

Minutes of the EURISCO Advisory Group

Fourth meeting, 12 March 2008, Bonn, Germany

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1. Welcome and introduction

A meeting of the EURISCO Advisory Group (EAG) was held on 12 March 2008 in Bonn, Germany, at the Central Office of the Federal Agency for Agriculture and Food (BLE).

Frank Begemann, Head of the Information and Coordination Centre for Biological Diversity (IBV), welcomed the group to Bonn and to BLE. He described the structure and functions of BLE and the role of IBV, which is a Division of the Federal Agency. In particular, he described the structure of the National Documentation of Plant Genetic Resources, currently providing data for more than 3000 species, with 155 000 accessions. The German *ex situ* conservation structure was also described, including: the German Federal Genebank in Gatersleben; the Genebank for Grapevine in Siebeldingen; the Genebank for Fruit Crops in Dresden-Pillnitz; the Tobacco Genebank at the Agricultural Technology Centre Augustenberg; the Ornamentals Genebank and the Crop Wild Relatives Genebank, currently under development.

He then presented the agenda and reminded that the objectives of the meeting were to analyze the status of EURISCO and to make plans for its technical and organizational progress. Theo van Hintum (CGN) asked to include in the agenda a discussion on the governance of EURISCO.

The participants briefly introduced themselves. Guests attending in view of EPGRIS3 activities that were to be discussed on the following two days were also welcome to intervene in the discussion of the EAG items.

2. EURISCO 2003-2007

2.1 Overview of EURISCO achievements

Sónia Dias (Bioversity International) presented an overview of the progress of EURISCO "Where we started and where we are? Overview of achievements. The driving forces 2003-2007", focusing on the following items:

- Status of National Inventories
 - Updates
 - Data quality and completeness
- Dissemination actions
 - What we did in 2005, 2006 and 2007
- Who is looking for us
- Current status
- Lessons learnt
- Streamlining access to data and the new Global Information System
- Network benefits and impact
- Key issues
- Future steps

A number of clarifications and points for discussion were raised:

- It was questioned whether the figures listed as indicators of the status of EURISCO could all be considered as appropriate indicators of progress. It was suggested that a list of agreed indicators of progress should be defined by the EURISCO Coordinator and further discussed by the EURISCO Advisory Group (EAG).

- It was pointed out that the number of accessions and of holding institutes included in EURISCO should not be given as a percentage of the total numbers estimated in the FAO State of the World Report, since those numbers are out of date and moreover they are not comparable to the lists of accessions that each country intends to include in its National Inventory (NI).
- Another point was made about the difficulty to list a meaningful number of genera that are included in EURISCO, given the presence in the catalogue of synonyms or even misspellings.
- The degree of completeness of the EURISCO descriptors is not always a relevant indicator. For example, data related to collected material are only relevant for a fraction of the accessions included in the catalogue and they are not relevant for bred material. On the other hand, the “biological status” of an accession is a more relevant descriptor, since it would be useful to know the status of each accession, and it would help to classify the accessions in order to make more meaningful conclusions about the “completeness” of passport data. Also a suggestion was made to consider the Documentation Quality Index as defined and used by CGN as an indicator of the completeness of the data.
- Regarding the translations of the EURISCO fact sheets in many languages, it was pointed out that these were in-kind contributions from the NFPs, with Bioversity providing the layout, PDFs and printouts. It was raised that it would be important to add translations into widely spoken languages such as Spanish, French and Russian.

2.2 EURISCO Web site

Sónia Dias and Samy Gaiji (Bioversity International) presented the structure and functionalities of the new EURISCO Web site. The front end of this Web site is ready available for comments ([include URL](#)). Technical solutions for the searches have been completed and it is now necessary to integrate these functionalities in the existing Web site so that they become accessible from the front end. Feedback from users on further improvement of the front-end and content will be welcome. It was reiterated that user-friendliness and intuitiveness are the most required qualities for the new Web site, as well as a flexible downloading option, allowing to formulate queries, e.g., per multiple countries AND multiple genera, and to download the result of any search in a single file. The new frontend of the EURISCO Web site was appreciated and commended by the EAG.

