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PILOT PHASE OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

Note by the Executive Secretary

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Established as a mechanism "to promote and facilitate scientific and technical cooperation", pursuant to Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the role of the clearing-house mechanism has been furthered by several decisions of the Conference of the Parties to also cover matters pertaining to, *inter alia*, the exchange and dissemination of information. The Conference of the Parties has also identified the clearing-house mechanism as one of the main mechanisms to support the implementation of the Convention. The present note responds to the request made by the Conference of the Parties in paragraph 10 (k) of its decision IV/2 for an independent review of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism and the elaboration of a longer-term programme of work.

In addition to reporting on the achievements attained to date in the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, the present note covers the highlights of the results of an open and participatory consultation process which actively involved the Informal Advisory Committee (IAC), the national focal points for the clearing-house mechanism and clearing-house mechanism partners. The process has yielded three fundamental tools for the development and implementation of the Convention and its clearing-house mechanism, namely the report of the independent review (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/1), a strategic plan (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/2) and a longer-term programme of work (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/3).

To date, 137 national focal points have been established for the clearing-house mechanism, of which 104 have e-mail facilities and 41 have established their own websites. A CD-ROM tool kit was produced to assist Parties in creating web pages and websites. To date, more than 4,000 web

* UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/1.

pages have been posted via the Secretariat's website (<http://www.biodiv.org>) in English, French and Spanish, a search engine ("Bioseek") has been made available through the mechanism's website to assist users in finding information, and several electronic databases on the rosters of experts on access and benefit-sharing, agrobiodiversity, forests, indicators of biological diversity, inland waters and marine and coastal biodiversity have been established. Synergies have been actively promoted with the Rio and the biodiversity-related conventions. In addition to disseminating and exchanging information via five electronic listservs (for the clearing-house mechanism national focal points, the Informal Advisory Committee (IAC), the biodiversity-related and Rio conventions), the clearing-house mechanism has enhanced its communication capacity (e-mail and Internet access). Six issues of the clearing-house mechanism newsletter (The Disseminator) have been widely distributed using electronic and non-electronic means. An awareness-raising brochure on the clearing-house mechanism is available in English, French and Spanish, and a user's guide for the mechanism is being elaborated. "Cyber-café" and presentations on the clearing-house mechanism have been held during meetings of SBSTTA and the Conference of the Parties. Four regional workshops have been organized and produced several significant recommendations. Advice was also received from two expert meetings and, on a continuous basis, from the Informal Advisory Committee.

The participants in the independent review acknowledged the importance and usefulness of the clearing-house mechanism and also identified a series of challenges. Several priorities for action were identified, namely to better describe the functions of the clearing-house mechanism, increase awareness about it, and use simple language, promote synergies, identify infrastructure needs, monitor and evaluate activities and plan for the long term in sustainable ways. The Informal Advisory Committee, the clearing-house mechanism national focal points and partners were identified as key contributors in this process.

In addition to the mission and a vision, three main goals were identified and developed in the strategic plan:

- (a) Promotion and facilitation of scientific and technical cooperation (within and between countries);
- (b) Development of a global mechanism for exchanging and integrating information on biodiversity;
- (c) Development of the network (the clearing-house mechanism national focal points and their partners).

The identified goals and strategic objectives will promote and support better and more cost-effective decision-making, international cooperation and sharing of related technology, capacity building, research, etc.; will reduce duplication of efforts and will thus promote a quicker, better and more cost-effective implementation of the Convention.

The longer-term work programme provides the roles, activities, responsibilities and time-frame to implement the proposed strategies and actions of the strategic plan and the recommendations emanating from the independent review process.

SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS

The Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice is invited to recommend to the fifth meeting of the Conference of the Parties that it:

1. Notes with appreciation the report of the independent review of the pilot phase as contained in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/1;

2. Endorses the strategic plan for the clearing-house mechanism as contained in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/2;

3. Also endorses the longer-term work programme for the clearing-house mechanism, as contained in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/3, and decides to establish a longer-term work programme for the clearing-house mechanism, with the following priority areas for the biennium 2001-2002; and

4. Requests Parties to:

(a) Establish a national directory of scientific institutions and experts working on specific thematic areas of the Convention on Biological Diversity and make it available through the clearing-house mechanism;

