



Minutes of the 15th ECPGR Executive Committee meeting



26-27 February 2020,
Longyearbyen, Svalbard Islands, Norway

Present:

Marianne Lefort (Chair)
Marc Lateur (Belgium)
Vojtěch Holubec (Czech Republic)
Küllü Annamaa (Estonia)
Benvindo Martins Maçãs (Portugal)
Lorenzo Maggioni (ECPGR Secretariat)

The Agenda for this meeting is available online ([here](#))

1. Introduction

The meeting was organized back to back with the [Svalbard Global Seed Vault 2020 event](#), during which a major seed deposit was made after the completion of a 20 million Euro technical upgrade of the facility by the Norwegian Government. The Seed Vault International Advisory Panel, of which our colleague Külli Annamaa is a formal member, was also convened at the start of the week.

During the Seed Vault event, the ExCo had the opportunity to briefly meet for the first time with Juan Lucas Restrepo, DG of the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT. There was just enough time to reciprocally introduce ourselves and to exchange a few words about the opportunity and challenge of the Alliance to continue hosting ECPGR, in line with the respective visions, potential synergies, complementarities and objectives.

Just before the start of the ExCo meeting, the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding between ECPGR and the Global Crop Diversity Trust took place at the Funken Hotel and a joint statement was released and then published on the respective websites (see www.ecpgr.cgiar.org/trust and www.croptrust.org/press-release/ecpgr-and-the-crop-trust-sign-m-o-u/).

At the start of the meeting, Marianne Lefort opened a short round table to hear all ExCo members' opinion about their participation to the Svalbard Seed Vault event.

There was agreement about the importance to be here together with the global PGR community. Moreover, Vojtěch Holubec was one of the seed depositors, while other European institutes from Germany, Ireland, Poland, Portugal, NordGen, Romania and the UK also deposited seeds during this event. At this regard, it was pointed out that only national depositors were obtaining visibility as contributors to the Vault, while the role of ECPGR as a network was not sufficiently highlighted. Since many seeds deposited from European countries were part of the AEGIS safety-duplication policy, a better visibility for ECPGR could be sought in a future dialogue with the Svalbard Global Seed Vault managers, highlighting its valuable partnering role in European and Global Genetic Diversity conservation efforts.

The ExCo appreciated the feeling that ECPGR's aim and vision seem to be well aligned with the PGR global conservation efforts. Additionally, the participation of ExCo members to

the event, together with many high-level authorities and partners dedicated to common efforts, helped to get a better perception of the various ongoing global initiatives. In this context, it was considered important to try offering information more frequently to all the National Coordinators about what is going on at the global level (FAO processes, EU Green Deal, Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) process), at least with a specific presentation during the SC meeting, but also possibly with a new section in the ECPGR e-bulletin for the most relevant events.

Regarding the meeting with the DG of the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, the ExCo confirmed to be ready for further dialogue with the Alliance and available to clarify ECPGR objectives and explore synergies, keeping in mind that our mission is to work for the European region and not to take global development approaches.

Regarding the visibility of ECPGR's contribution in both the global and European challenges for agricultural biodiversity conservation, the ExCo should consider its involvement at the occasion of relevant FAO events in Rome (e.g. organizing side-events at CGRFA and/or International Treaty meetings). In addition, the ExCo would like to stimulate a discussion within the Steering Committee on this issue, during the upcoming Mid-Term meeting to be held in November. The ExCo will prepare food for thought on this issue, as part of the implementation of its communication strategy; to do so, the collaboration of the Secretariat will be solicited. In order to improve the visibility, it was suggested that a poster defining the “why, who, what” of the ECPGR could be proposed to each National Coordinator (NC) and WG Chair who would publish it and display it visibly in the entrance of their Institutes (texts could be also translated in national languages).

2. Evaluation of Grant Scheme proposals for the Third Call of Phase X

Three proposals were submitted as a result of the Third Call of the ECPGR Activity Grant Scheme. Following an evaluation of these proposals, based on the established criteria, the ExCo selected for funding the two proposals submitted by the WGs on *Brassica* (about filling gaps in collections of wild Brassicas) and on Documentation and Information (a second training workshop on GRIN-Global). Some recommendations will need to be included in the Letter of Award to the *Brassica* WG. The third proposal, submitted by the On-farm conservation and management WG (on promoting a niche market for lentils in Germany), was not accepted due to a number of irregularities in the submitted documents, but mainly considering that the proposed Activity was merely projected at the national level and prepared without sufficient involvement of the rest of the Working Group.

