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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PILOT PHASE OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

Report of the Executive Secretary

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention on Biological Diversity states that the Conference of the Parties, at its first meeting, shall determine how to establish a clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation.
2. At its second meeting, the Conference of the Parties decided that the clearing-house mechanism should be developed, starting with a pilot phase for 1996-1997 (decision II/3, paragraph 4 (a)). The Conference of the Parties also decided to review the implementation of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism at its third meeting and requested the Executive Secretary to submit a progress report (decision II/3, paragraph 10). In decision III/4, the Conference of the Parties decided that the pilot phase approved in its decision II/3 should be extended for a further year, until December 1998.
3. For the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties, the Executive Secretary prepared, in accordance with decision II/3, a progress report on the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism (document UNEP/CBD/COP/3/4).
4. The present document reports on progress made by the secretariat and the clearing-house mechanism focal points, and on related thematic and regional initiatives in the development of the pilot phase of the clearing-house

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mechanism. It recalls the guidance provided by the Conference of the Parties and goes on to provide a description of the operational framework for the pilot phase, an update on the current status of the work, and a description of the activities envisaged for achieving the objectives of the three-year pilot phase.

Progress reported upon in the present report refers to activities undertaken during the period from January to December 1997. A list of national focal points to the clearing-house mechanism is contained in document UNEP/CBD/COP/4/Inf.5.

II. GUIDANCE PROVIDED BY THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES

5. In decision I/3, the Conference of the Parties decided to implement the provisions of Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention on the establishment of a clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation, operating under the authority of the Conference of the Parties.

6. The Conference of the Parties also decided that the activities of the clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation should be funded from the regular budget of the secretariat, as well as from voluntary contributions, subject to decisions to be taken by the Conference of the Parties at its second meeting.

7. In decision II/3, the Conference of the Parties decided that the clearing-house mechanism should be developed, inter alia, by gradually building up its functions in response to clear and identified demand based on experience gained and resources available.

8. It also decided that, during the pilot phase, the secretariat should act as a focal point and should:

(a) Encourage the development of a network of active partners. These partners should focus initially on:

(i) Developing national capabilities through exchanging and disseminating information on the experiences and lessons learned by the Parties in the implementation of the Convention. This can be done through guidelines, training programmes, seminars, workshops - where appropriate - and, upon request, by using the clearing-house mechanism;

(ii) Facilitating access to and dissemination of research relevant to the objectives of the Convention;

(iii) Facilitating the transfer of technology through exchanging and disseminating information on experiences and technologies relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity;

(b) Provide information on and facilitate access to those operating active partners;

(c) Support the active partners in developing specific training for the

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effective participation of users in the clearing-house mechanism network.

9. In its decision III/4, the Conference of the Parties, inter alia:

(a) Decided that the pilot phase approved in its decision II/3 should be extended for a further year, until December 1998;

(b) Requested the Global Environment Facility to support the capacity-building activities and country-driven pilot projects focused on priority areas as critical components in the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism at the national, subregional and regional levels, including in the pilot phase;

(c) Requested Governments and relevant financial, scientific and technical institutions to facilitate, including through the provision of voluntary contributions, regional workshops with a view to attaining a clear definition of country and regional-level scientific and technical information needs and priorities identified and modalities to deliver information and evaluate national capacities for the implementation of the Convention. Such workshops should also review experience in scientific and technical cooperation in support of the objectives of the Convention, in order to identify ways by which the clearing-house mechanism could best facilitate such cooperation;

(d) Emphasized that the key characteristics of the clearing-house mechanism were, inter alia, that it should be compatible with national capacities, needs-driven and decentralized in nature, should provide access to meta-data, should provide support to the decision-making process, and should to the extent possible involve the private sector;

(e) Endorsed the proposal of the secretariat for the publication of a clearing-house mechanism newsletter;

(f) Recognized that ownership of all information made available through the clearing-house mechanism should remain with the provider of the information;

(g) Agreed that the clearing-house mechanism should be assisted in its functioning by an informal advisory committee, constituted and coordinated by the Executive Secretary in a transparent manner, which would guide and integrate the development of the pilotphase activities and endeavour to ensure that all Parties could participate in the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism;

(h) 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, in order to facilitate the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources, linkages to patent offices in each country for up-to-date information on new patent registrations and patents in the public domain providing an example of one mechanism;

(i) Recommended that the work of the clearing-house mechanism at the

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international level should focus on providing thematic focal points for linking to the activities at the national and regional level;

(j) Recognized that close cooperation was needed with other conventions and agreements, and requested the secretariat to identify those activities and organizations which could support the clearing-house mechanism, and to provide appropriate advice to the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice at its next meeting;

(k) Requested all Parties to designate their clearing-house mechanism national focal points and make them operational as soon as possible;

(l) Requested those Parties with access to the Internet to connect their national clearing-house mechanism home-page to the secretariat's clearing-house mechanism home-page on the Internet, where possible, and further requested the Executive Secretary and partners to collaborate on the provision of advice to Parties and others on, inter alia, the necessary layout and system specifications.

III. OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

10. In accordance with the guidelines provided, the secretariat has consulted with national and thematic focal points and regional initiatives which have indicated their interest in assisting in the pilot phase. As a result of these discussions, an operational framework has been developed for implementing the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism by means of a decentralized structure.

11. The clearing-house mechanism is designed to promote and facilitate scientific and technical cooperation, and to contribute to the implementation of all three objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity. The clearing-house mechanism will act as a mechanism to bring together the supply and the demand components of those aspects related to the promotion and facilitation of technical and scientific cooperation. The purpose of the clearing-house mechanism is transactional between providers and users, rather than custodial.

12. A crucial component of the clearing-house mechanism's operational framework is that it is service-oriented. It must be able to link its information and knowledge in order to respond to queries on topics relevant to the implementation of the Convention, pointing the users to the location of relevant information, and answering specific scientific and technical questions posed by users. By its interactive nature, the clearing-house mechanism will provide a means for identifying and disseminating multiple sources of information in an effective and decentralized way.

13. The main benefits of the clearing-house mechanism are:

(a) To provide data for decision-making;

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- (b) To support faster access to existing knowledge;
- (c) To promote technical and scientific communication;
- (d) To avoid duplication of efforts;
- (e) To allow additional comparisons among existing data;
- (f) To generate new information;
- (g) To support a more effective and efficient implementation of the Convention; and
- (h) To function at both national and international levels.

14. The implementation of the clearing-house mechanism will require, inter alia, human resources and continuous training, access to metadata and databases, information technology, and institutional strengthening.

A. Synergy versus duplication

15. Close cooperation is needed with other conventions and agreements. The secretariat is identifying those activities and organizations which could provide support to the clearing-house mechanism, promoting synergy, avoiding duplication of efforts and providing appropriate advice to the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA).

16. In its three year pilot phase, the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism is to be developed in a way which serves both the users and providers of information. Cost-effectiveness, independence, transparency and a decentralized structure have to be linked and combined in such a way that duplication of efforts can be avoided while enabling the information searcher to find the relevant information without delay.

17. The operational framework presented here is specifically designed to avoid the duplication of effort and to maximize the exchange of existing information and knowledge through the development of databases of existing knowledge by clearing-house mechanism partners.

B. Partners and Target Group

18. The determination of target groups depends on national priorities and the accessibility of information. Decision makers in Governments and related institutions should currently be considered as the major target group. As data accessibility improves, the target group needs to be redefined, so that a wider audience can participate in and contribute to the system.

19. At the national level, the clearing-house mechanism will serve the information needs of those organizations involved in implementing the provisions

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of the Convention. Increasing numbers of sources of information relevant to the implementation of the Convention are likely to be identified (including United Nations organizations and agencies, local and national government agencies, universities and research centres, indigenous and local communities with traditional ecological knowledge, non-governmental organizations and the private sector), and the potential volume of information is such that national focal points would need to invest immense amounts of time conducting searches through that mass of information. Further contact with each source holding such information would be likely to reveal a need to distinguish which elements of the total body of information held by the institution were relevant and to ensure their availability in an appropriate format.

C. The clearing-house focal point concept

20. The process for gathering and organizing the information that will feed into the clearing-house mechanism is itself decentralized, with partners coordinating efforts among themselves and with the secretariat to address topics of common interest. The contribution of each partner will be included in the information system of the clearing-house mechanism and will be made available to all users 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. Four types of clearing-house mechanism focal points seem to be necessary for an effective, decentralized and networked system:

- (a) Secretariat focal point (the "secretariat");
- (b) National focal points;
- (c) Regional (and subregional) focal points; and
- (d) Thematic focal points.

22. The contributors to the system vary. Supported by the secretariat, the national focal points will provide and use the information content as well as provide national experiences through, inter alia, the national reports. The thematic focal points have a long, solid and specialized experience in given fields of biological diversity. It is envisaged that they will voluntarily provide their information sources, inter alia, on the Internet. Examples of such thematic focal points include the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), Species 2000, as well as joint approaches, such as the Biodiversity Conservation Information System (BCIS). Regional approaches, such as Biodiversity Information Network 21 (BIN21) or the Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN) initiative, as well as supra-regional initiatives such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Megascience Subgroup on Bioinformatics, the environment and natural resources management (ENRM) topic working group on biodiversity of the group of seven major industrialized countries, or the UNEP Biodiversity Data Management Project, will also contribute to the system. Many other initiatives have

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commenced. It is desirable to harmonize efforts to avoid duplication of work. Thematic focal points could provide information on special topics and priority issues of the Convention, such as in-situ conservation, coastal and marine biological diversity, terrestrial biological diversity, biological diversity of inland waters, agricultural biological diversity, forest biological diversity, biosafety, traditional and indigenous knowledge, incentive measures, access to genetic resources, benefit sharing, intellectual property rights, technology transfer and development.