(b) Conduct a survey to establish a national baseline of existing scientific and technical cooperation initiatives relevant to the implementation of the provisions of the Convention on Biological Diversity;

5. Recommends Parties to:

(a) Establish regional or subregional clearing-house mechanism focal points with the endorsement of clearing-house mechanism national focal points;

(b) Undertake cost-benefit analyses regarding the effective implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, taking into account investments related to institutional, human, financial, technological and informational resources;

(c) Also consider sources of technical information as a primary target audience, to ensure that a critical mass of scientific and technical information be made available;

(d) Develop, share and provide services and tools for the purposes of enhancing and facilitating the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, and to improve synergies with the biodiversity-related and Rio conventions;

6. Requests the Executive Secretary to:

(a) Convene regional workshops to support capacity building activities, training and awareness, with a focus on cooperation in biodiversity and information related to the implementation and management of the clearing-house mechanism at the national, subregional, biogeographic and regional levels, as appropriate;

(b) Develop ways and means to ensure a broader understanding of the role of, and value added by, the clearing-house mechanism, and also

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further develop non-Internet based tools to assist Parties in their national implementation efforts;

(c) Develop a pilot initiative for supporting the thematic issues directly linked to the work programme of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice, including the identification of national institutions and experts working on that specific theme by national focal points, the provision of particular information to the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice by national focal points, the use of the clearing-house mechanism to facilitate a consultation process for relevant assessments, as well as the identification of needs for scientific and technical cooperation at the national level to ensure the implementation of pilot initiatives;

(d) Identify international thematic focal points , which can provide relevant and appropriate thematic information, using the following criteria: expertise on themes directly relevant to the Convention on Biological Diversity, experience and expertise at the international level, endorsement of proposed thematic focal points by at least three national focal points, designation of a specific theme and a defined period of time, selecting between one or more thematic focal points for each theme, ability to leverage infrastructure, provision of relevant content, experience with specific issues, ability to advance clearing-house mechanism's objectives, ability to advance partner's objectives, provision of open access to information, allowance for the custodianship to remain with the provider of information, as well as the provision of metadata in the public domain;

(e) Identify potential components required by a clearing-house mechanism national focal point, and which may define the minimum activities of a national focal point, and to develop a list of best practices for the clearing-house mechanism implementation by national focal points;

(f) Develop a global electronic platform for scientific and technical cooperation in biodiversity on the Internet to match the demands and needs of Parties with respect to Article 18 of the Convention, as a transparent, open and publicly accessible forum;

(g) Encourage the establishment and maintenance of mirror sites of the Secretariat's website, within the other United Nations regions, as appropriate, in order to expedite access to Internet-based information;

(h) Provide advice to the next meeting of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice on formats, protocols and standards for the improved exchange of biodiversity-related data, information and knowledge, and to convene an informal meeting on this issue.

CONTENTS

	<u>Paragraphs</u>	<u>Page</u>
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....		1
SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS.....		3
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1-4	6
II. GUIDANCE PROVIDED.....	5-17	6
A. Conference of the Parties.....	5-8	6
B. Informal Advisory Committee (IAC).....	9-12	8
C. Regional workshops and expert meetings.....	13-17	8
III. ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE.....	18-26	10
IV. SYNERGIES WITH RELATED INFORMATION INITIATIVES.....	27-29	11
V. INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE PILOT PHASE OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM.....	30-36	12
VI. STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM.....	37-52	15
VII. LONGER-TERM WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE PERIOD 1999-2004..	1	18

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. In accordance with decision II/3, the Executive Secretary prepared a progress report on the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism (UNEP/CBD/COP/3/4) for the third meeting of the Conference of the Parties.
3. For the fourth meeting of the Conference of the Parties, the Executive Secretary prepared a report on the implementation of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism (UNEP/CBD/COP/4/8).
4. The present document reports on progress made in the development of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism. It recalls the guidance received and provides an update on the current status of work. It highlights the report of the independent review of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/1), as well as those on the clearing-house mechanism's strategic plan (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/2) and its longer-term programme of work (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/3). A list of national focal points to the clearing-house mechanism is contained in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/4. Progress reported upon in the present report refers to activities undertaken during the period from January 1998 to September 1999.