The approved proposals are listed in the table below. The full proposals and Letters of Award have been published on the ECPGR website (see [Outcomes of the Third Call](#)). In order to avoid delaying the launch of the projects, the ExCo agreed that the proposals should no longer be formally sent to the Steering Committee (SC) to allow for comments or objections regarding the proposed partnership in the Activity. In any case, comments or suggestions from National Coordinators can be taken into consideration at any moment.

Title of approved proposals	Working Group	Coordinator	Budget
1. Capturing Brassica wild relatives diversity in South eastern Europe	<i>Brassica</i>	Smiljana Goreta Ban, Croatia	€ 20 000
2. GRIN-Global II	Documentation and information	Ludmila Papoušková, Czech Republic	€ 18 450
Total Budget			€ 38 450

The ExCo decided to open a Fourth Call for proposals to be launched not later than May 2020 and with a deadline for submissions on 18 September 2020, maintaining a maximum budget of € 20 000 per proposal.

It was also recommended to revise the text of the next Call, to make it clearer that Activity Coordinators should prepare proposals in close coordination with the respective Working Group Chair and keeping the rest of the WG well informed about their initiatives. The ExCo will also review its scoring method.

3. GenRes Bridge Integrated Strategy (preparatory process)

L. Maggioni explained the approach defined by the EU-funded project GenRes Bridge for the preparatory process leading to the development of a European strategy on genetic resources conservation and use. This process was agreed by the project partners during their annual project meeting, recently held in Bonn, Germany, 18-20 February. The following elements are relevant for the ExCo, which is considered the 'Ad hoc Group' that will support the strategy preparation from the ECPGR side:

- The strategy will be composed of four standalone documents, that is one cross-cutting strategy document called: "European genetic resources strategy", and three domain-specific documents (to be respectively called 'plant/animal/forest strategy or programme'), to be prepared at the same time and possibly jointly published by June 2021.
- The scope of the strategy will cover geographical Europe.
- The proposed draft aim of the strategy is "To ensure the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources for food, agriculture and forestry in Europe to contribute to Agenda 2030, including the Sustainable Development Goals".
- The proposed draft objectives were the following:
 - a) Strengthen actions to fulfil the obligations of the European Union and other European countries under international agreements that require the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources by:
 - i. Engendering and coordinating within- and across-sector interaction and collaboration to increase and improve national and regional genetic resources conservation and sustainable use activities.
 - ii. Identifying and creating synergies between existing strategies relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources to optimize management interventions and use of resources.
 - iii. Promoting the development and implementation of appropriate policies and legislative instruments to ensure the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources.
 - iv. Integrating genetic resources conservation and sustainable use into policy and legislation with a focus on wider biodiversity, agriculture, forestry and rural development.
 - b) Provide a platform for and increase the visibility of the diverse genetic resources conservation and sustainable use by stakeholder communities.
 - c) Communicate and increase awareness of the fundamental importance of genetic resources as the foundations of the food, agriculture and forestry sectors in Europe.
- Proposed elements (content sections) of the strategy were outlined, including a description and analysis of the current situation and a section on measures to be taken (strategic recommendations to be taken at policy level, and an action plan for genetic resources conservation and sustainable use in the region).
- The process of drafting the strategy, under the coordination of the University of Birmingham (UoB), UK, will initially involve the Secretariats of the three Networks (ECPGR, EUFORGEN and ERFP) and the respective domain ad hoc groups, and then the National

Coordinators and other stakeholders (see figure below). At an early stage, UoB intends to ask National Coordinators to provide the respective national strategies, where they exist. A draft strategy will eventually become a background document to be presented, discussed and commented at the meeting of the three Networks' Steering Committees/General Assembly, which is planned in Padua, Italy, 24-26 November 2020. There will be space for separate domain discussions, in which the three Networks will carry on their own business, while 25 November will be dedicated to a joint session focused on the European Strategy (also called 'feedback workshop'). The strategy will then be refined and re-circulated, aiming at obtaining a final endorsement by the three Networks' governing bodies in April 2021 and publication in June 2021.



