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SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL COOPERATION AND THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

Proposals for the implementation of the strategic plan of the clearing-house mechanism

Note by the Executive Secretary

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The clearing-house mechanism is the information-exchange platform of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Created pursuant to Article 18, paragraph 3 of the Convention, to promote scientific and technical cooperation, it has evolved into a global network of websites consisting of national clearing-house mechanisms, partner organizations and the main website of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

2. In decision VIII/11, the Conference of the Parties adopted the strategic plan of the clearing-house mechanism and its programme of work for the period 2005-2010, and requested the Executive Secretary to prepare a report on progress made for consideration at the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties. The main purpose of this document is to assess the current situation of the clearing-house mechanism, halfway through the period covered by its strategic plan, and to present the priority areas of focus for the remaining time towards 2010, identified by the Executive Secretary in consultation with the Informal Advisory Committee..

3. In addition, in accordance with decision VII/23, paragraph 2, the Conference of the Parties is invited to review, at its ninth meeting, the continuation and mandate of the informal advisory committee to the clearing-house mechanism.

4. This note has been prepared by the Executive Secretary, in consultation with the informal advisory committee of the clearing-house mechanism, to assist the Conference of the Parties in addressing these issues. The content is based to some extent on the report of the meeting of the informal

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advisory committee held on 7 July 2007 in Paris (UNEP/CBD/CHM/IAC/2007/1/4) and is structured as follows:

- (a) Section II is a brief background on the current status of the clearing-house mechanism;
- (b) Section III situates the role of the clearing-house mechanism in a global biodiversity context;
- (c) Section IV stresses some challenges and gaps;
- (d) Section V proposes a service-oriented approach to contribute to the enhanced implementation phase of the Convention;
- (e) Section VI is devoted to the informal advisory committee;
- (f) Section VII contains a possible draft decision for the consideration of the Conference of the Parties.

II. BACKGROUND

5. The mission of the clearing-house mechanism, as defined in its strategic plan, is to contribute significantly to the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity through the promotion and facilitation of technical and scientific cooperation. This mission is further articulated around three major strategic goals aiming at:

- (a) Promoting and facilitating scientific and technical cooperation;
- (b) Promoting and facilitating the exchange of information;
- (c) Establishing a fully operational network of Parties and partners.

6. A number of activities of the programme of work have been undertaken and those carried out by the Executive Secretary are periodically described in the quarterly reports of the Secretariat (available at www.cbd.int/secretariat/qr). In addition, a document on the status of implementation of the programme of work (UNEP/CBD/CHM/IAC/2007/1/2) was prepared for the meeting of the informal advisory committee held on 7 July 2007 in Paris.

7. Despite these achievements, full implementation of the strategic plan remains constrained by the limited capacity and resources available at national and global levels, including the Secretariat. The key challenge is therefore to determine how to accelerate this implementation in an effective, mainstreamed and sustainable way. In this context, it is recommended to:

- (a) Strengthen the capacity of both the Parties and the Secretariat to carry out the activities of the programme of work of the clearing-house mechanism; and;
- (b) Focus first on priority activities or services that have the highest impact or added value on the achievement of the 2010 biodiversity target.

III. THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM IN A GLOBAL BIODIVERSITY CONTEXT

8. Today there is such an abundance of biodiversity cooperation initiatives, information sources and networks around the world that the challenge is to fill the right gaps and benefit from existing initiatives without duplicating them. At the same time, the distributed nature of the clearing-house mechanism has to be taken into account. These questions probably have different answers at each level of the network, namely the national level, the Secretariat level and the partner level. The table below gives an overview of the various roles at each level in order to meet the goals of the clearing-house mechanism.