II. GUIDANCE PROVIDED

A. Conference of the Parties

5. In its 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. In its decision II/3, the Conference of the Parties decided to establish a pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism which would be developed, inter alia, by gradually building up its functions in response to clear and identified demand based on experience gained and resources available.
7. In its decision III/4, the Conference of the Parties, inter alia, decided that the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism should be extended for a further year, until December 1998, and requested all Parties to designate their clearing-house mechanism national focal points and make them operational as soon as possible.
8. In its decision IV/2, the Conference of the Parties, inter alia:
 - (a) Requested all Governments and bilateral and multilateral funding institutions to provide funding for the development and implementation of the clearing-house mechanism, including support for national as well as regional and sub-regional clearing-house mechanism activities;

(b) Requested 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;

(c) Agreed that the clearing-house mechanism should act as the clearing-house mechanism for future programmes and activities under the Convention on Biological Diversity, subject to budgetary considerations;

(d) Instructed the Executive Secretary:

- (i) To put in place 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;
- (ii) To act as a focal point, during and after the pilot phase, to encourage the development of a network of partners, including indigenous and local communities, and to facilitate these in developing specific training for the effective participation of users in the clearing-house network;
- (iii) To ensure that the clearing-house mechanism should be continuously assisted in its functioning by the Informal Advisory Committee which is to provide guidance to the Executive Secretary during and after the pilot phase, and to play a full role in the further development of the clearing-house mechanism;
- (iv) To provide encouragement for and facilitate the coordination of biodiversity-related networks, activities and focal points that may constitute the clearing-house mechanism, to encourage their linkages within the clearing-house mechanism network and to make available information arising from the Secretariat's own functions as outlined in Article 24 of the Convention;
- (v) To assist in ensuring that the implementation of Convention Articles 16 (Transfer of and Access to Technology), 17 (Information Exchange) and 18 (Scientific and Technical Cooperation) is facilitated by the clearing-house mechanism;
- (vi) To produce an informative and widely disseminated clearing-house mechanism brochure and newsletter to increase awareness of the activities of the clearing-house mechanism;
- (vii) To improve synergy in regard to information exchange with other biodiversity-related conventions and ongoing international or supranational information initiatives, and 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;

- (viii) To produce a tool-kit prototype containing necessary information for national focal points to build their national clearing-house mechanisms, drawing upon the recommendations of the regional workshops and following an informal assessment of national practices in collaboration with the Informal Advisory Committee on the clearing-house mechanism;
- (ix) 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 together with a longer-term programme of work for the clearing-house mechanism.

B. Informal Advisory Committee (IAC)

9. In its decision III/4, 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. The mandate was extended by decision IV/2, which states that the Informal Advisory Committee is to provide guidance to the Executive Secretary during and after the pilot phase and to play a full role in the further development of the clearing-house mechanism.

10. The following Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity participate in the Informal Advisory Committee: Burkina Faso, Canada, Colombia, Hungary, Indonesia, Italy, Jamaica, Malaysia, Malawi and the Russian Federation. The following non-country members also attend: Biodiversity Information Network 21 (BIN21), Biodiversity Conservation Information System (BCIS), Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN), Indigenous Biodiversity Information Network (IBIN) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Working Group on Bioinformatics/Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF). Formerly Cameroon, Germany and Poland also served on the Committee as country members.

11. In addition to electronic consultations, to date twelve meetings have been held taking advantage of meetings of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice and the Conference of the Parties, as well as other meetings under the Convention. Future meetings are envisaged during the respective fifth meetings of SBSTTA and the Conference of the Parties.

12. The Informal Advisory Committee has been fully involved in the development of the clearing-house mechanism during its pilot phase. It also played a leading role in the independent review of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism as well as in the formulation of its strategic plan and longer-term programme of work. Consultations have been actively pursued with the Committee members using electronic means.

C. Regional workshops and expert meetings

13. Four clearing-house mechanism regional workshops and two expert meetings were held in 1997 and 1998, to attain a clear definition of national and regional-level scientific and technical information needs and priorities, as

well as modalities to deliver information and evaluate national capacities for the implementation of the Convention.

