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REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PILOT PHASE OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM
IN FACILITATING AND PROMOTING TECHNICAL
AND SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION

Note by the Secretariat

I. INTRODUCTION

1. At its first meeting, the Conference of the Parties decided to implement the provisions of Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention, which is the basis for the establishment of the clearing-house mechanism aimed at promoting and facilitating technical and scientific cooperation among Contracting Parties and partners.
2. For the second meeting of the Conference of the Parties the Secretariat prepared, in accordance with decision I/3, a comprehensive study containing concrete, costed recommendations for the establishment of the clearing-house mechanism (UNEP/CBD/COP/2/6).
3. 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 of the

* UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/3/1.

Convention 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.

4. For the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties, the Secretariat 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).

5. The present note is an updated version of the note by the Secretariat on the role of the clearing-house mechanism in facilitating and promoting technical and scientific cooperation in research and development (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/2/9), prepared for the second meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (SBSTTA) and the above-mentioned progress report on the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism (UNEP/CBD/COP/3/4), prepared for the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties. It reports on progress made by the Secretariat, Parties and by subregional and regional initiatives in the development of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism. After recalling the guidance provided by the Conference of the Parties, it provides: (a) a description of the operational framework for the pilot phase; (b) an update on the current status of the work; and (c) a description of the activities envisaged for achieving the objectives of the three-year pilot phase. Progress reported upon in the present note covers activities undertaken during the period from September 1996 to June 1997.

6. A list of National Focal Points (NFPs) to the clearing-house mechanism is contained in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/3/Inf.3.

II. GUIDANCE PROVIDED BY THE CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES

7. In Decision II/3, the Conference of the Parties decided that the clearing-house mechanism should be developed:

- (a) Starting with a pilot phase for 1996-1997;
- (b) Through specific and focused areas of activities related to the promotion of international technical and scientific cooperation;
- (c) By gradually building up its functions in response to clear and identified demand based on experience gained and resources available;
- (d) In a neutral, transparent, cost-effective, efficient and accessible manner;
- (e) As a decentralized mechanism using such resources as print and electronic media, including the Internet;

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(f) By making full use of existing facilities, which will avoid any duplication or overlap of activities and allow for the early implementation of the mechanism;

(g) In close cooperation with relevant international organizations and entities as active partners in the clearing-house mechanism in order to maximize the existing experience and expertise;

(h) 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.

8. The Conference of the Parties 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 these operating active partners;

(c) Support the active partners in developing specific training for the effective participation of users in the clearing-house network.

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

(a) Decided that the pilot phase approved in its decision II/3 shall 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;

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(c) Further requested the interim financial mechanism to implement its revised operational criteria for enabling activities in relation to the clearing-house mechanism to give effect, as quickly as possible, to the recommendations reflected in subparagraph (b) above;

(d) Also requested Governments and other bilateral and multilateral funding institutions, as far as possible and as appropriate, to provide funding for capacity-building related to the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism;

(e) 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 can best facilitate such cooperation;

(f) Emphasized that the key characteristics of the clearing-house mechanism are, 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;

(g) Recommended that the clearing-house mechanism should disseminate, in addition to scientific and technical information, information on policy and management issues relevant to the implementation of the Convention;

(h) Endorsed the proposal of the Secretariat for the publication of a clearing-house mechanism newsletter;

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

(j) 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 pilot-phase activities and endeavour to ensure that all Parties could participate in the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism;

(k) 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;

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(l) Recommended that the work of the clearing-house mechanism at the international level should focus on providing thematic focal points for linking to the activities at the national and regional level;

(m) Recognized that close cooperation was needed with other conventions and agreements, and requests 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;

(n) Recognized the role of the Secretariat in the coordination of the successful implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, and recommends that the clearing-house mechanism posts within the Secretariat should be filled as soon as possible;

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

(p) 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 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.

