



DIVSEEK STEERING COMMITTEE

28 May 2015
Rome, Italy

REPORT

I. Background

1. In January 2015, the First DivSeek Partners' Assembly approved the DivSeek Charter and elected Prof. Susan McCouch as Chairperson of the Assembly. Subsequently, the Joint Facilitation Unit circulated a call for candidates to DivSeek's Steering Committee and compiled a roster of candidates. Through electronic voting, Partner organizations selected 8 candidates from the roster. The elected candidates confirmed their willingness to serve in the Steering Committee for staggered terms.
2. The Chairperson of the Assembly, also member of the Steering Committee, called for an in-person, one-day meeting of the Committee. The Secretariat of the International Treaty hosted the meeting, which was held in Rome, Italy, at the Headquarters of FAO, on 28 May 2015. The Secretariat of the International Treaty and the Global Crop Diversity Trust, two of the four member organization of DivSeek's Joint Facilitation Unit, agreed to jointly support the meeting financially.
3. The list of participants in the meeting is in Appendix 1 of this Report. In her capacity of Chairperson of the Assembly, Prof. Susan McCouch chaired the meeting of the Steering Committee.

II. Welcome and approval of the agenda

4. The Chairperson invited Dr. Shakeel Bhatti, Secretary of the Governing Body of the International Treaty, to address the participants at the opening of the meeting. Dr. Bhatti expressed his gratitude to all the members of the Steering Committee for their dedication to the initiative and invited them to consider the hosting of the meeting by the Treaty Secretariat as a tangible sign of the commitment by the Treaty community to continue facilitating DivSeek. Dr. Bhatti affirmed that, as much as plant science was in rapid evolution, so were PGR information systems to keep pace and deliver good services to the multiple communities that were engaged in downstream uses of germplasm. Dr. Bhatti illustrated how the Global Information System of the International Treaty was moving into the implementation phase and appreciated the common line of thinking with DivSeek, in areas such interoperability among information systems, data sets and knowledge networks, adoption of standards and technologies Dr. Bhatti encouraged the Steering Committee to devise a program of work for DivSeek that would integrate into existing international cooperation.
5. The Chairperson made some introductory remarks in order to guide the Steering Committee through the tasks it was expected to accomplish. She invited the Committee, in its deliberations, to consider activities that would generate value for the Partner organizations in the short, medium and long term and assess the capacity and expertise that would be needed to meet these goals. The Chairperson reminded the Committee that although they should be mindful of the 'bigger picture' they would also need to focus their efforts on determining a set of strategic activities to conduct before the second Partner

Assembly of January 2016 based on the available capacity. In the views of the Chairperson, the DivSeek comprised three domains of activities: 1) germplasm characterization using rapidly evolving scientific concepts, tools and information platforms, 2) training and capacity-building efforts, and 3) a public-relations domain that describes DivSeek's value propositions to the multiple relevant constituencies, including in developing countries.

6. Following the above opening remarks, the Committee was invited to consider the agenda of the meeting. It approved the agenda as contained in Appendix 2 of this report.

III. Draft landscaping study

7. The Committee was invited to appraise an initial landscape of projects of relevance for DivSeek that Dr. Bastow, of the Joint Facilitation Unit and the Global Plant Council, had developed. Dr. Bastow described four categories of projects, focused on: 1) software infrastructure, tools and standards; 2) crop databases and portals; 3) crop germplasm-evaluation projects that include data generation; 4) sequencing of reference genomes. Members of the Steering Committee expressed interest in learning of the large number of projects and crops represented by the initial landscape study and discussed the need for a more comprehensive study to ensure representation of less visible projects and to highlight areas where DivSeek might facilitate coordination and help to leverage the sharing of information and expertise among different projects.

8. The Committee recommended expanding the landscape study into a formal publication to serve as a reference document for DivSeek and for science policy makers, as well as to provide a basis for fundraising for DivSeek. The Committee suggested that a refereed publication could be accompanied by an interactive, on-line information resource to facilitate feedback, updating and data curation by project partners and beneficiaries. In strategic terms, the Committee valued the landscaping study as a tool for future boundary setting, i.e. to determine the characteristics and features of projects associated with DivSeek, and to encourage interactions among projects. The study was also considered instrumental to illustrating value propositions, monitoring and assessing impact of the DivSeek initiative.