Goals	SCBD Level	National Level	Partner Level
1. Scientific and technical cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Global information on cooperation initiatives and their impacts - Facilitating the matching of supply and demand by exchanging information on needs and opportunities - Promoting North-South, South-South cooperation and other partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordination between national biodiversity stakeholders. - Involvement in national strategies and action plans - Inventory of national initiatives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Major cooperation agencies (strategies & links to CBD, procedures, activities)
2. Exchange of information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Central website - Global compilation and dissemination of information - Global search - On-line collaboration tools (discussion forums, blogs, wikis) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Compilation of national information on biodiversity - National website - Outreach activities - communication, education and public awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Providers of scientific and other relevant information
3. Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Links to each network node - Guidelines and standardization - Exchange of CHM experiences - Support to national CHM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Network of national stakeholders - Support to other national CHM 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International and regional networks

9. A few other essential points need to be considered to further clarify the role of the clearing-house mechanism:

(a) A clearing-house refers is an institution that collects and distributes information. Information dissemination is just one side of this exchange mechanism, the purpose of which is also to gather relevant information from various sources and organize it in a way that makes it easily accessible to everyone;

(b) It is important to keep in mind that the clearing-house mechanism is interested only in information that is already in the public domain or in improving the accessibility of other unrestricted information. By definition, confidential information is not meant to be openly available to everyone. This key point was reinforced by decision VIII/11, paragraph 3, whereby the Conference of the Parties invited the Parties to provide free and open access to biodiversity information, in accordance with national and international legislation. Put another way, Parties should make their best efforts to share any information whenever distribution is not restricted;

(c) According to its mandate, the Secretariat is not a scientific institution, nor is it an implementing agency. Scientific information on biodiversity is available from specialized sources and technical cooperation is carried out by international or national organizations. As the role of clearing-house mechanism is to improve access to such relevant information, all these stakeholders are encouraged to become active partners within the clearing-house mechanism network.

IV. CHALLENGES AND GAPS

10. The following sources of information have been taken into account to analyse challenges and gaps faced by the clearing-house mechanism:

(a) The report of the first independent CHM review covering the pilot phase 1996-1998 (UNEP/CBD/COP/5/INF/2).

(b) The report of the second independent CHM review covering the period 2002-2003 (UNEP/CBD/COP/7/INF/12).

(c) The synthesis of the third national reports on Articles 17 (Exchange of information) and 18 (Technical and scientific cooperation) of the Convention (UNEP/CBD/CHM/IAC/2007/1/INF/1);

(d) Comments and advice received by the informal advisory committee for the clearing-house mechanism, Parties and national focal points, including those made by national focal points for the clearing-house mechanism during an informal meeting in Quito on 15 December 2006 (UNEP/CBD/CHM/IAC/2007/1/3, annex I.)

(e) The report of the brainstorming workshop for the identification of a strategy for the Belgian partnership for the period 2008-2012, held in Brussels, 2-3 May 2007 (UNEP/CBD/CHM/IAC/2007/1/INF/2);

(f) The experience of the Secretariat.

11. The information provided by those sources converge in terms of challenges faced by the clearing-house mechanism, and reveal that some gaps still need to be filled, as summarized below:

(a) As always, resources are limited and sustainability remains an issue for many national clearing-house mechanisms;

(b) There is still a lack of understanding of the clearing-house concept and its potential benefits. This perception is partly due to the fact that there is no central portal offering true clearing-house services.

(c) Efforts and resources required for the establishment, maintenance and effective operations of a national clearing-house mechanism are often underestimated, especially at the level of inter-institutional coordination and information management;

(d) With regard to information exchange, the clearing-house mechanism network suffers from a lack of focus, consistency and standardization, resulting in limited information integration and global exchange;

(e) The Secretariat and the Parties receive limited feedback on the implementation of the Convention, and sometimes remain unaware of the impact of many initiatives;

(f) So far, information made available by the clearing-house mechanism has not been geared towards the enhanced implementation phase of the Convention. For instance, Parties do not necessarily know where to find specific guidelines or how to exchange experiences.