14. The regional workshops were held from 13 to 15 October 1997, in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, for the Latin American and Caribbean region; from 27 to 29 October 1997, in Gödöllő, Hungary, for the Central and Eastern European region, from 3 to 5 December 1997, in Kuala Lumpur, for the Asian region; and from 5 to 7 March 1998, Nairobi, for the African region.

15. The regional workshops made general and specific recommendations as well as recommendations on information content, information structure and capacity building for the clearing-house mechanism at the national and regional levels. The full report of the workshops is contained in document UNEP/CBD/COP/4/Inf.6.

16. The following main recommendations arose from the regional workshops:

(a) 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;

(b) The clearing-house mechanism should be needs-driven and based on an assessment of needs for technical and scientific cooperation by potential user groups;

(c) Benefits to be provided by the clearing-house mechanism include: better information for decision-making, faster access to existing knowledge, promotion of technical and scientific cooperation and avoidance of duplication of efforts, facilitation of comparisons among existing data and generation of new information. A more effective and efficient implementation of the Convention is thus ensured;

(d) Information and 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;

(e) 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.

17. International clearing-house mechanism expert meetings have been held from 25 to 29 June 1997 in Bonn and from 19 to 25 July 1998 in Florence, Italy. The main recommendation was that the Secretariat of the Convention would begin the development of a global strategic plan for the implementation of the clearing-house mechanism immediately. The strategic plan should include, inter alia, the following four main goals:

(a) Development of national clearing-house mechanisms;

(b) Coordination of the network of clearing-house mechanism focal points and connection with related networks;

(c) Development of appropriate biodiversity-related networks, entities and activities at the international level;

(d) Development of a monitoring and evaluation system to determine the efficiency and the effectiveness of the clearing-house mechanism network.

III. ACHIEVEMENTS TO DATE

18. The CD-ROM tool-kit to assist the clearing-house mechanism national focal points in their efforts to design and establish clearing-house mechanism websites and pages, has successfully been produced by the Secretariat. The tool-kit was launched and distributed to all the clearing-house mechanism national focal points in June 1999, on the occasion of the fourth meeting of SBSTTA. The Government of Canada made the development of the CD-ROM tool-kit possible through its additional voluntary financial contribution.

19. Responding to the needs of the Parties and decisions of the Conference of the Parties, several electronic databases have been developed: a roster of experts on access to genetic resources and benefit-sharing, forest biodiversity, agrobiodiversity, biodiversity indicators, inland waters and marine and coastal biodiversity. In addition, online databases of focal points and of national reports are under development. These databases will be available to the public in the last quarter of 1999.

20. Electronic list servers for the clearing-house mechanism national focal points, the Informal Advisory Committee, the SBSTTA Bureau, the biodiversity related conventions and the Rio conventions were established to facilitate the rapid exchange of information. A listserv for the Convention focal points is currently under development.

21. The Internet website has new developments, more than 100 web pages of the Secretariat's clearing-house mechanism website are now also available in Spanish and French languages at <http://www.biodiv.org/chm/index-s.html> and [index-f.html](http://www.biodiv.org/chm/index-f.html) respectively. The Clearing-House Mechanism Unit manages the Secretariat's website, and to date approximately 4,000 web pages and documents have been made available.

22. The enhancement of the Secretariat's electronic communication capacity has been one of the main achievements in the clearing-house mechanism's pilot phase, through the establishment of a network infrastructure serving individual working stations and servers. Through a secure environment ("Firewall"), adequate communication tools (e-mail 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. The ongoing achievements include: e-mail conferencing (listserv), on-line database access, search engines, documentation archives and CD-ROM developments. The electronic 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-Internet-connected users.

23. "Cyber-café" were organized at meetings of SBSTTA and the Conference of the Parties. Several international and national presentations were offered on the progress and achievements made by the clearing-house mechanism-related initiatives.

24. Three issues of the clearing-house mechanism newsletter were published in 1998 and three issues in 1999. All newsletters have been distributed to the focal points and clearing-house mechanism partners employing electronic and non-electronic means. The clearing-house mechanism brochure was published

in February 1999 in English, French and Spanish. The other language versions are under preparation. They are also available electronically on the clearing-house mechanism's website.

25. To date 137 designations of clearing-house mechanism national focal points have been officially received in the Secretariat. Of them, 104 have established e-mail addresses and 41 have created their national clearing-house mechanism websites on the Internet.

