



**Report from the ExCo on progress made
during Phase IX, including evaluation of
Working Group Chairs**

**Highlights and recommendations
for the remaining part of the Phase**

A questionnaire was sent to National Coordinators in order to assess progress made related to the ECPGR objectives at national level. It is notable that only 17 countries completed or partially filled in the questionnaire. This assessment will, therefore, probably give a skewed picture on PGR status in the region.

Outcome 1 – AEGIS is operational. Accessions in AEGIS are characterized and evaluated

Output 1.1 – Membership agreements signed

There has been a slight increase in new Associate Members (AMs) during the current Phase. One more country and four new Associate Member institutions joined AEGIS. Whereas the total number seems fine, it should be noted that not much progress has been made during the current Phase, especially regarding new Associate Members.

Recommendation

Those member countries which have not yet completed Associate Agreements with their national genebanks and/or other institutions managing germplasm that is or will be included in the European Collection on behalf of the National PGR Programme are encouraged to do so.

Output 1.2 – AEGIS collections established

The number of accessions included in the European Collection during the current Phase (17 305 or 152% increase) could be seen as an adequate progress since the activity is still in its infancy. However, on the basis of the assessment of the countries' responses, further inclusion might not be as impressive in the short term. In fact, only low or medium progress was made in the identification of new accessions for inclusion, with one exception where 20 000 accessions have been identified. Since this progress probably does not reflect the total amount of accessions in European genebanks which are expected to be AEGIS candidates, further promotion of the system at national level might be needed.

Although there are clear and simplified guidelines on how to identify and flag accessions in EURISCO, countries seem to apply very different mechanisms and procedures for the identification and designation of accessions. This situation could well hamper the further development of the European Collection.

Monitoring of the management of AEGIS accessions is a prerequisite for a functional system. However, also here a number of AMs failed in this respect, even if some AMs do have adopted the AEGIS principles. It will be important to identify the problems and obstacles that individual institutions face when implementing these principles.

Recommendations

- a) Request NCs to take stronger and persistent action to promote the identification of AEGIS candidates in their respective countries.
- b) Ask NCs and WG Chairs to focus on the guidelines for identifying and flagging accessions in order to streamline the procedures between countries.
- c) Address AMs directly with a questionnaire regarding the implementation status of the AEGIS principles.

Output 1.3 – AQUAS quality system developed and operationalized

The operationalization of the system has had a slow start. Just a few of the AMs from reporting countries have so far used the *Template for operational genebank manual* to generate their own operational genebank manual, a requirement as per AQUAS.

The task of formulating crop-specific standards has made some progress. This has been done by eight WGs for orthodox seeds and two for field genebanks and *in vitro*/cryopreservation during the current Phase.

Recommendation

NCs are encouraged to urge their respective AMs to finalize their genebank manuals.

Output 1.4 – Funds mobilized to help Associate Members to implement AQUAS

It might look as if upgrading of the AMs' quality system is not a priority or even needed. However, this is most likely a false picture keeping in mind that there were expectations for funding through the Horizon 2020 project proposal for such support. The proposal was, however, not funded.

Recommendation

Currently there seems to be no source of funding for quality upgrading and prospects of receiving project funds from the EU are scarce. The NCs are therefore encouraged to look into internal funding sources and also use their own channels into relevant EU bodies to lobby for establishment of a funding structure for long-term funding of PGR conservation.

Output 1.5 – Other capacity building schemes for Associate Members operational

Even if no capacity building needs have been requested, there are needs and backlogs regarding several genebank activities in most genebanks. AEGIS opens up for possibilities for exchange of services between genebanks such as regeneration/multiplication, characterization/evaluation (especially molecular characterization) and safety-duplication. These possibilities have however, so far not been taken into account.

Recommendation

WGs should bring the issue of service exchange into their agenda and actively inventory both needs and possibilities among AMs.

Outcome 2 – Quantity and quality of data in EURISCO, including *in situ* and on-farm data, have been increased. Functionality of EURISCO meets users’ expectations

Output 2.1 – All National Focal Points (NFPs) update national inventories effectively and timely

The updating of EURISCO seems to work fairly well even though there is a difference between the degrees of activity among countries. The ongoing training workshops have had, and will have, a positive effect on the process.

Output 2.2 – C&E data in EURISCO included, with high quality and wide coverage

The incorporation of C&E data in EURISCO will increase the value of the database for the user community. The training workshops have been a valuable instrument to initiate the data uploading process which is expected to increase in the near future.

Recommendation

The EURISCO training activities have been instrumental for the progress of uploading different kind of data from NIs. The SC should therefore consider turning these training activities which are now applied for through the Grant Scheme, into a regular annual activity of the Doc&Info WG with a budget line of its own during the remaining part of this Phase.