12. The point made in subparagraph 11 (e) above emerged from a detailed look at the third national reports, and more specifically at the sections on Articles 17 and 18 of the Convention. National reports have intrinsic limitations as they are a static snapshot of the status of implementation at a given time. There is no global structured mechanism to assist Parties in planning and reporting on initiatives related to the Convention, and it is difficult to establish links between decisions and related implementation initiatives. Moreover, there is no systematic way of collecting this missing information from other sources, such as the main implementing agencies, major donors, regional institutions, and many Governments actively involved in international cooperation. If such a mechanism existed, it would benefit the Parties by providing them with additional facts that could assist them in making sound decisions. Overall, filling this knowledge-management gap would contribute to the effective implementation of the Convention.

V. PROPOSED SERVICES TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE ENHANCED IMPLEMENTATION PHASE OF THE CONVENTION

13. Given the previous section, there is an opportunity for the clearing-house mechanism to play a stronger role in the enhanced implementation phase of the Convention. The vision is to position the clearing-house mechanism as a provider of on-line services that assist Parties in the implementation process. These services should be need-driven to fill identified gaps. The table below summarizes this service-oriented approach further described in the following sub-sections.

Needs	On-line Services
Parties need access to relevant reference information, such as guidelines, strategies, reports, etc..	Knowledge Base
Parties need to collaborate to share ideas and brainstorm on how to implement the Convention.	Collaboration Tools
Parties need to plan and report on implementation activities.	Planning and Reporting Facility
Parties need to reach out to many audiences, disseminate national information and share their experiences.	National Information and Websites

14. To a large extent, the success of these on-line services will be determined by sound planning, careful design and realistic phased implementation. These global services can be established by the Secretariat provided appropriate resources for development and sustained operations are made available. It is also expected that such services will help demonstrate the role of the clearing-house mechanism.

A. Knowledge base

15. There is a wealth of reference information such as guidelines, strategies, reports, case-studies and toolkits that can help Parties implement the Convention. Much of this is produced by Parties themselves, as well as by partner organizations (United Nations agencies, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and academic institutions). This information is scattered across multiple locations and sources, and Parties do not necessarily know how to access it. The ongoing series of regional and subregional capacity-building workshops on national biodiversity strategies and action plans and biodiversity mainstreaming has demonstrated the wide range of existing material. Those workshops, which have in themselves constituted an important opportunity for sharing information among countries, have emphasized the need for such sharing to be facilitated systematically, through the clearing-house mechanism.

16. In line with activities under its strategic goal 2.3 aiming at “making data and information available in support of activities related to the implementation of the Convention”, the clearing-house mechanism should initiate a knowledge management initiative to inventory, organize and classify this information with a long-term objective to build an easy-to-access on-line knowledge base on the Convention and its implementation. This knowledge base will grow incrementally, depending on resources made available.

17. A logical starting point would be the compilation of guidelines, toolkits, and case-studies related to the implementation of the Convention with a particular focus on national biodiversity strategies and action plans, as recommended by the Ad Hoc Working Group on Review of Implementation of the Conference of the Parties in paragraph 8 (u) of recommendation 2/1. Parties and partner organizations will be invited to identify and submit relevant information.

18. Whenever possible, Parties would make such information available through their national clearing-house mechanisms. On-line submission by Parties and partners would be encouraged. The Secretariat will design an on-line system and manage its content. In particular, the Secretariat will ensure that submissions are correctly classified and that appropriate contextual summary information is present to facilitate access to relevant material.

B. Collaboration tools

19. Parties need to collaborate to share ideas, exchange expertise, seek advice and brainstorm on how to implement the Convention. Discussion forums, blogs and wikis are popular on-line collaboration tools that can connect together national focal points, the Secretariat and other Convention stakeholders in a modern and easy way. The characteristics of each tool is summarized below:

(a) A discussion forum involves many active participants. It is usually structured around key questions and reply threads. Moderation and a time scope are recommended;

(b) By contrast, a blog (for web log) consist of simple posts to share information on a particular subject. Blog entries are usually created by a single person or small team and displayed in reverse chronological order. Blog readers can provide comments. Many search engines are now specialized in searching blogs;

(c) A “wiki” is a website that allows visitors to update content and provide comments. It can be seen as a generalization of a blog where everyone is a potential contributor.