26. The Global Environment Facility has funded 69 clearing-house mechanism projects under the add-on modules of the Enabling Activities (maximum of US\$ 14,000 per module). A total of US\$ 804,580 has been disbursed for these projects, and countries have received on average US\$ 11,661 to establish their national clearing-house mechanism node.

IV. SYNERGIES WITH RELATED INFORMATION INITIATIVES

27. There is a need to continue establishing a reliable biodiversity network of existing and evolving institutions and initiatives that 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 biodiversity network with clearly identified and shared responsibilities. To this end, memoranda of understanding with the major institutions will be needed, to clearly identify, harmonize and designate responsibilities of such a system. A joint and harmonized approach of these evolving initiatives is therefore needed and needs to be initiated and developed to support and facilitate these processes.

28. Biodiversity-related information management initiatives contributing to the clearing-house mechanism include:

(a) The other biodiversity-related conventions –the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, Especially as Waterfowl Habitat (the Ramsar Convention), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention);

(b) The Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Megascience Subgroup on Bioinformatics;

(c) The World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) and BCIS, a consortium of global acting and biodiversity-related non-governmental organizations (information content and capacity building).

(d) Regional and thematic initiatives, such as the Biodiversity Information Network (BIN 21), the Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN), the Indigenous Biodiversity Information Network (IBIN), the North American Biodiversity Information Network (NABIN) and the European Community CHM.

29. Joint and harmonized approaches in information management are also being discussed with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, as well as with the biodiversity-related conventions. Several meetings have been held with the information officers of the sister conventions to discuss future steps to harmonize and integrate information initiatives. Joint Internet websites, listservs and keyword lists have been created. Further identification of potentially joint and harmonized areas in information management will be sought.

V. INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM PILOT PHASE

30. This section of the document contains the summarized results of the independent review of the pilot phase of the clearing-house mechanism. One of its main achievements was its open and participatory approach and the active and significant involvement of the Informal Advisory Committee, the clearing-house mechanism national focal points and partners. A consultant was identified by the Informal Advisory Committee to conduct the review process in an independent manner. The information and conclusions have come directly from insights and expertise of those with first-hand experience using and working with the clearing-house mechanism – the Parties to the Convention, the Informal Advisory Committee and related international initiatives and conventions. The full version of the review is available as document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/1.

Results

31. The clearing-house mechanism was established as a mechanism "to promote and facilitate scientific and technical cooperation", and Parties and partners working to implement the Convention on Biological Diversity saw value in the mechanism and embraced it. The original mandate of the clearing-house mechanism has been enriched, and the result is a worldwide network of people – representing Governments, initiatives, organizations, and groups – that recognize the importance of working together to obtain the information, expertise, and alliances necessary to successfully meet the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

32. As a tool to support implementation of the Convention, members of the global clearing-house mechanism network can celebrate a number of achievements. In all, 137 of the 175 Parties to the Convention have to date "put a face" to the clearing-house mechanism by establishing nodes (called "national focal points") with staff and resources dedicated to obtaining and sharing information related to biological diversity. With this infrastructure in place, national focal points are receiving and providing information requests related to biological diversity (104 focal points have e-mail and 41 have websites), and are using the clearing-house mechanism network to fill their information needs. They are also working in partnership with organizations locally and internationally in support of the objectives of the Convention.

33. Another important development is the clearing-house mechanism support function in the Convention Secretariat to support and facilitate the development of the clearing-house mechanism network. The Secretariat is recognized as a valuable source of information and documentation related to the Convention. Key tools, services, and capabilities developed and implemented to date include:

(a) The clearing-house mechanism website, with several electronic databases, documentation archives, and a search engine ("Bioseek") to assist users in finding and obtaining the information they need;

(b) CD-ROM tool-kit, produced to assist the clearing-house mechanism national focal points in their efforts to design and establish clearing-house mechanism websites and pages;

(c) The clearing-house mechanism newsletter (*The Disseminator*);

(d) A clearing-house mechanism brochure (available in English, Spanish, and French);

(e) Establishment of e-mail conference abilities ("listservs") for national focal points, the Informal Advisory Committee for the clearing-house mechanism, the SBSTTA Bureau, biodiversity-related conventions, and the Rio conventions; and

(f) Enhancement of the Secretariat's electronic communication capacity through implementation of a communication strategy focused on improvements to information structure, tools, and organization.

