



Minutes of the Meeting of the Working Groups Chairs and the Executive Committee

5–6 April 2022
Online (Teams platform)

Present:

Executive Committee:

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

Working Group Chairs:

Helena Stavelikova, Czech Republic (Chair of *Allium*)
Andreas Katsiotis, Cyprus (Chair of *Avena*)
Monika Höfer, Germany (Chair of Berries)
Parthenopi Ralli, Greece (Chair of *Beta*)
Ferdinando Branca, Italy (Chair of *Brassica*)
Maria Raffaella Ercolano, Italy (Chair of Cucurbits)
Creola Brezeanu, Romania (Chair of Grain legumes)
Jelka Šuštar Vozlič, Slovenia (Chair of Leafy vegetables)
Violeta Andjelkovic, Serbia (Chair of Maize)
Marc Lateur, Belgium (Chair of *Malus/Pyrus*)
Ana Maria Barata, Portugal (Chair of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants)
Veli-Matti Rokka, Finland (Chair of Potato)
Georgios Merkouropoulos, Greece (Chair of *Vitis*)
Dragoslav Ivanisevic, Serbia (Co-Chair of *Vitis*)
Daniela Giovannini, Italy (Chair of *Prunus*)
Willem van Dooijeweert, the Netherlands (Chair of Solanaceae)
Charlotte Allender, United Kingdom (Chair of Umbellifer crops)
Albrecht Serfling, Germany (Chair of Wheat)
Stephan Weise, Germany (Chair of Documentation and Information)
Küllli Annamaa, Estonia (Vice-Chair Documentation and Information)
Theo van Hintum, The Netherlands (Former Chair of Documentation and Information)
Nigel Maxted, United Kingdom (Chair of Wild Species Conservation in Genetic Reserves)
Valeria Negri, Italy (Chair of On-farm Conservation and Management)

ECPGR Secretariat

Lorenzo Maggioni, Secretary
Nora Capozio, Communications specialist

Unable to attend

Working Group Chairs:

Jan Svensson, Sweden (Chair of Barley)
Anna Palme, Sweden (Chair of Forages)

Working Groups not represented:

Fibre Crops (Flax and Hemp)
Cryopreservation

1. Introduction

The meeting of the Working Group (WG) Chairs with the members of the Executive Committee was organized online, as the first meeting of this kind during Phase X of ECPGR (2019–2023). This meeting was scheduled by ECPGR as a follow up to the previous Chairs' meeting held in October 2017 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. At that time, the Chairs had requested the possibility to meet more often and coordinate better, also with the possibility to influence the agenda of the Steering Committee. The COVID19-related delay in the organization of the Mid-Term Steering Committee meeting, eventually scheduled for June 2022, also affected the organization of the Chairs' meeting, which was planned to be held in advance of the Steering Committee meeting.

M. Lefort, Chair of the ECPGR Executive Committee, welcomed all participants and explained the objectives of the meeting, which is to offer an opportunity to the Chairs to reflect on the implementation of the first part of ECPGR Phase X (years 2019–2021), better coordinate their work and suggest improvements to the attention of the Steering Committee.

In preparation for this meeting, an online questionnaire was sent to the Chairs and vice-Chairs of 21 Working Groups on 26 January 2022. The purpose was to obtain feedback about their chairing experience and the effectiveness of the WGs with the current structure and mode of operation, as well as about the Chairs' expectations regarding the future implementation of the *Plant Genetic Resources Strategy for Europe* (PGR Strategy hereafter), recently published by ECPGR. Replies were received from 14 Working Groups and these were collected and analyzed by the Secretariat in a background document made available to the participants, together with an overview table of the activities of the Working Groups during Phase X (also see [website](#)).

The meeting was held over two mornings, with presentations from L. Maggioni (overview of the WG activities and analysis of the results of the questionnaire) and M. Lefort (The Plant Genetic Resources Strategy for Europe). The presentations were followed by a discussion, mainly focusing on recommendations to be forwarded to the attention of the Steering Committee. Presentations and background documents are available on the [ECPGR website](#).

A list of points of agreement is included in Appendix 1.

