



ISPC Commentary on the Expression of Interest for the CGIAR Coordinating Platform on System-wide Genetic Resources Policy

Summary

The ISPC, since its inception, has been very supportive and sometimes instrumental in the debate on the role played by the System concerning the conservation and use of genetic resources, in the context of the CGIAR reform. There is no doubt that the CGIAR needs to re-establish a globally relevant voice in genetic resources policy. Indeed, in its comments on the “*CGIAR Genebanks Options Paper*” submitted to the 13th meeting of the Fund Council, the ISPC clearly stated “*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.*”

The ISPC recognizes that this Expression of Interest (EoI) responds to a number of challenges affecting the conservation and sustainable use of genetic resources maintained by the CGIAR Centers’ infrastructures, including the complex political environment in which these activities are governed and operated, geographical global distribution and the rapidly evolving scientific and technological knowledge base required to conduct these activities at high level, internationally agreed standards.

However, the ISPC considers this Expression of Interest (EoI) as having **Major concerns**, and recommends that the proponents submit a revised EoI addressing the following substantive issues (elaborated upon in the subsequent commentary):

- The proposed governance structure must be streamlined, ensuring that it adequately represents the Centers and incorporates key representation of System level actors. This is critical to ensure that advocacy, compliance with agreed international standards and procedures and, more importantly, representation in the international arena is genuine and undeniably system-level; this aspect needs to come across strongly in the revised document.
- It is imperative to identify and prioritize, in a given time frame, the key policy issues within the CGIAR that must be coordinated by the Platform, incorporating lessons learned.
- The associated budget, taking into account the expected outputs and potential outcomes, needs to be substantially revised.

Overall score: C

1. Excellence and quality of the proposed coordination of Lead Center and partners

The problem statement and general information at the beginning of the proposal are convincing and sound. The proposal’s relevance and strategic nature are undisputed, and this is supplemented by a number of examples about the critical role of previous coordinating structures

in the development of internal policies and instruments. On legal policy, international agreements from the FAO, ITPGRFA, CBD, Nagoya Protocol as well as international intellectual property conventions are considered as they relate to genetic resources for food agriculture. At the same time, the scientific and technological progress and related policy (needs) are mentioned too. It is a suitable approach to have this broader view of the policy environment in which the CGIAR operates. It stretches from access and benefit sharing to intellectual property rights on biotechnologies and bioinformatics.

An extra quality aspect of the proposed coordinating Platform is the reflection of the policy impact on food and nutrition security, resilience and climate change adaptation where so called “neglected and under-utilized crops” play an increasing role. These are worth mentioning as an example of a non-enabling policy environment restricting the further improvement of crops or species important for global food security. A common approach to such questions through the entire CGIAR system would strengthen its role and (indirect) impact on achieving the SLOs, IDOs and sub-IDOs.

The proposed lead partner seems to be qualified to coordinate the Platform and has put together an admirable team of experienced people. Nonetheless, there are strong parallels between what the proponents are proposing and what IPGRI/Bioversity managed with the inter-Centre “System-wide Genetic Resources Programme” (SGRP) over sixteen years; the “Genetic Resource Policy Committee” (GRPC) working from 1995 to 2010 (27 sessions); and the SINGER genetic resources database. Yet all three initiatives - SGRP, GRPC, and SINGER – have now been discontinued, presumably as a result of failures at System level management of some kind or other contextual reasons. Taking these into account, a historical perspective on past cross-Centre genetic resource management (and its obvious challenges and pitfalls) needs to be understood before fully endorsing this EoI. Further, the ISPC believes that the governance issue has not been thoroughly addressed. Independent adjudication and monitoring is crucial and the ISPC would need more reassurance that representation at international fora is System-led and will be appropriately dealt with in the revised governance structure. The governance structure is also very heavy - an indication of low value for money. The frequency of meetings of governance structures seems to be high. The ISPC therefore suggests that the governance of the Platform be streamlined.

2. Level of ambition described in the collaboration/network and the commitment of the participants/partners

The proposal in general sounds very ambitious. There are five objectives proposed to be addressed. While this set of objectives is comprehensive, a priority analysis on what would compose the initial basket of functions and associated activities seems to be necessary, after an in depth CGIAR discussion on the priority issues to be coordinated in the policy domain (research, services, advocacy, representation, etc.).

