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Networking, partnerships and tools to enhance in situ conservation of European plant genetic resources

Developing network models: Analysis of promoting and blocking factors for the development of community seedbanks in Europe

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1.0 Introduction

This short analysis is based on the report, '[Community seedbank management guidelines along four network showcases](#)', which shows that independently of the evolutionary steps, every community seedbank (CSB) normally follows, **internal factors** such as organization structure, CSB member structure and shared missions and visions, as well as **external factors** such as legal and policy environment and economic factors on a national and international level, are influencing each other in so many ways, that it is difficult, if not impossible to hand out recipes that tell the CSB managers/members how to combine the different ingredients to get a similar and sustainable end result.

This analysis compiles a list of different factors that the four network showcases (from different regions of Europe and with different maturity levels) consider to be promoting or blocking with their organization development.

2.0 List of promoting and blocking factors

2.1 Internal factors

Topic	Promoting factors	Blocking factors
<p>Organization structure^{1, 2} <i>Three of the four showcases are associations. One organization is a foundation. Due to the legal, social, political, economic etc. environment and the type of activities, neither one or the other structure has its advantages.</i></p>	<p>A legal organization structure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Facilitates recognition and collaboration with national and international institutions. – Eases fundraising activities. – Requires from the founders well-defined goals, vision and mission. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Transparency, which creates trust and reliability, provides framework and rules to solve conflicts. ● Strategic and operative entities are strictly separated and roles and responsibilities of the different actors (members, board, employees, etc.) are well defined and respected. Gender representation is balanced in every functional layer. ● Board members are primarily elected based on their skills, experiences and knowhow. ● Organization structure includes collective, participative and bottom-up decision-making processes within the organization. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rules of collaboration and decision-making processes are not clear or non-transparent. ● Structures are too complex and overly hierarchic. ● Complete independence is not ensured. ● Independent controlling mechanisms are lacking (financial control, corporate governance). ● Board members privilege their own specific interests or a specific group and do not stand for the whole organization. ● Important activities remain in the responsibility of volunteers – professionalization and adaptation of the structure doesn't happen.
<p>Member structure^{3 4}</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Member structure represents the mission of the organization and members can identify themselves with the main message (mission) of the organization. ● Members feel well represented in the organizational activities and they get the services they need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Omnipotent leadership can hinder necessary changes and block pragmatic solutions. ● Founding members having difficulties to hand over responsibilities to a next generation.

¹ mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-five-trademarks-of-agile-organizations

² Laloux, F. 2015. *Reinventing Organizations: A guide to creating meaningful forms of collaboration*. Vhalen, Franz. 356 p.

³ Balázs, B., Smith, A., Aistara, G. and Bela, G. 2015. WP 4: case study report – Transnational Seed Exchange Networks, TRANSIT: EU SSH.2013.3.2-1 Grant agreement no: 613169. transitsocialinnovation.eu/resource-hub/wp4-case-study-report-transnational-seed-exchange-networks

⁴ Haxeltine, A., Pel, B., Dumitru, A., Avelino, F., Kemp, R., Bauler, T., Kunze, I., Dorland, J., Wittmayer, J., and Jørgensen, M.S. 2017. Towards a TSI theory: a relational framework and 12 propositions, (TRANSIT working paper; 16, December 2017), TRANSIT: EU SSH.2013.3.2-1 Grant agreement no: 613169. transitsocialinnovation.eu/content/original/Book%20covers/Local%20PDFs/286a%20TRANSIT_WorkingPaper_TowardsTSItheory%20AH161217.pdf

Topic	Promoting factors	Blocking factors
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social aspects such as working in a team, meetings, events are well organized and well implemented in the culture of the organization. • Volunteers are appreciated and welcomed. Well defined and described tasks are assigned for them and fit to purpose communication tools and platforms are provided. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of time of the members to cope with administrative burdens (e.g., database management, documentation, etc.). • Lack of donors and sponsors in the member structure, beside active members.
Mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scope of the mission is explicit, answers and solves the present and expected challenges/needs. • It is the result of a democratic, inclusive and mediated process, therefore members can easily identify themselves with the scope of activities. • It allows dynamic and adaptive strategies to improve impact and effectiveness, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The scope of the mission is rather limited and exclusive and doesn't address the main/widely accepted challenges. • The mission is the result of a top-down process, without, implementation and proper dissemination failing to give guidance to the members.
Funding structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy, safe and widely accessible tools are provided for payment (e.g., online payments). • The funding structure is based on different pillars (sponsors, projects, member fees, state, commercial activities, services, donations, etc.). • Fundraising is part of the organization's tasks, where targets are set up and a delegated person is responsible for fundraising activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of legal structure of the organization hinders access to public funds. • Lack of a sustainable funding structure and own financial capacities hinders access to European funds. • The organization is highly dependent on one funding pillar. • Dependence on project driven and project bound funding for a very limited time. • Members are not supportive towards fundraising activities of the organization.
Governance and mindset	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The organization structure provides enough space for discussions and co-creation. • A common understanding on the applied terminology is established (e.g., conservation – adaptation, <i>in situ</i> – on farm, commercial – nonprofit, etc.). • Visions and values are reviewed carefully and regularly, with an open mindset and proper awareness. • Equilibrium between theory/scientific approaches and practical know how is ensured. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Founders are limiting the possibilities of change and development (e.g., missing the right moment to integrate new generations and new ideas). • A strong and common vision becomes an ideology, not allowing to think out of the box. • Activities which are not successful any more are carried on.
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper monitoring and documentation of PGR and conservation management activities are set up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring and documentation of PGR and management of conservation activities are not supported.

