

Minutes: Alternet Management Board Meeting 2023

12-13 January 2023

INBO - Brussels, Belgium

ROOMS:

- 12 January: van 8u30-12u30 Herman Teirlinck - **01.20 - Willy Van Der Meeren**
- 12 January: van 12.30 tot 18 u Herman Teirlinck - **01.21 - Jeanne Brabants**
- 13 January: van 8u30 tot 18 uur: Herman Teirlinck - **00.48 - Keldermans**

Present (in-person): Jiska van Dijk (chair, JvD), Sonja Jaehnig (SJ), Mark Frenzel (MF), Juliette Young (JY), Ana Lillebo (AL), Allan Watt (AW), Lisa Norton (LN), Maurice Hoffmann (MH), Mart Kùlvik (MK), Marie Vandewalle (MV), Tyler Kulfan (TK)

Present (virtual): Riikka Paloniemi (RP), Joan Pino (JP), Philip Roche (PR), Adriana Cliville Morato (ACM)

Day 1 (12 January 2023)

9:00-17:00

1. Welcome

Chair Jiska van Dijk welcomed all representatives to the 2023 meeting of the Alternet Management Board.

Documents and proposals need to be prepared for the Council by early February. These will include activity and budget plans for 2023, keeping mind of the long-term continuation and financial sustainability of Alternet.

2. Official acceptance of previous two MB meeting minutes

Ghent meeting:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ldZpS7lpSUKjGSHRMK_qSM883T_p_hRB/edit?usp=share_link&ouid=109923963138953940534&rtpof=true&sd=true

Virtual meeting December 2022:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gmo2IKGfgLe_vFGidby_cySOoiyEBjL85nRfOlp2wdo/edit?usp=sharing

The draft minutes of two MB meetings were shared prior to the meeting for comment and review.

Decision: The minutes were accepted by the MB and will be officially published.

3. Acceptance of agenda; AOB inquiry

The agenda that was distributed prior to the meeting was raised for comment.

Decision: The agenda is accepted.

AOB:

- MH proposed a short discussion concerning BioAgora
- MK proposed a discussion on the subject of the call exchange review
- AW proposed a discussion on the Alternet Alumni initiative
- MV proposed discussing an Alternet ethics committee
- MH proposed a discussion of individual natural person membership in Alternet

4. Introductions and setting the stage - Budget overview, ongoing and new initiatives INGO, and changes/achievements/challenges (Jiska van Dijk)

JvD began setting the stage for the present meeting by refreshing all on the goals of Alternet. She stressed that consideration should be given to why partners would wish to become a member. The stages of Alternet, including the transition to legal entity status, adoption of Eklipse, and acceptance in three European projects were reviewed.

The Council previously decided that a minimum of 80,000.00€ must be maintained in the Alternet bank account. Under the hosting of IGB, the secretariat employment was increased. 15% of Eklipse request income is received as overhead for Alternet. There is now a contract with an accountancy firm and the opportunity to pay for legal help as needed. Alternet is also now in collaboration with Biodiversa+ on the Summer School and alumni initiatives, both of which are receiving financial support from Biodiversa+. MH has also suggested individual membership for the inclusion of alumni. It is possible for natural persons in loose association to apply for membership, but this will require a fee.

Issues of accountancy and legal tasks were discussed, with the option of legal services being provided as needed from member institutes. However, it was stressed that familiarity with Belgian law is needed and that the call for volunteer accountants received no feedback. It is important to establish how much the accountant services are to cost annually.

Budget overview:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1KaALhGlojNWgKLYR0kduAQw20mWoqQpq/edit?usp=share_link&ouid=109923963138953940534&rtpof=true&sd=true

Tessa Van Santen is still managing the Alternet bank account. JvD reviewed Tessa's Alternet budget file and shared it with the MB. Income was reviewed, with notice that WENR still hasn't paid their fees for the past four years and that MTA-OK also consistently had not paid fees. Another invoice was sent in December. It is suggested that henceforth those partners that do not pay the fee are removed from membership.

All incomes and costs were presented. All MSR contracts are fully and finally paid. One half of the AHIA project contract (Bede West) has been paid. Payment to IGB still needs to be made. As of the 31st of December, the bank account balance was 404,894.00€. With similar expenses, we will likely reach the 80,000.00€ balance in 1-2 years. It was noted that the overhead incomes of EU projects cannot be used to support all activities of Alternet.

PR and JP suggested addition of incomes from projects to the budget file. A separate file was made for Eklipse contracts and income; JvD suggests likewise for EU projects, as the income for both of these is to be used for specific purposes. An idea of what is left after overheads would also be of value. Contracts have been done in-kind to date, but this is no longer sustainable (the work required for iNGO Alternet management extend far beyond in-kind capacity). As net income will be very low, prioritization of activities and self-sustaining transformation of certain activities is needed. The only activities with zero income include MSR, AHIA, and Mobility Fund. Eklipse is a separate type of activity and needs to reinvest its income in order to grow. Management must question where the added value is to be found for partners on a self-sustaining or reduced activity setup.

