

The European Regional Focal Point (ERFP) and its Role in the Management of Farm Animal Genetic Resources

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Introduction

In Europe, the awareness of possible erosion of Animal Genetic Resources (AnGR) originated in the 1960s, and from the beginning, the emphasis was put on preservation of endangered breeds. Concerted activities on AnGR in Europe started in 1980, when the European Association for Animal Production (EAAP) established a working group on AnGR. At the global level, 1980 is also the starting point, since the first expert consultation on AnGR was held in Rome with FAO.

Discussions between the National Coordinators (NC's) of the European countries nominated in the frame of FAO's Global Program for the Management of Animal Genetic Resources on the need to establish a Regional Focal Point (RFP) for Europe started in 1996 and after 5 years of discussion it was decided to create the ERFP which became operational in 2002. During the discussions the NCs considered that RFP must have a light organizational structure in order to support important and future evolution and to respect the national sovereignty in the farm animal genetic resources management allowing the free adhesion of the countries at this co-ordinating structure. Based on these conditions the ERFP was created as a cooperative framework, which assists and coordinates activities and communication among the NC's of the European countries to develop and use animal genetic resources. It is a free union of countries represented by the country-appointed National Coordinators, it receives country contributions and it is managed by the Secretariat and the Steering Committee, following the strategy defined by the Annual Workshop of the NCs. The fundamental element of ERFP and the decision body is the Annual Workshop which brings together all NCs annually to exchange information on relevant national and sub regional activities. The annual Workshop decides on the ERFP budget, the general rules, the ERFP Steering Committee and Secretariat and the future activities.

ERFP intended to assist independently the countries of Europe to design and establish their own most cost-effective management programmes for animal genetic resources and the maintenance of domestic animal diversity and to coordinate common regional and sub-regional needs and activities which include policy development, training, research and field activities.

More specific the aims of the ERFP, are:

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- To assist and enhance the AnGR activities of National Focal Points (NFPs) at European level.
- To develop and maintain regular contact and exchange of relevant information on AnGR horizontally between European NFPs and vertically with the Global Focal Point in Rome within FAO's agreed global structure.
- To stimulate the funding and organisation of regional projects, workshops and national programmes on AnGR within the European Region.
- To maintain appropriate liaison with the European Union, the Permanent Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity and other bodies (intergovernmental, governmental and non-governmental) actively involved in the management of European Farm Animal Genetic Resources and the conservation of Domestic Animal Diversity.

In general, the ERFPP works with the sub-regional organisations in order to reinforce the common approach in neighbouring countries or having the same problems or needs. The ERFPP, acting independently, does not create new structures, but relies, as far as possible on existing functional structures in the different countries. The ERFPP provides support for assisting in identifying and undertaking of projects, monitors development of relevant European policies, facilitates participation in meetings, and undertakes other activities of regional importance. It stimulates and co-ordinates the maintenance and further development of national and regional AnGR databases and encourage European information networking on AnGR. ERFPP has proven invaluable in facilitating regional communications and development of regional policies; providing technical assistance; coordinating training, research, and planning activities amongst countries and interacting with government agencies, donors, research institutions and non-government organizations.

ERFPP Strategy for 2006-2010 and beyond

ERFPP as a broadly recognized organization for the coordination of the AnGR activities in Europe enters a new phase, where its role and actions should be enhanced. The main bottleneck for implementation of policies or strategies is the lack of public awareness about the importance of conservation and sustainable use of FAnGR. Lack of funding and lack of infrastructure is related to the lack of awareness. There is a considerable need to raise awareness of the important roles and values of animal genetic resources. Such national awareness building should draw attention to the specific features of the livestock sector and should seek to mobilise resources from private and public initiatives for the sustainable, use, development and conservation of FAnGR (FAO (2007)). Conservation and sustainable use of FAnGR should be included in future livestock policies and it is crucial to have a broader range of stakeholders involved who support the FAnGR work (Planchenault (2005)).

The ERFPP priorities for the period 2006-2010 were the following:

- Enhance the cooperation and the promotion of joint actions with governmental, research and non-governmental organizations working in the field of Animal Genetic Resources and Biodiversity.
- Develop further the involvement of the NCs in the activities of ERFPP and enhance their role in the management of AnGR and their cooperation with relevant bodies in their countries.

- Enforce the connection with EU Commission, in order to play a more active role in the development of strategies related with the conservation and sustainable use of animal genetic resources in Europe and in the mechanisms related with the implementation and funding of these strategies.

For ERFP the Website and the European database (EFABIS) are considered as basic tools for the work of NCs and the support for their management, use and implementation is a priority issue. The establishment of a permanent monitoring procedure or an early warning system to identify needs for action could be developed on the base of an updated European database. In this context the monitoring of 'local' and 'transboundary' breeds at regional level and to harmonise policy development, is considered. Furthermore, assessment of the value and importance of local production systems is needed, including assessment of trends and drivers of change that may affect the genetic base and the resilience and sustainability of the production systems.

