



Report of the  
**Global Research Council Regional Meeting of  
the European Region on COVID-19**

14 JANUARY 2021

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## Colophon

May 2021

### **Report of the Global Research Council Regional Meeting of the European Region on COVID-19**

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Acknowledgments: Marc Schiltz, Katja Becker, Véronique Halloin, José Labastida, Dirk-Jan den Boer, Zeynep Arziman, Christoph Bärenreuter, Charlotte Deane, Lidia Borrell-Damián, Yazdan Yazdanpanah, Mairéad O'Driscoll, Sven Stafström, Elena Domínguez, Gabriel Barbash, Thierry Damerval, Signe Ratso, Vasee Moorthy, John-Arne Røttingen, Euclides de Mesquita Neto, Aldo Stroebel, Roshni Abedin, Michael Bright.

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## INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of a new type of Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) delayed the organisation and hosting of all GRC meetings in 2020. On 14 January 2021, Science Europe and the German Research Foundation (DFG) co-hosted the 2020 regional meeting for the European region on COVID-19.

The virtual seminar started with introduction speeches from Marc Schiltz, President of Science Europe and GRC Board Member, and Katja Becker, President of DFG and Chair of the GRC Board. These were followed by three thematic sessions featuring keynotes, short statements, and discussion rounds with questions from the virtual floor. The event concluded with reports from the other GRC regions, the presentation of a series of wider GRC activities, and closing speeches by the hosts.

This report focuses on the major outcomes of session one, two and three. Refer to the Annex for further information on the programme of the event. The biographies of all speakers are included in the event documentation accompanying this report.

## SESSION 1

### THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FUNDERS' CORE BUSINESS – CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

Session 1 speakers, including keynote speaker José Labastida, Head of the Scientific Department at the ERC Executive Agency (ERCEA), addressed the best practices, challenges, and successes in how their organisations dealt with the impact of COVID-19 on their core business. Topics and questions linked to the session were, among others: remote review panels and quality assurance, fast track calls, and unexpected side-effects and funding matters.

#### Remote assessment project evaluations

Funders such as the ERC and those represented by the panellists (NWO, TUBITAK, FWF, and UKRI) rapidly adapted to the crisis and successfully performed their core activities via electronic means, such as by organising remote panel assessments. In the beginning, difficulties were reported co-ordinating reviewers from different time zones. To support the workflow and work performance under the new circumstances, new guidelines for officers and expert in assessment panels were issued. Positive effects of using digital tools were that remote assessment panels could be scheduled at much shorter notice. Also, the results of the calls were available shortly afterwards. Another positive effect of the introduction of remote meetings was the savings made on travel and subsistence costs. Funders such as the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (TUBITAK) reported that the pandemic fostered, in general, more co-creation among different stakeholders and encouraged the participation of young researchers in the calls.

The speakers agreed that the remote assessment project evaluations were more efficient and successful than expected and did not compromise the quality of the outcomes. However, they also noted that remote panels cannot replace the interactions and exchange of reviewers that traditionally happen during an in-person review process.

ERCEA reported that it was conducting a survey among reviewers to help compile the lessons learned. The survey included questions on possible new processes for remote review once normal activities would resume. The results of the survey will be public.

#### Fast-track calls in time of crisis and side-effects

Funders reported that they had issued fast-track calls with varying research focuses, specifications, aims, or administrative modalities to provide fast responses to the pandemic. Some COVID-19 calls were implemented within two to four weeks (in contrast with traditional call assessment processes that can take up to 6 months).

The Austrian Science Fund (FWF) issued a multilateral call for multidisciplinary research on COVID-19. The call was open to projects involving researchers based in Luxembourg, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovenia, Poland, and the Provincial Administration of South Tyrol under the lead agency agreements between FWF and FNR, SNSF, GACR, DFG, ARRS, and NCN.<sup>1</sup>

The World Health Organisation (WHO) blueprint template<sup>2</sup> was deemed very useful in providing a roadmap for research topics to address the knowledge gaps. As the pandemic evolved, the relevance of calls and research projects granted were re-evaluated to help meet new knowledge gaps.

