Alercia offered invaluable support and advice for the development of ECP/GR and IPGRI descriptors.

9. Conclusion

The first part of Phase VII of ECP/GR was implemented according to the recommendations developed by the SC in Izmir, Turkey in 2003. The speed of implementation has been slower than expected, owing to the large constituency of the ECP/GR community and the complexity of the Programme (9 Networks, 18 Working Groups, task forces and other bodies).

The major beneficial outcome of the new mode of operation, in the opinion of the ECP/GR Coordinator, was the flexibility introduced in the use of Networks' budgets, accompanied by the enhanced "self-determination" of the Networks for the use of these funds. Another positive element was the increased intra-Network and inter-Network coordination. This was made possible by the creation of Network Coordinating Groups that were enabled to meet and to take strategic decisions.

Another important change introduced in 2003 was the mechanism to develop medium-term plans, looking into the future Phase VIII already at the mid-term of Phase VII. The effectiveness of this approach will be verified during the mid-term meeting, when the SC will examine proposals for the future made by the NCGs.

The AEGIS feasibility project has required considerable effort from the Secretariat, but it has proven to be a subject which is gaining momentum, raising interest, generating new ideas and promoting new ways to collaborate for crop genetic resources in the future in Europe.

Among the constraints of the Programme that can be highlighted in order to reflect on possible improvements, the following three are perhaps the most evident at this stage:

- 1) The expansion of the membership of ECP/GR seems to have failed to involve important countries in eastern Europe, namely the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Although PGR stakeholders in these countries are convinced about the benefits of partnership in ECP/GR, only passive support has been obtained at the administrative and political levels so far.
- 2) Several initiatives are generated by the Networks and Working Groups. Although the new budget flexibility allows sustaining some of these actions, in most cases there is no appropriate channel to which to submit project proposals. The EC AGRI GEN RES Regulation has offered some hopes to be the natural funding resource for initiatives taken within the context of ECP/GR, but it has always been clear that this Regulation would not be sufficient to satisfy the existing expectations and needs. It is widely expected that there will be no continuation for the Regulation in the future. At the same time, some expectations fall on the Secretariat, but its capacity and time to dedicate to fund raising activities would have to be further explored in order to become effective.
- 3) Level and intensity of participation of member countries in ECP/GR activities has not been very homogeneous in this initial part of Phase VII, as can be testified by the unequal use of country quotas. This may be the result of insufficient information reaching the National Coordinators and the PGR community in the member countries. This should be considered a warning for the Secretariat. Hopefully the SC meeting in Latvia can be the occasion to increase awareness of the existing opportunities for participation of country representatives into ECP/GR activities.

★★★

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Rome, 8 August 2006

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Annex I

Recommendations from the NCG meeting in Bonn, Germany (29-31 March 2006) to the ECP/GR Steering Committee

Based on the wrap-up of the Networks' cross-cutting issues discussed throughout the meeting, a set of operational and strategic recommendations to be presented to the ECP/GR Steering Committee was drafted. These recommendations were discussed at the closing session and endorsed with a few modifications, as below:

- **AEGIS**

The meeting acknowledged a broad appreciation by the networks of the concept of AEGIS as outlined in the Strategy Framework Paper, and the application of AEGIS in order to create European Crop Collections. It also recognized its impact on the stimulation of several WGs (i.e. *Allium* and *Brassica*).

The meeting recommends to the Steering Committee to support the broad implementation of AEGIS, especially including the need to accept obligations related to the national programmes.

- **Global Conservation System**

It was noted that several global initiatives on PGR conservation are ongoing (Convention on Biological Diversity, Global Crop Diversity Trust, International Treaty, Global Plant Conservation Strategy). It was considered important that ECP/GR continues to support these processes by making i.e. its knowledge, germplasm, training and capacity building available in this global context. In this context, AEGIS could be seen as a model contribution.

Efficiency in conservation, documentation and facilitated use of PGR

The Networks reported some progress in improvement of quality and quantity of information and management of resources. However, agreement was reached to prioritize in the future on quality (i.e. quality vs. quantity of data, focus on characterization and evaluation data). Improvements in sharing of responsibilities in cryopreservation, in vitro infra-structure, as well as in situ and on-farm conservation areas (for instance through survey of present status) should be considered.

- **Increase inter-regional cooperation (Europe with other regions)**

The value of cooperation was recognized as being reciprocal. The meeting encourages reinforced inter-network relationships, as well as strengthening inter-relations with national and international development agencies.

- **Role of EURISCO as a central platform of ex situ, in situ and on-farm data**

The participants recognized the increasing key role of Documentation and Information in conservation and utilization of PGR. In this respect EURISCO was appreciated as a central platform, which in future will cover ex situ, in situ and on-farm data on PGR.

EURISCO, the NI/NFPs and the CCDBs are at the centre of the process. Their relationship needs to be clarified and the conditions for the functioning of the CCDBs need to be strengthened.

- **Implications of the International Treaty**

The meeting took note of the upcoming meeting of the Governing Body of the ITPGRFA and was informed of the possible implications at the international level, i.e. the sMTA. The Steering Committee was requested to investigate further implications at the international level for national programmes (designation of accessions to the MLS, data structures, use of MTAs and their documentation).

- **Strengthening efficiency of national programmes**

While progress was noted for most of the networks and WGs, the level of activities has developed very differently. This difference is partly due to insufficient levels of inputs and participation by individual national programmes. It is recommended that the National Coordinators assess the selection process for country representatives in the various activities and enable their operation at the ECP/GR level.

- **Coverage of crops**

After the last SC meeting the coverage of crops was expanded and positive experience was reported from the Networks. However, additional proposals came up from the Networks to further broaden the coverage of crops to be taken care by ECP/GR (e.g. rice, cotton, currant, strawberry, minor cereals). It is recommended that the Steering Committee consider such a broadening process and presents clear guidance to the Networks on this matter.

- **Budget implications**

The meeting is aware that ECP/GR used to work on the basis of strong inputs-in-kind by national programmes by means of providing a platform to exploit synergies among these, i.e. working through improved coordination, communication, meetings, training, PR activities. It was noted that ECP/GR provided substantial input into the preparation of projects that had been funded by external sources such the EU GEN RES programmes. However, such external funding is not sustainable and the above-mentioned tasks raise concern due to the limitations of the present ECP/GR budget. It is therefore suggested that the SC should not only consider maintaining the present budget line, but also consider an increase along the priorities outlined above, for Phase VIII.

The past experience of ECP/GR showed that besides funding meetings, a certain amount of funds need to be reserved to targeted ad hoc actions. Attention to a fund-raising role is also recommended.

- **ECP/GR and EU relationship**

The meeting noted that the current and future EU legislation has an increasing impact on ECP/GR activities. It is therefore suggested that communication between ECP/GR and the relevant European Commission services be improved (AGRI, Environment, SANCO and RESEARCH being the most important ones).

Steering Committee members are encouraged to facilitate this process via their national inter-department links.