2. Main points of discussion

2.1 The COVID-19 scenario during Phase X and general remarks for the future

It was remarked that the pandemic situation had not allowed full implementation of the measures adopted at the start of Phase X (a new mode of operation with opportunities for more meetings and more flexible arrangements). Therefore, an appropriate evaluation of the effectiveness of such measures was not fully possible.

On the other hand, urgent issues to address in the future and particularly in the next Phase of ECPGR will be related to food security, local production and climate change. The importance of genetic resources to address these is becoming more evident.

2.2 The questionnaire

It was expressed that the questionnaire was not sufficiently representative of the views of the ECPGR community since only 14 replies were received, and that it should have been sent to all the WG members. Others remarked that 14 out of 21 is a good percentage and that the opinion of the Chairs was the most significant and most suitable to answer the specific questions.

2.3 Influence of WG Chairs in decision-making

It was considered important for the Chairs to have the possibility to better influence the decision-making process of the Steering Committee, considering that the work plans are implemented by the Working Groups. Opportunities were discussed for more frequent reciprocal interactions (such as online annually, and in-presence biannually) and also with the ExCo. The wish was also expressed to be informed in advance about issues under discussion by the Steering Committee so that inputs could be provided.

2.4 Role of the WG Chairs

The majority opinion was that monetary compensation for the activities of the Chairs is not required (not even a symbolic amount), but an acknowledgement of their work would be appreciated, either expressed by the respective National Coordination institutes or by the Secretariat, in the form of letters of thanks. Also, a more systematic use of Vice-Chairs/Co-Chairs would be useful, especially placing attention to complementarity of background, crop expertise or geographical representation. The Vice-Chair could also become the natural candidate to become the next Chair. There was the opinion that a maximum period should be established for the Chair's position, such as two terms (two Phases), to allow space for new people and ideas. At the same time, the difficulty to find available Chairs was hinting at not introducing fixed rules.

A revision of the Terms of References of the Chair was not specifically discussed, even though the ToRs may require an update in light of future objectives.

Participation of the WG members in the election of the Chair would be desired, although this is difficult to implement when people do not know each other and do not meet in person. However, the opportunity to submit candidate Chairs' Expressions of Interest to the evaluation of WG members could be a feasible option.

2.5 Structure and composition of WGs

The idea to reduce the number of WGs is often not favoured since many WGs already cover several crops (such as the WG on Leafy vegetables, Grain legumes, *Prunus*, Solanaceae, etc.) and already struggle to stay focused. Also, this may risk increasing the number of members excessively. It is also important not to discourage the participation of the same person in several groups, since many small countries have staff that oversees several crops.

The low responsiveness of many WG members remains a problem and the possibility to have more committed people or a core group of committed people would be useful. At least a contact person per country should be designated and this person should have a clear mandate to interact with the Chair and participate.

2.6 Country quota

The rule of participation through 'country quota' was considered in some cases a limitation to the participation of useful and active members. It was felt that geographically balanced participation in meetings should be ensured.

2.7 Tools

Physical meetings are considered important to make significant progress, especially at the start of a Phase or an Activity and when people do not know each other. The practice of online meetings, experienced during the COVID-19 lockdown, has shown the opportunities offered by technology and there will be confidence to use them more frequently for specific and quick interactions. A tool provided by the Secretariat to set up meetings could be useful.

At least one in-person meeting per Phase would be desired.

The possibility to use ECPGR funds for the meetings leading to the preparation of project proposals is an opportunity that could be used more frequently and that needs to be publicized, since it is potentially available.

The launching of Calls of the Grant Scheme with predefined objectives is considered a possibility to better orient the work of the WGs, but also non-specific calls are considered valuable, to enable WGs to propose activities of their interest, still within the boundaries of the ECPGR objectives. Continually open calls are preferred, although some Chairs prefer to get organized around fixed deadlines.

Webinars or workshops on specific topics of interest could be introduced, both open to all WGs, or specific to certain WGs. These are considered very effective for capacity building and the exchange of information. It should be clarified whose responsibility should be for the organization of these webinars.

2.8 Effectiveness of WGs in the different areas of work

The interpretation of the questionnaire results was questioned when the average scores indicated lower suitability of the modus operandi to deal with 'use' and 'on-farm'. While some WGs do not have good contacts with breeders, others reiterated that the interest of breeders for genetic resources is very high, as indicated for example by the experience of the EVA network. In general, WG chairs recognize the interest in the EVA network and would like it to be extended to more crops. Many crop WGs have not been working on *in situ* crop wild relatives (CWR) or on-farm conservation and it is their point of view that this might have biased the scores towards lower effectiveness in these areas.