2.2 External factors

Topic	Promoting factors	Blocking factors
<p>Political environment/Social environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Supportive environment for civil society movements (like CSB) and recognition of their important role as regulatory factors in society. ● Openness of competent authorities for enabling agrobiodiversity in use. ● Incentives for the conservation of agrobiodiversity in use (<i>in situ</i> conservation). ● Promoting the integration of CSBs in national conservation programs e.g., in the case of <i>in-situ/on-farm</i> conservation management. ● Raising the awareness of society on (agro)biodiversity loss. ● Agroecological and social aspects are integrated in implementation agendas of national biodiversity management strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Funding structures or application processes and criteria implemented by national authorities that does not allow CSBs to apply for public funds. ● Lack of interest, different priorities of the policy makers regarding PGR conservation and sustainable use. ● Bureaucratic obstacles when establishing an association or foundation.
<p>Funding</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Willingness of the people to pay for agrobiodiversity services. ● Availability and adapted application process for civil society to get access to public funds. ● Funding possibilities are linked to national long-term conservation and diversity management strategies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Legal restriction for not-for-profit organizations. Not all kind of funding activities are allowed (e.g., services/goods linked to membership fees). ● Complicated VAT-obligations (e.g. for mandate, providing a service) or support (getting funds for a project)). ● Funding guaranteed only for a short project period hinders to build strategies and manpower, as well as knowledge for sustainable and long-term development of the organization. ● Post-project payments obstruct CSBs, without liquidity, to apply and participate in project activities.

Topic	Promoting factors	Blocking factors
Competitors^{5 6 7}, commercial environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative platforms can create trust and transparency. Competitors become partners and develop synergistic fields of activities in a defined area. Positioning instead of competing. • Possibility to exploit capacity as well as to define/find new ways of collaboration to open new fields of activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hidden agendas. • Competing environment which can lead to lose energy and time. • Lack of agroecological systems that are able to cope with agrobiodiversity to scale up CSB-systems within agriculture. • High administrative hurdles for little seed companies and farmers to commercialize PGR are a threat to integrate such actions in a sustainable funding strategy of CSB-system.
Access to PGR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access to the PGR from the national genebank. • CSB create trust for farmers and gardeners to collect PGR on-farm / <i>in-situ</i> and to provide information and PGR to others. • Clear access rules for non-members enable use of samples maintained by a CSB 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IPR-rules hinder access to PGR, by strengthening powerful, multinational companies that monopolize PGR. • High administrative burden for little seed companies and farmers to commercialize PGR is a threat for a sustainable funding strategy of CSB-system and prohibits easy public access to PGR.
Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate change creates pressure for a transition. • Social media provide new effective and rather cheap tools to link people and develop vivid networks. • Capacity building, strong willingness of the society in volunteering. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electronic devices and access to technology as well as fast internet are not available to everybody. • Data-tools are not intuitive and thus demotivate non-dedicated users from the potential benefit of the tool. • Climate change is threatening conservation of PGR in its region of origin - cooperation of different climatic zones will become vital.

⁵ Will, M. 2008. Promoting Value Chains of Neglected and Underutilized Species for Pro-Poor Growth and Biodiversity Conservation. Guidelines and Good Practices. Global Facilitation Unit for Underutilized Species, Rome, Italy.

bioversityinternational.org/fileadmin/migrated/uploads/tx_news/Promoting_value_chains_of_neglected_and_underutilized_species_for_pro-poor_growth_and_biodiversity_conservation_1294.pdf

⁶ Jarvis, D.I., Hodgkin, T., Sthapit, B.R., Fadda, C. and Lopez-Noriega, I. 2011. A Heuristic Framework for Identifying Multiple Ways of Supporting the Conservation and Use of Traditional Crop Varieties within the Agricultural Production System. *Critical Reviews in Plant Sciences*, 30(1-2), 125–176. doi.org/10.1080/07352689.2011.554358

⁷ Felber, Chr. 2010, 2012, 2014 und 2018, «Die Gemeinwohl-Ökonomie», Aktualisierte und erweiterte Neuauflage, Deuticke im Paul Zsolnay Verlag Wien.