9. The Committee invited Mr. Francisco Lopez from the Treaty Secretariat to describe a pilot project financed by the Benefit-Sharing Fund of the International Treaty and coordinated by the Indonesian Agency for Agricultural Research and Development (IAARD) and IRRI – two DivSeek Partner organizations – to introduce the use of permanent unique identifiers (PUIDs) to facilitate tracking and quality control of rice germplasm and associated data. The Committee noted that this project represented an important global initiative that would greatly enhance the ability to link diverse sources and domains of information about genetic resources across projects, databases and communities. The Committee also noted that the project offered a valuable example of developing-country leadership, and of the catalytic role played by the CGIAR gene banks in partnership promotion.

10. Starting with the topic of PUIDs as an “organizing principle” for germplasm-associated data, the Committee continued discussions about related topics such as data quality, data curation, preferential vs. public access to data, and subscription-fee-based models for funding the maintenance of databases, such as the model proposed by a white paper submitted by Syngenta to the attention of DivSeek Partner organizations after the first Assembly and shared with Committee members.

11. The Committee was then briefed by Mr. Manzella, of the Joint Facilitation Unit and the International Treaty, on the outcomes of the Expert Consultation on the Global Information System (GLIS) stipulated by Article 17 of the International Treaty, which had taken place in January back-to-back with the DivSeek Assembly. Mr. Manzella shared with Committee members a paper that outlined a draft vision for the GLIS, accompanied by annotations that will consolidate into a programme of work and a roadmap for implementation within the context of the International Treaty.¹ A web-based GLIS platform

¹ The annotated vision and the terms of reference are available, respectively, in Annexes 3 and 5 of this <http://www.planttreaty.org/sites/default/files/COGIS1re.pdf> document.

with use-oriented entry points to germplasm-associated information was offered for consideration by the Committee as a possible point of intersection between the work plan of the International Treaty and DivSeek. In considering analogous elements between DivSeek and GLIS, including data standards, interoperability among existing systems, transparency on the rights and obligation of users of germplasm-associated information, communication and collaboration efforts and capacity strengthening, the Committee agreed on the need to avoid overlaps and promote complementarity. The Committee flagged joint advocacy and communication efforts, and training and capacity building as promising areas of activity that could foster an harmonious relationship, while respectfully retaining the individual and distinct identities of the DivSeek initiative and the GLIS of the International Treaty.

12. In considering DivSeek as a bottom-up initiative and GLIS as a State-driven platform stipulated by an international legal instrument, the Committee agreed on the high potential for DivSeek to stimulate experimentation, innovation and variability of approaches to data management as well as to upstream and downstream uses of germplasm and associated information among its Partner institutions. The more formal framework of GLIS was recognized as one of the key players of the DivSeek initiative, and it was noted that there were other experienced players in the field. The Committee was informed that in addition to the 14 members of the GLIS Scientific Advisory Committee appointed by State governments, the Secretary of the International Treaty would appoint 10 further members and that Treaty was open to consider representation from DivSeek-associated scientific and technical experts for these appointments.

13. The Committee agreed to keep the issue of the non-exclusive relationship between DivSeek and GLIS under consideration in the course of development of DivSeek's programme of work.

IV. Potential elements for a DivSeek strategy

14. The Chairperson asked Dr. Wenzl, of the Joint Facilitation Unit and the Global Crop Diversity Trust, to introduce the document he had prepared together with Dr. Bastow. The "straw man" document was intended to initiate discussions on elements for a DivSeek strategy. The list of potential elements was organized according to the four priority areas that the DivSeek community had flagged, namely: community building and networking; research approaches and tools; information management; and rights management. In previous discussions, the Committee had indicated communication and capacity building as additional priority areas, and the document reflected them as well. The full list of potential elements for a DivSeek strategy is in Appendix 3 of this report.

15. The Committee considered the different elements, with particular attention to phenotyping platforms, APIs, data standards, training and capacity building on genotyping techniques. The Committee noted the considerable number of potential strategy elements included in the document, reflecting the broad range of expectations of the Partner organizations and potential research opportunities, and decided to continue assessing the importance and urgency of the different elements in the course of development of current and future DivSeek annual programmes of work. The Committee also agreed to assess the funding required to support such strategies.

16. The Committee highlighted the need to keep momentum within DivSeek and to work towards a series of strategic action points. It also invited the institutions serving the Joint Facilitation Unit to align their goals and motivations with DivSeek's future strategy, while recognizing DivSeek's unique and independent identity.