Speakers mentioned the importance of building flexibility measures into all type of research processes (for example, call deadline extensions, grant and project applications, project reporting).

Depending on the national context, some funding agencies observed unplanned or unintended effects of rapid response measures. In some cases, those side effects were consciously accepted due to the need to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fwf.ac.at/en/research-funding/fwf-programmes/international-programmes/joint-projects>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.who.int/teams/blueprint/covid-19>

react rapidly and/or to build up capacities in certain research domains. In other cases, a redesign of the process that produced such effects was necessary.

UK Research & Innovation (UKRI) reported that in some cases, during the early phase of the crisis, calls may not have attracted the best possible scientific proposals. This led to a decrease in the success rates of early-career scientists, who had not yet had the possibility to demonstrate a strong research record in fields related to COVID-19 or other pandemics.

The Dutch Research Council (NWO) reported about a call issued on a weekend and which led to a substantial oversubscription, favouring specific groups of scientists and disadvantaged others, in particular women applicants.<sup>3</sup>

For funders, it is of utmost importance to learn from these cases and to ensure a level-playing field of opportunities for all researchers to attract the best outcomes for every programme.

### Funding and funding decisions

Despite the prioritisation of COVID-19 research, most funders were able to spend their available 2020 funds reasonably among all research fields. Also, most funding agencies – but not all – were able to provide funds for project extensions. Those measures were important to limit the effect of the pandemic on research careers and maintain the trust between funders and scientists.

The Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS) in Belgium was able to raise additional funds for research through patronage and public donations, organised via a previously set up cancer donation platform ('Televie'). Consequently, they were able to fund around 20 additional COVID-19 small projects of €1M each.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Note: There is an increasing amount of literature showcasing the cost of COVID-19 to female scientists. For example, <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-02183-x>

<sup>4</sup> <https://televie.be/category/news/>

## SESSION 2

### THE INTERFACE BETWEEN THE RESEARCH ECOSYSTEM AND POLITICS

In session 2, keynote speaker Yazdan Yazdanpanah, Director of ANR's Emerging Infectious Diseases Agency and advisor to the French Government on COVID-19, and panellists discussed the tension between science, policy, and the public. This session also addressed the challenge of integrating scientific advice into policymaking during the pandemic. The session was composed of researchers with an advisory function to their national governments on COVID-19 and GRC participants.

#### Science Advice and communication

Participants agreed that the crisis has demonstrated the critical importance and need for science advice. The topic, however, remains complex. They reminded the audience that scientists cannot provide all answers to policy makers. Major unknowns remain on which measures are the most effective, which are the best medicines and treatments, and what will be the future social-political implications of the different types of interventions. Governmental advisors Yazdan Yazdanpanah (France) and Gabriel Barbash (Israel) reminded the audience that scientists need to communicate openly to policy makers and the public on both what is known and what is unknown, to maintain trust. A constant challenge for both scientists and policy makers is how to best communicate complexity and uncertainty to the public. Often, the public, and at times policy makers, lack a general understanding of how the research process works. Academic debates with contradictory results run the risk of confusing a 'non-scientifically trained' audience.

At times, the lines between policy makers and scientists can be blurred and it may be hard to avoid a selective use of data by politicians or misuse of evidence to serve other political agendas. Also, scientists cannot take over the responsibilities of policy makers, who are elected by the public.

Panellists acknowledged the fact that since the crisis started, the prestige of researchers and institutions has significantly increased, and that science has never been so visible as it is currently.

#### Science advisory structures

Speakers said that an effective national science advice system supports the scientists in their mission of providing efficient advice, particularly in times of crisis. The Health Research Board (HRB) in Ireland reported that establishing such structures also enhances the relationship between scientists and the Government. In Spain, where the government was establishing a formal scientific advisory structure, the media also played an important role as a mediator in the relationship with the public, according to the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).