34. Many participants in the review shared their belief that the clearing-house mechanism has been helpful in working toward the goals of the Convention. However the participants also identified challenges and concerns facing the clearing-house mechanism:

(a) Uncertainty exists about what the clearing-house mechanism is, and how it supports efforts by countries to implement the Convention, and how it relates to other international initiatives related to biological diversity. The value of participating in the clearing-house mechanism network is unclear;

(b) There are many questions regarding "who-does-what" with respect to implementing the clearing-house mechanism, which makes it difficult for Parties, partners and potential partners to contribute to the process and become involved in the global clearing-house mechanism network;

(c) Language barriers limit the participation of countries in the clearing-house mechanism;

(d) Without any long-term strategies for obtaining financial or technical support, Parties are unsure about their continued ability to be involved in the clearing-house mechanism;

(e) Technological problems accessing the Internet can make it difficult to make use of the clearing-house mechanism network.

35. The following priorities for action have been developed in the review's report in direct response to the issues and concerns raised by participants in the independent review process. In every case, the priority for action is based on advice and feedback obtained during the review. By building on the experience and expertise gained through the pilot phase, the Parties to the Convention have the opportunity to strengthen the clearing-house mechanism network, and continue its development into an essential asset to biological diversity conservation efforts worldwide:

(a) Describe the clearing-house mechanism – what it is and how it works. Address questions regarding what the clearing-house mechanism "is in business to do", how it works, who is involved, how it fits with other international initiatives related to biodiversity, and why it is something that countries working to implement the Convention should invest in;

(b) Communicate – let the Parties, partners, and public know the role and value of the clearing-house mechanism. All Parties to the Convention need to be aware of the global clearing-house mechanism network, and the importance of taking an active role in developing the clearing-house mechanism and supporting the objectives of the Convention. A "template operational model" that documents the key elements of a national focal point needs to be developed and communicated. In addition, all existing and potential partners need to know the important contribution which their expertise and information makes to the global clearing-house mechanism network. There is also an important opportunity to raise the public's awareness of biological diversity, the Convention, and the role of the clearing-house mechanism;

(c) Identify synergies – and make use of them. The relationship between the Convention on Biological Diversity and the many other initiatives related to biological diversity need to be researched, defined, and communicated. It is essential that a process for linking the clearing-house mechanism to these initiatives be established, and that opportunities to increase efficiency and improve effectiveness be continually explored;

(d) Use clear, concise vocabulary, which is easy to translate – everyone needs access to the information. All clearing-house mechanism information needs to be simple, straightforward, and to the point. This increases the chance that ideas will be communicated accurately when translated into the United Nations official languages. This also makes it easier for countries to translate information into the many local languages around the world;

(e) Create mechanisms of mutual support – make it easier to work together. Implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity depends on collaboration – countries and partners working together, learning together, and sharing expertise, knowledge and experiences. Mechanisms are required to support this collaboration. There has been a strong call from clearing-house mechanism users for new mechanisms which include: a set of standards and guidelines for information management and exchange; a system to identify the needs of countries and partners working to implement the Convention (including strategies to overcome the barriers that currently limit the participation of indigenous communities); a system to identify resources available to meet those needs; approaches for sharing expertise, experiences and success stories; and methods for building local and regional capacity to implement the clearing-house mechanism and the Convention;

(f) Identify infrastructure needs – and then meet them. To maximize participation in and access to the global clearing-house mechanism network, it is important to identify a minimum level of technological infrastructure required to participate in the clearing-house mechanism. Efforts then need to be made to ensure that Parties and partners meet this minimum technological threshold;

(g) Monitor and evaluate activities of the clearing-house mechanism – make a commitment to continuous improvement. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of clearing-house mechanism activities is essential to ensure that the needs of clearing-house mechanism users are being met efficiently and effectively. This ongoing process includes the proactive identification and filling of information gaps, and identification and integration of new technologies. It also includes proactively identifying gaps in skill sets and expertise, and building the capacity to develop the required knowledge;

(h) Think sustainably – plan for the long term. The global clearing-house mechanism network needs to plan for its long-term sustainability, and access to resources – financial, technical, human and information – are

essential to that sustainability. Relationships between the clearing-house mechanism and international financing initiatives need to be fostered and strengthened, and creative partnership opportunities need to be explored.

