



Minutes of the 17th ECPGR Executive Committee meeting

7 May 2021
online

Present:

Marianne Lefort (Chair)
Vojtěch Holubec (Czech Republic)
Birgitte Lund (Denmark)
Benvindo Martins Maçãs (Portugal)
Beate Schierscher (Switzerland)
Lorenzo Maggioni (ECPGR Secretariat)

1. Introduction

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, this short meeting (ca. three hours) was held online via the MS Teams platform, mainly to discuss the launch of the next call for proposals of the Activity Grant Scheme and the organization of the Mid-Term Steering Committee meeting. The process, leading to the approval of the European Plant Genetic Resources Strategy was also discussed, as well as issues related to the Farmer's Pride project and other business. Participation for the first time of Birgitte Lund as member of the Executive Committee was welcomed.

2. Launch of the Fifth Call of the Activity Grant Scheme (Phase X)

Based on the presentation of the ECPGR financial status by the ECPGR Secretary, the ExCo was informed that a budget of ca. euros 476,000 can be used for ECPGR activities until the end of Phase X, provided all countries pay their regular dues. This total amount can be split between Grant Scheme Activity (through calls for proposals) and Working Group meetings (upon request by the Working Groups). So far, very few meetings could take place during Phase X, due to the Covid pandemic restrictions. Also, the Grant Scheme budget was only marginally utilized, partly due to delays in the implementation of activities (also dependent on Covid), and partly due to the low response by the Working Groups to the previous four calls for proposals (only seven proposals accepted for funding).

The ExCo discussed which measures could incentivize the interest and proactivity of the Working Groups and it was agreed that the next Call for proposals could provide a higher budget of euros 30,000 per Activity. Additionally, to encourage the coordination of proposals, the establishment of a fixed amount of 10% of the budget of each proposal, to be assigned to the Activity Coordinator, was proposed and agreed.

Finally, it was considered that the lack of opportunities for the Working Groups to meet in person and for members to get to know each other, was affecting the traditional benefit generated by ECPGR in terms of increasing the spirit of collaboration among its members. Clearly, the Covid situation did not help in this direction; however, the Working Groups should be encouraged to better interact, also via online meetings if necessary, and to write Activity proposals involving a larger part of the Working Groups. To this effect, the criteria of evaluation of the Activity proposals was slightly amended, raising the weight of the 'appropriateness, quality and diversity of the partnership' from 15% to 25%.

The new weights of the criteria used to select the proposals will be as follows:

1. Overall quality of the proposal: 45% (from 50%)
2. Applicability to the entire European region: 15% (from 20%)
3. Appropriateness, quality and diversity of the partnership: 25% (from 15%)
4. Additional contributions (financial or in kind): 15% (same as before)

3. Mid-term Steering Committee meeting

The Mid-term Steering Committee meeting was originally scheduled for 2021, then anticipated to 2020 so that it could be held as part of the GenRes Bridge Consultation meeting in Padua, but it was eventually cancelled due to the Covid pandemic.

A new option now would be to hold the meeting at the time of the GenRes Bridge final dissemination meeting in November 2021 in Brussels, thereby using the GenRes Bridge funds to cover a large part of the costs of participation of all the National Coordinators. However, it still seems uncertain whether open travel and a large meeting (involving the three Committees of ECPGR, EUFORGEN and ERFP) will be possible in November 2021, while the risk of organizing an event that cannot take place (with the consequential need to cancel travel and hotel bookings) is still high.

An alternative would be to plan the meeting for 2022, keeping in mind that the end-of-Phase meeting would need to take place not later than June 2023, i.e. 6 months before the end of Phase X. The option to extend Phase X of one year into 2024 was also proposed to allow more time for the preparation of a possible new Phase XI of ECPGR. However, this latter option was considered too difficult to implement since it would require the approval of all the ECPGR member countries' implementing agencies.

The ExCo agreed to submit a proposal to the Steering Committee, aimed at organizing, as far as possible, a physical Mid-Term meeting in May or June 2022. National Coordinators will also be invited to offer a possible hosting for this meeting. In case of continuing Covid-related problems, the meeting would be converted into virtual, still retaining the same dates.

