



**CONVENTION ON  
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DIVERSITY**

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**OPERATION OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM OF THE  
CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

*Note by the Executive Secretary*

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. The clearing-house mechanism of the Convention on Biological Diversity was established in accordance with Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation in support of the Convention and its three objectives: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources. The Convention recognizes the important role of partnerships and cooperation in achieving these objectives, and the clearing-house mechanism has been established to assist in this.

2. It should be noted that the mandate of the clearing-house mechanism derives from Article 18 of the Convention, entitled “Technical and Scientific Cooperation”, rather than Article 17, “Exchange of

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Information". This emphasizes that the role of the clearing-house mechanism extends beyond information exchange alone.

3. The clearing-house mechanism is conceived of as a global network of Parties and partners working together to facilitate implementation of the Convention. The priorities and work programme of the clearing-house mechanism are decided by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention, on the basis of the advice of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA). The Conference of the Parties designated 1996-1998 as the pilot phase of clearing-house mechanism operations, during which activities and services would evolve in response to the needs of countries and partners working to implement the Convention. It requested the Secretariat to facilitate the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism and established an informal advisory committee (IAC) to provide the Secretariat with feedback and advice through the pilot phase and beyond. In May 2000, the Conference of the Parties endorsed a strategic plan for the clearing-house mechanism and a longer-term programme of work for the period 1999-2004.

4. According to the strategic plan, the clearing-house mechanism has three objectives:

(a) *Cooperation* - the promotion and facilitation of scientific and technical cooperation within and between countries;

(b) *Information exchange* - the development of a global mechanism for exchanging and integrating information on biodiversity within and between countries;

(c) *Network development* - the development of the clearing-house mechanism focal points and their partners.

5. The first objective implies using the clearing-house mechanism to identify, develop and promote opportunities for collaboration. It focuses on six key areas of scientific, technical and technological cooperation: decision-making tools and processes, training and capacity-building, research, funding, access to and transfer of technology, and repatriation of information.

6. The second objective implies providing improved and integrated access to information sources that already exist, as well as fostering establishment and development of necessary information sources where they do not exist. Furthermore, exchange of information, knowledge, experience and best practices should be promoted by the clearing-house mechanism.

7. The third objective covers the development and ongoing support of the clearing-house mechanism's network of networks, to meet the growing needs of the clearing-house mechanism in a timely manner and with limited resources. This network consists of people, organizations, web sites, newsletters, and other mechanisms for cooperation and sharing of information. While the priority is to support the growth of clearing-house mechanism focal points, the intention is to work through them to support their partners and networks as well.

## **II. GUIDANCE BY THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES WITH REGARD TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM**

8. As part of its medium-term programme of work, the Conference of the Parties decided to consider the clearing-house mechanism as a standing item on its agenda. At its first meeting, held in 1994, the Conference of the Parties decided that a clearing-house mechanism should be established to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation and that the activities of the mechanism should be funded through the regular budget of the Convention as well as from voluntary contributions.

9. At its third meeting, in 1996, the Conference of the Parties decided that the clearing-house mechanism would be assisted in its functioning by an informal advisory committee, constituted and coordinated by the Executive Secretary. The committee was to guide and integrate the development of pilot-phase activities and endeavour to ensure that all Parties could participate in the pilot phase. At its fourth meeting, in 1998, the Conference of the Parties decided that the committee should continue to provide guidance after the pilot phase and should play a full role in the further development of the clearing-house mechanism. At its fifth meeting, in 2000, the Conference of the Parties specified the objectives of the committee and decided to review its continuation and mandate at its seventh meeting.

10. At its third meeting, the Conference of the Parties requested that regional workshops to be held to attain a clear definition of national- and regional-level scientific and technical information needs and priorities, as well as modalities to deliver information and evaluate national capacities for the implementation of the Convention. Furthermore, the workshops should review experience in scientific and technical cooperation in support to the objectives of the Convention, in order to identify ways by which the clearing-house mechanism can best facilitate such cooperation.

11. In 1999, an independent review of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism was undertaken. The results of the review were submitted to SBSTTA for its consideration, together with a strategic plan and a longer-term programme of work for the clearing-house mechanism for the period 1999-2004. At its fifth meeting, the Conference of the Parties expressed support for the implementation of the strategic plan and endorsed the longer-term programme of work, recognizing the important role that country partnerships can play in implementing the programme. It also decided that the strategic plan of the clearing-house mechanism should become a component of the Strategic Plan of the Convention.