Output 2.3 – Inclusion of relevant *in situ/on-farm* data in EURISCO realized

Activities on *in situ/on farm* (especially *in situ*) inventorying is probably in its infancy in many countries which is also indicated by the responses from NCs. Endorsement of the On-farm Concept might inspire some countries to initiate some activities.

Output 2.4 – Users’ expectations explored and functionalities of EURISCO increased

Even though a regular survey of the user communities’ expectations of EURISCO has not been carried out, regular communications with users have proven that the database is appreciated

and have also contributed to further improvement of its functions. This shows that direct involvement of the users in the development work is crucial for its future applicability.

Recommendation

The EURISCO Coordinator with the Doc&Info WG are encouraged to carry out a users' survey (Activity 2.4.1 of the ECPGR Objectives).

Outcome 3 – *In situ* conservation of priority crop wild relative (CWR) and landrace (LR) populations are implemented throughout Europe. Mechanisms are in place for more effective utilization of the conserved germplasm

The outcome and outputs of this ECPGR objective must be considered as long term and extending far beyond the current Phase. In addition, the regional activities very much depend on the implementation at national level.

Output 3.1 – National CWR conservation strategies produced

The successful EU-funded projects related to CWRs have certainly contributed to progress made in some of the countries.

Recommendation

NCs and WG members are encouraged to promote related activities at country level.

Outputs 3.2 – 3.6 – Referring to regional CWR activities

ECPGR has now a CWR strategy which is pending for implementation. This cannot, however, be realized fully without additional funding, preferably coming from ECPGR or other donors, such as the EC/EU.

Recommendation

NCs are encouraged to (1) assist in mobilizing either national or EU funding for activities to be carried out through ECPGR, and (2) use established channels into relevant EU bodies to lobby for the endorsement of the ECPGR CWR strategy.

Outcome 4 – Commitment and regular resources of national governments are sustained or increased, and commitments and resources of the European Commission (EC) as well as other potential donors towards ECPGR are increased

Output 4.1 – Relationship between ECPGR and EC/EU and responsible national ministries strengthened and sustainable funding of ECPGR secured

The slow and low level of member contribution to ECPGR is worrying. The Secretariat is spending a considerable amount of time on the task to encourage members to renew their membership.

Considerable efforts have been made to investigate possible funding opportunities within the EC, i.e. applying for project funding in EU calls, lobbying for recognition of ECPGR and its elements during different events where EC representatives have participated and in direct discussions with these representatives. It seems that the doors of current EC funding opportunities are closed during a foreseeable future. There is, however, a hope that the ongoing 'Preparatory action on EU plant and animal genetic resources in agriculture' will come up with recommendations for recognition of ECPGR and other European GR networks and support of their activities. The recommendations are expected to be announced at the final workshop of the action on 9 June 2016.

Recommendation

Since funding from current EU sources seems to be inaccessible for the type of activities which ECPGR is carrying out, there is a need for another type of funding structure within the EC. The NCs are therefore encouraged to bring this need up during relevant meetings at the EC and with EC representatives, and lobby for recognition of ECPGR as an EU platform for conservation and use of PGR, including policy development.

Output 4.2 – Increased awareness of the value of PGRFA amongst policy-makers at national and regional level

Based on the responses from countries it seems as if contacts with policy-makers at the national level are fairly good in many countries. However, contacts at the EU level need to be improved.

Recommendation

See under Output 4.1.

Output 4.3 – Increased collaboration between ECPGR and the International Treaty for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) and FAO Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (CGRFA)

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Secretariats of the International Treaty and ECPGR is at the table for endorsement by the SC and the two Secretariats are already participating in and exchanging information during relevant meetings.

Output 4.4 – Increased awareness of the value of PGRFA amongst users and the wider public

Based on the progress reported under Outcome 4 it is obvious that more needs to be done or done in a different way, even if current documents, brochures, and articles explain the achievements of ECPGR with regard to the benefits of genetic resources from a regional perspective. Benefits of being a member have also been listed in individual letters to prospected new members. Nevertheless, it might be useful to prepare public awareness material which clearly presents the benefits of being a member of ECPGR and the achievements made. This could be facilitated through a communication and public relation strategy which currently does not exist.

Recommendation

- a) Preparation of a communication and public relation strategy which includes developing information on the value of germplasm and that – based on the input from the members themselves – clearly presents the benefits of being an ECPGR member.
- b) Requesting the members to prepare a short statement on why they appreciate the benefits of being a member, i.e. why they decide to continue their membership and why they want ECPGR to continue.