The Swedish Research Council (VR) considered that the key ingredients for successful science advice were the trust of the public and policy makers in the science advice and in the official advice structure. Other reflections were given on the advantage of multidisciplinary panels in which experts could better deal with complex interconnected issues that span over several different fields of research. A joint effort would balance out different interests, goals, and values of single scientists. Such structures could be networks, expert panels with an overarching interdisciplinary panel, or a single interdisciplinary panel and they would support and better protect individual scientists when they speak in public.

#### New formats for communication

Panellists agreed that in the future there would be a need for greater investment in science communication. Enhanced communication formats would be required to maintain the public's trust in science and to stand together against disinformation.

Speakers also discussed the fact that media, politics, and science operate on different timescales. To add even more complexity, news on social media circulates even more rapidly than in traditional media. Social media reaches large groups of citizens who do not use traditional media, such as newspapers, radio, or TV.

The spread of fake news is omnipresent and evidence-based campaigns are needed to counteract disinformation.

While preprints have helped to advance knowledge rapidly, they also bring confusion as the information they contain has not yet been validated. Diverse platforms such as Google Drive and YouTube have published non-peer-reviewed results which were then taken up by the media, further contributing to disinformation.

Speakers discussed if a new format for scientific debates would be useful in times of crisis. This would help provide a balance of opinions from different researchers, 'homogenise' key academic results, and communicate them more synthetically to the public. Such services could be provided by academies, panels, or a new type of body whose task is to process and prepare research knowledge.

### Preparedness

Speakers highlighted that among all points made so far, one of the most urgent actions needed is to increase the preparedness-level of societies to cope with the current and future crises. One approach could be to improve the expertise of the population by engaging scientists with citizens and discuss how society should deal with the crisis. Another popular suggestion was to reflect upon the need to establish guidelines and a code of conduct for scientific advice in times of crisis.



### SESSION 3

#### HOW TO STRENGTHEN EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL CO-ORDINATION EFFORTS FOR PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT PANDEMIC AND FUTURE CHALLENGES?

Session 3 saw the participation of representatives from research funding organisations, the European Commission (EC), WHO, and national advisors. They discussed the impact of the pandemic on the global research and innovation system and the implication for future international collaboration.

Marc Schiltz emphasised the need for better co-ordination and collaboration among European countries, with the support of international actors, to help cope with the pandemic and move past the crisis. He acknowledged that there was an urgency to tackle the fragmentation of national, European, and global research efforts.

Several funders, notably from smaller countries, mentioned that they would not have the capacity, expertise, or resources to address issues of a global pandemic.

Other important topics discussed were the mobilisation of the global research community and the importance of the free flow of ideas between academics, as well as enhanced collaborations between academia and stakeholders from government and industry, including those from less-developed countries, and the use of infrastructures for data sharing.

#### Mobilisation and funding of researchers at the European and global level

Participants acknowledged the extraordinary mobilisation efforts of the international scientific community in all fields of research. According to the French National Research Agency (ANR) in France alone, hundreds of experts shared their knowledge in panels and defined research priorities. Speakers agreed that it is crucial to continue to promote mutual exchange in the research community and provide the means for a rapid response to national and global challenges and a way to transform research results into useful solutions.

The support of fundamental research as a driver for innovation and preparedness against future crises was mentioned by Katja Becker. She reported about Ugur Sahin, BioNTech's CEO, a former grantee of DFG who had previously stated that without the funds of the DFG, and the support of research, he would not have been able to produce the vaccine against COVID-19.

Katja Becker also emphasised the importance of research and the freedom to conduct research as indispensable prerequisites for Europe's resilience and progress.<sup>5</sup>

#### European and global actors

In addition to national efforts, the European and global actors play a crucial role in guiding, coordinating, and co-financing large global endeavours.