23. The role of the secretariat should be that of a facilitator, ensuring the dissemination of experience and knowledge among all partners, so that the system as a whole learns from that shared experience and that different solutions to similar problems are recorded and exchanged. As a facilitator, the secretariat needs to provide learning feedback so that areas of priority interest to the Parties can be identified. This learning feedback is needed in order to identify areas considered priorities by the Parties. This will ensure the worldwide sharing of experience in the implementation of the Convention and will also lead to a conceptual network model in which the secretariat functions as a node to the clearing-house mechanism acting as a coordinating switching-centre and facilitating linkages to the other categories of associated focal points. The secretariat is pursuing, inter alia, the following tasks:

- (a) Encouraging the development of a network of partners and focal points;
- (b) Providing information on and facilitating access to these operating partners and focal points;
- (c) Supporting focal points and partners in developing specific training for the effective participation of users in the clearing-house mechanism network; and
- (d) Assisting in linking the non-connected clearing-house mechanism national focal points to the World Wide Web (the so-called "Partnering" initiative).

24. National focal points should facilitate access to information, conduct surveys of information needs and information providers at the national and local levels, produce directories that promote better communication, avoid duplication of efforts, and promote scientific and technical cooperation.

25. A gradual process is recommended in the development of focal points. Priority should be given to developing the national focal point to the clearing-house mechanism, acknowledging that it will be necessary at a later stage to develop subregional and regional focal points. The activities of the regional focal points include training and joint research. The Regional focal points should also deal with commonalities in the region.

26. Thematic focal points at the national, regional or subregional levels could be designated by the relevant national focal points, regional or

subregional groups.

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

IV. CURRENT STATUS

28. An important feature of the operational framework is the identification of three distinct components that constitute the conceptual basis of the activity programme of the pilot phase. These are, first, the organizing and linking of information relevant to the implementation of the Convention; second, the visualization of the information, which will facilitate the integration of information from many disciplines and domains; and, third, the decision-support function, which will consist of providing syntheses of global trends and priorities identified by the Parties. These three concepts have been laid out in detail in the note by the Executive Secretary on operation of the clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation, contained in document UNEP/CBD/COP/3/4. The implementation of the pilot phase during the period in question has therefore focused, inter alia, on activities that enhance the value of existing information by improving access to that information on-line and, in particular, by developing ways of visualizing the data and information to make it more useful to those involved in the decision-making process.

29. A logo, illustrated below, has been developed for the clearing-house mechanism and its use is encouraged. This will create a distinct clearing-house mechanism identity for all clearing-house mechanism activities and relevant information sources, and will assist in the easy identification of focal points on the Internet. The Conference of the Parties may wish to consider recommending criteria for the use of the clearing-house mechanism logo.



30. To date, 99 countries have officially designated their clearing-house mechanism national focal point. The total number of submissions for the clearing-house mechanism technical evaluation of clearing-house mechanism national focal points is 54 from Contracting Parties. This corresponds to about 32 per cent of the 171 Contracting Parties. Of these 54 submissions, 91 per cent have access to a personal computer, 69 per cent have email and 26 per cent have an Internet site.

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A. Informal advisory committee

31. In its decision III/4, the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties agreed that the clearing-house mechanism shall be assisted in its functioning by an informal advisory committee, constituted and coordinated by the Executive Secretary in a transparent manner, which will guide and integrate the development of the pilot-phase activities and endeavour to ensure that all Parties can participate in the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism.

32. The first preliminary meeting of the Informal Advisory Committee took place during the third meeting of SBSTTA, 1-5 September 1997, Montreal. The terms of reference were considered for this Informal Advisory Committee by its first meeting. The finalization of the terms of reference is in progress.

33. The following Contracting Parties participate in the Informal Advisory Committee: Burkina Faso, Canada, Colombia, Germany, Hungary, Indonesia, Jamaica, Malaysia, Malawi and Slovakia. The following observers attend: BIN21, BCIS, IABIN and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Working Group on Bioinformatics.

34. The Informal Advisory Committee will be fully involved in the further development of the clearing-house mechanism during its pilot phase.

B. Clearing-house mechanism brochure and newsletter

35. The production of an informative clearing-house mechanism brochure is considered necessary. Employing both text and graphic elements, the brochure will aim to inform a wide constituency about the aims, scope and goals of the clearing-house mechanism.