10. In the same decision, the Conference of the Parties gave also further guidance by:

(a) Emphasizing the main features of the operational framework of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism, namely, information linking and organization, visualization and the decision-support function;

(b) Noting that progress made to date in the implementation of the pilot phase had produced valuable insights as to the future development of the clearing-house mechanism and expressing its concern that it was now time for these initial experiences to be brought together and advanced in a systematic manner so as to ensure that the clearing-house mechanism was expeditiously implemented in accordance with the expectations of the Parties;

(c) Noting also that:

(i) The crucial part played by technical and scientific cooperation on all aspects of biological diversity, including taxonomy and transfer of technology, in ensuring the capacity of the clearing-house mechanism to play an important role in the implementation of the Convention;

(ii) The need for the clearing-house mechanism to be clearly focused on the implementation of the Convention;

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(iii) The need for the clearing-house mechanism activities to include information-exchange modalities additional to the Internet to ensure the participation of Parties without Internet access;

(iv) The need for capacity-building for the purposes of the clearing-house mechanism in developing countries, including training on information-systems technologies that would allow developing countries to take advantage of the recent developments in electronic communication, including the Internet;

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

III. OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

11. In accordance with the guidelines provided, the Secretariat has consulted with national and thematic focal points who have indicated their interest in assisting with the start-up of the pilot phase. As a result of these discussions, an operational framework has been agreed upon for implementing the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism by means of a decentralized structure.

12. This framework provides the means by which access to, and the inter-active nature of, an information-exchange system can be maximized during the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism. Such an approach takes into account the complexity of the many Convention-related areas of interest and is especially relevant when considering the demands for inputting and updating the different types of information to be submitted by a growing number of partners and participants.

13. The clearing-house mechanism will need to function at both national and international levels.

14. At the national level, the clearing-house mechanism will serve the information needs of those organizations involved in implementing the provisions of the Convention. The nature of these needs is complex and multifaceted. Opportunities for addressing them are offered through ongoing developments in information technology. Increasing numbers of sources of information relevant to the implementation of the Convention are likely to be identified (including, United Nations organizations, 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 this mass of information. Further contact with each source holding such information would be likely to reveal a need to distinguish relevant information among the overall information held by the institution and to ensure its availability in an appropriate format.

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15. The clearing-house mechanism at the national level therefore needs to support the activities of the National Focal Points and to assist with linking Thematic Focal Points (TFPs) to the wider clearing-house mechanism network. The operational framework presented here is specifically designed to avoid the duplication of effort, and to maximize the exchange of existing knowledge through the development of databases of existing knowledge (or meta-databases) by national-level clearing-house mechanism partners.

16. At the international level, the operational framework provides for the development of a decentralized system of information-gathering and retrieval, a visualization function, and a decision-support function. These functions are explained in paragraph 21 below.

17. The role of the Secretariat should be that of a facilitator, ensuring: the dissemination of experience and knowledge amongst all partners; that the system as a whole is learning from shared experience; and that different solutions to similar problems are being recorded and exchanged. As a facilitator, the Secretariat will need to provide learning feedback so that areas of priority interest to the Parties can be identified.

18. A crucial component of the clearing-house mechanism's operational framework is that it is service-oriented. It must be able to link its meta-information 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 exploring and identifying topics and issues that will need to be addressed in future stages of the programme, and for identifying and disseminating multiple sources of information in an effective and decentralized way.

19. The process for gathering and organizing the information that will feed into the clearing-house mechanism is itself decentralized, with partners coordinating efforts amongst 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. In this way, updating the information in the system will not be the responsibility of any one institution, or of a programme officer in the Secretariat. It will be a decentralized activity, to be undertaken by the partners, with the responsible programme staff at the Secretariat playing a role analogous to that of a "web manager" on the Internet.

20. The following section presents a number of proposals that have been developed in this initial stage of the pilot phase.

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IV. CURRENT STATUS

21. The most important feature of the operational framework that has been agreed upon is the identification of three distinct components that constitute the conceptual basis of the activity programme of the pilot phase. These are:

(a) The organizing and linking of information relevant to the implementation of the Convention. This is an essential first step in linking scientific knowledge on biodiversity to the policy-making process. In general, information relevant to the implementation of the Convention remains dispersed around the world, often in a form that is only useful to experts in a particular field. This component will begin the process of facilitating access to the information, and will provide the means of identifying the real needs of the user community at the national level;

(b) The visualization of the information, which will facilitate the integration of information from many disciplines and domains into formats useful to the design of strategies, plans and programmes relevant to the Convention. Possibly the greatest challenge of the pilot phase lies in making a complex body of information comprehensible by its illustration in visual formats that can best demonstrate the links between the different factors relevant to the objectives of the Convention;

(c) The decision-support function, which will consist of providing syntheses of global trends and priorities identified by the Parties and others from information provided in national reports, thematic assessments, studies on the regional distribution of the condition of the components of biological diversity, and other information. This component will need to be developed in close collaboration with those involved in country-level decision-making processes in order to assist the development of increased national capacity for the implementation of the strategies, plans and programmes relevant to the Convention.