WHO reported from the global roadmap built on the lessons learned from past outbreaks such as the Ebola virus disease, SARS-CoV, and MERS-CoV.<sup>6</sup> They used the roadmap to facilitate a co-ordinated and accelerated response to COVID-19, including an unprecedented programme to develop a vaccine, research into potential pharmaceutical treatments, and strengthened channels for information sharing between countries.<sup>7</sup>

The EC has also played a decisive role in launching various calls under Horizon 2020 for COVID-19 research, as well as in ramping up clinical trials and repurposing therapeutics and the development of vaccines as part of the 'ERAvsCORONA' Action Plan.<sup>8</sup> The COVID Data Platform also played a new role in initiating new

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<sup>5</sup> Bonn Declaration on the freedom of academic research:

[https://www.bmbf.de/files/10\\_2\\_2\\_Bonn\\_Declaration\\_en\\_final.pdf](https://www.bmbf.de/files/10_2_2_Bonn_Declaration_en_final.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/a-coordinated-global-research-roadmap>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.who.int/teams/blueprint/covid-19>

<sup>8</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/covid-firsteravscorona\\_actions.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/covid-firsteravscorona_actions.pdf)

collaborations in ways that have been little exploited until now.<sup>9</sup> By the end of 2020, the EU invested €1 billion into research and innovation to tackle COVID-19 and its consequences.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the 'Global Goal: Unite for our Future' pledging summit organised by the EC and Global Citizen mobilised in total €15.9 billion in additional funding to help develop and ensure equitable access to coronavirus vaccines, tests, and treatments.<sup>11 12</sup>

### Global Collaboration via information, data and sample sharing

Some speakers expected the COVID-19 crisis to result in a paradigm shift in the dissemination and sharing of research findings, with an unprecedented acceleration of research and innovation. In early 2020, Wellcome called on researchers, journals, and funders to ensure that research findings and data relevant to this outbreak were shared rapidly and openly to inform the public health response.<sup>13</sup> The call was based on the 2015 and 2017 updated WHO guidelines and the statement on 'Developing Global Norms for Sharing Data and Results During Public Health Emergencies'<sup>14</sup> affirming that timely and transparent pre-publication sharing of data and results during public health emergencies must become the global norm.<sup>15</sup> To date, around 170 organisations including many GRC participants and Science Europe have signed this call and made a commitment to share research data and findings relevant to COVID-19.

Speakers stressed that the sharing of information at the national and European level and the promotion of Open Science will help to support real-time research as required in times of crisis. Creating robust data management plans and policies, and the recently published Science Europe work on research data management<sup>16</sup> was mentioned as a best practise examples to facilitate a faster transition to Open Science practices.

Panellists in all sessions mentioned the importance of funding platforms for data and sample collection, as well as the need for quality control and standardisation of data and samples. Beside joint databases on clinical trials, other types of infrastructures are needed, for example, digital infrastructures for genomic sequencing. The regulation of the use of biomedical material across the border would have to be organised using existing international agreements such as the Nagoya Protocol.<sup>17</sup>

### Preprints, certified platforms and preparedness

The role of pre-prints in the crisis was addressed again in Session 3. Panellist agreed that pre-prints furthered the rapid uptake of information. However, a lot of results were published in a fragmented way, lacked quality and also sometimes compromised the research process. New guidelines are needed on how to publish literature in times of crisis. In this context, the role of platforms able to validate or certify preprints was mentioned. The sharing and the protection could be organised in a way that would allow authors to deposit

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<sup>9</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_20\\_680](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_680)

<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/research\\_and\\_innovation/research\\_by\\_area/documents/ec\\_rtd\\_coronavirus-research-projects-overview.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/research_and_innovation/research_by_area/documents/ec_rtd_coronavirus-research-projects-overview.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda\\_20\\_1216](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1216)

<sup>12</sup> [https://global-response.europa.eu/index\\_en](https://global-response.europa.eu/index_en)