36. Pursuant to decision III/4, the clearing-house mechanism newsletter is in preparation. This electronic and non-electronic publication highlights the most important features of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism. The first issue covers, inter alia, the results of the clearing-house mechanism regional workshops, the achievements of the Informal Advisory Committee and the significant developments of the secretariat's Internet home page.

C. Harmonization of information management of other biodiversity-related agreements

37. This project, currently being undertaken by WCMC, on behalf of the five biodiversity-related convention secretariats and UNEP, to identify the potential areas of synergy between the five conventions and to determine the practical steps to achieve them. The project concentrates on identifying practical actions that will benefit all the secretariats, such as harmonized reporting requirements, managing information holdings, information support to subsidiary bodies, feedback to Parties and responding to information requests.

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D. Synergy with other biodiversity information initiatives

38. Information management initiatives contributing to the clearing-house mechanism include, besides national and regional efforts:

- (a) The UNEP Biodiversity Data Management Project (capacity-building);
- (b) The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Megascience subgroup on Bioinformatics and the G7 ENRM topic working group on biodiversity (information structure);
- (c) BCIS, a consortium of global acting and biodiversity-related non-governmental organizations (information content and capacity-building).

39. There is a need - both during the clearing-house mechanism's pilot phase and in the long-term - to establish a reliable biodiversity network of existing and evolving institutions and initiatives which can serve the needs of Parties to the Convention. This network is needed to facilitate and support the implementation of the three objectives of the Convention. Major institutions and initiatives are now starting to establish joint initiatives and consortia covering certain aspects and fields in relation to the programme areas of the Convention. The opportunity should be taken to support and facilitate this process of creating a joint biodiversity network with clearly identified and shared responsibilities for such a globally owned network. To this end a memorandum of understanding between the major institutions will be needed after the clearing-house mechanism pilot phase, in order clearly to identify, harmonize, and designate responsibilities of such a system. A joint and harmonized approach of these evolving initiatives is therefore needed and will be initiated and developed to support and facilitate these processes.

40. These joint efforts are undertaken within the global approach of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and focus on cooperation aspects, rather than a bare information system. Their function is to act in a facilitator capacity, providing the infrastructure necessary for making available and accessible the content to be channelled from the support to the demand side.

41. Joint and harmonized approaches are also currently being discussed with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa. Gradual harmonization will also be sought with other relevant processes, in particular Agenda 21.

E. Secretariat's communication infrastructure

42. Enhancement of the secretariat's electronic communication capacity has been one of the main achievements in 1997, through the establishment of a network infrastructure serving individual working stations and archive servers.

Through a secure environment (Firewall), adequate communication tools (email and Internet access), software standards and continuous training, the secretariat has reached a crucial step in the empowerment of its communication infrastructure to provide an efficient service to the Parties to the Convention.

Under the clearing-house mechanism umbrella and assistance, a Web server has been created to strengthen the continuous access to the secretariat's activities and information. Each main theme of the secretariat has made available its information, including meeting announcement and documentation. In the meantime, a clear communication strategy has been implemented through better information structure (registry, filing systems, documents archives), tools (Java technology, database, mapping) and organization (layout, structure) as the main objectives. The ongoing achievements include: newsgroups and email conferencing (Listserv), on-line database access, search engines, documentation archives and CD-ROM development. The communication strategy has focused its efforts on facilitating access to the secretariat's information using all existing Internet tools but also by producing a CD-ROM version of this information for non-connected users.

43. Faced with the wide needs of the Parties, the clearing-house mechanism has extended the available communication tools to empower the in-house experience, knowledge and capacities. Based on the recommendations from consultations and regional workshops, the clearing-house mechanism has radically extended its communication tools in order to reach a wider range of users. The optimization of existing communication tools has been one of the main priorities with:

(a) Access to a Listserv-hosting email newsletter, discussion groups and email archives. This service is intended to encourage the discussion around issues related to the Convention and to make accessible the secretariat archive facilities to users without full Internet access;

(b) Availability of an on-line database on the world wide web (WWW) (focal points, contacts, roster of experts) ;

(c) Creation of a WWW search engine enhancing the Internet-search for issues related to the Convention; and

(d) Availability of a CD-ROM version for users without Internet access.

44. In order to reach a wide range of users the clearing-house mechanism is providing most of its official meeting documentation in the six official languages, through a wide range of communication tools such as Internet tools (WWW Gopher, FTP, Newsgroup and Listserv facilities) and is planning also to use other tools, such as CD-ROM technologies, in various compatible formats (HTML and PDF).

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45. For compatibility and harmonization reasons, the clearing-house mechanism's information is available on each platform using such common standards as HTML and PDF formats. This sustainable communication strategy will allow any user to access the information from the clearing-house mechanism.

V. CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM REGIONAL WORKSHOPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

46. Clearing-house mechanism regional workshops were held in 1997 and will be held in 1998, with a view to attaining a clear definition of country and regional-level scientific and technical information needs and priorities identified and modalities to deliver information and evaluate national capacities for the implementation of the Convention. Such workshops review experience in scientific and technical cooperation in support of the objectives of the Convention, in order to identify ways by which the clearing-house mechanism can best facilitate such cooperation.

47. Regional workshops were held from 13 to 15 October 1997, in Cartagena de Indias (Colombia), for the Latin American and the Caribbean Region, from 27 to 29 October 1997, in Goedöellöe (Hungary), for the Central and Eastern European Region, and from 3 to 5 December 1997, in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), for the Asian Region. The African Regional Workshop is planned to be held on 5 to 7 March 1998. A second round of regional workshops are envisaged to be held during 1998, in order to promote attaining a clearer definition of country and region-level scientific and technical information needs and priorities.

48. The regional workshops made general considerations and recommendations and specific regional recommendations and recommendations on information content, information structure and capacity-building for the clearing-house mechanism. Only a selection of their findings could be presented in this report. The full reports of the clearing-house mechanism regional workshops can be found in document UNEP/CBD/COP/4/Inf.6.

A. General considerations and recommendations arising from the regional workshops:

49. In its operation, the clearing-house mechanism should reflect decision III/4 of the Conference of the Parties, which stated that the clearing-house mechanism should be clearly focused on the implementation of the Convention.

50. Information systems are an important component of the clearing-house mechanism. Among other services which the clearing-house mechanism should provide are to identify and assess user needs at the national, regional and global levels; cross-sectoral considerations could also be taken into account.

51. The clearing-house mechanism should be needs-driven and based on an assessment of needs for technical and scientific cooperation by potential user groups.

52. Benefits of the clearing-house mechanism include better data for decision-making, support faster access to existing knowledge, promote technical and scientific communication and avoid duplication of efforts, allow additional comparisons among existing data and generation of new information, and a more effective and efficient implementation of the Convention, requiring, inter alia, access to metadata and databases, information technology, institutional strengthening, human resources and training.

53. Data used for the clearing-house mechanism need to be organized, standardized and made available, in order that they may be integrated, interpreted and summarized according to needs.

54. Ownership of all information made available through the clearing-house mechanism shall remain with the provider of the information. Restrictions to access may exist according to terms and conditions agreed upon with the provider.

55. Benefits should be shared with the providers of the information, especially information related to the use of traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of local and indigenous communities, in accordance with Article 8 (j) of the Convention.

56. Information exchange should take advantage of information technology including, inter alia, the use of the Internet, CD-ROMs and diskettes.

57. Financial resources need to be made available to support the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, through bilateral and multilateral funding institutions and other international donors. The Global Environment Facility (GEF), as the interim financial mechanism, should maintain a range of funding options that are flexible and that meet national needs and the requirements of decision III/4, as well as those of recommendation III/6 of SBSTTA.

58. Beyond the exchange of information, the secretariat focal point of the clearing-house mechanism should play a role in identifying technologies that are required by Contracting Parties to fulfil their obligations under the Convention. It should facilitate the transfer of such technologies to the Contracting Party concerned and facilitate also the building of capacity in the recipient country to use the transferred technology. In addition, it should facilitate the further development of such technology in the recipient country where necessary and possible.

B. Information Content

59. At the multilateral, regional, subregional and bilateral levels, the content of the clearing-house mechanism should include the following elements:

(a) The content of national strategies, programmes and plans, and also, but without being restricted to, the full text of the Convention;

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(b) Information on the country studies, national strategies and reports, including, inter alia, case studies and practices;

(c) Opportunities for international, regional and multilateral cooperation;

(d) National information on other international and regional treaties related to biological diversity of which the country is a member; and

(e) Case studies referring to activities related to the implementation of the Convention.

60. The contents of the clearing-house mechanism at the secretariat's focal point could include information on the Convention on Biological Diversity (summary information could also be provided as appropriate); a glossary of terms; information on national focal points; thematic focal points; financial resources; enabling activities; and a help desk.

61. The content of the clearing-house mechanism at the national level may include, but not necessarily be limited to, the following aspects, depending on national priorities and capacities:

(a) Country profile;

(b) International activities;

(c) Translation of Conference of the Parties and SBSTTA documents and resolutions into the language of the country;

(d) Interpretation (national and non-technical language) of all resolutions and opportunities;

(e) National strategy, action plans, activities, and evaluations;

(f) National legislation;

(g) International agreements;

(h) Scientific information;

(i) Technological information;

(j) Research results;

(k) Services;

(l) Help desk;

(m) Biodiversity information and practices;

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- (n) Threats to biological diversity;
- (o) Directory of institutions and experts;
- (p) Economic valuation of biodiversity and incentives for its sustainable use;
- (q) Markets and trade of goods and services related to biodiversity;
- (r) Environmental impact assessment and management; and
- (s) Services including training, surveys, technology experts or other specialities.