2.3 External evaluation of EURISCO

Iva Faberová reported about the survey she made as part of a consultancy commissioned by Bioversity International in December 2007 – April 2008. The survey was conducted with a questionnaire of 58 questions that was circulated to all the National Inventory Focal Points (NFPs) and a modified version with 52 questions intended for the Central Crop Database (CCDB) Managers.

From the 39 NFPs contacted, 27 responded to the questionnaire, while from the 45 CCDB managers, 25 replies were received.

Among the various points raised by the survey, the following considerations were highlighted:

- The number of accessions in EURISCO is inflated by the presence of about 200 000 records of *Arabidopsis* accessions that are included in the UK inventory. Moreover, these *Arabidopsis* records are not complete in many descriptors, which is influencing the percentages indicating overall completeness of data. Some participants raised also the issues of non-PGRFA species also included in EURISCO such as ornamentals. By excluding *Arabidopsis*,

there might be some implications for other species also presently included in EURISCO. The group felt that a proper definition of the role and scope of EURISCO and what material and information it should contain needs to be better clarified in the future. However, the statement should also clearly say that information on all kinds of materials, as decided by the NFP, is welcome to be uploaded into EURISCO.

- Latitude and Longitude are present in different percentages and this is an indication of incompleteness of data.
- Several errors can be identified in the taxonomy and crop name description.
- The current Web application offers only 19 out of 34 descriptors for searching and display and this is leading to data invisibility. This should be addressed by the new EURISCO front-end.
- A number of descriptors are not understood by National Inventory Focal Points (NFPs) (examples: provision of description, latitude and longitude of the holding institute rather than of the collecting site).
- Several spelling mistakes are present in the text fields.
- Two thirds of NFPs expressed their need for specialized training (5% urgently, 38% in a short term and 24% in a future perspective) dedicated to data conversion and download to EURISCO.
- A number of descriptors are not understood by NFPs (examples: provision of description, latitude and longitude of the holding institute rather than of the collecting site; both fields - <donor> and <donordescr> - are filled in at once; holding institution and donor are identical; etc.).

Many other points were emphasized as being positive and the impact that EURISCO has had in the setting up of the NIAs as well as in their improvement:

- 40% of the respondents state that EURISCO was the driving force behind the establishment of the respective NI
- 36% of the total passport data is only available in EURISCO, since the National Inventories providing these data are not available online
- EURISCO holds data on 96% of the countries that have nominated a National Inventory Focal Point
- 80% of the NFP informed that the EURISCO upload mechanism has helped them to correct their original dataset
- 77% of the respondents confirm that the reports generated for Taxonomy and GIS, sent to the NFP by EURISCO Coordinator, have helped them to improve data quality by correcting the original datasets
- 63% of the respondents are of the opinion that EURISCO is an important tool to be used for the reporting procedure under the sMTA of the MLS of the ITPGRFA as well as for the registration procedure of the MLS

2.4 ALIS and EURISCO

Samy Gaiji presented the project submitted to the Trust for the development of an Accession Level Information System (ALIS). This project, if approved, will allow integration of EURISCO, together with SINGER and other databases, into a shared database back-end. The

database back-end technology utilized for ALIS will therefore be applied to EURISCO. More importantly, S. Gaiji reported that one EURISCO representative should be nominated as a full member of the ALIS Steering Committee.

