

Budget cuts force lay-offs at UN biotechnology centre

International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology seeks extra support after main funder slashes contribution.

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27 February 2012

An international biotechnology research centre is facing lay-offs and equipment shortages following budget cuts by Italy, one of its main funders.

The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) was set up in 1987 by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization to advance research and training in biomedicine and plant biotechnology for the developing world. The centre is now an autonomous, intergovernmental organization in the UN system. It has 61 member states, many of which are developing countries, and employs more than 500 scientists at campuses in Trieste, Italy; New Delhi; and Cape Town, South Africa. The Italian site focuses on biomedicine and molecular biology, the Indian one on virology, immunology and plant biotechnology, and the South African campus on infectious diseases and cancer.



ICGEB

The International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology, headquartered in Trieste, Italy, is facing its first budget cut in 25 years.

Marc Van Montagu, founder of the Institute of Plant Biotechnology for Developing Countries in Ghent, Belgium, and a scientific advisor to the ICGEB, says that the UN centre has an important role in international development. “The time of giving aid money to developing countries should come to an end; the ICGEB teaches these countries how to have access to their own agricultural resources,” he says.

The governments of the countries that host the research campuses together cover 95% of the nearly €17-million (US\$22.8-million) core budget. But this year, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs is cutting €2 million from its €12.4-million contribution, as part of a multi-billion-euro package of austerity measures approved by the Italian parliament last November.

“This is the first time we have suffered cuts in 25 years,” says Francisco Baralle, a molecular biologist and director-general of the ICGEB. “Some personnel reduction will be necessary in Trieste and New Delhi.” The Cape Town campus has a separate budget provided by the South African government, and won’t be affected by the funding squeeze.

“No member state seems prepared to take over from Italy.”

Austerity measures

The cuts will be distributed equally between the Italian and Indian sites, which will have to lay off some of the 171 staffers who are paid from the core budget. The ICGEB has already asked for voluntary resignations, with a non-voluntary phase to follow if necessary.

Pierre Chambon, founder of the Institute for Genetics and Cellular and Molecular Biology in Strasbourg, France, and a former scientific adviser to the ICGEB, says that the Trieste campus is “one of the best research centres in Italy, but these cuts will hit it hard”.

Fabian Feiguin, a neurobiologist and group leader at the Trieste site, is worried. “These measures will affect the number and length of fellowships, and are already affecting equipment affordability,” he says.

The New Delhi campus is facing further problems. Its budget is already too small to cover electricity and maintenance expenses, says Baralle. Other sources familiar with the situation say that researchers must seek authorization to perform experiments at night not only for security reasons, but also to reduce electricity costs.

In a statement to *Nature*, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Italy is asking for more cooperation from other member states. “We are supporting the ICGEB mainly on a voluntary basis and will continue to do so, but it is desirable to reach a new equilibrium among donors,” it said. Italy is also urging member states that are behind with their dues to pay up.

Baralle hopes to mitigate the effects of the cuts by expanding the centre's non-core budget, which currently makes up 30% of the total and comes from external research grants. But, warns Chambon, "it's not easy to cover such a sum with extra grants".

The ICGEB will also ask other member countries to increase their contributions. However, Van Montagu fears that it will prove difficult to get more money. "No member state seems prepared to take over from Italy," he says.

Nature | doi:10.1038/nature.2012.10111