62. Participants considered that thematic focal points could provide information on special topics and priority issues of the Convention, such as marine and coastal biological diversity, terrestrial biological diversity, biosafety, access to genetic resources, intellectual property rights, technology transfer and development, threatened species, traditional and indigenous knowledge, agricultural biological diversity and inland waters.

63. One element of the content of all focal points should be a directory of meta-databases which are of global interest and relevant to the Convention.

64. In order to promote scientific and technical cooperation at the national and regional level, common needs and priorities from other parties should be clearly identified. Examples at the regional level includes shared ecosystems, migratory species and invasive species; also information about markets, biological collections, maps and satellite images, clean technologies, training opportunities and funding sources.

C. Information structure

65. A gradual process is recommended in the development of the focal points. Priority should be given to developing the national focal point to the clearing-house mechanism, acknowledging that it will be necessary at a later stage to develop subregional and regional focal points to the clearing-house mechanism. Activities of the regional focal points include training and joint research. The regional focal point should also deal with commonalties in the region.

66. It may be desirable that the clearing-house mechanism national focal point be in the same institution designated as the Convention on Biological Diversity focal point. Participants noted that the multiplicity of focal points may create coordination problems for some countries.

67. Thematic focal points at the national, regional or subregional levels could be designated by the relevant national focal points, regional or subregional groups. It is recommended to the Conference of the Parties at its next meeting to establish criteria and guidelines for the selection of global thematic focal points and the role of such global thematic focal points.
68. It was deemed necessary that the clearing-house mechanism national focal point have access to the Internet and email, to CD-ROM and fax facilities.
69. Further discussion of custodianship and responsibility of information and data made available through the clearing-house mechanism was deemed necessary.
70. In addition to the designated national language the use of the English language to facilitate the exchange of information between the clearing-house mechanism focal points was recommended.
71. The organization of the Convention information in the clearing-house mechanism could use a common format, where the orderly sequence of the articles of the text of the Convention could be followed; alternatively, the sequence of the three objectives of the Convention could be considered.
72. The secretariat should assist in linking the non-connected clearing-house mechanism/national focal points to the world wide web.
73. National focal points of the clearing-house mechanism should facilitate access to information, conduct surveys of information needs and information providers at the national and local levels, produce directories that promote better communication, avoid duplication of efforts, and promote scientific and technical cooperation.
74. National advisory committees could be established to assist the national focal points in establishing needs and priorities, as well as to monitor the impact of the clearing-house mechanism on the implementation of the Convention at the national level.
75. In order to facilitate the exchange of ideas and experiences in the development of the clearing-house mechanism it is proposed to establish a clearing-house mechanism-national focal point email group, including the current 171 national focal points, moderated by the secretariat.
76. To improve synergy with regard to information exchange with related conventions (e.g., the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Waterfowl Habitat (Ramsar)Convention, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the Framework Convention on Climate Change and other information management initiatives, the avoidance of duplication of efforts is recommended.

D. Capacity-building

77. In order to promote and facilitate cooperation between Parties for implementing the Convention, capacity-building in areas concerning its three objectives is needed.

78. In addition, the clearing-house mechanism, in compliance with paragraph 3 of Article 18, should not only enhance capacity in data management, but also assist Parties to prioritize country-driven areas of research, education and training. This increasing scientific, technical and technological capacity should promote both North-South and South-South cooperation.

79. Cooperation in capacity-building should include, but not be limited to human resource development in information technologies and management for promoting and facilitating cooperation and other capacity-building needs for promoting and facilitating cooperation; institutional strengthening; information technologies and management; relationships; and other aspects of institutional strengthening.

80. A clearing-house mechanism-national focal point needs assessment for a clearing-house mechanism "start-up kit" should be conducted. A needs analysis could include one or more of the following: inventory of existing sites, a technical questionnaire, structured interviews, and workshops. It was recommended that this prototype be developed, be tested at regional clearing-house mechanism workshops and expert meetings, and be made available to Parties who may wish to test it. At the country level, the development could be supervised by a steering group and implemented by a working group with appropriate expertise. The content of such a tool-kit could comprise the following: World Wide Web authoring tools, including public domain or commercial products to develop a website; standard "front end" pages; common material (link to official Convention sites, etc.); standard format for national reports; tutorial material. The secretariat would keep the tool-kit up to date.