V. New membership

17. The Chairperson opened the consideration of this agenda item by soliciting the Committee's advice on: a) possible membership by individuals; b) possible membership by projects and consortia; c) a membership campaign to attract developing country qualified institutions; d) the features of the membership application process that the Committee had established, in particular as regards the requirement to indicate the anticipated contribution to DivSeek; e) possible membership by private sector, both at the level of individual companies and at the level of associations (e.g. ISF).

18. Regarding *a)* and *b)*, the Committee agreed to provisionally keep the current membership at the level of organizations/institutions, as this aligned with the current governance settings of the Charter. It considered membership tiers as a possible future solution to reflect different interest groups (e.g. donors, communities of practice, advisors and service providers).

19. Regarding *c)*, the Committee recalled the open and inclusive nature of DivSeek and agreed to encourage membership from developing country stakeholders with an interest in promoting germplasm evaluation and information sharing.

20. Regarding *d)*, the Committee confirmed the validity of requesting standardized information from new members in order to manage membership efficiently and strategically. The Committee decided to amend the request to indicate the anticipated contribution to DivSeek (e.g. projects, activities), if any, of the Partner organizations.

21. Regarding *e)*, the Committee was alerted by the Joint Facilitation Unit to the opportunity to keep an active line of communication with the private sector representatives who were at the first Partner Assembly. The Committee highlighted the potential of private sector engagement for DivSeek funding of future training and capacity building programs, as well as for expanding the range of expertise and knowledge within DivSeek. It also discussed some of the systemic and practical implications of private sector membership, with particular attention to a balanced relationship among different DivSeek constituencies and the need to promote equitable data sharing policies. It also recalled the annotation in the Charter, which referred to observer status for private sector, pending the development of operational guidelines for private sector engagement.

22. The Committee decided to request one of its members, namely Ms. Emily Marden, to convene, under her chairmanship, a governance expert group, in accordance with the Charter's provision to elaborate operational guidelines through expert consultations, in order to:

- i) validate the Committee's provisional opinion about membership at the level of organizations/institutions, and/or clarify alternative options and implications;
- ii) advise the Committee on possible steps towards private sector membership or other engagement, including an assessment of the implications on the implementation of DivSeek's principles as stated in the Charter.

23. In conjunction with the decision to convene a governance expert group, the Committee was informed about an on-going research project by Arizona State University (ASU) on institutional and organizational factors for enabling data access, exchange and use, which the Global Crop Diversity Trust and the Secretariat of the International Treaty were co-funding. Mr. Manzella, of the Joint Facilitation Unit and the International Treaty, informed the Committee of the preliminary research activities conducted by the ASU research team for the project, and distributed a progress report. The Committee invited Ms. Marden to coordinate with the ASU research team to obtain early access to the results of the study for consideration as part of the work of the governance expert group.

24. The Committee reviewed an application for DivSeek membership made by *Universita' Politecnica delle Marche* in connection to the ERA-CAPS project on the genetic architecture of adaptation outside centers of domestication of *Phaseolus vulgaris* and *Phaseolus coccineus* (BEAN_ADAPT project).² In the light of the relevance of project activities and outputs to DivSeek's mission and goals, the Committee favorably appraised the application and instructed the Joint Facilitation Unit to formalize the membership.

² ERA-CAPS is a project of the seventh framework program for Coordinating Action in Plant Sciences (www.eracaps.org)

VI. DivSeek's annual program of work

25. Based on the discussions held on the previous agenda items, the Chairperson invited the Committee to consolidate a set of strategic and feasible activities to feed into the first annual Program of Work (PoW) that the Steering Committee, with the support of the Joint Facilitation Unit, would submit to the Assembly for review and approval, and to make additional proposals for medium or longer term activities. The Chairperson also invited the Committee to advise on preparatory work for the development of the PoW.

26. In general terms, the Committee agreed on DivSeek operating at the interfaces among projects through a network approach, to encourage coherent actions across, and add value to otherwise disconnected efforts, in alignment with DivSeek's principles and value propositions. In the views of the Committee, DivSeek had already generated first examples of connectors among projects (i.e. the landscaping study, the ASU governance research project) and was to continue along this path, and add essential components, such as: leveraging new funding opportunities; advocating for minimum standards for genotyping and phenotyping; promoting knowledge exchange and training; managing public relations for the benefit of the community.