The Group noted that, although the proposal had not been approved yet, a lot of investment had been already made. The group felt that the use of ALIS as a database back-end to EURISCO remains a logical but internal issue to Bioversity and the way it will manage EURISCO in the future. However, this choice should not affect the fact the EURISCO should keep its autonomy and independence. S. Gaiji reassured the group that the ALIS project should not be seen as a replacement of EURISCO but instead as an opportunity for Bioversity to better manage the Global, CGIAR and European information systems it has the responsibility for. The EURISCO Advisory Group appreciated to receive background information about and welcomed this global initiative but at the same time it wished to keep focus of the discussion on EURISCO, while keeping ALIS more as a technical database back-end issue

Discussion

The discussion mainly focused on the scope of EURISCO and the need for indicators of quality of the catalogue and of its progress.

Scope: regarding the choice of species to be included in EURISCO, it was reiterated that it is a country decision what to include in the National Inventory. For example, UK decided to include *Arabidopsis*, Czech Republic and Poland have included ornamental plants. The current scope of EURISCO is therefore wide, although it is nowhere specified what categories of plants are expected to be included.

Decision 1

*It was agreed that a footnote should be included in the web site and in the MOUs that are in the process of being renewed. The footnote will explain all the categories of Plant Genetic Resources that are expected to be in EURISCO, specifically including ornamentals and genetic stocks such as *Arabidopsis* research material (and excluding forest genetic resources).*

It was pointed out that plant breeders would welcome having access to the most complete and user-friendly data through the entry point of EURISCO. It was noted that some countries, for political reasons, will only include a sub-set of their data in their national inventories and that EURISCO is not hosting characterization data at the moment. The users that EURISCO intends to serve are various, including policy-makers, researchers and plant breeders.

Decision 2

It was agreed that a statement of objectives should be included in the MOUs and in the web, indicating which users EURISCO aims to serve.

Indicators: The percentage of the European countries contributing to EURISCO and the age of the data (date of last update) were considered useful indicators. On the other hand, EURISCO should not be judged against previous estimates of numbers of accessions included in the FAO State of the World, since EURISCO should be the basis for new estimates.

Decision 3

It was agreed that the EURISCO Team should propose a number of indicators of quality and of success for EURISCO and submit this list for comments to the EURISCO Advisory Group.

3. EURISCO 2008-2010 (2012) priorities

Sónia Dias presented an overview of EURISCO issues to be considered as priorities for Phase VIII of ECPGR (2008-2010-2012). She highlighted the most important issues to focus on:

- To improve quality and quantity of PGR data, with particular emphasis on quality;
- To improve functionality of EURISCO, NIs;
- To improve international/inter-regional collaboration with international information activities/systems;
- To continue to strengthen national and institutional capacity in Europe in relation to Documentation and Information
 - EURISCO for registration procedure for European material under MLS of the IT
 - EURISCO as reporting procedure under the sMTA of the IT
 - Flag for AEGIS material, "The European collection"
 - Plan the preparation of a "Vision paper for the future of EURISCO".

This presentation was followed by the proposed actions needing priority attention in 2008.

3.1 Proposed Workplan for 2008

The proposed actions for consideration were the following:

- Further support countries (NI and NFP)
- Improve the accuracy of information in EURISCO
 - Focus on taxonomy and location data
- Promote EURISCO as a model and research tool
- Seek integration in support of the International Treaty
 - sMTA reporting procedure
 - registration procedure for MLS
- Contribute to the strengthening of the Global Information System
- Workflow improvement (centralized vs. decentralized)
- Intranet-upload mechanism revised and improved
- Web services data harvesting
- Web site management and search component further improved

Network National Focal Points

- Training and networking
- Implementation of Web services
- Support to NFPs/NI:
 - High priority -Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Malta, Moldova, Turkey

The above priority activities were presented to the EAG and the Group agreed that the 2008 Workplan should focus on the following list of important actions for EURISCO, and to be addressed in some cases through the EPGRIS3 initiatives and by the respective activity leaders:

1. Continue supporting NI and NFPs
 - a. The remaining countries should be included, with priority for Turkey, considering the large number of accessions, followed by the other five: Albania, Belgium, Croatia, Malta and Moldova.
 - b. A manual for the National Inventory Focal Points needs to be prepared, explaining how to compile a National Inventory.

