

Asian Experts' Conference on Cooperation in the Exploration and Sustainable Use of Microbial Genetic Resources –March 16, 2004

Successful collaboration amongst Asian countries to explore microbial genetic resources for the common benefit of mankind

Chair - Katsumi Isono (NITE-DOB), was elected as chair of the meeting. He asked the participants to feel free to express their opinions, questions, comments, requests, etc. so as to accomplish successful opinion exchange during the meeting.

Outline of the Asian delegates' reports and the panel discussion of the Asian Regional Workshop - In reference to the outline of the workshop and the panel discussion on March 15th (for both, see attached), Katsumi Isono asked participants to note that the term “member countries” is used loosely to include those countries in attendance at the conference. Accordingly, the selection of member countries to join the “Asian consortium” (tentative) would be further discussed in today's meeting. A summary of the previous day was delivered. In brief, it emphasized the importance of diversity in climate and also in cultures amongst the participating countries. It also specified the need for promotion of research and development and bilateral and multilateral joint research projects. Lastly, the necessity of forming a consortium or collaboration was reiterated.

Successful collaboration among Asian countries to explore microbial genetic resources for the common benefit of mankind - The general consensus was that there will be much work to be done in terms of human resources development and the promotion of research and development in individual countries. To this end, it was agreed that a task force(s) should be formed to act as an “initiator” to establish a future collaboration framework for the preservation of biodiversity and development of methodology for the effective and sustainable use of microbial genetic resources in Asian countries.

Human resources development: It was widely acknowledged that more efforts will be needed to attract young people/scientists into the field. Sayanto Pawiroharsono (Indonesia) mentioned the importance of continued support for human resources development, citing that there hasn't been an appropriate program in which NITE could collaborate with universities to promote the education of young scientists. Katsumi Isono replied by saying that NITE does not have an

established system to educate post-graduates and therefore couldn't accommodate foreign students at least for the time being. He added, however, that it was something NITE would like to pursue in the future.

Human resources development was deemed to be one way in which individual countries could support their culture collections. Mohd Shukor Nordin (Malaysia) raised the point that not all Asian countries are the same in terms of financial support, facilities and resources. He continued to say that collaborative efforts might look good on paper, but are often difficult in practice. Before anything could be achieved, funding for human resources development will be essential.

Balijanova Tsetse (Mongolia) also commented on the issue of limited funding and suggested the idea of two funds; one for culture collections and another for supporting talented scientists, possibly sending them abroad for post-graduate study. Gao Fu (China) mentioned the need of working together to attract outsiders to the "world of BRCs". Amin Soebandrio (Indonesia) talked about providing management training for BRC personnel to arm them with the necessary skills to successfully negotiate with government for financial assistance.

All participants agreed that the private sector is generally unwilling to provide training and that government support was necessary. Also mentioned was that more funds for publications would increase the likelihood of government's financial assistance.

Katsumi Isono agreed that without funds, nothing could be achieved. He encouraged the participants to appeal to their respective governments so that all countries concerned could improve the learning of young people and, by doing so, the quality of biological resources. He concluded that an exchange of young scientists and researchers is important, but that a system that would facilitate the exchange of communication is also necessary.

Pursuing research and information exchange: Manny Bravo (The Philippines) emphasized the need for creating a research agenda before launching the topic on R&D. Although all participants were concerned about R&D, priorities amongst the member countries differ greatly. He said that all countries needed to align their priorities with NITE so that the collaborative work performed on microorganisms will become mutually beneficial. He recommended achieving this through workshops before any further agreement on collaboration is reached. Specifically, he asked, "Where are we going to channel our collective efforts"? In this connection, he provided for discussion the idea of 'educating' our 'partners in government', namely the policy-makers. He proposed that they be encouraged to attend workshops, because they tend not to have technical backgrounds. They should be exposed to discussions on microbial resources so that they can confidently say that they are in support of it.

Also discussed was the idea of an international training center, like the one established in

China, which could support neighboring countries in the classification of microorganisms. Ma Juncal (China) confirmed that the information center in China is interested in sharing information with those in other Asian countries.

The idea of constructing a central database for information exchange was suggested by Dong Xiuzhu (China), to which Ken-ichiro Suzuki (NITE-DOB) responded by saying that from the taxonomical point of view, information exchange would be useful because there are cases of confused naming and organisms don't always have the same name. He elaborated by saying that he and colleagues often have to specify the kind of bacterial strain to the public so information exchange in this regard would be helpful.

Katsumi Isono said that the time isn't ripe for an international information center. The first step would be to establish such organizations in individual countries. NITE needs to improve its own information system too.

Task forces: Initially, establishing a task force(s) was naively conceived to identify and extract issues being confronted by countries in the region. As the discussion progressed, differences in opinion as to the implementation and shape of task forces became clearer. These concerns can be summarized as follows:

- a) Should the task force be established immediately or over time? Katsumi Isono suggested that the task force consist of one representative from each of the countries in attendance. The task force could be a loose association of these members who would all communicate initially by email. Whilst some participants favored this kind of a gradual start, others were more inclined to start proceedings immediately. "Do we have to wait until we meet again in the next (Japanese) fiscal year"? Gao Fu (China) suggested a "trivial MOU" collaboration to launch the task force. It would be "a multilateral MOU".
- b) Would it be necessary for the task force to include all countries represented at the conference? Although all participants expressed interest in collaboration, not all agreed as to whether it would be necessary to have all countries represented in the task force. A task force of 5-6 people will be more cost-effective and efficient than the one that incorporates too many people.
- c) If a task force of 5-6 people be formed, then how would the task force members be selected?
- d) Would a task force consisting of a select number of countries truly represent the needs and interests of all collaborating countries?
- e) What would be the first step towards setting up a task force?
- f) How would the task force be funded?

- g) Would membership be extended to countries that were not in attendance at the Asian Experts' Conference on Cooperation in the Exploration and Sustainable Use of Microbial Genetic Resources? Masahiro Miyazaki (NITE-DOB) mentioned in this connection that initial invitation was sent out also to Brunei, Laos and Singapore and, therefore, they should be included.
- h) How much government support would be necessary for the effective establishment of a task force? Eudang Sukara (Indonesia) talked of Japan being the most important member. Following Japan would be China and Korea. Pisey Oum (China) was not in favor of government ministers being involved as different countries have specific and varying priorities. One strategy might fit the Cambodian situation, but not Chinese one. Daniel Baskaran (Malaysia) emphasized the fact that ASEAN plus three is a very powerful group, which should form a task force to identify issues that get ministerial approval (using the Korean model). He continued to say that approaching individual countries to get approval would be too time-consuming. Involving a few major countries on the ministerial level would be preferable.

Other matters: Shigeaki Harayama (NITE-DOB) questioned the assumption that the private sector isn't inclined to fund research in the exploration and sustainable use of microbial genetic resources. He said that through NITE, the Japanese private sector sought information on the policy of distribution in regional countries. By working with NITE, Asian countries could raise funds for research from private industry. The government isn't the only source of funding.

Chair's Summary - Katsumi Isono asked if any participants objected to having the information in their Power Point presentations shared with others. There were no objections. It was decided that summaries of presentation materials and of the panel discussions would be sent to all participants on CD and in print. Katsumi Isono suggested that a similar workshop be held annually at which the findings of the task force could be discussed. All participants volunteered to join the task force.

End of meeting.