27. In order to achieve the above, the Committee believed it essential to further clarify and streamline the nature and strategy of the initiative. In addition, the Committee confirmed the necessity to define requirements for associating projects and/or becoming a Partner organization, and to clearly illustrate the added values and services that DivSeek can offer to existing projects.

28. The Committee discussed a range of potential areas of work and listed the following preparatory activities for the first annual PoW:

- a) the continuation and expansion of the landscape study, in an on-line interactive format, for future publication and analysis;
- b) the revamping of the DivSeek website to bring it in line with the current status of the initiative;
- c) the development of FAQs on practical DivSeek topics, including principles and parameters for DivSeek-associated projects, for the Assembly to review and approve;
- d) based on the list of potential elements for a DivSeek strategy, the compilation of a menu of topics for DivSeek knowledge exchange and capacity building workshops, including the identification of possible funding sources (e.g. the Benefit-Sharing Fund of the International Treaty, the COST Action of the European Union, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, for African students in particular);
- e) the elaboration of a multi-year vision and strategy for DivSeek, taking into account the list of potential elements for a DivSeek strategy as well as the need to promote developing country membership and private sector participation;
- f) the continuation of the ASU governance research project and communication of findings to the governance expert group convened by Ms. Marden.

29. To further develop point *d*) above the Chairperson requested that each Committee member draft a one-page outline for a DivSeek knowledge exchange and capacity building workshop.

30. Based on the above list, the Committee tasked itself with the elaboration of a multi-year vision and strategy for DivSeek and requested the Joint Facilitation Unit to develop a draft of the 2016 PoW for the consideration of the Committee and the Partners' Assembly, to program preparatory activities up to the next Assembly taking into consideration available resources, and to report on achievements made in year 2015.

VII. Operation of the Joint Facilitation Unit

31. The Chairperson invited Mr. Manzella to present the document that described the mandate of the Joint Facilitation Unit, as set forth in the DivSeek Charter, its composition and working modalities, and its activities in year 2015.
32. The Committee welcomed the document as clear and concise. It considered a number of potential issues in relation to the role of the Joint Facilitation Unit within DivSeek, as follows:
- i) modalities for expansion or contraction of the Joint Facilitation Unit, e.g. in cases where one organization is inactive or becomes unable to serve, or where a Partner organization expresses interest in joining the Unit;
 - ii) the roles and responsibilities of individual representatives of the organizations that serve the Unit;
 - iii) the modalities of representation by the respective organizations within the Unit;
 - iv) the modalities for decision-making within the Unit;
 - v) the relationship between the Unit and the other elements of DivSeek's governance structure (i.e. the Assembly and its Chairperson and the Steering Committee) with respect to communication lines and providing guidance and direction.
33. The Committee requested the governance expert group to be convened by Ms. Emily Marden to prepare a document for the consideration of the Committee, based on the provisions of the DivSeek Charter, to explain the governance structure of DivSeek, to describe mechanisms that would allow it to evolve in the future, and to present options for clarifying the above issues.

VIII. Other business

34. In order to review progress on the action points that the Committee selected for the various agenda items and to prepare for the second DivSeek Partners' Assembly, the Chairperson invited the Joint Facilitation Unit to explore possible financial and technical support for another in-person meeting of the Committee, in the last quarter of the year.
35. The Chairperson expressed her intention to approach one of the organizations of the Joint Facilitation Unit to clarify its future engagement in the Unit.

IX. Preparation of the report

36. The Chairperson requested the Joint Facilitation Unit to prepare a concise report of the meeting, to reflect the main thread of the discussions and the consensus of the Committee on individual agenda items.
37. The Committee requested the governance expert group to be convened by Ms. Emily Marden to elaborate a policy on the publication of DivSeek meeting documents and reports, for the consideration of the Committee. Pending the development of such a policy, the Committee decided not to publish this report online.
38. In closing the meeting, the Steering Committee thanked the Joint Facilitation Unit for the excellent support to the meeting, including the preparation of documents, and the Secretariat of the International Treaty for the efficient hosting arrangements and the contributions made in the course of the discussions.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Members of the Steering Committee

Susan	McCOUCH
Andreas	GRANER
Ruaraidh	SACKVILLE HAMILTON
Elizabeth	ARNAUD
David	MARSHALL
Peter	BRETTING
Sarah	AYLING – <i>available by audio link</i>
Rajeev K.	VARSHNEY

Joint Facilitation Unit

Peter	WENZL
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Secretariat of the International Treaty

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