2. Seek integration into EURISCO of additional mechanisms in support to the International Treaty
 - a. sMTA reporting procedure (EPGRIS3 activity, lead by IBV, EURISCO Coordinator to follow up on the developments)
 - b. Registration procedure for MLS
3. Intranet-upload mechanism to be revised and improved
4. Improve access to accurate information in EURISCO
 - a. Taxonomy data. Need to clarify what are the terms of the taxonomy issue and need guidelines on how to resolve it (EPGRIS 3 activity (2-01) lead by IPK);
 - b. Also need to re-run the taxonomy checker and continue providing reports of errors to the NFPs, for them to forward these to the individual contributing genebank curators for improving the quality of their original data.
5. Improve further Web site management and search components (**highest priority**)
 - a. To be uploaded in a password-protected site for comments, feedback until recommended to be made available on line. Potential testers of this beta-version should be invited for testing and feedback.

Decision 4

The EAG asked that the EURISCO Coordinator prepare a workplan, with specific activities and expected outputs for 2008 on the basis of the above list of important actions, thus indicating to what extent Bioversity will bring forward the agreed priority actions. It was also clarified that 17500 Euro are still available from the ECPGR budget allocated to EURISCO.

3.2 General issues for a Workplan 2009-2011

Decision 5

The EAG asked the EURISCO Coordinator to prepare a draft Work plan with concrete actions for 2009-2011, on the basis of the above list of important actions. This work plan should be circulated through the Doc & Info Network Coordinator, F. Begemann, who will then submit a proposal for Phase VIII to the ECPGR Steering Committee.

4. Overview for Phase VIII of ECPGR

4.1 Governance of EURISCO

Th. van Hintum presented to the EAG a draft document on the governance of EURISCO. There was agreement on the need to increase transparency and finalize such a document in revised form (see below, Decision 6). The Bioversity representative, S. Gaiji, welcomed this informal discussion and reiterated that Bioversity would require through appropriate channels receiving advice on how to best manage EURISCO. Better transparency combined with appropriate rules and procedures will greatly benefit Bioversity in its constant effort and commitment to support the management of EURISCO on behalf of the ECPGR.

4.2 The role and future of the EAG

F. Begemann explained a proposal that he had circulated to the Documentation and Information Network Coordinating Group (NCG), in which it was noted that there was a large overlap of the members of the NCG and EAG. A proposal to reduce duplication of coordinating bodies was made, with a suggestion to incorporate all the tasks in the NCG, including the advisory role to EURISCO. The composition of the NCG will be enlarged, maintaining a balanced number of Central Crop Database managers and NFPs, including NordGen and SEEDNet representatives, as well as four *ex officio* standing guests (*In situ* and

On-farm Network Coordinator, EURISCO Coordinator, ECPGR Coordinator, and the IT representative of the institute hosting EURISCO). The Documentation and Information NCG had given a positive response by email to this proposal and the EAG agreed to terminate itself in its present form and to transfer its EAG function to the Doc & Info NCG, which will continue to operate also as EURISCO Advisory Group.

Decision 6

F. Begemann will draft the ToRs of the new Doc & Info NCG, operating also as EAG and including the governance of EURISCO. These documents will be circulated to the new NCG and to the ECPGR Secretariat for comments and eventually included among the background documents to the next ECPGR Steering Committee meeting for endorsement.

Eliseu Bettencourt wished to greet the other members of the EAG, considering that, since he is not a member of the Documentation & Information NCG, he will not continue to be a member of the Group in its new formulation. The meeting thanked Eliseu for his long and constructive collaboration as a member of the EPGRIS project and subsequently of the EAG.

At the closing of the meeting, the Chair of the session re-stated the Group's satisfaction on the achievements and developments of the EURISCO activities and catalogue and congratulated the EURISCO Team for the new Web site. Some words of encouragement to continue in the same direction were pronounced.

Appendix I. List of participants

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