## **Guidance to Parties**

### *National action*

12. At its second meeting, the Conference of the Parties called upon Parties that had not already done so to designate their national focal point for the clearing-house mechanism. At its third meeting, the Conference of the Parties recommended that one important role of the clearing-house mechanism at the national level should be to provide relevant information linkages to the national focal points and relevant thematic focal points. Furthermore, the Conference of the Parties requested those Parties with access to the Internet to link their national clearing-house mechanism home page to that of the Secretariat. At its fourth meeting, the Conference of the Parties recommended that each Party organize a national clearing-house mechanism steering committee or working group to achieve broad participation of different stakeholders.

### *Information and case-studies*

13. The Conference of the Parties has recommended that in building up the content of information in the clearing-house mechanism at the national, subregional and regional level, the following should be included: country profiles, biodiversity strategy and action plans, appropriate legislation, scientific and technological information, and financial sources. Parties have been recommended to include in their national reports lessons learnt through activities undertaken to implement their national clearing-house mechanism.

## **Financial resources and mechanism**

### *Guidance to the financial mechanism (the Global Environment Facility)*

14. At its third meeting, the Conference of the Parties requested the financial mechanism to support capacity-building for the purposes of the clearing-house mechanism in developing countries, including

training in information system technologies, and to support country-driven pilot projects to enable developing countries to begin to implement the main features of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism. It also requested the financial mechanism to implement its revised operational criteria for enabling activities in relation to the clearing-house mechanism to give effect to these activities.

15. Further guidance to the financial mechanism was adopted at the fourth and fifth meetings of the Conference of the Parties.

#### *Additional financial resources*

16. The Conference of the Parties has requested Governments and other bilateral and multilateral funding institutions to provide funding for capacity-building for the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism. It has further requested Governments and financial, scientific and technical institutions to facilitate and provide funding for regional workshops.

#### **Guidance to the Secretariat**

17. The Conference of the Parties has given guidance as to the nature and content of the clearing-house mechanism. Furthermore, the Conference of the Parties has indicated that the Secretariat should encourage the development of a network of partners, including indigenous and local communities, and to facilitate these in developing specific training for the effective participation of users in the clearing-house mechanism network.

18. In relation to taxonomy, the Conference of the Parties has directed the Executive Secretary to ensure that the clearing-house mechanism develop protocols and strategies for coordinating access to and distribution of taxonomic information contained in collections.

19. Requests for specific information to be disseminated through the clearing-house mechanism are addressed under the headings “Relevant aspects of thematic work programmes” and “Other relevant decisions” in paragraphs 23-24 below.

#### **Cooperation with other conventions and organizations**

20. At its second meeting, the Conference of the Parties decided that the clearing-house mechanism should be developed in close cooperation with relevant international organizations and entities as active partners in it to maximize existing experience and expertise. The development of the mechanism should be aided by enhancing networking between existing national, regional, subregional and international centres of relevant expertise, as well as governmental and non-governmental institutions and the private sector.

21. At its third meeting, the Conference of the Parties recognized that close cooperation is needed with other conventions and agreements.

22. At its fourth meeting, the Conference of the Parties instructed the Executive Secretary to improve synergy with regard to information exchange with other biodiversity-related conventions and ongoing information initiatives. It also asked to contribute to the harmonization of information management of other biodiversity-related treaties and to discuss possibilities of joint and harmonized approaches with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention to Combat Desertification. It also instructed the Executive Secretary to explore the possibility of linking the clearing-house mechanism with relevant international and other organizations to access publicly available information on intellectual property rights (IPRs) based on biological resources, and to report on progress to the Conference of the Parties at its fifth meeting.

### **Relevant aspects of thematic work programmes**

23. The Conference of the Parties has directed that certain information be made available through the clearing-house mechanism in relation to the work programmes on marine and coastal, agricultural, inland water, forest biological diversity, and the biological diversity of dry and sub-humid lands.

### **Other relevant decisions**

24. The Conference of the Parties has directed that information and case studies on a range of issues be made available through the clearing-house mechanism, such as:

- (a) Information contained in national reports;
- (b) Reports on experiences on the application of assessment methodologies and results of assessments;
- (c) Information on legislative, administrative and policy measures on access to genetic resources and benefit-sharing; on access and benefit-sharing arrangements; and on user institutions, the market for genetic resources, non-monetary benefits, incentive measures and *sui generis* systems;
- (d) Experience on the development and application of indicators;
- (e) Case-studies on incentive measures;
- (f) Information on public education and awareness initiatives;
- (g) Information related to impact assessment;
- (h) Assessments of the intellectual property rights implications and of the ecological, social and economic effects of genetic use restriction technologies, and assessments of the need to develop effective national regulations;
- (i) Case-studies on alien species that threaten ecosystems, habitats or species;
- (j) Publicly available information held by the Global Invasive Species Programme and other relevant bodies, including databases of alien species;
- (k) Database on biodiversity-related funding information;
- (l) Existing guidelines on incorporating biological diversity considerations into environmental impact assessments;
- (m) Notification of inter-sessional activities, documents received, peer-review processes, liaison groups and other expert bodies.

