

## Support to European endangered collections: Potential responsibility and role of ECPGR

Prepared by the ECPGR Executive Committee – May 2023

**International context: The establishment of an Emergency Reserve for Genebanks to fulfil obligations under art.15 of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA) (regarding ex situ collections of global and regional importance held by a number of international institutions)**

### Extract from 'An emergency Reserve for Genebanks – Operational Framework'<sup>1</sup>

**Article 15 of the International Treaty**, and the agreements concluded under it, mandate the Secretary to respond to situations where the orderly maintenance of a collection is at risk due to unforeseen events. In particular, the Secretary must seek to intervene or provide assistance when a collection is threatened. This includes providing technical support and assistance for the evacuation or transfer of a threatened collection, as may be required. However, no dedicated resources are currently available to the Secretary to fulfil this critical mandate, or to deliver this vital support. While the Crop Trust has a mandate to provide long-term support to *ex situ* collections from its endowment, there is no financial or technical mechanism in place that can provide the quick emergency support needed at the most critical times. This is why the Secretariat of the International Treaty on PGRFA and the Crop Trust have jointly established "The Emergency Reserve for Genebanks" in 2021.

**The Emergency Reserve** will provide rapid, short-term urgent support to unique *ex situ* collections in the Multilateral System, where there is an **imminent threat to the collection and no alternative financial support is available**.

The Emergency Reserve will address requests for urgent and critical support and accelerate interventions to safeguard international and national collections. Interventions may include repairing or procurement of equipment or supplies, the evacuation or temporary relocating of a collection, mitigation of the effects of war or civil unrest, and the duplication of unique materials under threat. Field collections are also in the scope of the Emergency Reserve.

The operational framework associated with the 'Emergency Reserve' includes a long list of disbursement principles and eligibility criteria. Among those, "*the endangered collection has to be located in a developing country (as defined by the OECDs DAC/ODA list)*". this excludes *de facto* most European countries.<sup>2</sup>

The ExCo has been recently approached with the request to fund the regeneration of an endangered collection in a European country which is not eligible for FAO/Trust Emergency Reserve. ***The ExCo wishes to hear the Steering Committee before going further on this request, which could have political and economic implications and will constitute a precedent.***

### Has the ECPGR a specific role to play vis à vis European endangered collections/accessions?

**Theoretically**, all European countries have the responsibility to conserve their national collections under the conditions defined in the International Treaty and have to allocate the necessary funds to their genebanks' infrastructure. In case of problems with endangered collections, European countries have the responsibility to solve the problems, even if few of them can apply for very specific support to the FAO/Trust Emergency Reserve (see footnote 2). In this last case, a specified process exists to solicit funds (see '*Disbursement principles and eligibility criteria of the Reserve operational framework*'<sup>1</sup>).

**In practice**, some European countries that are not eligible for FAO/Trust Emergency Reserve support, have difficulties to conserve their PGR collections as a result of a lack of support from national authorities (staff, infrastructure, capacity building). Some of these collections may be seriously endangered in the very short term (emergency actions) while others may be endangered in the medium term (within 8–10 years) and this may lead to a reduction of the diversity available in the European collection (AEGIS). In these specific cases and under the condition of proven value of the endangered accessions for the European collection, several questions can be raised:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fao.org/3/cb7732en/cb7732en.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Only Belarus, Georgia, Montenegro, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine are included in the OECDs DAC list of ODA recipients

1. Has ECPGR a specific support role to play vis à vis those short-term and/or medium-term endangered accessions, as part of the current and potential European collection, in a context where countries have national sovereignty and responsibility over their genetic resources?
2. If the answer is no, we need to elaborate on the reasons for a negative SC decision
3. If the answer is yes, further questions have to be addressed:
  - What are the conditions, rights and obligations of the beneficiaries of ECPGR support? Should ECPGR align eligibility conditions for its support to endangered collections as far as possible with those of the FAO/Trust Emergency Reserve – at least for very short-term support – and complement them with specific amendments, as far as needed?
  - What forms of support could be encompassed specifically under ECPGR (short-term/emergency and medium-term perspectives): mobilizing expertise to assess the status of the collection, rescue regeneration project within or outside the country, small laboratory equipment and consumables, training and capacity building, etc. Also, would it be relevant to mobilize ECPGR operational bodies (Working Groups, future network of genebank’s managers) in the implementation of such activities?
  - Which funding mechanism could be envisaged, either the current ECPGR budget (grant scheme that could incorporate a dedicated line for this fund) and/or external funding support (as far as external funding/sponsoring could be mobilized)?