36. The Parties to the Convention, national focal points, the Convention Secretariat, the Informal Advisory Committee and clearing-house mechanism partners have important contributions to make to the development of the clearing-house mechanism network. The Conference of the Parties provides overall strategic advice, while the national focal points are responsible for leading implementation. The Secretariat provides support and facilitation to the global clearing-house mechanism network, and it is the responsibility of the Informal Advisory Committee to provide advice to the Secretariat and members of the clearing-house mechanism network regarding the development and operations of the clearing-house mechanism.

VI. STRATEGIC PLAN FOR THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

37. This section of the document contains the summarized conclusions of the strategic plan of the clearing-house mechanism. These conclusions have come directly from insights and expertise of those with first-hand experience using and working with the clearing-house mechanism - the Parties to the Convention, the Informal Advisory Committee, the Convention Secretariat, and related international initiatives and conventions. The Government of Canada made the development of the strategic plan possible through its additional voluntary financial contribution. The full strategic plan is contained in document UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/2.

Mission and vision

38. The clearing-house mechanism was established by the Convention on Biological Diversity *to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation* in support of the Convention and its three objectives.

39. The clearing-house mechanism will become the primary global cooperation and information network on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity. It will promote and support at the local, national, sub-regional, regional and international levels:

(a) Better, more cost-effective decision-making (for example for trans-boundary issues and topics such as migratory and alien species, and for situations where only readily available information can be considered);

(b) International cooperation and sharing of related technology, training, education, research, information and expertise;

(c) Reduced duplication of related efforts; and therefore

(d) Quicker, better and more cost-effective implementation of biodiversity-related initiatives, and of the convention overall.

40. Working in collaboration with related global initiatives, the clearing-house mechanism will also link and synergize their contributions, and help consolidate and influence the development of the biodiversity component of an emerging global information infrastructure covering many other subject areas as well.

41. Embracing person-to-person, paper-based and electronic components, it will operate as a decentralized, open and transparent, distributed network of mutually supportive networks. It will take a proactive and collaborative

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approach to identifying, prioritizing and meeting the needs of its wide range of users, and shall endeavour to expand its activities and services over time to meet the broad objectives of the Convention.

Goals and strategies

42. The clearing-house mechanism has three goals, all of which are necessary for achieving the goals of the Convention on Biological Diversity:

(a) Cooperation – *the promotion and facilitation of scientific and technical cooperation;*

(b) Information exchange – *the development of a global mechanism for exchanging and integrating information on biodiversity, and*

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

43. The following is a condensed overview of these goals and the strategies that will be used to achieve them.

Goal 1: Promotion and facilitation of scientific and technical cooperation

44. The first goal involves use of the clearing-house mechanism for identifying, developing and promoting opportunities for collaboration. It focuses on six key areas of scientific, technical and technological cooperation:

- (a) Decision-making tools and processes;
- (b) Training and capacity-building;
- (c) Research;
- (d) Funding;
- (e) Access to and transfer of technology; and
- (f) Repatriation of information.

45. This goal will be achieved through the following four strategies:

(a) **Track best practices, needs and priorities for collaboration**. For each of the six key areas of cooperation, track and share information on needs, priorities, strengths, best practices, lessons learned, and trends for implementing relevant articles of the Convention, on an ongoing basis;

(b) **Identify funding to promote country involvement, partnering and progress in priority areas**. In cooperation with GEF and other international funding partners, and on the basis of demonstrated user needs, establish criteria and funding pools for supporting progressive, national-based and regional-based projects in each key area of cooperation;

(c) **Provide a collaboration promotion mechanism for institutions and experts, and service and technology providers**. Create a mechanism that institutions and experts, and service and technology providers can use to introduce themselves, and to identify areas of potential collaboration, which they are interested in pursuing. Users would be able to search by various criteria, including geographical location, type of assistance (including each key areas of cooperation) and subject matter;

(d) The clearing-house mechanism focal points would act as "gatekeepers" to the information on their nodes, with full local access to content. The service and technology providers, institutions and experts would be responsible for keeping their own information up to date, and for conforming to guidelines.

