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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE
AND NATURAL HABITATS

Standing Committee

Meeting of the Advisory Group of Experts on Budget

Strasbourg, 16 September 2013

MEETING REPORT

*Secretariat Memorandum
prepared by
the Directorate of Democratic Governance*

AD HOC ADVISORY GROUP OF EXPERTS ON BUDGETARY MATTERS

Strasbourg, 16 September 2013

Palais de l'Europe, Room 16, 9.30 am

1. OPENING OF THE MEETING

The Chair of the Standing Committee to the Bern Convention, Mr Jan Plesnik, opened the meeting recalling that the Ad-hoc Advisory Group of Experts on Budgetary matters was set up by the Standing Committee to examine Parties and Secretariat's suggestions on ways and means to improve the financing of the Convention. He further thanked the Parties who sent a representative to the meeting, as well as those who submitted a written contribution. He concluded this agenda item by reminding the main tasks given to the Group, as foreseen in the Group's Terms of Reference.

2. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA

The draft Agenda for the meeting was adopted without amendments.

3. INFORMATION FROM THE SECRETARIAT ON LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

The Secretariat started its presentation by recalling the background to financial discussions. In fact, in 2011 the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly adopted Recommendation No. 1964 (2011) on « The need to assess progress in the implementation of the Bern Convention », praising the work of the Convention and requesting that the activities of the Bern Convention be made one of the priorities of the Council of Europe and that more efforts, including financially, be put in place to ensure the proper implementation of the Convention.

The Recommendation, as well as the possible expected reply to it by the Committee of Ministers, generated a debate at the 31st Standing Committee meeting on the financial sustainability of the Convention, particularly in a period of economic crisis. On that occasion, the Parties decided to show a responsible behavior by acknowledging the effects of the financial crises on Council of Europe activities in general and taking the lead in reforming the funding system of the Bern Convention. The Secretariat presented three options for improving financing and the Standing Committee asked the Chair to engage a reflection on the matter and to follow-up closely the on-going reform process at the Council of Europe.

However, the first meeting of the Ad Hoc Advisory Group of Experts on Budgetary issues received low attendance from Parties and, moreover, only few of them submitted written positions. Therefore no conclusions could be reached and the issue was again discussed at the 32nd Standing Committee meeting.

In the decision delivered in 2012, the Committee instructed the Bureau to carry-out a careful analysis of the opinions expressed by Parties, as well as to seek for the views of other States, taking into account also Council of Europe budgetary provisions for the 2014 and 2015. The Bureau was requested to submit to the Committee a draft decision on budgetary matters at its next meeting (33rd meeting). The Secretariat was instructed to consult Parties on their possible voluntary contributions and the form in which they preferred to receive financing requests.

The Secretariat continued its presentation by explaining how financial issues are dealt with at the general Council of Europe level. The Secretariat informed on the procedure for the adoption of the biennial Council of Europe "Programme and Budget", emphasising on the control mechanisms established at the level of the Committee of Ministers, including double checks by a Budget Committee made up of 11 independent experts, an Internal Auditor responsible *inter alia* for risk assessment, an External Auditor appointed by the Committee of Ministers, and an Audit Committee.

The Delegates of the Committee of Ministers examine the Progress Review report submitted by the Secretary General, the main orientations for future actions, the suggested priorities, and their budgetary implications. They finally approve the amount of Member States contribution to what is called the Ordinary Budget (deriving from the contributions of Member States, calculated using the average of the data of each Member States on annual population and Gross Domestic Product converted to US dollars in respect of the three-year period ending 24 months before the date of entry into force of the scale. In the calculation, the weighting given to data on GDP is five times the weighting given to the data on population).

The Secretariat further stressed that, since this year and according to CM Resolution (2013) 7 on “Financial arrangements for the participation of non-member States in Council of Europe conventions”, non-member states are also called to contribute to the costs relating to the functioning and operation of Council of Europe’s Convention with monitoring mechanism to which they are Party.

Moreover, the Secretariat summarised the two main financial options discussed at last Standing Committee meeting, i.e. Option one, consisting in a reduction of the expenditure through a reduction of the activities (presenting the advantage of lowering the functioning costs, but also the visibility and impact of the work done under the Convention), and Option three revised, suggesting that a recommended contribution is set up for Parties upon request and that, at the same time, savings are done whenever possible, including by using new tools or working methodologies. The latter seemed to be favored by the majority of Parties in 2012.

