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WORKING DOCUMENT

*ISPC comments on the
“CGIAR Genebanks Options Paper”*

Submitted by:
*Independent Science and Partnership Council
(ISPC)*

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The CGIAR Genebanks Options Paper for FC13 was first submitted to the ISPC in early March 2015 as an interim draft and then as a final draft on 17th March. The Fund Office (on behalf of the Fund Council) requested comments from the ISPC.

The document presents options for consideration of the Fund Council, in response to a request for an analysis of the “*funding for and management of the CGIAR genebanks, including identifying potential implications in the event of a short fall in the Crop Trust target endowment and proposing a plan for submission to the Peer Review Team for its review and input*”. In addressing this remit it differs substantially, as expected, from a research proposal and the ISPC considers that it must be evaluated through this lens, i.e. as a response rather than a fully fledged proposal.

In principle, the ISPC recommends support for Option 2 and a much needed renewal of the CGIAR’s engagement in genetic resources policy and representation in relevant international fora. The ISPC also recommends that the minimum germplasm health unit costs to ensure safe transfer of genetic materials be budgeted additionally within Option 2. Option 3 includes some exciting research possibilities to enhance the utility of the conserved germplasm, for research and for stakeholders, but these are provided as illustrative suggestions only. As the paper mixes the management and financial aspects with some research considerations, the paper needs more clarity on how these two areas are to be articulated for decision-making.

The document reinforces the undisputed historical and vital role played by CGIAR Centers in the area of conservation and use of genetic resources and, more recently, by the Global Crop Diversity Trust (Crop Trust), and presents options for funding key activities undertaken by genebanks, according to a proposed typology. The typology groups genebank activities in four main areas: (1) Core genebank operations (from acquisition to conservation and distribution of germplasm); (2) Core collective needs (from policy development to two other groups of activities of critical importance: achieving minimum standards as a pre-requisite to long-term agreements with the Crop Trust, and data management); (3) Outreach and partnership activities, and (4) Future opportunities. The ISPC commends the proposed typology of activities presented¹, as it reflects an evolution in the process of framing the relevant activities undertaken by genebanks as a whole and within the CGIAR in particular. It also properly addresses the criticism that genebanks (not only those of the CGIAR) are simply static structures for the deposition of genetic materials, by proposing a scope

¹ although the term “collective” might be changed to “system-level”, “cross-genebank” or something similar, to distinguish it from germplasm *collection*, which is not meant here.

of activities that encompasses efforts to make genetic materials available to users with the associated information being managed by the CGIAR.

As far as the *core genebank operations* are concerned, the set of performance targets consolidated in the Genebank CRP 2013 report (Table 2) projects a realistic scenario linked to the proposed funding strategy. It indicates that long term conservation and data management standards will be achieved in the course of the next 5 years and that the CGIAR genebanks will progressively become eligible for receiving additional Crop Trust funds. The pace of achieving the long-term conservation standards in the CGIAR as a whole is expected to slow down, due to the specificities of perennial mandate crops (e.g. CIFOR genetic resources unit) and the need to develop conservation protocols for crops that received less attention in the past (e.g. developing protocols for yam tissue culture at IITA).

In relation to *core collective needs*, the ISPC strongly supports the description of the needs for a renewed CGIAR capacity in genetic resources policy (p12 of the paper) and endorses the option of setting up a small high level policy advisory committee, in line with the role played by the Genetic Resources Policy Committee in the past.

In the case of *outreach and partnership activities*, the option paper highlights the importance of “targeted collecting” of germplasm, in partnership with national programs. The ISPC supports this if it is made part of a global strategic approach, noting that national programs sometimes choose the CGIAR genebanks as a repository for duplicates of their own collections, even recognizing that access and ownership issues at national and international levels are not fully resolved.

In regards to the required roles of Centers’ GHU, it is well known that the degradation of seed as a result of various fungal and bacterial infections will, over time, reduce germination and affect the genetic integrity of the samples kept in genebanks. Also, there are various partnership arrangements of genebank health units with national phytosanitary authorities, as a consequence of the variable capacity at national level for the safe introduction of plant materials or, where required, to develop the full range of quarantine activities. The ISPC believes that the part of GHU activities strictly related to germplasm conservation and safe movement should be incorporated into the list of *outreach and partnership* activities. We recognise the continuing internal CGIAR debate on what a broader GHU agenda might entail and whether this should be incorporated into the Genebank CRP, as costs vary considerably by Center, mandate crop etc., and that GHU covers activities that go beyond those related to germplasm conservation and use. Thus the ISPC notes also that in the case that this suggestion is accepted, the budget implications must also be examined within option 2.

The ISPC supports the proposal for an upgrading of Center’s Germplasm Health Unit(GHU) to strengthen the conservation and safe movement of germplasm, and suggests that a small group of experts, from within and outside the CGIAR, develop a priority agenda in this regard accompanied by a five year budget and that this is incorporated into the costs of Option 2.