Goal 2: Development of a global mechanism for exchanging and integrating information on biodiversity

46. This goal involves:

(a) Providing improved and integrated access to information sources that already exist;

(b) Fostering the establishment and development of necessary information sources where they do not exist; and

(c) Promoting the exchange of information, knowledge, experience and best practices.

47. It will be met primarily through the following four strategies:

(a) **Provide open, worldwide access to existing biodiversity information.** Ask national and regional focal points, and thematic initiatives and institutions, to provide access through the clearing-house mechanism to existing information on the national, regional and global levels;

(b) **Ensure compatibility through standardization and interoperability.** Provide and achieve acceptance of tools, guidelines, protocols and standards for promoting the compatibility of network structure and processes;

(c) **Track information needs, priorities and best practices.** Track and share national needs, priorities, best practices, lessons learned, and gaps in information and expertise on an ongoing basis;

(d) **Prioritize and promote expansion in content.** Determine priorities for growth and improvement in information content, based on user needs and strategic considerations; promote expansion accordingly.

Goal 3: Development of the clearing-house mechanism focal points and their partners (network development)

48. This goal covers the development and ongoing support of the clearing-house mechanism's network of networks, to meet the growing needs of the clearing-house mechanism in a timely manner and with limited resources. While the priority is to support the growth of clearing-house mechanism Focal Points, the intention is to work through them to support their partners and networks as well.

49. It will be met primarily through the following seven strategies:

(a) **Provide start-up assistance and ongoing capacity building.** Ensure that countries, regions, and sub-regions are assisted in setting up and developing their focal points, and in accessing ongoing capacity-building support;

(b) **Address obstacles to growth.** Identify and overcome national, regional and international obstacles to the establishment and full development of clearing-house mechanism focal points;

(c) **Maintain local ownership of information;**

(d) Rely on partnerships, and focus on facilitation. Concentrate on facilitating, encouraging and promoting rather than implementing. Engage a wide range of biodiversity stakeholders, to pool resources and share work, including promotion of the clearing-house mechanism and its Call for Proposals. Help with partners' capacity-building through joint endeavours;

(e) Concentrate on value-added. Continue to clarify, grow competence in, and gain widespread recognition for the value-added roles of each type of focal point;

(f) Promote use of the clearing-house mechanism. Promote awareness, understanding, expansion and use of the clearing-house mechanism through communications and education activities; and

(g) Develop funding strategies for all focal points. Ensure the long-term development and operation of clearing-house mechanism focal points, by developing sound short- and long-term funding strategies for focal points at all levels.

50. In order to guide and evaluate its progress, the clearing-house mechanism will rely on two primary evaluation mechanisms. Starting in 1999, an independent review of the clearing-house mechanism shall be conducted every five years. User surveys, which will form an integral part of each independent review, will also be carried out at least one additional time between each independent review.

51. Ongoing investments will be required to develop and sustain the operations of the clearing-house mechanism's nodes at all levels. It may be difficult to quantify the overall return on these investments. However many biodiversity initiatives worldwide require the sorts of cooperation and information availability that is supported by the clearing-house mechanism, or could be implemented more cost-effectively through its use. The proponents of these initiatives, who are potential "users" of the clearing-house mechanism, should be considered as potential clearing-house mechanism funders as well. Just as the Parties to the Convention must support the clearing-house mechanism as a necessary foundation for implementing the Convention, other actors worldwide must also come to support the clearing-house mechanism as a critical tool for implementing their own initiatives and achieving their own goals.

52. The strategic plan outlines an ambitious number of objectives. Key performance indicators for the coming three years include:

(a) The clearing-house mechanism's perceived contribution to effective decision-making, and the overall contribution of the information exchanged;

(b) Awareness and use of the clearing-house mechanism;

(c) Establishment of the clearing-house mechanism's focal points, and related capacity-building; and

(d) Strengthened and increased programmes and projects to promote scientific and technical cooperation.

VII. LONGER-TERM WORK PROGRAMME FOR THE PERIOD 1999-2004

The 1999-2004 work programme (UNEP/CBD/SBSTTA/5/INF/3) indicates the time-frame, roles and responsibilities as well as relevant costs to implement the proposed strategies and actions of the strategic plan and cover the results and recommendations of the independent review.