Outcome 5 – Relations with users of germplasm are strengthened

Output 5.1 – Good knowledge of which C&E data are of high relevance to potential users

The needs of the users seem not to be very well communicated to the genebanks. This is not a new phenomenon since it is a well-known fact that plant breeders use genebank material to a limited extent due to the fact that breeders' populations mostly contain sufficient variation on a short time perspective. In addition, the incorporation of exotic material is a long-term approach which requires considerable financial input. Nevertheless, a closer collaboration between the conservation and breeding communities would be desirable in order to better make use of resources (financial and timing). This will also be needed in order to justify the future existence of the genebanks.

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Recommendation

When planning germplasm evaluation activities, WGs should focus on crop improvement needs and always consider including breeders in these activities.

Output 5.3 – Enhanced use of CWRs realized

See comments under Outcome 3.

Output 5.4 – Improved collaboration with users in public and private sector

See comments and recommendation under Output 5.1.

Outcome 6 – Organizational structure and secretarial support are adequate to effectively sustain the operations of ECPGR

Output 6.1 – New structure for the operations of WGs implemented and operational

Progress will be reported under another agenda item.

Output 6.2 – Effective operation of Executive Committee (ExCo) and Steering Committee (SC)

Results have been reported via minutes from meetings and email communication.

Output 6.3 – Synergies with external partners are realized (i.e. BGCI, CPVO, EC, ESA, ETP, EUCARPIA, FAO, SEEDNet)

Contacts with external partners are very important, and synergies and common interests need to be identified. The ECPGR Secretariat has been very active and successful in promoting ECPGR during different meetings and establishing contacts with different partners. Also WG Chairs and members have reported participation in different fora and contributing to make ECPGR and its activities more visible.

Output 6.4 – Fundraising is undertaken

See comments and recommendation under Output 4.1.

Output 6.5 – Effective operation of the Secretariat

The ECPGR Secretariat has fulfilled their duties and obligations in an excellent way. The presented list of tasks carried out covers a very broad field of activities which corresponds perfectly well with the ECPGRs objectives. The work of Lorenzo, Lidwina, Elinor and Jan is therefore very much appreciated and acknowledged by the ExCo.

Evaluation of Working Group Chairs

An online evaluation of the WG Chairs was requested from all the WG members. The results were provided confidentially to the Executive Committee. The ExCo has treated this information with great care and respected fully the confidentiality of it. Therefore, only the WG Chairs receiving the highest score for each question will be disclosed.

The number of respondents from each WG varied between 9 and 24. Most responses were received from the Wild species WG and least from the *Beta* and Fibre Crops WGs.

The score values were on a 4-points scale: 0 = Not satisfactory; 1 = Partly satisfactory; 2 = Satisfactory and 3 = Highly satisfactory.

The overall ranking of Chairs varied between 1.5 – 2.71. The Chair of the Wild species WG received the highest score. This WG also had the highest number of respondents (24).

The following specific questions on the WG Chairs' performance were asked:

Provide information to the WG members on ECPGR events and mode of operation, on a need or request basis.

The scores varied between 2.79 and 1.56 among WGs. The Chair of the *Prunus* WG received the highest score.

Orchestrate the know-how available in the pool of experts for a given crop genepool to resolve specific technical issues that might evolve as part of the operation of the WG or that are being raised by Associate Members as part of the management of the European Collection.

The scores varied between 2.67 and 1.8 among WGs. The *Beta* WG Chair received the highest score.

Initiate and coordinate the preparation of project ideas and proposals for funding from the competitive ECPGR funding scheme and/or from other sources. The WG Chair will also be responsible for the timely submission of the proposals to the Executive Committee (ExCo).

The scores varied between 2.64 and 1.63 among WGs. The Chair of the *Vitis* WG received the highest score.

Coordinate ECPGR-related activities for the crop genepool(s) that fall under the responsibility of the respective WG.

The scores varied between 2.67 and 1.7 among WGs. The *Beta* WG Chair received the highest score.

In addition to the specific questions above, the members of the Thematic WGs were asked to evaluate the following:

Develop a Workplan for each new Phase in line with the ECPGR objectives for the respective theme, in consultation with WG experts.

The scores varied between 2.6 and 2.25 among the WGs. The Chair of the Wild species WG received the highest score.

The WG members were also asked to **make any specific or general comments or suggestions.**

The following comments received are compiled without indicating from which WG.