### **III. THE GLOBAL CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM NETWORK**

25. The clearing-house mechanism is developing into a global network. Of the 177 Parties to the Convention, 144 have established national focal points (NFPs) for the clearing-house mechanism. The NFPs designated by the Parties are generally institutions or centres with expertise on biodiversity or environmental information and are responsible for coordinating the activities of the clearing-house mechanism nationally. They have a central role in the global clearing-house mechanism network, which

also includes other partners (e.g. sister conventions, international initiatives, institutions, organizations, and individuals) working to implement the Convention.

26. National focal points are responsible for facilitating access to information about biodiversity within their countries, conducting surveys of information needs and information providers at the national and local levels, producing directories that promote better communication, avoiding duplication of efforts, promoting technical and scientific cooperation, and encouraging networking among government agencies, expert groups, non-governmental organizations and private enterprises at all levels.

27. National advisory committees may be established to assist the national focal points in identifying needs and priorities, as well as to monitor the impact of the clearing-house mechanism and facilitate the implementation of the Convention at the national level.

28. The clearing-house mechanism at the national level should serve the information needs of those organizations involved in implementing the Convention.

29. The Conference of the Parties has also recommended the establishment of regional or subregional clearing-house mechanism focal points. Such regional focal points should deal with issues of common concern in the region and activities could include training and joint research.

30. At its fifth meeting, the Conference of the Parties established criteria for identifying and establishing cooperative arrangements with international thematic focal points that can provide relevant and appropriate thematic information.

#### **IV. SUPPORTING BODIES, MECHANISM, AND TOOLS**

31. The main supporting bodies guiding the development of the clearing-house mechanism are the Conference of the Parties, the SBSTTA, the informal advisory committee (IAC), and regional workshops. The financial mechanism of the Convention, operated by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), provides financial support to clearing-house mechanism national focal points in eligible countries. A series of electronic and non-electronic tools have also been developed to support the operations of the clearing-house mechanism at all levels.

32. As noted above, the development of the clearing-house mechanism has been assisted by an informal advisory committee as requested by the Conference of the Parties. The role of the committee is to guide the development and activities of the clearing-house mechanism, facilitate participation by the Parties, and encourage cooperation with relevant international and regional initiatives.

33. Four clearing-house mechanism regional workshops and two expert meetings were held in 1997 and 1998. The regional workshops were held in Colombia, Hungary, Malaysia and Kenya, and the expert meetings in Germany and Italy. The workshops addressed the scientific and technical information needs and priorities of countries and regions. They also considered means to deliver information and evaluate national capacities for the implementation of the Convention. Special attention was given to needs related to information content, information structure and capacity building. For the biennium 2001-2002, the Secretariat will convene further regional workshops, subject to the availability of resources.

34. As the institution operating the financial mechanism of the Convention, the Global Environment Facility provides financial support to eligible Parties in accordance with the guidance of the Conference of the Parties. As noted above, GEF has been requested to provide support for capacity-building to facilitate the development of the clearing-house mechanism. GEF also supports country-driven projects to establish and strengthen biodiversity information systems. Under its biodiversity enabling activities, the financial mechanism provides the possibility of funding a clearing-house mechanism module. Recently,

GEF has approved new guidelines for additional funding of biodiversity enabling activities, including continued and more flexible support for clearing-house mechanism projects.

35. Among the most important tools developed to support clearing-house mechanism operations are the clearing-house mechanism websites around the world. At present, 52 national focal points have developed websites. These websites contain information on national implementation and other information related to biodiversity. The Convention's website, managed by the Secretariat, is an integral part of the clearing-house mechanism network and provides general information on the Convention and different thematic areas, links to national clearing-house mechanism websites, access to databases (e.g. rosters of experts, URL database), and services to assist the search for information (e.g., a biodiversity search engine).