<sup>13</sup> <https://wellcome.org/coronavirus-covid-19/open-data>

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.who.int/medicines/ebola-treatment/data-sharing\\_phe/en/](https://www.who.int/medicines/ebola-treatment/data-sharing_phe/en/)

<sup>15</sup> WHO Policy on use and sharing of data collected in Member States by the World Health Organization (WHO) outside the context of public health emergencies:

[https://www.who.int/publishing/datapolicy/Policy\\_data\\_sharing\\_non\\_emergency\\_final.pdf](https://www.who.int/publishing/datapolicy/Policy_data_sharing_non_emergency_final.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Science Europe 'Practical Guide to the International Alignment of Research Data Management - Extended Edition (January 2021): <https://scieur.org/rdm-guide>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.cbd.int/abs/#:~:text=The%20Nagoya%20Protocol%20on%20Access%20to%20Genetic%20Resources%20and%20the,a%20fair%20and%20equitable%20way>

their outputs and grant access to the information, whilst retaining ownership. The Cochrane Library was mentioned as a good example of such a potential platform.<sup>18</sup>

While COVID-19 was considered a success story for science thanks to the rapid development of vaccines, it would be important to anticipate the future. An idea could be to establish structures or connect platforms made up of funder networks that could be used to share information in times of crisis.

### Policy roadmaps accompanying research roadmaps

In addition to bottom-up research, the need for a more direct approach for research in times of crisis was suggested by John-Arne Røttingen, Ambassador for Global Health, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Such a policy roadmap could lay out the rules and provide balance between the collaboration–competition tension in research and the competition of ideas and funds. In addition, one could think of future policy roadmaps that would lay out how to use research results and help to co-ordinate European or global response. An existing network for such an approach could be GLOPID-R.<sup>19</sup> This established network is already invested in research capacity and capabilities to support the rapid initiation of scientific research in case of an outbreak.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.cochrane.org/evidence>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.glopid-r.org/>

## NEXT STEPS

The 2020 GRC seminar on COVID-19 for the European region provided a platform for mutual exchange and learning on three important domains: The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the core business of GRC participants from the European region; science advice in times of crisis and the relationship with policy makers, the role of media, and the engagement with citizens; and, the leadership of European and international organisations, as well as the need for enhanced tools and instruments for multilateral coordination and collaboration. GRC panellists welcomed the rich debate and the opportunity to establish further links with the Scientific Department of the World Health Organisation.

The GRC secretariat will collect all reports from all regions to analyse and present the results for the GRC Governing Board for further decision. The GRC assembly is the ideal place to continue reflections on how to cope with the pandemic and future challenges. In times of crisis, there is a window of opportunity as the global research community comes together.

## Other Sources

- Science Europe COVID-19 web page: <https://www.scienceeurope.org/our-priorities/covid-19/>
- Leopoldina: <https://www.leopoldina.org/presse-1/nachrichten/ad-hoc-stellungnahme-coronavirus-pandemie/>.
- DFG Establishes Interdisciplinary Commission for Pandemic Research: [https://www.dfg.de/en/service/press/press\\_releases/2020/press\\_release\\_no\\_22/index.html](https://www.dfg.de/en/service/press/press_releases/2020/press_release_no_22/index.html)

## Annex

# Programme

### 09.45–10.00 OPENING

Opening and setting the scene by the hosts

- **Marc Schiltz**, President of Science Europe, Secretary General of the National Research Fund of Luxembourg (FNR), and European Member of the GRC Governing Board
- **Katja Becker**, President of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and Chair of the GRC Governing Board
- Introduction to workshop, 'housekeeping rules' (Science Europe)

### 10.00–11.15 SESSION 1: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FUNDERS' CORE BUSINESS – CHALLENGES AND BEST PRACTICES

Chair: **Véronique Halloin**, Secretary General of the Fund for Scientific Research (F.R.S.-FNRS), Belgium