20. Those collaboration tools have an important role to play in complementing other online services. For instance, they can be used for exchanging experience and seeking advice on the forthcoming fourth national reports. Those reports will be critical for assessing progress towards the 2010 biodiversity target. The Secretariat has prepared guidelines for the preparation on the fourth national report and is now developing a reference manual and model report. In this context, a moderated discussion forum or blog could be established to support the preparation of those reports.

C. Planning and reporting facility

21. In its decision VIII/14, paragraph 10, the Conference of the Parties decided to establish an online facility to support national planning and reporting, through the clearing-house mechanism. This online facility should be designed to fill the gaps mentioned in section IV. Basically, the proposal is to develop a system with the following features:

(a) The system will be a central registry for reporting initiatives related to the implementation of the Convention. This registry will be available on line. Off-line submission mechanisms could be considered if needed;

(b) Each initiative registered will conform to a common format to be defined by the Secretariat. The format will capture the main elements of an initiative with the understanding that further details could be obtained by contacting the submitter;

(c) Submission of information by the Parties will be considered part of the normal reporting process. This information will be controlled by the Convention Secretariat or national focal point for the clearing-house mechanism in charge of compiling data at the national level. Relevant partner organizations will also be encouraged to submit relevant information;

(d) Whenever possible, national reports and other documents will also be made available on the national clearing-house mechanism. The online facility will be designed in a way that maintains the link between the central registry and the national clearing-house mechanism;

(e) The Secretariat would be responsible for providing metadata information connecting initiatives to articles and decisions;

(f) Only publicly available information will be registered.

D. National information and websites

22. The new version of the Convention website contains a section dedicated to country profiles. Besides providing a snapshot of national activities to implement the Convention, these web pages are an entry point to national biodiversity strategies and action plans, national reports and other country-level information. These pages will be further developed and linked with the network of national clearing-house mechanisms (chm-cbd.net) as well as the proposed online planning and reporting facility. In the longer term, it is envisaged that updates to the country pages should be controlled by national focal points.

23. Capacity-building for the development of national clearing-house mechanisms should be encouraged. The Secretariat, Parties, the financial mechanism, and other partners should join efforts in assisting and supporting countries willing to establish or further develop their national clearing-house mechanism. In that respect, the report of the “Brainstorming Workshop on the Identification of a Strategy for the Clearing-House Mechanism Partnership for the Period 2008-2012”, submitted by Belgium (UNEP/CBD/COP/9/INF/21) contains a series of recommendations for improving the national clearing house mechanisms as well as the partnership to support their development. These recommendations are reflected in paragraph 3 of the draft decision at the end of this document.

VI. THE INFORMAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE (CHM-IAC)

24. During their last meeting held on 7 July 2007, in Paris, the members of the informal advisory committee discussed the role and the future of their committee. The general view can be summarized as follows:

(a) The mandate of the informal advisory committee is to provide guidance to the Executive Secretary on matters related to the clearing-house mechanism, as described in section A of the annex of decision VII/23. Such a mandate is deemed appropriate as it broadens the Executive Secretary's perspective on the clearing-house mechanism;

(b) Operational procedures are well-defined in decision VII/23, and the committee does not see a need to update them;

(c) According to the operational procedures, membership should be balanced in terms of expertise and regional origin. Although the Executive Secretary did ensure such balance, effective participation of representatives from developing countries, economies in transitions, and small island developing States has been very limited (to less than 20 per cent of the participants) because of the absence of funding. Effective participation has been biased in favour of countries and organizations able to cover their own costs. In addition, potential membership has always been restricted to participants attending major meetings under the Convention, which excludes most national focal points for the clearing-house mechanism, even if they possess strong relevant expertise;

(d) The absence of funding also has negative impacts on both the organization and the outcome of the meetings. There is always some uncertainty as to if a meeting could take place with sufficient participants. More importantly, meetings are always limited to one day, which is often not enough to cover all major issues;

(e) The option of online collaboration and virtual meetings is being explored, but it has some limitations. First, face-to-face meetings are desirable to strengthen human links and collaboration. Secondly, organizing professional virtual meetings does require appropriate equipment or resources for each participant;

(f) Ideally, regional representatives should be empowered by playing an active regional networking role among the national focal points of the clearing-house mechanism.