81. Adequate training on current information management, including software and hardware should be considered. Training can be provided in country or in the form of "Training of the trainers". The objective is to raise the level of expertise not only for those delegated to implement the national clearing-house mechanism but also their colleagues. Also a choice of training methods would need to be made, or even a combination of methods, depending on the circumstances and needs. In addition to basic training, second-level advanced training is needed, including on the application of database-web and geographic information system-web interconnectivity. Training could be provided by an organization or organizations that meet specified criteria, such as: provision of in-country training on the Internet, including the World-Wide Web, understanding Convention on Biological Diversity and clearing-house mechanism issues; training experience in closely related areas; and the ability to provide support services (including distance learning).

82. It is proposed that the secretariat facilitate modalities to support those Parties without full Internet access, preparing and disseminating updated information on CD-ROM or diskettes, either periodically (e.g., quarterly) or as required, and rendering assistance to those Parties in the dissemination of appropriate information. Support would be needed in such areas as: publishing (paper, CD-ROM, etc.), distribution, external WWW host (CBD-clearing-house mechanism), email, newsgroups, bulletin boards, external publisher, data management and data-basing.

83. The use of the clearing-house mechanism will be facilitated if priority is given to ease of use, through intuitive interfaces, appropriate indexing and search capabilities and minimal number of layers of information.

84. Significant efforts should be made on initial promotion (nationally and internationally) to raise awareness in order to encourage national focal points to plan the development of their clearing-house mechanisms.

85. It is also important to encourage and monitor feedback from users of the clearing-house mechanism to ensure that it meets their needs. This will prove very useful in setting priorities. Some kind of question and answer forum could also prove useful. This will also involve maintaining contact with the secretariat to ensure that the clearing-house mechanism is developing in line with current decisions of the Conference of Parties and other players.

E. Clearing-house mechanism module under the enabling activities of the GEF

86. Several clearing-house mechanism partners have proposed the development of an Internet-based training package as part of the implementation of decisions II/3 and III/4. It is planned that the secretariat will coordinate and assist the national focal points in the development and evaluation of these training materials, and report on the results at the fourth meeting of the SBSTTA. It is envisaged that eligible national focal points for the clearing-house mechanism will be supported in their efforts through the provision of elementary hardware and software equipment by the financial mechanism, enabling Internet connectivity of designated national focal points for the clearing-house mechanism.

87. The Conference of the Parties requested the GEF to support the activities referred to in decision III/4 as critical components in the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism at the national, subregional and regional levels, including in the pilot phase.

88. At its third meeting, the Conference of the Parties further requested GEF to implement its revised operational criteria for enabling activities in relation to the clearing-house mechanism.

89. The need for capacity-building for the purposes of the clearing-house mechanism must be encouraged in developing countries, including training on information systems technologies that will allow developing countries to take advantage of the recent developments in electronic communication, including the Internet.

90. The advantages of country-driven pilot projects focused on priority areas identified by the Conference of Parties would enable developing countries to begin to implement the main features of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism.

91. GEF provides under its enabling activities programme a country-level support to the national implementation of the clearing-house mechanism. Support can be obtained by eligible Parties through one of the three implementing agencies of the GEF.

F. Clearing-house mechanism work programme within and beyond the pilot phase

92. The Conference of the Parties is invited to take note of SBSTTA recommendation III/6, concerning the implementation of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism (contained in the report of the third meeting of SBSTTA, document UNEP/CBD/COP/4/2). Reference with respect to recommendations for guidance to the financial mechanism in its relationship to the clearing-house mechanism is also dealt with in the SBSTTA report.

93. A number of other elements of the proposed longer-term programme of work, to be considered under other items of the agenda of the meeting, will have an impact on the mandate of and the support by the clearing-house mechanism. The following documents prepared for the fourth meeting contain recommendations to the Conference of the Parties in respect of the role of the clearing-house mechanism, and therefore have implications for the work programme and the proposed budget of the clearing-house mechanism: inland waters (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/4), marine and coastal biological diversity (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/5), agricultural biological diversity (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/6), forest biological diversity (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/7), implementation of Article 8 (j) and related provisions (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/10), incentive measures (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/18), benefit-sharing (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/21). The future protocol on safety in biotechnology will have information exchange requirements which may impact on the clearing-house mechanism. The implementation of these other parts of the overall work programme will entail the need for additional allocations to the budget of approximately \$100,000 per annum, plus an additional professional post in the clearing-house mechanism unit of the secretariat.

94. In order to perform the tasks and roles proposed in the clearing-house mechanism work programme, appropriate allocations in the budget of the General Trust Fund for the Convention on Biological Diversity will be necessary for the biennium 1999-2000. These include resources for staff and support to the clearing-house mechanism, additional to the levels approved for the current period (decision III/24). Financial and human resources are needed for

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clearing-house mechanism activities, travel of staff, purchase of hardware and software; public awareness materials, such as the clearing-house mechanism brochure and newsletters, and other activities needed to build an effective network of focal points and partners. The work programme indicates the implications for the budget, which are also reflected in the proposed budget of the Trust Fund of the Convention (document UNEP/CBD/COP/4/25).