22. Identifying these three components has helped, in turn, to identify the different types of activities relating to information needs for the implementation of the Convention. It highlights the fact that data-gathering, although a valuable activity in itself, does not of itself lead directly to improvements in the development and implementation of the strategies, plans and programmes required under the Convention.

23. The implementation of the pilot phase during the period in question has therefore focused on activities that enhance the value of existing data and 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.

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V. THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM'S WORLD WIDE WEB HOME PAGE

24. The first product of the pilot phase has been the clearing-house mechanism's World Wide Web home page. The layout has been improved and can be explored on the Web (URL: <http://www.biodiv.org>). It is important to emphasize that this in itself is not the clearing-house mechanism, which is more than an Internet home page or a database stored on a computer. The purpose of the clearing-house mechanism is to develop a self-sustaining process of information exchange to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation for the implementation of the threefold objectives of the Convention.

25. Even though the clearing-house mechanism Web page is different from the traditional tree-based information-providing structure, this feature is still part of the system, and certainly has a place as a viable solution for providing information that is more specifically defined within a certain discipline or topic. In addition to this feature, however, it was felt that there is a need for an interactive system that can go directly to the information that users consider useful, going through the minimum number of intermediate pages on the Web.

26. To achieve this, the clearing-house mechanism Web page needs to include a number of features that are already freely available, but that are not common on most Web pages. Such features include interactive, multiple-field search engines directly included in the page; a self-indexing feature; the capacity to post up-to-date documents and texts concerning current activities relevant to the Convention; a question and answer service whereby users can ask a voluntary panel of recognized experts questions on a range of topics identified by the partners themselves.

27. In addition to these features, the clearing-house mechanism Web page includes a number of the elements seen in conventional Web pages, such as links to existing clearing-house mechanism focal points in all the countries, links to relevant international organizations, conventions, sectoral focal points, regional focal points, other World Wide Web engines, and the Convention Secretariat.

28. The information-exchange service of the clearing-house mechanism Web page provides links to other relevant Web sites, including national, regional, international and sectoral organizations relevant to the implementation of the Convention. It is worth emphasizing that responsibility for the accuracy and updating of the data and information found at any of these sites lies with the relevant institution. The clearing-house mechanism only provides a road-map to facilitate access to information and will not be in a position to verify the quality of the data.

29. The clearing-house mechanism Web page includes listings with links to recognized scientific and technical international organizations relevant to the Convention on Biological Diversity, regional centres or focal points, sectoral focal points, other conventions, other World Wide Web engines, and a link to the main Convention home page.

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30. The different features described above are not fixed or permanent components of the clearing-house mechanism Web page. These features have been included as part of the preliminary experimental phase of the clearing-house mechanism in order to provide good examples of how the service-oriented nature of the clearing-house mechanism Web page might be fulfilled. As innovative ideas arise, or in response to suggestions from the partners on improvements to the service, these can and will be included. The same is also true for the items currently included under each section of the Web page. For example, as new organizations are identified, they will be added to the existing list of international organizations or Thematic Focal Points, and the appropriate link will be made to their Web page, if this exists, or to the appropriate e-mail address.

VI. ACTION PROGRAMME OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM UNTIL THE END OF ITS PILOT PHASE IN DECEMBER 1998

31. This note has emphasized the service-oriented nature of the clearing-house mechanism and has described the agreed operational framework for implementing the pilot phase of its establishment as a mechanism for promoting and facilitating technical and scientific cooperation.