25. In view of the above, the Conference of the Parties can choose between the following options regarding the future of the informal advisory committee:

(a) Extending its mandate without a budget; this is the status quo. The informal advisory committee would continue to operate under the same constraints highlighted above, which do have an impact on its effectiveness;

(b) Extending the committee's mandate and strengthen it with funding from the budget. These funds will be used for improving the regional balance, with increased participation from developing countries, economies in transition, and small island developing States. In addition, the funds should cover the organization of one yearly two-day meeting back-to-back with a major meeting under the Convention. This arrangement will allow for an in-depth coverage of the main issues and will result in a more effective informal advisory committee.

VII. DRAFT DECISION

The Conference of the Parties,

Noting with appreciation the Executive Secretary's efforts to enhance the Convention's website and to translate it into French and Spanish,

Having considered the note (UNEP/CBD/COP/9/23) prepared by the Executive Secretary in consultation with the informal advisory committee of the clearing-house mechanism,

Aware that full implementation of the strategic plan of the clearing-house mechanism is constrained by the limited capacity and resources available at the national and global levels, including the Secretariat,

1. *Welcomes* the priority areas of focus identified by the Executive Secretary in consultation with the informal advisory committee of the clearing-house mechanism:

(a) A knowledge base, to facilitate access to relevant references, such as guidelines, strategies, reports and other information;

(b) Collaboration tools to enable Parties to maintain contact, share ideas and brainstorm on how to implement the Convention;

(c) A planning and reporting facility to assist Parties in their implementation process, and to provide feedback on implementation;

(d) A web portal promoting the information available through the network of national clearing-house mechanisms;

2. *Decides* to extend the mandate of the informal advisory committee, as defined by its operational guidelines, and to review it at the eleventh meeting of the Conference of the Parties;

3. *Encourages* Parties, whenever appropriate, to take the following steps with a view to establishing strong and sustainable national clearing-house mechanisms:

(a) If not yet done, designate a national focal point for the clearing-house mechanism, as requested by paragraph 7 of decision II/3;

(b) Prepare a national implementation strategy for the clearing-house mechanism, preferably as a component of the national biodiversity strategy and action plan;

(c) Develop the national clearing-house mechanism as a key mechanism for the implementation and review of the national biodiversity strategy and action plan;

(d) Whenever possible, integrate the national clearing-house mechanism into existing networks, and develop information exchange mechanisms with relevant national databases;

(e) Establish a national structure to coordinate the development of the clearing-house mechanism, such as an inter-ministerial steering committee;

(f) Mobilize and allocate resources for sustaining the operations of the national clearing-house mechanism;

(g) Define roles and responsibilities for collecting, reviewing and disseminating information, managing website content, and for outreach activities;

(h) Identify major relevant biodiversity-related information sources at the national level and promote them through the national clearing-house mechanism;

(i) Allow national focal points to contribute national information to a future global online system also used for planning and reporting, including information on the implementation of the implementation of the strategic plan of the clearing-house mechanism;

4. *Encourages* relevant partners holding biodiversity-related information to:

(a) Designate a technical contact or focal point for the clearing-house mechanism;

(b) Investigate ways to make their information accessible through the clearing-house mechanism;

5. *Requests* the Executive Secretary to:

(a) Strengthen the Secretariat's capacity in areas related to the clearing-house mechanism, such information technology, website, knowledge management and other modern information services, focussing on the priority areas identified in paragraph 1 of this decision;

(b) Pursue the ongoing efforts to improve the Convention's website and to make it available in several United Nations languages;

(c) Provide guidance and support to Parties willing to establish their national clearing-house mechanism, including through organizations which are present and active at the national level;

6. *Invites Parties, other Governments,* the financial mechanism, relevant agencies and other donors to provide resources to enable Parties and the Executive Secretary to carry out the above activities.