95. The Conference of the Parties is invited to adopt the following work programme, drawn up on the basis of the recommendations of the third meeting of SBSTTA and other activities identified by the secretariat. The draft work programme is contained in Annex 1 to this report.

The Conference of the Parties,

1. Adopts recommendation III/6 of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice as part of the work programme of the clearing-house mechanism;
2. Requests Governments and bilateral and multilateral funding institutions to provide funding for the further development and implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, including support for regional clearing-house mechanism workshops;
3. Requests Parties to develop concrete examples of best practices in the use of the clearing-house mechanism. Such information could include access to expertise on the implementation of the Convention's objectives and of decisions of the Conference of the Parties, as well as advice on the best ways and means to promote and facilitate scientific and technological cooperation among the Parties, in particular with developing country Parties, and should be made available in print and electronic forms;
4. Requests those Parties with access to the Internet to link their national clearing-house mechanism home page to the secretariat's clearing-house mechanism home page, where possible, and further requests the Executive Secretary and partners to collaborate on the provision of advice to Parties and others on, inter alia, the necessary lay-out and system specifications;
5. Recognizes the urgent need for the private sector to be involved in the clearing-house mechanism activities to ensure that the facilitation and promotion of the transfer of technology meet the needs of Contracting Parties;
6. Endorses the need to establish a reliable network of existing and evolving biodiversity institutions and initiatives which can serve the needs and demands of Parties, not only during the pilot phase but also in the long-term;

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7. Agrees to use a common format under which the orderly sequence of the Articles of the Convention should be followed; alternatively the sequence of the three objectives of the Convention could be considered as the organizing format for information in the clearing-house mechanism;
8. Agrees that the clearing-house mechanism shall also act as the clearing-house mechanism for the future protocol on biosafety;
9. Requests the Global Environment Facility:
- (a) To play the role of major catalyst in the full development and implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, so that this can fulfil its role in promoting and facilitating the implementation of the Convention, in a participatory manner and fully incorporating available modern information and communication tools;
 - (b) To support capacity-building activities and country-driven pilot projects focused on priority areas, as critical components in the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism at the national, subregional and regional levels, both during and after the pilot phase;
 - (c) To continue to provide, under its enabling activities programme, support at the country level to the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, including support to such categories of activities as regional workshops, regional efforts, subregional and national studies and training materials, and to strengthen national biological diversity information systems and networks and their linkage to the clearing-house mechanism;
10. Instructs the Executive Secretary:
- (a) To implement a list-server with all officially designated clearing-house mechanism national focal points and other partners for the purpose of disseminating information on new and recent developments regarding the clearing-house mechanism, at either the national, regional or international level;
 - (b) To act as a focal point, during and after the pilot phase, to encourage the development of a network of partners and to support these in developing specific training for the effective participation of users in the clearing-house network;
 - (c) To ensure that the clearing-house mechanism should be continuously assisted in its functioning by the Informal Advisory Committee, to provide guidance, to ensure that all Parties participate in the clearing-house mechanism after its pilot phase, and to play a full role in the further development of the clearing-house mechanism;
 - (d) To enable the work of the clearing-house mechanism at the

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international level to focus on identifying thematic focal points and to be linked to the activities at the national and regional levels;

(e) To facilitate the principal role of the secretariat of providing a gateway and enabling access to the clearing-house mechanism network, and of making available information arising from the secretariat's own functions as outlined in Article 24 of the Convention;

(f) To assist in ensuring that the implementation of Articles 16 (Transfer of and Access to Technology), 17 (Information Exchange) and 18 (Scientific and Technical Cooperation) is facilitated by the clearing-house mechanism;

(g) To produce an informative and widely disseminated clearing-house mechanism brochure and newsletter to increase awareness of the activities of the clearing-house mechanism;

(h) To improve synergy in regard to information exchange with other biodiversity-related conventions and ongoing international or supranational information initiatives, in order to encourage and optimize cooperation and collaboration with other conventions and agreements;

(i) To identify those activities and organizations which could support the clearing-house mechanism, and to provide appropriate advice to the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice at its fourth meeting;

(j) To contribute to the harmonization of the information management of other biodiversity-related treaties and to continue to discuss the possibilities of joint and harmonized approaches with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa;

(k) To facilitate modalities to support those Parties without full Internet access, preparing and disseminating to them updated information on CD-ROM or diskettes, either periodically (e.g. quarterly) or as required, and facilitating the dissemination of appropriate information by those Parties;

(l) To produce an initial CD-ROM containing necessary CBD-related information, as well as a "start-up kit" for national focal points to build their national clearing-house mechanism focal points;

(m) To undertake an independent review of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism, starting at the end of 1998, to be presented to the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice for its consideration at its fifth meeting."

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