32. The operational design has paid particular attention to the iterative process of establishing the clearing-house mechanism. In this sense, the pilot phase serves as a way of encouraging partners to contribute their creative resources in order to identify innovative ways of facilitating the exchange of scientific, technical and technological information. The role of the Secretariat in this process will be to provide the learning feedback in order to identify areas considered priorities by the Parties and to ensure the worldwide sharing of experiences in the implementation of the Convention.

33. In order to implement the decisions II/3 and III/4 of the Conference of the Parties, it is planned to organize four regional workshops both in 1997 and in 1998 as part of a pilot-phase process of user-driven development of the clearing-house mechanism. The organization of these workshops depends upon securing the necessary funding, and details of dates and venues can only be finalized once this has happened. The workshops are intended to assist National Focal Points of the Parties in identifying the key elements in a strategy for supporting clearing-house mechanism implementation needs in Contracting Parties. To date, only two countries have officially signalled their interest in hosting a regional workshop.

34. The types of information provided by the clearing-house mechanism have to date been based on the assumption of the Secretariat about the potential user and country demands. Identification of the target groups, as well as of user needs, are major matters of concern for the planned regional workshops. Participants in the regional workshops are asked to address their national information demands and needs to enable the Secretariat to explore modalities how best to provide the types of information required.

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35. An agreement on the harmonization of formats, structures, key-words, attribute lists and thesauri would facilitate both the input of information by National and Thematic Focal Points and the efficiency of search procedures for users. Guidelines for the usage of such agreed formats, and periodic updates, would then be provided to partners and users. It is foreseen that through the regional workshops some basic information about structures and formats will be identified and agreed upon by the respective National Focal Points to the clearing-house mechanism.

36. The Secretariat plans to convene a first meeting of an informal advisory committee to assist the functioning of the clearing-house mechanism. It will be constituted and coordinated by the Executive Secretary in a transparent manner. The advisory committee 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. It is also planned to use the regional workshops to identify designated National Focal Points to participate in the advisory committee and use the workshops as a platform to discuss issues related to the role and tasks of the advisory committee.

37. National and Thematic Focal Points will be encouraged to explore options for information-dissemination systems able to present information on biodiversity in ways that are comprehensible to policy makers, the media and the general public. This process will need to focus on flexible methods of generating large-scale meta-information and its summarized expression in spreadsheets or other formats, as well as systems for generating maps at different scales and other visual forms of presenting data.

38. It is planned that an information service covering topics under consideration at meetings of the Conference of the Parties, SBSTTA and other relevant meetings under the Convention will be included in the pilot phase. It is envisaged that, as topics are identified and programmed for consideration by the Conference of the Parties and the SBSTTA, National and Thematic Focal Points will compile subsets of specific pointers leading users to sources of information on that topic. A simple way to avoid duplication of effort would be to set up in the system a single pointer to the partner responsible for the compilation.

39. It is also envisaged that the clearing-house mechanism plays an important role with respect to the national reports to be submitted under Article 26 of the Convention. Once the first national reports are available to the Secretariat, possibilities to disseminate relevant information contained in national reports will be explored.

40. National and Thematic Focal Points are exploring ways of encouraging agencies and other institutions to use the clearing-house mechanism for promoting and facilitating the access to and transfer of relevant technologies, drawing upon well developed methodologies used in distance learning.

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41. Several 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 SBSTTA. It is also envisaged that eligible National Focal Points will be supported in their efforts through the provision by the financial mechanism of elementary hardware and software equipment that would enable designated National Focal Points to the clearing-house mechanism to be connected to the Internet.

42. A logo has been developed for the clearing-house mechanism and its use will be encouraged. This will provide a distinct identity to all clearing-house mechanism activities and relevant information sources, and will assist in the easy identification of National Focal Points on the Internet. The Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice may wish to consider recommending criteria for the use of the clearing-house mechanism logo.

VII. FURTHER ADVICE BY SBSTTA

43. In its decision II/3, the Conference of the Parties also decided to review the implementation of the pilot phase at its fourth meeting and requested SBSTTA to provide scientific and technical advice. As the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism was extended by decision of the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties until December 1998, SBSTTA may wish to consider the preparation of its advice for a final review in 1998.

44. The SBSTTA may also wish to consider how the clearing-house mechanism can contribute to supporting initiatives arising out of other matters under consideration at the present meeting.