The Secretariat continued by presenting the main proposals submitted this year by Parties, highlighting that some of these were particularly useful and innovative, while some others were referring to practices already in place and used by the Secretariat, on which perhaps communication should be improved. The Secretariat stressed the good quality of the received written contributions which proved to be useful for the internal reflection on budgetary matters. Again, the majority of Parties which sent a written contribution expressed a preference for the so-called Option three revised.

In the last part of its presentation, the Secretariat identified, for each of the new concrete proposals submitted by the Parties, those which are already being implemented, those which can be implemented, and those which are not feasible under the current Council of Europe framework. It further illustrated the new suggested practices which have been already integrated in the working methodology of the current year, and emphasised on the initiatives which could benefit the Convention, but whose responsibility relies on Parties.

The conclusions were devoted to a short presentation of relevant examples of activities organised making use of the suggestions received by the Parties, as well as of their challenges and success.

The Chair thanked the Secretariat for the most comprehensive presentation, which clarified the internal Council of Europe procedure and provided a good basis for the discussions of the Parties, foreseen under agenda item 7.

5. PROPOSALS FROM PARTIES

The Chair noted that this agenda item was covered by the presentation of the Secretariat and proposed to consider it closed.

6. DRAFT PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES AND BUDGET 2014-2015

The Secretariat presented a preliminary draft Programme of Activities and Budget (PoAB) for 2014-2015, explaining that this consisted in a table detailing the activities to be organised in the coming two years, as well as the necessary budget. Regarding the narrative part of the document, the Secretariat suggested to move to a new format, which would include an overview of the progress and objectives achieved in the current year and a tentative calendar of meetings.

The Secretariat stressed that the activities included in the PoAB were identified taking into account both the priorities identified by the different Bern Convention’s Groups of Experts, and the work programmes of other relevant agreements. Concerning the budget, the figures are based on costs estimated following the past experience and taking into consideration the input given by the Parties for reducing expenses.

7. INTERVENTIONS AND DISCUSSION

The Chair opened this agenda item by thanking the Secretariat for the very good preparation of the background information for the meeting, as well as the Parties for the useful written contribution submitted.

All the participants took the floor for summarising their authorities' position in the light of the information received.

While taking the floor, the representative of the European Commission clarified she was attending the meeting on behalf of the European Union as a Party to the Convention, therefore not in representation of the EU Member States. She stated that the Bern Convention remains an important tool for the European Commission's cooperation, particularly with neighborhood countries, namely on key priorities such as the protection of migratory species and the Invasive Alien Species management and eradication. She further recalled that the Commission is largely co-financing the joint CoE/EU Emerald project and ensured that the EU remains committed to the financing of the Convention, without prejudice to the EU Member States.

The discussions then focused on clarifying some procedural issues, as well as on how to ensure that the need of cost-reductions does not impact on the convention's implementation..

Some participants made suggestions regarding the presentation of the table on the estimated costs, so to make it clearer for the readers. Some other expressed satisfaction for the customised letter requesting voluntary contributions they received as a novelty this year.

They all welcomed the probable decision of the Committee of Ministers to keep almost unvaried the provision of Ordinary Budget allocated to the Convention.

8. DRAFT DECISION

The Secretariat presented the draft decision, prepared taking into consideration all the proposals of the Parties which seemed to be feasible according to external and internal constraints. It further clarified that the Bureau would be the body entitled to express its final decision on the draft text to be submitted to the Standing Committee.

The participants welcomed the text as a good compromise taking into account all the opinions expressed by the Parties and proposed to send it to the Bureau with the agreement of the Ad Hoc Group.

9. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

None were raised.

The Chair thanked the Secretariat and the participants for the concrete and useful discussions and expressed his satisfaction for the results reached on financial matters. He concluded by expressing the wish that this work will benefit the coming debates at the 33rd Standing Committee meeting.