The ExCo took note of the process and decided to inform the NCs as soon as possible. They also agreed to take responsibility for the drafting of the PGR-specific component to be annexed to the joint strategy. The ExCo will soon start to work on the structure of this specific 'Plant document', broadly relying on the structure of the FAO Global Plan of Action, including sections on Conservation (*in situ* and *ex situ*), Documentation, Sustainable use (including PGR characterization) and Capacity building. It could also highlight its contribution to the implementation of the sustainable development goals. This work will need to be coordinated with the drafters of the overall strategy and receive inputs from National Coordinators at early stages of development.

4. Preparation of the ECPGR Steering Committee Mid-term meeting

Besides taking note of the dates of the Steering Committee, to be jointly held with the GenRes Bridge 'feedback workshop', the ExCo agreed that ECPGR will need one additional day to cover its entire Mid-Term SC agenda. Therefore, the 16th ECPGR Steering Committee meeting should take place in Padua, Italy, over the four days of 24-27 November. The costs of meetings' participants should be mostly covered by the GenRes Bridge funds, except for the ECPGR specific extra day.

The suggested items of the provisional agenda and the Background documents (**BD**) to be prepared and provided one month in advance of the meeting are listed below:

- Opening session
- Overview on political arena and global context of PGR (FAO, Trust, EC, etc.)

- Discussion on European genetic resources strategy and preparation of statements by ExCo (including interaction with UoB)
- Reporting from Secretariat (technical report about membership, events, mode of operation of Phase X, staffing, etc. and account of financial situation) – **BD**
- Report from ExCo on their activity during Phase X – **BD**
- Narrative progress compiled by the Secretariat on specific ECPGR objectives (based on very few indicators, due to the short delay after the beginning of Phase X) – **BD**. The SC will also be solicited to work on a process to better define indicators that make sense in terms of progressive achievements of the goals.
- Inputs from WG Chairs – **BD**
- Communication issue (monitor how it is progressing and make proposals on implementation of the strategy and other specific proposals (presentation and list of practical proposals by Marianne Lefort and Benvindo Maças, with help of Secretariat)
- Looking forward to remaining part of Phase X
- How to complete/implement the European PGR strategy

5. Information on progress of Farmer's Pride project

The ExCo Chair, together with the Secretariat and the former ExCo Chair Eva Thörn, who is a member of the EU-funded Farmer's Pride project's Advisory Group, have recently commented a concept note circulated by the project coordinators (UoB). This document was meant to explain the rationale of a proposal for the establishment of a European network for *in situ* conservation and sustainable use of PGR – in cultivation and in the wild.

Main reasons for criticism of this proposed new network were its complexity and dubious feasibility, together with doubts about the appropriateness to deal with the very different issues pertaining to crop wild relatives and on-farm crops with a common approach. Also, the absence of ECPGR as a possible point of departure of this new network was noted. Consequently, an invitation sent by the Farmer's Pride coordination to the ECPGR Secretariat and ExCo Chair, suggesting they join in a lobbying activity at the EC level in support of the new network, was declined.

The ExCo shared similar opinions to those expressed by Chair and Secretariat and suggested to remain open to hear at the Mid-Term SC meeting about the network's progress and to eventually establish links with it whenever appropriate.

6. ECPGR updates

The following items were reported/discussed:

- As a new practice introduced for Phase X, a meeting of the WG Chairs should theoretically be organized in advance of the Mid-Term Steering Committee meeting, to provide inputs to the National Coordinators on the progress and operation of ECPGR. However, the anticipated dates of the Mid-Term SC meeting would only allow a very short time for the preparation of such meeting of the Chairs. Many Chairs and the Secretariat are also heavily engaged with EU-funded projects and other activities and may not be in condition to effectively organize such meeting. However, the ExCo agreed to encourage the Chairs to organize an open channel of communication among themselves in order to discuss their positions and collect feedback via email, Skype or other means (including small physical meetings). The Chairs would be expected to finalize a joint statement or list of recommendations by the end of October 2020, as a background document for discussion at the SC meeting of November 2020. To this end, the Secretariat will send a message to the Chairs, also seeking volunteers among them, wishing to coordinate this process.