A consensus was expressed on the need to increase connections between genetic resources and users, such as supporting the EVA network with a specific budget in the future and making sure that the material conserved can be easily accessible and is of high quality.

The *In situ* CWR WG is thought to be at the service of the crop WGs and it would be useful to strengthen the connection/interaction between thematic and crop WGs through a more systematic exchange of information, as well as the possibility to invite representatives of crop WGs to thematic WGs and vice versa. Bureaucratic and structural changes may not be necessary.

It is perceived that the WGs should not reduce their scope towards very targeted focuses, but rather maintain a wide focus on all the ECPGR objectives, with better communication between crop and thematic WGs.

2.9 External interactions

Each Chair should be attentive to interactions with networks, agencies and bodies working in the same area and strive to establish connections. One particular area of attention should be the link with biodiversity agencies, with the potential to tap into some of the resources that may be dedicated to genetic resources. Another area could be the link with organizations working with data (GBIF, others).

2.10 WGs as appropriate bodies to support the approaches described under the “Objectives by 2030” in the new PGR Strategy

'*Ex situ*' and 'Documentation and Information' are the areas of work receiving almost unanimous appreciation about the appropriateness of WGs (making material properly conserved, and available for use). Other areas are also considered appropriate, even if with lower percentages. The least appropriate areas, according to the scores received in the questionnaire (pre-breeding, participatory breeding, crop diversification), still receive some appreciation (around 50%).

2.11 Reducing bureaucracy

ECPGR already maintains a very low level of bureaucracy and there is not much more that can be improved. The principle to keep in mind might be 'avoiding bureaucracy'.

Examples were made of high levels of bureaucracy existing within the countries, such as making it difficult to flag accessions to AEGIS and making them visible in EURISCO.

Appendix 1. Main points of agreement in the Working Groups' Chairs meeting

Structure of Working Groups

- Strengthen integration across WGs:
 - Involvement of one member of the Crop WGs in *In situ* and On-farm WGs
 - Closer communication between Documentation and Information and *In situ* WGs
- No limitation to members regarding participation in several WGs
- Encourage definition of a contact person
- Commitment of WG members is often unclear. Propose a way to confirm/clarify their commitment
- Not a good idea to merge WGs (too many members and too many crops)

Role of WG Chair

- Encourage identification of Vice-Chair/Co-Chair (especially useful when there is complementarity of skills/background on different crops/geographical interests). Plans could be made for the Vice-Chair to become the new Chair after a given time
- No need for monetary compensation, but letters of acknowledgement from the Secretariat/ExCo to the Chair's institution (also from the National Coordinator to the Chair's institution may be appreciated, when appropriate)
- Period in office should not be too long, but no fixed limit is proposed, since sometimes it is difficult to replace the Chair
- Election of Chair with more input from the WG members would be ideal, especially when there is more than one candidate.

Country quota

- Independently from the country quota, ensure balanced participation in meetings/activities.

Tools

- Grant Scheme Calls could be targeted to carry out predefined tasks, but calls that are not prescriptive offer flexibility to implement WG-specific priorities. Calls with a deadline can be useful for strict planning. Other Chairs prefer to have always open calls.
- Information on projects prepared for submission to Grant Scheme should be circulated by the Chair to all the WG members
- Face-to-face meetings remain important (at least one per Phase). Online meetings can be more frequent (with optional Secretariat support)
- Encourage organization of meetings aimed at preparation of project proposals (EU, Grant Scheme, other)
- Organize webinars on themes of common interest (such as across WGs) (at the initiative of WG Chairs and/or Secretariat).

External interactions

- Each WG Chair should be attentive to the existence of other networks/bodies/agencies working in the same area and strive to establish connections/collaborations.

Areas of work

- Maintain wide scope for the area of work of WGs (also *in situ/on-farm/use*)
- Support the EVA model with a specific budget line

Decision making

- More frequent meetings of the Chairs (every year online, in person before SC meetings)
- Chairs to be informed about policy decisions and other relevant issues under discussion by the SC, with the opportunity to provide advice.