#### Keynote speech (15')

The ERCEA response to the impact of COVID-19

- **José Labastida**, Head of the Scientific Department, European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA)

Reports from GRC Participants (5' each)

- Report from **Dirk-Jan den Boer**, Director of the Social Sciences and Humanities domain, Dutch Research Council (NWO)
- Report from **Zeynep Arziman**, Programme Coordinator, Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (Tubitak)
- Report from **Christoph Bärenreuter**, Programme Manager, Austrian Science Fund (FWF)
- Report from **Charlotte Deane**, UKRI Director for the COVID-19 response, UK

Open discussion with questions from the floor (25–30')

### 11.15–11.25 COFFEE BREAK

### 11.25–12.40 SESSION 2: SCIENCE ADVICE IN TIMES OF CRISIS – OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES

Chair: **Lidia Borrell-Damián**, Secretary General, Science Europe

#### Keynote speech (15')

**Yazdan Yazdanpanah**, Director of ANRS Emerging Infectious Diseases Agency, Director of Aviesan Institute of Immunology, Inflammation, Infectiology, and Microbiology at Inserm, Head of the Infectious Disease Department at Bichat Claude Bernard Hospital Advisor to the French Government on COVID-19

State of Play (5' each)

- Ireland: **Mairéad O'Driscoll**, CEO of the Health Research Board (HRB)
- Sweden: **Sven Stafström**, Director General of the Swedish Research Council (VR)
- Spain: **Elena Domínguez**, Vice-President of International Relations, Spanish Research Council (CSIC)

- Israel: **Gabriel Barbash**, Director General Emeritus of Israel's Ministry of Health and Director of the Weizmann Institute's Bench-to-Bedside Program

Open discussion with questions from the floor (25–30')

12.40–13.40 LUNCH BREAK

13.40–15.00 **SESSION 3: HOW TO STRENGTHEN EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL CO-ORDINATION FOR PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE TO THE CURRENT PANDEMIC AND FUTURE CHALLENGES?**

Chair: **Marc Schiltz**, President of Science Europe, Secretary General of the National Research Fund of Luxembourg (FNR), and European Member of the GRC Governing Board

Keynote speech (15')

- **Katja Becker**, President of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and Chair of the GRC Governing Board

Stakeholder Discussions (5' each)

- **Thierry Damerval**, President and CEO of the French National Research Agency (ANR)
- **Signe Ratso**, Deputy Director-General Research & Innovation, European Commission
- **Vasee Moorthy**, Senior Adviser, WHO Science Division, World Health Organisation
- **John-Arne Røttingen**, Ambassador for Global Health, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Open discussion on collaborations (25')

15.00–16.00 **SESSION 4: GRC BUSINESS**

Chair: **Bonnie Wolff-Boenisch**, Head of Research Affairs, Science Europe

Report from the GRC Regions (10' each)

- Report from the Americas: **Euclides de Mesquita Neto**, The São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), Brazil
- Report from the Sub-Saharan African region: **Aldo Stroebel**, National Research Foundation (NRF), South-Africa

Closing the 2019–2020 GRC cycle: launch of the GRC Statements of Principles (5' each)

- Mission-Oriented Research Statement of Principles: **Ben Sharman**, Senior Policy Manager, UK Research and Innovation
- Public Engagement Statement of Principles: **Aldo Stroebel**, NRF, South-Africa

GRC Working Group knowledge products (5' each)

- Partnered Research Programmes: **Aldo Stroebel**, NRF, South-Africa
- Survey on gender-disaggregated data at GRC Participating Organisations: **Roshni Abedin**, co-lead of the GRC Gender WG, UK Research and Innovation

Announcements by GRC Executive Secretariat (5')

GRC 2021 Annual Meeting (24–27 May 2021, Durban, South Africa)

- **Michael Bright**, Executive Secretary of the GRC

Closing (5')

Farewell from the hosts