- One single Expression of Interest to become Chair of the Wheat WG, replacing retiring François Balfourier, was received and approved by the ExCo. Albrecht Serfling from JKI, Germany, will take over this new responsibility, effective 1 June 2020.
- Delays of a few countries to pay contributions to ECPGR continue to make them ineligible to receive ECPGR funds. This situation is counterproductive to the effective implementation of the EVA project, since institutions from those countries have taken important responsibilities for that project. The ExCo agreed to allow the Secretariat to use some flexibility to anticipate essential payments to such institutions, in order not to compromise the EVA project. However, no formal derogation of the ECPGR rule is foreseen.
- The table of country quotas of Phase X, applicable to the 'ECPGR meetings' budget line, had been drafted in May 2018, based on an estimate of the available budget. This table needs to be updated by the Secretariat, taking into account the voluntary contributions received from Germany and Hungary. As a result, the available quotas of each country will slightly increase.
- Two requests to hold WG meetings were submitted by the respective WG Chairs. These requests were granted. The meetings are respectively planned on 26-27 May 2020, in Skierniewice, Poland (budget Euro 9750) for the *Allium* WG and on 8-9 June 2020 in Pontecagnano, Italy (budget Euro 12 000), for the Solanaceae WG, back to back with the EVA-pepper meeting of 9-10 June.

7. Jubilee video

Marianne informed the ExCo of the progress made by the specific Task Force working for the development of a video to celebrate the 40th anniversary of ECPGR in October 2020. The Task Force is composed of Marianne Lefort, Rene and Pavol Hauptvogel, Marc Lateur, Jens Weibull and Lorenzo Maggioni, with the external help of Ewa Hermanovicz (EUFORGEN Communication Officer). The Task Force will select a suitable story among various options, to illustrate the importance of diversity for food, climate change and other global challenges, and the need for conservation activities, while keeping link with ECPGR activities. A professional company would then be hired to complete the video.

8. Relevance and nature of ECPGR support to a Dutch experiment intending to test the request of genebank material within ECPGR

Through a Skype connection with CGN, The Netherlands, Theo van Hintum explained to the ExCo his initiative to test the effective availability of genebank material that is of potential use by the breeders. Based on feedback received by mainly Dutch breeders for priority interest vegetable accessions of five crops, CGN will act as an intermediary to acquire such accessions from a number of European genebanks. The declared intention to carry out this test exercise to verify the effective availability of such material, will be transparently communicated to the genebanks, while the material eventually received will be effectively introduced into ongoing breeding programmes. Any problems that should arise in fulfilling the requests of the breeders will be analysed and constructively reported to ECPGR with the intention to jointly address potential existing barriers.

The ExCo thought that this was a good initiative and asked Theo to inform the Steering Committee members about its results during the Mid-term meeting of November 2020. The ExCo agreed that Theo could quote ECPGR in his letter to the genebanks, using the following suggested wording: *"The ECPGR Executive Committee has been informed of this experiment and thinks it is an interesting and valuable initiative. Based on lessons learned, ECPGR may consider extending it in scope, in terms of crops, genebanks and breeding community"*.

9. Cryo Vault proposals from Bioversity-Leuven

Following the announcement during the last FAO International Treaty Governing Body meeting in Rome that the Belgian government was prepared to host a “Cryo Vault” backup facility at Bioversity-KU Leuven, Nicolas Roux from the Alliance of Bioversity and CIAT, approached ECPGR to explore the interest of the European genebanks to back up their currently available cryopreserved accessions. According to EURISCO, there are nearly 8400 cryopreserved accessions in Europe. Most of these (ca. 5700) are wild materials conserved at the UK Millennium Seed Bank. For crops, there are seven institutes in the Czech Republic, three in Germany and one in Estonia that declare cryo samples, with the largest numbers consisting of potato and *Allium* accessions. It was also proposed to consider the creation of an ECPGR Working Group on long-term conservation (including cryopreservation) of vegetatively propagated crops.

The ExCo acknowledged that the establishment of such a WG might be useful and in line with ECPGR objectives, specifically output 1.5 “Options and opportunities for a cryopreservation network explored”.

The ExCo delegated the next steps to Marc Lateur, inviting him to further discuss the case and the available options on how to proceed with Nicolas Roux, keeping in mind the possibility to request funds for meetings or activities through the existing ECPGR budget lines (Grant Scheme and Meetings).

10. Other business

This meeting was the last for Marc Lateur as member of the ExCo, after his four-year term. The Group expressed warm thanks and farewell to him for his past engagement and took note that he will remain in the loop of several ongoing ECPGR initiatives. His position of representative in the ExCo of the ‘broad’ West of Europe will be replaced by Beate Schierscher from Switzerland as of 1 March 2020.

The ExCo expressed its sincere thanks to the South Bohemian University, České Budějovice for enabling to use the Czech Arctic Research Station, Longyearbyen for its meeting during 26-27 February 2020.