ERFP enhances the collaboration with EAAP WG-AnGR, with the main objective to strengthen the work of NCs in national and international level. The "European Database" can be one of the issues of cooperation with the EAAP WG-AnGR.

ERFP activities in communication should be improved in order to increase the interest of the relevant experts and scientists and also the society. Increasingly complex issues are emerging the livestock sector, which require balancing the interests of a variety of stakeholders. In this context the dissemination of information and the cooperation with the private sector, including industry and breeders organization is encouraged. The publication of the Newsletter helps towards this direction, as well as the publication of ad-hoc papers and notes (Georgoudis (2006)).

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the FAO State of the World Report (FAO-SoW), and the FAO Global Strategy for Management of Animal Genetic Resources, the European Association for Animal Production (EAAP) and the European Regional Focal Point (ERFP) each acknowledge the need for a "cross-border", regional approach to biodiversity conservation. However, Europe as a region is unique, due to the extensive existing levels of regional collaboration engendered by the European Union (EU). Agriculture is one area of policy where Member States have conceded significant sovereignty and decision-making to the European Union. Therefore, Europe has already accepted the inherent added value of working together as a community to feed Europe through sustainable agriculture. Community added value is at the heart of Community laws, which through its Directives requires Member States to harmonize or implement legislation incorporating the intentions of the Directives. Policy makers and decision makers require information to support them to identify necessary actions, to implement policies and to keep track on progress. It is of the interest of ERFP to enhance progress towards the development of AnGR policies in connection with the European Commission. The closer interaction of ERFP and EU will enhance the role of the regional focal point in the formulation of proposals and future directions of policies related with the management of AnGR. Furthermore, ERFP supports the cooperation and the promotion of joint actions with governmental, research and non-governmental organizations working in the field of Animal

Genetic Resources and Biodiversity. The Call for Action has been the main tool toward this direction. Through this well established activity ERFPP is funding since its establishment several projects, seminars or supporting initiatives with considerably results. ERFPP support projects that promote the regional collaboration in the use and development of transboundary breeds. Several projects within ERFPP Call for action developed to successful research project proposals submitted to EU (in the frame of 870/04 Regulation). In this context, it is important to find new opportunities for funding the work on AnGR. There are possibilities to incorporate the work on AnGR with the food security and sustainability, the protection of the environment, the multifunctionality of agriculture etc.

Although governments have national responsibilities to conserve their AnGR, many breeds exist in different countries and countries face similar problems. Local breeds could benefit from stronger sub regional collaboration. Collaboration could include characterization, genetic studies, development of joint breeding programs, etc. During the discussion for the Strategic Priorities it has been stressed the importance of Sub regional or bilateral collaboration, aiming to create common projects for managing and exchanging shared (endangered) FAnGR between (neighbouring) countries to save the indigenous 'transboundary' breeds, the development of joint breeding programmes, research work for the genetic distancing and characterization, for capacity building or the development of legislation/legal framework (Hiemstra and Oldenbroek (2006)).

Conclusion

The finalization of the State of the World's Animal Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture and the International Technical Conference on Animal Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, that was held in September 2007 in Interlaken, Switzerland, marks a historic opportunity for the international community to make strategic choices on the future management of animal genetic resources, to reach agreement on how best to address priorities for the sustainable use, development and conservation of animal genetic resources, and to raise awareness and appreciation of the various stakeholders and policy makers. The international community adopted the first ever *Global Plan of Action for Animal Genetic Resources (GPA)*, comprising twenty-three Strategic Priorities which are aimed at combating the erosion of animal genetic diversity and at using animal genetic resources in a sustainable way. The actions that ERFPP develops and implement are in harmony with the Strategic Priorities for Action, but attention should be given to cover multinational involvement and avoid to undertaken actions that under the responsibility of the individual country.

It is a common perception that ERFPP can play a more active role in the development of strategies related with the conservation and sustainable use of animal genetic resources in Europe and in the mechanisms related with the implementation and funding of these strategies. Moreover, ERFPP encourages the establishment and development of Regional Focal Points in other parts of the world by exchanging experience from the work already done in Europe. It should be considered that a number of the member countries of ERFPP are not (yet) members of EU and also other countries not members of ERFPP and EU are interested in ERFPP activities. In this context, ERFPP has started initiatives to strengthen its working relations with authorities acting in the field of AnGR and biodiversity of these countries.

In the continuous efforts to further develop the efficiency and the structure of ERFPP a new business plan is under development. The objectives of the proposed ERFPP business plan for the period of 2010 -2014 is to implement the principles of the strategic plan by organising the activities of the ERFPP in a concrete project with formulated workplan, priorities and objectives, according to the experience of the plant genetic resources. This business plan should ensure ERFPP ability to further develop its work following its statutes and running projects. Furthermore this should be in harmony with the Global Plan for Action and contribute to the follow up of the implementation of the Global Plan for Action in European Region (Maki-Tanila and Georgoudis (2009)).

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