Appendix 1



Advisory Group of Experts on Budget

Strasbourg, 16 September 2013
Palais de l'Europe, Room 16, 9.30 am

AGENDA

- 1. OPENING OF THE MEETING**
Introduction by the Chair of the Standing Committee and the Secretariat
- 2. ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA**
- 3. INFORMATION FROM THE SECRETARIAT ON LATEST DEVELOPMENTS**
- 5. PROPOSALS FROM PARTIES**
 - a. Ensuring constant and predictable funding
 - b. Ensuring a cost effective management
 - c. Possible scales for suggested contributions
 - d. Partnership with the private sector
- 6. DRAFT PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES AND BUDGET 2014-2015**
- 6. INTERVENTIONS AND DISCUSSION**
- 7. DRAFT DECISION**
- 8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

Appendix 2**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS****CZECH REPUBLIC / RÉPUBLIQUE TCHÈQUE**

Mr Jan PLESNIK, Adviser to Director in foreign affairs, Nature Conservation Agency (NCA CR), Kaplanova 1931/1, CZ-148 00 PRAGUE 11 – CHODOV

Tel +42 283 069 246. Fax +42 283 069 241. E-mail: jan.plesnik@nature.cz

EUROPEAN UNION / UNION EUROPEENNE

Ms Milena NOVAKOVA, Policy Officer, European Commission, DG ENVIRONMENT, Unit B.2 Bio-diversity, Avenue de Beaulieu 5, BU-5 04/125, 1160 AUDERGHEM, Belgium

Tel : +32 2 299 53 79. E-mail : Milena.Novakova@ec.europa.eu

FRANCE / FRANCE

Ms Marianne COUROUBLE, Chargée de mission Affaires internationales, Sous-Direction de la Protection et de la Valorisation des Espèces et de leurs Milieux, Direction de l'eau et de la biodiversité – DGALN/DEB, Ministère de l'Ecologie (MEEDDTL), Arche Sud, 92055 LA DEFENSE Cedex.

Tel : +33 140 81 31 90. Fax : +33 140 81 74 71. E-mail : marianne.courouble@developpement-durable.gouv.fr

ICELAND / ISLANDE

Dr Jón Gunnar OTTÓSSON, Director General, Director General, Icelandic Institute of Natural History, Urriðahóltsstraeti 6 – 8, 212 GARDABAER

Tel : +354 5900 500. E-mail : jgo@ni.is

SERBIA / SERBIE

Ms Snezana PROKIC, Focal point for Bern Convention, Adviser, Ministry of Energy, Development and Environmental Protection of the Republic of Serbia, Omladinskih brigada 1. Str, SIV III, NEW BELGRADE, 11070

Tel: +381 11 31 31 569. Fax : +381 11 313 2459. E-mail: snezana.prokic@ekoplan.gov.rs or snezana.prokic@merz.gov.rs

SECRETARIAT / SECRÉTARIAT

Council of Europe / Conseil de l'Europe, Directorate of Democratic Governance / Direction de la Gouvernance démocratique, F-67075 STRASBOURG CEDEX, France

Tel : +33 3 88 41 20 00. Fax : +33 3 88 41 37 51

Mr Eladio FERNÁNDEZ-GALIANO, Head of the Democratic Initiatives Department / Chef du Service des Initiatives démocratiques

Tel : +33 3 88 41 22 59 Fax : +33 3 88 41 37 51 E-mail : eladio.fernandez-galiano@coe.int

Ms Ivana d'ALESSANDRO, Secretary of the Bern Convention / Secrétaire de la Convention de Berne, Biodiversity Unit / Unité de la Biodiversité

Tel : +33 3 90 2151 51. Fax : +33 3 88 41 37 51. E-mail : ivana.dalessandro@coe.int

Ms Iva OBREtenova, Administrator, Biodiversity Unit / Administrateur, Unité de la Biodiversité

Tel : +33 3 90 21 58 81. Fax : +33 3 88 41 37 51. E-mail : iva.obretenova@coe.int

Ms Lilia KOLOMBET, Administrator, Biodiversity Unit / Administrateur, Unité de la Biodiversité
Tel : +33 390 21 53 85. Fax : +33 3 88 41 37 51 E-mail : lilia.kolombet@coe.int

Ms Véronique de CUSSAC, Administrative assistant, Biological Diversity Unit / Assistante administrative, Unité de la Diversité biologique
Tel : +33 3 88 41 34 76 Fax : +33 3 88 41 37 51. E-mail : veronique.decusac@coe.int