These issues should be addressed in greater detail of course if the SC wishes to proceed on the implications of establishing an ECPGR fund for endangered collections that contain unique GR of interest for sustainable agricultural and food systems, in a context of climate change and limited natural resources. The ExCo received an actual request for support from Bulgaria (see below paragraph), which was used as a reference case to elaborate draft criteria for eligibility of potential ECPGR support. ***In case the SC recommends elaborating more on this general issue, the ExCo recommends setting up a Task Force to look into this sensitive issue.***

**The request from Bulgaria to be funded for regeneration of soybean accessions: preliminary thoughts from the ExCo.**

**Context:**

The Bulgarian genebank had submitted a request for ECPGR support for the regeneration of soybean accessions which were at risk of being lost due to loss of viability. Owing to insufficient expertise locally, the genebank was planning to outsource the regeneration to the legumes department in the Institute of Field and Vegetable Crops, Novi Sad, Serbia. The cost of this operation was estimated at €25/accession per 200 accessions = € 5,000. The list contains accessions acquired mainly between 1954 and 1983, largely of foreign origin. The EURISCO coordinator compared the list of 209 accessions with other existing accessions in EURISCO and concluded that possibly 68 of these accessions might be present in other genebanks (but only based on accession name, since other details were lacking).

**ExCo preliminary thoughts about eligibility criteria (relying on the eligibility criteria of FAO/Trust Emergency Reserve)**

<b>FAO/Trust Emergency Reserve</b> Funds will be disbursed in line with the principles of <u>expediency, responsiveness and transparency, and in line with the following eligibility criteria:</u>	<b>ExCo additional suggestions to be considered in the eligibility criteria</b>
There is a demonstrated actual, imminent threat to a collection in an emergency situation.	It is necessary to maintain this condition, incorporating examples of what could be considered as “actual, imminent threat to a collection in an emergency situation” (short-term) and in an anticipated severe threat in the next years (medium-term). Consider the need for external technical review.
Proposed rescue activities focused on immediate, short-term impact (such as mobilizing expertise for rapid assessments, purchasing failed equipment and maintaining minimum operations).	This criterion has to be maintained
There is demonstrated financial need. In particular, it has to be demonstrated that sufficient financial support for the collection has been unsuccessfully solicited from other funding mechanisms, or that no suitable such mechanisms exist.	This criterion has to be maintained

<p>The collection (including those maintained in the field) comprises unique genetic resources of regional and international significance.</p>	<p><b>Suggestion:</b> The uniqueness of resources should be considered as a vital criterion and rely on factual elements. This implies:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To elaborate a bit more – as far as possible – on the actual criteria for selection of AEGIS accessions: "<i>Genetically unique within AEGIS, to the best available knowledge (i.e. genetically distinct accessions; assessment based on available data and/or on the recorded history of the accession)</i>";</li> <li>2. to assess the conservation status/presence of the accessions in other collections that could reinforce the relevance of the rescue demand;</li> <li>3. to make use of the experience of Trust/FAO Emergency reserve in assessing uniqueness of accessions.</li> </ol>
<p>The recipient collection must be part of, or contain a reasonable amount of material that is in the International Treaty's Multilateral System, or is otherwise operating under the terms and conditions as set out by the Multilateral System.</p>	<p><b>Suggested revision of this criterion:</b> The recipient collection must be part of, or contain a reasonable amount of material that is part of the European collection (AEGIS), or is otherwise operating under the terms and conditions as set out by the Multilateral System.</p> <p><b>Associated obligations of applicant institution:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The regenerated accessions will be included in AEGIS, as long as the country hosting the endangered collection has signed the MoU to become an AEGIS member and the applicant institution is an Associate member, or a duplicate should be sent to an AEGIS Associate member institution</li> <li>2. A safety duplicate of the regenerated accessions will be deposited either in a European-certified genebank or in Svalbard.</li> </ol>
<p>The recipient has a risk mitigation strategy and contingency plan in place for the collection, or agrees to develop a risk mitigation strategy and contingency plan as a matter of urgency, and generally complies with the due diligence requirements of both the Treaty and the Crop Trust.</p>	<p><b>Suggestion:</b> It could be accepted that the recipient should have or develop a risk mitigation strategy, to avoid losing the collection in the future for the same reasons. Possibly, and if applicable, this strategy should also be extended to collections of other crops conserved in the same genebank.</p>
<p>The collection is located in a developing country (as defined by the <b>OECD's DAC/ODA list</b><sup>3</sup>) and has a written plan that explains the long-term conservation goals of the collection.</p>	<p><b>Suggestion for revision of this criterion:</b> The collection is located in a European country member of ECPGR that is not eligible for the FAO/Trust <i>Emergency Reserve</i>.</p>
<p>The recipient institution managing the collection agrees to transparent, efficient management of funds and timely reporting on their use.</p>	<p>This criterion has to be maintained</p>