On the evaluation:

- Several respondents stressed that it was in fact not possible to evaluate the Chair since she/he had recently been appointed.
- A few respondents declared that it was the Activity Coordinator, not the Chair, who had received the scores.
- It was mentioned that it is quite difficult to evaluate Chair performance, if ECPGR activities are performed mainly virtually without any practical work during “face to face meetings”.
- A suggestion was that rather than evaluate the WG Chair, it would be better to evaluate the commitment of the WG members; “By evaluating only the Chair, it is even more emphasized that the WG Chair is expected to do all the work”.
- There was also a suggestion to evaluate AEGIS/AQUAS since it was pointed out that “many genebankers doubt their effectiveness”.

On the network structure:

- It was considered that the WG Chairs were given less room for work due to the current organization of ECPGR. The difficulty to keep an active dialog and initiate activities in the absence of regular WG meetings was stressed. It was also mentioned that the size of the project funds discourage initiatives to come from members.
- It was expressed that the highest impact had been reached through the former structure of the networking with personal meeting of members. “Through this network structure funding had been raised that exceeded any ECPGR fund for the benefit of PGR work. Many in kind inputs had also been supplied.”
- A fear was expressed that ECPGR and the Working Groups would lose impact and reputation due to the current mode of operation.

On sub-regional/country needs:

- It was considered that lack of full WG meetings will risk losing contacts with several WG members, especially from East European countries.
- More attention and cooperation projects for the Balkan countries were requested.
- More meetings/trainings for discussion on the details were requested by one country representative.

On the efficiency:

- A few respondents requested that the WG members should be active on a more regular basis.
- It was considered to be a very difficult task to effectively orchestrate the know-how of such a diverse pool of experts across Europe. “The Chair is expected to know work profiles, experiences and capabilities of each member of the WG and even know how to approach them.”
- “The Chair should be thinking more strategically in order to initiate successful project ideas. The Chair should also better understand the goals and objectives of the ECPGR and even try to take part in their development and formulation from the very beginning.”
- It was pointed out that only a rather limited part of the WG members know each other, so that discussions and information exchange hardly happens.
- A wish for more active skype meetings and networking in general was expressed.

A quotation from one member which is probably shared by several others is reported below:

- “We need to meet each other personally once in a while to exchange our thoughts about several issues in formal and informal ways. This is not a travelling circus but an essential part of the way how a community works. Currently I see the effects of the ECPGR policy change quite clearly as a lot of genebankers have no idea what is going on at other European genebanks, so we have become isolated genebankers and that is very bad for development of the genebank sector. This could be done via organizing for example once in the two years a consolidated crop meeting per specific crop area (for example a vegetable meeting in which all vegetable working groups participate; like the last one in Catania). During this 3 day meeting, 1-1.5 days can be dedicated to general issues and 1-1.5 days can be used for separate working group meetings. In this way formal and informal contacts can be established and maintained and the idea that we form a group of people with a common interest in conservation and use of PGR stays alive.”

Reflections and recommendations from the ExCo

In general, there was a rather low percentage of responses and it is therefore difficult to form a reliable generic opinion of WG members. This might rather be a hint on the function of the WGs and its members rather than on WG Chairs.

Since several of the WG Chairs have been appointed only recently, they have not had enough time to communicate with their WG members. This is reflected in several of the responses. However, as indicated by some, it would perhaps be relevant to also evaluate the composition and efficiency of whole WGs.

Many WG members express dissatisfaction with the new ECPGR structure/policy and argue that there is currently less interaction within the WG or between genebanks. The need for regular meetings of WG members are requested by many. However, the set-up was changed by the SC with a clear objective to achieve more commitment and result. Two and a half years might be too short a time to evaluate the effect and benefits of the current structure. An evaluation of the

outcome of the total round of the Grant Scheme in order to assess its benefits might be necessary before a final appraisal can be made.

Lack of sufficient funding for activities is a concern among WG members. It is also clear that finding space for input in kind is still a challenge. The difficulty for WGs and the whole network to get support from external funding agencies is another aggravating factor.

The request for general meetings of the whole WG would indeed reduce the available amount of funding for activities and definitely not (only) go to those more active and committed to fulfil the specific goals and objectives of ECPGR.

The responsibility for communication within WGs and among members is, as indicated by some respondents, not only of the Chair, but of all those who want to participate actively in the network.

Recommendations

- Based on the evaluation results, no specific measures with regard to Chairs should be taken at this stage.
- Some WG Chairs have still not submitted their reports despite reminders from the Secretariat. All Chairs should be requested to report on time henceforth.
- WG members' evaluation results should be shared with their respective Chair.
- The specific comments regarding the low activity level of WG members and the need for WG meetings should be taken up for discussion with the SC when planning for the next Phase.
- When discussing WG structure and activities before the next Phase, the outcome of the current Grant Scheme should be taken into consideration.