36. Several electronic tools have been developed by the Secretariat. A CD-ROM tool-kit provides assistance to clearing-house mechanism national focal points wishing to set up a national website. All official documents related to the Convention have also been made available on CD-ROM. A list server has been established to ease communication between all clearing-house mechanism national focal points with an e-mail address. An electronic platform for technical and scientific cooperation is being developed to facilitate international cooperation on training, research, funding and technology transfer related to biodiversity. Some non-electronic tools have also been developed by the Secretariat, including the newsletter.

## **V. REVIEW OF THE PILOT PHASE**

37. The independent review of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism, referred to in paragraph 11 above, sought to identify the achievements to date, constraints experienced, and opportunities for improvement. The Parties to the Convention and related international initiatives and conventions were consulted in the process.

38. The review concludes that as a tool to support implementation of the Convention, the global clearing-house mechanism network could claim some successes. As noted above, there are currently 144 national focal points, 122 of them with e-mail, and 52 national clearing-house mechanism websites. The national focal points are working in partnership with organizations locally and internationally in support of the objectives of the Convention. There are tangible examples of how the clearing-house mechanism has been successful in facilitating scientific and technical initiatives essential to successful implementation of the Convention.

39. Another important development recognized in the review is the role of the Convention Secretariat in supporting and facilitating the development of the clearing-house mechanism network. The Secretariat is a valuable source of information and documentation related to the Convention. A number of key tools, services, and capabilities have been developed and implemented.

40. However, among the challenges identified in the review was the large variation in level of knowledge regarding the clearing-house mechanism (including what it is; its role in implementation of the Convention; its role generally within the international biodiversity landscape; and the value of participating). This low level of awareness is undoubtedly an obstacle to involvement in the clearing-house mechanism by many categories of potentially valuable partners. Furthermore, there is uncertainty regarding "who-does-what" with respect to implementing the clearing-house mechanism. This makes it difficult for Parties, partners and potential partners to find out what is required to become involved in the clearing-house mechanism network. Other challenges identified in the review were: language barriers, lack of long-term strategies for obtaining financial and technical support for national focal points, and technological problems related to access to the Internet.

## VI. KEY ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

41. The strategic plan of the clearing-house mechanism and its work programme for the period 1999-2004 were endorsed by the Conference of the Parties in May 2000. These two documents will be important instruments guiding its future development.

42. The strategic plan covers the projected operations of all clearing-house mechanism focal points worldwide, for the period from 2000 through 2004 and with a longer-term overall strategic view to 2009. It should be regarded as a “living plan” that will be continually refined as the clearing-house mechanism matures. Among the features of interest to the Meeting of Technical Experts on the Biosafety Clearing-House, is an analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the clearing-house mechanism, as well as of opportunities and threats facing the clearing-house mechanism. Based on this analysis, key issues have been identified and addressed.

43. The following are the key issues identified in the strategic plan:

(a) *Definition of the clearing-house mechanism.* There is a serious lack of understanding of what the clearing-house mechanism is, where it should go, and what is needed to build national clearing-house mechanisms. The assumption by some countries that creating a national clearing-house mechanism means nothing more than putting up a web page needs to be corrected;

(b) *Focus.* Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention instructs the clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation. So far, most of the focus of the clearing-house mechanism has been on information rather than cooperation. Although information exchange is necessary to facilitate technical and scientific cooperation, the clearing-house mechanism has to be developed into something more than a simple referral system in biodiversity. A major objective of the strategic plan is to broaden the clearing-house mechanism focus to include technical and scientific cooperation between Parties to the Convention, their partners, and other stakeholders;

(c) *Ownership.* The expressed intention of the Conference of the Parties in establishing the clearing-house mechanism was bottom-up, i.e. that the member countries would assume ownership of the clearing-house mechanism and provide direction and resources. In practice, however, there has been a lack of commitment and support from many member countries;

(d) *Asymmetries.* Major asymmetries in participation exist in the current implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, with technically advanced and extensive networks operating in some countries, while the majority of the Parties are still unsure what the clearing-house mechanism is all about. Identifying real benefits for participation in the clearing-house mechanism will be key;

(e) *Role of the Secretariat.* The Clearing-House Mechanism Unit of the Secretariat has limited resources in light of the tasks assigned to it by decisions of the Conference of the Parties;

(f) *Funding.* Financial support to developing countries to implement their clearing-house mechanisms has been inadequate in relation to the practical costs of creating a viable national network. A wider base of support for the clearing-house mechanism needs to be established;

(g) *Sustainability.* The global clearing-house mechanism network needs to plan for its long-term sustainability, and access to resources – financial, technical, human and information – is essential to that sustainability. Relationships between the clearing-house mechanism and international financing initiatives need to be fostered and strengthened, and creative partnership opportunities need to be explored.