

GRA INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH COLLABORATION WORKING GROUP (IRCWG) MEETING

Brussels, 13-14 June 2016

Chair's Summary Report

Introduction

Following initial discussions in Iowa, the GRA Council agreed to establish a working group to explore options for enhancing research collaboration among GRA members with a focus on the International Research Consortium model that was presented to the Council by the EC.

The first meeting of the Working Group was by teleconference on 12 April with the main focus being to finalise the Terms of Reference for the Working Group. It was agreed that a physical meeting would be required to enable the Working Group to get a better overview and understanding of research collaboration models. The European Commission (EC) offered to co-host this meeting in Brussels to take advantage of their meeting room facilities and the availability of key people to present on European collaboration models.

Following the first teleconference the ToR for the WG was finalised as were the dates and venue for the physical meeting (13-14 June in Brussels).

- The WG ToR is attached as Annex 1
- The Agenda for the Brussels meeting is attached as Annex 2
- The participants list is attached as Annex 3
- Presentations are in the attached zip file.

The Working Group was co-facilitated by Matt Hooper from the NZ Embassy in Rome (in support of NZ's role as GRA Secretariat) and Agnieszka Romanowicz from the EC. The Working Group would like to extend thanks to the DG AGRI (particularly Agnieszka Romanowicz and Jean-Charles Cavitte) for the excellent arrangements in co-hosting the meeting at short notice, as well as to all the presenters that gave up their time to address the Working Group.

Presentations

FACCE-JPI (Heather McKhann)

Three different collaboration initiatives that the FACCE-JPI is involved in were presented.

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MACSUR1 is a network of researchers modelling European agriculture under climate change. It has helped to create a strong operational alignment between researchers as well as some capacity building. The network has relied on existing funding although some new money has come into it, primarily to assist with the heavy coordination workload given the 300 plus researchers. MACSUR1's strength is its flexible and balanced governance but there are limitations in terms of funding and the 'bottom up' approach.

KNSI is the Knowledge Network on Sustainable Intensification which brings together a national scientist and a national representative from a funding organisation into a network organised around a series of hubs. The tool is still under development.

TAP Soils is the Thematic Annual Programming Network on Soils. This is a soft mechanism that looks to harmonise methods and protocols as part of the existing work of countries. Programs are funded at the national level and results are then shared and communicated across the network. Similarities with existing GRA networks were noted.

Belmont Forum (Paul Vossen)

The Belmont Forum is a network of national research funding agencies from around the world. Agencies represent themselves, rather than their countries, although presumably their priorities/funding reflect national policy positions. The Forum develops Collaborative Research Actions that generally involve a subset of interested members and that have their own rules and governance. The Forum itself has one annual meeting. There is no formal contracting between members and there is scope for non-members to be involved in CRAs. Implementation of research is done in accordance with the national rules of the members.

The Forum is best described as an 'enabling mechanism' for collaboration rather than one that negotiates and sets its own strategic direction top down. There is no up-front funding commitment required. The strength of the Belmont Forum is its ability to act rapidly and catalyse collaboration in areas where there is shared interest. The Forum has an "open data" policy. Perhaps of greatest interest to the Working Group was the fact that the Forum is made up of national research funding agencies rather than research organisations or policy organisations.

International Rare Diseases Research Consortium as example of an IRC (Iiro Eerola)

An International Research Consortium made up of more than 40 members from four continents – both public and private members – aimed at created economies of scale in the fight against rare diseases. The IRC has developed a strong, top down strategic direction based on common goals and objectives, and a focussed, outcome based program to deliver measurable results. The IRC is open to any funder, including charities and philanthropic organisations. The IRC is structured into six taskforces dealing with specific issues that are time limited and objective driven.

The IRC is not a legal entity but members are required to sign a “letter of intent” and adhere to governance framework and policies. There is a minimum funding contribution required of USD 10 million although groups can join together to meet this threshold. Policies and guidelines emphasise the need for collaboration and cooperation and cover issues such as sharing of data, publication of results, common quality standards, harmonization of ontologies, and involvement of patients. There is a great deal of flexibility afforded by the IRC model, including with respect to financial contribution thresholds. While “joint funding calls” may be part of an IRC, the primary focus is on coordination of research agendas to answer significant strategic research questions.

Jean-Charles Cavitte presented on the recently formed IRC on Animal Health which has many of the same elements as the Rare Diseases consortium. This IRC evolved out of many years of networking (through STAR-IDAZ) and represents a move to more deliberate and targeted research collaboration in this area.

“4 per 1000” Soil Carbon initiative and the role of the GRA Integrative Research Group (IRG) (Jean-Francois Sousanna)

“4 per 1000” was formally launched by France at COP21 as part of the Lima-Paris Action Agenda and one of its components is an international collaborative research effort on soil fertility and carbon sequestration. The GRA and, in particular, the IRG, are seen as having a central role to play in this international research effort along with the CGIAR and other organisations and institutions involved in soil research such as the Global Soil Partnership. The IRG is about “upscaling” more localised research efforts to look at potential gains across landscapes and regions involving a range of agricultural systems. The IRC model is seen as particularly applicable to “4 per 1000” given the focus on targeted research linked to addressing global strategic challenges as well as the intention to ensure research leads to concrete actions on the ground.

The EC advised of its plans to launch a Coordination and Support Action (CSA) in 2017 to support the development of research collaboration on soil carbon sequestration in the context of climate change and food security. Relevant organisations including “4 per 1000”, the GRA and the FACCE-JPI will be encouraged take advantage of this support initiative which is intended to support the development of appropriate collaboration mechanisms (rather than to fund actual research).