It might be questioned whether the first point (creating a mechanism for system-wide coordination) is an objective by itself or rather describes an activity or instrument to achieve the objectives. There are more basic objectives to secure CGIAR’s credibility such as increasing knowledge and ensuring compliance related to genetic resources policy. In addition, there are more far-reaching objectives when trying to influence international fora developing policies. The

development of harmonized genetic resources policy guiding the CGIAR system is extremely important and should be set at highest priority. It is required to ensure that the CGIAR Centers and CRPs comply with genetic resources policy-related obligations. Appropriate interventions of the CGIAR to defend its interests in international fora are well understood and appreciated. However, caution must be exercised in trying to influence national programs, including national governments, to develop their own policies. If such complementary activities could additionally be funded, the Platform might engage in national capacity building to implement international agreements such as the ITPGRFA and its multilateral system for access and benefit sharing.

The envisaged partners in the Platform are listed in the text. Some of them seem to have confirmed their commitment, while others are still to be determined or to be confirmed. The ISPC recommends the inclusion of letters of commitment (cooperation agreements) of the partners to be able to assess their willingness to cooperate as well as their roles.

3. Strategy for system wide networking

In order to achieve the proposed objectives, an outline of activities has been put forward by the proponents. Although these parts include many concrete examples of activities, a strategic workplan has not been included. Hence, a real strategy for the system-wide networking cannot be seen. For example, from the presented text, a workplan could be structured possibly according to the following elements: to develop a mechanism for system-wide coordination (network of experts, internet-Platform, etc.); to develop a knowledge base on genetic resources-related policy (open source, existing literature/information); to conduct research on such policy to add value to the knowledge base; to raise awareness on such policy (highest priority within CGIAR, less priority outside CGIAR); to conduct a multi-stakeholder consultation, etc. From such kinds of activities, a strategy could become more obvious. It would be easier to follow how the Platform tries to achieve the objectives in a rational manner and would provide a better basis for the ISPC to analyze the proposed revised budget.

It is worth mentioning that the Genebank-CRP preproposal submitted to the ISPC requested a budget for policy issues (also coordinated by Bioversity International) that is far lower (USD 2.97 million) than the proposed coordinating Platform's budget (USD 12.4 million). The proposal for the Platform should provide a detailed year by year budget and clarify which activities would be additional and why those activities would cost more. The budget would need to be reviewed once there is a better understanding of the priority coordinating functions, services and products in the initial phase.

4. Quality and efficiency of the implementation including strategy for strengthening expertise across the system

As outlined before, quality depends on up-to-date knowledge and efficiency is very much dependent on the structure(s) to make knowledge available. Hence, it would be an essential asset for the CGIAR to create such a knowledge base for genetic resources-related policy. In line with the wider CGIAR policies, the knowledge base should be open-source and be part of the global public goods the CGIAR is maintaining and developing. The knowledge base is however not a static database but should continuously be enriched by new research undertaken by internationally recognized experts in this field, including from the CGIAR. The ISPC recommends giving more emphasis to the research component of the Platform.

5. Potential impact

The Platform's anticipated impact seems realistic on the harmonized approach among Centers (outcome 1), compliance of the CGIAR genebanks with genetic resources policy obligations (outcome 3), and more information provided by the CGIAR to international policy making bodies (outcome 2). The pathway to outcome 4, which states: "*Key CGIAR partners and beneficiaries adopt complementary approaches and mechanisms to operating under, and contributing to, evolving genetic resources policies frameworks*" is less obvious. It is even more difficult to see the direct impacts that are listed – in reality these might be more indirect in nature and dependent on third parties not directly involved in the Platform. The ISPC recommends revisiting the list of expected outcomes and impacts and identifying more realistic and direct ones which will only depend on the Platform's coordinating activities and achievements themselves. This could be facilitated by the development of a detailed priority workplan with the intended activities, milestones and the related cost estimates.

6. Contribution to establishing and strengthening a durable cooperation between the partners that will contribute to the CRPII Portfolio and the SRF

A durable solution depends on a permanent structure which well reflects the inter-relationship of the different dimensions of genetic resources activities along the value addition chain. Technical activities of conservation and use of genetic resources cannot be seen independently from the policy framework which is governing and prescribing so many details in this specific area of work. It also relates to research and innovation which in itself is ruled by intellectual property rights regulations. The Fund Council, at its 13th meeting, approved funding for the period 2017 - 2021 for genebank programme support. Therefore the ISPC recommends a connection of the coordinating Platform to the genebank programme structure to exploit synergies and exchange expertise among technical and legal experts, in particular for issues that have a direct relation with policy research and advice.