3.0 Lessons learned

The above listed internal factors can be successfully used by CSB coordinators when they are working for the development of the organization. External factors like political and social environment are the key factors to be considered when choosing good examples from existing, successful CSBs. The more stable and transparent these external factors are, the better a CSB can be established and developed with a long-term and sustainable perspective. Long-term and multiple funding schemes, like member fees and donors, as well as some commercial activities, compared to strictly project-bound and very time-limited funding, provide capacities to improve existing organization structures, tools, and governances, and provide operational space to develop improved strategies to fulfill the purpose of the CSB in its operational context, as well as to foster the impact on national and international decision-making processes.

Considering the supporting and blocking factors listed above, some of the involved CSBs have chosen three steps they are making or are willing to tackle in their next operational phase.

3.1 ProSpecieRara

ProSpecieRara is working on three topics that are currently blocking the organization's development :

Organization structure: More and more people are working at ProSpecieRara and the network has grown considerably as well. In recent years, the staff have had to face the fact that the hierarchic structure isn't able to cope with the manifold tasks and areas of work in an increasingly dynamic operational environment. Therefore, new ways of collaboration have to be established. Employees have to get out of their primary working fields and reconnect themselves with other colleagues of other working areas to co-create new teams to better and efficiently solve new challenges.

Time for better collaboration: ProSpecieRara has become an established organization that has tried to position itself within the national plant and animal conservation management community. In the meantime, other organizations have appeared, developed their field of operation, and created their profile. It's time now for better collaboration to join forces by offering together new services for knowledge transfer and to increase impact on policy developments as well as improving documentation efforts. Taking climate change into consideration as well, this becomes a strong argument for better collaboration across national borders and between organizations in different countries.

Getting rid of blocking IPRs: One of the most blocking factors for a better collaboration between NGOs like ProSpecieRara and the private industries are intellectual property rights (IPR) issues—especially patents. These issues are not solved with the existing material transfer agreements (MTAs) and access and benefit-sharing (ABS) rules. In Europe, partners of both 'worlds', even if they are willing to collaborate and would both see win-win situations, have almost no best practice examples of how to develop a practicable contract basis for future collaboration.

3.2 Arche Noah

Promoting factors that have supported the development of Arche Noah and should be developed further:

Legal/policy environment: Austrian implementation of EU seed laws can be seen as best practice, enabling conservation and sustainable use of plant genetic resources. This includes the possibility of free exchange of limited quantities of seeds from non-registered material (including exchange against money) and easy registration of amateur varieties. Arche Noah helped to shape this biodiversity friendly legislation in Austria by continuous lobbying. Austrian legislators and administration have been open for improvements.

Funding structure: More than 14,000 members and 3000 long-time donors are the base of a stable funding structure of Arche Noah, allowing long-term activities and political independence.

Blocking factor in the case of Arche Noah:

Governance and organizational structure: During the fast growth in terms of members, sponsors and activities of the organization in the last 10 years, the internal administration structure (controlling, book-keeping, support for members, infrastructure –offices, IT, etc.) did not grow at the same pace. Long-term leaders were focused on increasing activities with minimal costs, ignoring the need for higher administration capacities. After they left in an argument, shaking the whole organization, the internal structure now must be reinforced, causing very high costs in the short term.

3.3 Magház

Magház in the coming period is aiming to work on the following internal and external factors:

Funding structure: Currently Magház is highly dependent on project funding, which makes the organization economically very vulnerable and imposes a number of limits. The aim is to bring some balance, via introducing membership fees and launching commercial activities, like selling seeds, running training courses and other know-how transfer packages.

Membership: In order to better engage people in the activities and to increase the number of members, Magház has to develop a system with specific criteria on the basis of which different levels of members join the network, address how communications can be effectively organized, identify the benefits of volunteering, and what kind of incentives can be offered to the members for a membership fee, etc.

Seed marketing: There is a growing demand for sustainable, environmental-friendly seed sources, but not everybody is interested in DIY seed saving. These people would rather purchase the cultivars that are offered, but the seed sector in Hungary is very strong, thus the legal environment is strict, which has a negative impact on 'marketing agrobiodiversity'. Registration and marketing of landraces and obsolete varieties is possible and free of charge, but it is very bureaucratic, and propagation and marketing of landraces is limited to their region of origin, which usually is a village and its narrow surrounding. In case a landrace is coming from another country, that gives further obstacles. To illustrate the consequences of the legislation there is only one corn and 13 landrace vegetables registered in the country. To overcome these bottlenecks, lobbying at, and trust building with the national authorities is needed.