Global Partnerships in Livestock Emissions Research (Peter Ettema)

New Zealand’s significant GHG emissions profile from pastoral livestock farming led NZ to establish the Global Partnerships for Livestock Emissions Research (GPLER) as part of our contribution to the GRA. Using a “research challenges model” New Zealand has put up NZ\$25 million over four years to fund collaborative research projects whereby research consortiums bid into the fund. Projects have to demonstrate strong GRA member or NZ leadership for funding and if more than 10 percent of the funding requested in going to international partners then this must be matched by equal levels of co-funding. Three rounds have been held to date with 3-4 projects having been funded in each round (10 in total).

Lessons learnt included the need to provide adequate time for collaborations to form in the period between a funding round being announced and when applications were due. GPLER has given rise to genuine international collaboration and highlights what can be achieved when funding is specifically earmarked for collaborative projects.

US national and bilateral collaboration (Louie Tupas)

US government funding agencies are domestically focused but they are encouraged to form international relationships. This is done on an institutional level by the scientists themselves. Bilateral collaborations are often established at institutional level (Ministries or Research organisations) via MOUs (including via the Belmont Forum) which can be easier to initiate than at Govt to Govt level although this is also possible. The US Department of Agriculture has also worked with the US Agency for International Development through the PEER programme to trigger research collaboration with developing country researchers. Researchers apply to USAID who will fund their collaboration with domestic partners that are funded by domestic agencies.

Summary of Working Group discussions and Recommendations

On Day 2 the Working Group recapped the different models covered on Day 1 while considering more explicitly what elements might be applicable to the GRA. This helped identify what elements are currently missing in the GRA context and the types of mechanisms, structures and processes that might be needed to catalyse international research collaboration within the GRA.

Some of the key points that emerged from the discussions were as follows:

- GRA research activity is currently being driven by the Research Groups in a bottom-up manner. There are presentations to Council on what the RGs are doing but no real strategic top down direction or discussion by the Council to set a “GRA Research Agenda”, say for the coming 2-years. Such a Research Agenda should be directly linked to the GRA’s Strategic Plan which is under development (and where discussions have included a need for greater specificity about the GRA’s research priorities). Without this, it’s hard for the GRA to start developing internal collaboration initiatives or engaging with other international research collaboration initiatives.
- While the Research Group Co-chairs and the Council would be central to defining the “GRA Research Agenda”, decisions regarding research funding, including in the context of international collaborations, are very much the responsibility of research funding agencies. There is currently no specific forum or grouping within the GRA framework for engagement by research funding agencies.
- If the GRA is working on developing a Research Agenda that will be the subject of international collaboration initiatives then it makes sense to be working closely with key Partner Organisations. Two organisations that were identified as being particularly relevant are the FACCE-JPI and the European Commission – neither or which are currently GRA Partners. CGIAR/CCAFS, who is a GRA Partner, would be another obvious one.
- Once a GRA Research Agenda is agreed then there can be an associated discussion/planning exercise around what sorts of collaborations might be developed to implement the Agenda. A range of different collaboration mechanisms might be utilised and there is unlikely to be any “one size fits all” solution. An IRC could be created to take forward a specific area of work. Collaborations on more specific topics could fit under an IRC umbrella – indeed there are endless possibilities. What is

important is to have the right people having the right sorts of conversations at the right stage in the process.

- This led to discussion about what sort of additional “body” might be needed within the GRA structure to advance discussions on specific research collaboration initiatives and associated funding opportunities, including with relevant partners. This is a key area for further discussion, particularly given there was also a clear desire to not introduce unnecessary complexity or administrative burden to the GRA structure. It was noted that the GRA Charter does provide for establishment of cross-cutting groups on issues of high priority to the GRA but that it would be important to ensure all relevant organisations were able to engage.
- On 4/1000 and the issue of soil carbon sequestration and soil health there is clearly momentum to do something sooner rather than later. The EC is planning to issue a Cooperative Support Action (CSA) for 2017 that a consortium will be able to bid for to fund coordination of soil carbon research collaboration. GRA, FACCE and 4/1000 are all actively encouraged to get engaged. The clear incentive is for the three organisations to talk to each other and work something out in advance that the EC can then support. As envisaged, this is a good “first off the block” practical test of our ability to get more advanced research collaboration working.

Recommendations

Key recommendations arising from the Working Group are as follows:

1. The GRA needs to develop a clear Vision and Research Agenda that sets out the priority research questions/projects for the coming period and this should be directly linked into the GRA’s new Strategic Plan. Without this, it will be difficult for the GRA to start engaging on/with international research collaboration initiatives. GRA Research Group Co-chairs should be tasked to collectively identify key research projects for consideration by Council.
2. There is a need to more directly involve the research funding agencies from GRA member countries in discussions on international research collaboration.
3. The GRA should work to develop and strengthen relationships with key partner organisations to take forward the GRA Research Agenda, and consider new partnerships with relevant organisations such as the EC and the FACCE-JPI.

4. Consider establishment of an additional body under the GRA framework to specifically focus on international research collaboration mechanisms. This could be a Cross-cutting Group established under the GRA Charter.
5. Consider how the GRA can best support international research collaboration on soil carbon sequestration and take advantage of momentum arising from the “4 per 1000” initiative and the EC’s planned CSA on this topic in 2017.

Next steps

- Finalised Brussels meeting report to be circulated to IRCWG members and GRA Co-Chairs for consideration.
- Advice and recommendations to the Council to be finalised, including compilation of a list of existing collaboration mechanisms that are available for GRA members (as per ToRs) since this was not covered at the Brussels meeting.