Besides the Mid-Term SC meeting, the opportunity was also considered to hold an online meeting this year, focusing on the approval of the European Genetic Resources Strategy and the European Plant Genetic Resources Strategy, before the meeting in Brussels in November 2021. A decision in this regard was postponed and thus made it dependent on the advancement of the two strategies and the feedback received.

As a consequence of the above proposals, the ExCo would not encourage the use of GenRes Bridge or ECPGR funds to physically invite National Coordinators to the GenRes Bridge final dissemination event in Brussels in November 2021. The ExCo would prefer to encourage virtual participation of SC members if this event could be organized in the form of a hybrid meeting with physical participation of the project partners and virtual participation of National Coordinators and other stakeholders. These suggestions need to be quickly agreed by the SC because the Secretariat has to inform the Coordinator of the GenRes Bridge project before the end of May about the proposed approach of ECPGR for the final dissemination meeting.

4. Update on European Plant Genetic Resources Strategy's process

Following the deadline of 7 May for comments to Draft 1 of the 'Plant Strategy' from the Steering Committee, Working Group Chairs and other stakeholders, the Secretariat is planning to prepare a synthesis document to facilitate collective work of the Drafting Team to be concluded through meetings between 31 May - 4 June 2021. The finalization of Draft 2 is expected at the beginning of July. A second circulation, to the same audience who received the first draft, was recommended by the ExCo since it is important to listen to the various stakeholders. Assuming that a second round of inputs can be received by 15 August, finalization of Draft 3 could be planned for 15 September and the endorsement of the SC by the end of October at the latest.

4. Farmer's Pride developments

A letter to the Steering Committee had been sent by the ExCo Chair on 16 April 2021 with expected feedback to be received by 14 May. The letter referred to the need for the Steering Committee to agree on a joint position regarding the proposed establishment of an *In situ* Network by the project, Farmer's Pride. Points of concern were expressed regarding the setting up of one single network gathering both CWR and on-farm landraces, as well as the lack of a clear connection with ECPGR and the developing European Strategy and complementary Plant Strategy on PGRFA. Doubts also existed about the creation of a network with specific governance, funding

and legal framework, while ECPGR is promoting a more comprehensive environment for conservation and sustainable use of PGRFA in Europe wherever conserved *in situ*, on-farm and *ex situ*. This included, among others, a consistent policy framework, technical infrastructures as well as a European Coordination and Information Centre on genetic resources and a secured financial basis for both collaborative and national programmes.

The very recent dispatch of letters sent by the Chairs of the *in situ* CWR and on-farm Working Groups requesting support of National Coordinators for the Farmer's Pride Network, had created confusion among several National Coordinators, since the letters seemed to be written on behalf of ECPGR, while the governing bodies of ECPGR did not have the opportunity to comment or authorize such letters. The ExCo encouraged the Chair to quickly inform all the National Coordinators that the Farmer's Pride letters were not sent on behalf of ECPGR, since the formulation of a joint position on the Farmer's Pride Network was still pending.

The ExCo also encouraged holding a round table with the coordinators of Farmer's Pride, after receiving specific feedback from the National Coordinators, with the aim of finding a suitable common language for the promotion of the Farmer's Pride products and tools, as well as, possibly, of associated Network(s). In the view of the ExCo, a well-funded platform/package hosting both *in situ* networks could become one pillar of ECPGR, as long as it is a light structure under the umbrella of ECPGR. The creation of a parallel structure would, on the other hand, not be desirable.

The ExCo agreed to prepare a 'position statement' for submission to the SC through a virtual meeting to be organized before 28 May. The draft position statement could then be used as dialogue with Farmer's Pride, pending its amendment and finalization with the endorsement of the SC, not later than 14 June.

5. Hiring new staff at the Secretariat

After the departure of Scientific Assistant, Elinor Lipman (50%), the Secretariat was now planning to fill its gap in terms of English language editing (also with a view to supporting the Editor of the 'Genetic Resources' journal) and communications skills (web site management and communication strategy development). A new staff member, possibly a full-time position, will be hired as soon as possible through the publication of a regular announcement and a selection process.