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CONFERENCE OF THE PARTIES
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Item 6.4 of the provisional agenda

CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM FOR TECHNICAL AND
SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION

Note by the Interim Secretariat

1. INTRODUCTION

1. Article 18, paragraph 3, of the Convention states that, at its first meeting, the Conference of the Parties shall determine how to establish a clearing-house mechanism to promote and facilitate technical and scientific cooperation.

2. In preparing this item for consideration by the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties, the second session of the Intergovernmental Committee had before it on this subject a note by the Interim Secretariat as well as recommendations of the Open-ended Intergovernmental Meeting of Scientific Experts on Biological Diversity (UNEP/CBD/IC/2/11). On the basis of these, the Committee suggested a number of guidelines for the establishment of a clearing-house mechanism under the Convention presented in the report of its second session (UNEP/CBD/COP/1/4, sect. 4.1.4, paras. 125-133).

3. The present note builds upon those guidelines in presenting several proposals relating to the policy aspects of a clearing-house mechanism under the Convention, which the meeting is invited to consider and decide, and on the basis of which further work towards developing the concept and operation of the clearing-house mechanism can be undertaken. The note also outlines an approach and a programme of work to be carried out in 1995, the results of which may facilitate the work of the Conference of the Parties in establishing the clearing-house mechanism under the Convention.

4. The meeting is requested to consider and decide on these policy aspects for the clearing-house mechanism presented below and to approve the approach and proposed programme of work towards its establishment.

2. POLICY ASPECTS OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

5. The following proposals relating to policy aspects are proposed for consideration:

2.1 Scope

(a) The clearing-house mechanism should be established on an incremental basis, beginning with a limited number of focused subject areas based on the needs of the parties for scientific and technical cooperation in carrying out their obligations under the Convention; these subject areas would be expanded in number and scope as the mechanism develops operational experience and as the needs of parties evolve;

(b) In the early stages of operation the mechanism should seek to limit the categories of users, with priority being given to servicing the needs of parties, expanding to include other users as its capacity develops;

(c) In the early stages of operation the subject areas should be geared to support and facilitate activities that parties can be expected to undertake in the early stages of implementation of the Convention; thus, the mechanism would seek to provide information on, and refer to, sources of support for:

- (i) National strategies, plans and programmes, including legislation, for implementing the Convention;
- (ii) Expertise and access to technical and scientific data (including databases of related Conventions);
- (iii) Programmes and projects at the national, regional and international level on conservation of biological diversity and sustainable use of its components;
- (iv) Methodologies and technologies for assessing and valuing biological resources and for analysing requirements for their conservation and sustainable use;
- (v) Benefits to be derived from the use of genetic resources and sharing of benefits from such use;
- (vi) Traditional knowledge to conserve biological diversity and sustainably use its components;
- (vii) Socio-economic research.

2.2 Functions

6. The clearing-house mechanism should focus in the early stages of operation on the provision of information and referral services to facilitate:

(a) Scientific cooperation (scientific data on ecosystems, species and genetic resources and biological diversity, as well as methodologies for assessing, valuing and conserving them);

(b) Technical cooperation (information on technology sources and on brokerage services);

(c) Policy development (in the development of national strategies and programmes and in the formulation of legislation).

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7. At a later stage of its operation a brokerage service may be offered by the clearing-house mechanism to facilitate development of agreements between parties for access to genetic resources and their information including indigenous knowledge, transfer of technology and sharing of benefits.

2.3 Operations

8. The following operational characteristics of the mechanism are proposed:

(a) Access to the services provided by the mechanism should be through a variety of means, namely:

- (i) On-line electronic database;
- (ii) Direct electronic;
- (iii) Diskette;
- (iv) Printed information;

(b) The range of information held by the mechanism should be known and available to all users; it should be available in comprehensible standardized formats in order to be accessible to a wide range of users;

(c) The mechanism should avoid duplicating services or information already provided by existing centres; the clearing-house mechanism under the Convention should therefore take the form of "a clearing-house of clearing-houses", or a switching centre, making most effective use of other entities, with which cooperative agreements may need to be developed;

(d) The mechanism should establish and/or link with national, subregional and regional centres of information, for which technical and financial assistance for capacity-building may be necessary.

2.4 Governance

9. The following proposals are made regarding the governance of the clearing-house mechanism:

(a) The clearing-house mechanism would be subject to periodic evaluation and review by the Conference of the Parties;

(b) The Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice would have oversight of its operation on behalf of the Conference of the Parties and would evaluate its operations and effectiveness and recommend modifications to the Conference of the Parties;

(c) The coordination of the mechanism would be undertaken by the Secretariat to the Convention and the "switching centre" located within the Secretariat;

(d) An Advisory Committee to the Secretariat of approximately 8-10 representatives of cooperating centres would be established to provide technical advice on the operational aspects of the mechanism.

3. WORK PROGRAMME TOWARDS ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MECHANISM

10. On the basis of the decisions at the present meeting of the Conference of the Parties on the above policy aspects, further work will be undertaken during 1995 to prepare the basis for a pilot phase of operation of the mechanism. This work will involve the following tasks:

(a) To identify the range of existing clearing-house mechanisms (national, regional and international) and correlate their information base with the subject areas and type of service to be offered in the initial phase;

(b) To discuss the terms of, and arrangements, for their participation in the clearing-house mechanism and develop draft agreements for participation where necessary;

(c) To analyse and characterize immediate needs of parties to assist their implementation of the Convention and especially needs/possibilities for scientific and technical cooperation;

(d) To assess most appropriate forms for packaging/disseminating information (print, electronic mail, diskette, etc.);

(e) To select countries which have immediate need and capacity to access the clearing-house mechanism (institutional arrangements, personnel, electronic connections, computer hardware, etc.) for a pilot exercise;

(f) To assess needs of other interested parties for bringing them "on-line" and estimate financial requirements;

(g) To design and estimate the cost of a pilot phase operation.

11. The capacity and support cost required for carrying out the above tasks has been reflected in the 1995 budget for the Secretariat.

12. The results of the above tasks would be presented to the second meeting of the Conference of the Parties after consideration by the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice, if possible, depending on the timing of its first meeting. It is proposed that a pilot phase of operation could then take place in the period 1996 - 1998 based on the decision of the second meeting of the Conference of the Parties on its design and financing.

13. The pilot operation could be designed:

(a) To institute the information and referral service in keeping with the policy decisions of the present meeting;

(b) To assist interested parties in building, where needed, the human and institutional capacity to access the services of the mechanism;

(c) To assist in strengthening centres at regional, subregional and national level, as appropriate, in order to build the framework in which the mechanism could eventually operate on a decentralized basis and ensure wider access.

14. At its first meeting, the Conference of the Parties may wish to consider how the pilot phase operation should be financed, in particular whether it should be designated as a programme priority under the financial mechanism of the Convention.

4. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CLEARING-HOUSE MECHANISM

15. The evaluation of the pilot phase operation would take place as part of an overall assessment of progress under the Convention, as proposed in the medium-term programme of work of the Conference of the Parties (see UNEP/CBD/COP/1/13). On the basis of this evaluation and the recommendations of the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice, adjustments could be made by the Conference of the Parties to the concept, structure, functions, and operations in order to establish the permanent clearing-house mechanism under the Convention.

5. CONCLUSION

16. The meeting is invited to consider the above proposals and:

(a) To decide on the policy that would guide further work towards establishing the clearing-house mechanism;

(b) To authorize the further work outlined to be undertaken by the Secretariat in 1995;

(c) To advise on the financing possibilities for a pilot phase operation.