5. SWOT presentations:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1S6-xGOwbFwkmjrFw72kvbiUJAOFonFku?usp=share_link

Presentations of the SWOTs by the activity representatives shed light on the strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with each activity. The SWOTS listed below were presented:

- Summer School - Allan
- MSR - Joan
- AHIA – Philip
- Conference - Jiska
- Call exchange - Mart
- Eklipse - Marie

6. SWOT discussion with prioritization session

Marie suggested that the One-Stop-Shop could be promoted with an explanatory slide everytime Alternet is presented; and she also suggested linkage with the ENoN would be valuable. MH stressed that MSR is to produce new pan-european data and knowledge; AHIA seeks to synthesize existing data into new knowledge and collaborate on publications.

JvD presented on the conference SWOT, which was created with help from other MB representatives. After the conference, there was an evaluation with the scientific and organizing committees. Via questionnaire, partner institutes hosting each conference was suggested as an alternative model. MV suggested that an assigned MB member should oversee the management

and implementation at every stage (organizing committee, scientific committee, etc.). She also noted the need for clear branding.

7. Brainstorming - different models and options

Following lunch, a voting session was held wherein the participants could select the activities that they think are of highest priority and those that are expendable.

Three voting sessions were held—for activities to be kept as is, activities to be kept with changes, and activities of least importance.

- Activities to be kept (top three): Summer school (12 votes), Eklipse (11 votes), conferences (9 votes),
- Activities to be kept with changes (top three): SPI webinars (11 votes), call exchange (6 votes), SPI OSS (6 votes) and AHIA (5 votes)
- Activities of least importance: MSR (10 votes), Mobility Fund (9 votes), AHIA (6 votes)

MF noted that MSR has not yielded high quality applications and that it would be better left to eLTER; AHIA is similar, but to a lesser degree. LN stressed that offering researchers mobility funding is highly important; MF questioned, however, if it advances Alternet purposes, and MV suggested if it is to continue it should be specifically linked to Alternet activities.

MV proposed an open, ongoing call for AHIA projects and rolling consideration of support for such projects (expertise, methods, etc.). AW stressed that the mobility fund is a great idea that hasn't been used for its intended purposes. MK stated that AHIA is one of three main opportunities for outreach, alongside conferences and summer schools. MH agreed that the format of AHIA could change to offer expertise rather than funding, as suggested by MV. At the moment, the main attraction of AHIA is the production of a high-impact deliverable. JY stressed that at present, regardless of how it functioned in the past, there is no added value. It could retain value in the future insofar as it can be linked with other Alternet activities. This would double as a new way of promoting Alternet. AL noted that the AHIA activity could be linked to the conference and serve as an output of the conference. This could in practice look similar to the present request by Peter Bridgewater to publish an article in Biodiversity and Conservation following the 2022 conference on key messages from the final session. SJ voiced support for this approach and suggested that it could be imprinted into the planning of the conference from the start and increase the Alternet branding of AHIA.

JvD questioned whether the MSR should be officially discontinued; PR noted that there will be no call this year regardless. He proposed securing the summer school and secretariat and then cutting the budget of everything else. LN suggested not funding MSR but maintaining it; AW agreed that good ideas should not be discarded but rather maintained without fixed calls and budgets and supported as needed upon engagement. MH noted that MSR is outside the scope of all other activities, as it is intended for the creation of new data. Decisions of support for collaborative Alternet activities could be made on a rolling basis—and this pool of collaborative

Alternet activities would replace the individual activities of AHIA, MSR, and the mobility fund. It would be open at all times via promotion/campaigning on the website, etc. RP stated that we focus should be aimed at impact and consider support for those actions/projects that wouldn't be successful without the support of Alternet. AW suggested a call for proposals within this broader collaborative Alternet activities pool. PR suggested a reduction of funding for a few years and to consider other means of Alternet support (non-monetary). AW suggested that activities should not be merged but grouped.

MK suggested that there is a need for a more clarified strategy of Alternet for achieving its stated goals. JvD stressed that there has been a change related to collaboration methods, formats, and strategies. She questioned if this type of collaboration is still a priority of Alternet. Alternet's collaborative added value was demonstrated in the successful BioAgora project proposal. MV stated again that the impact of the call exchange should be displayed publicly in order to prove its added value. AW suggested that real networking, rather than call exchange interest lists, is essential for consortium building and that conferences are thus essential, alongside social media.

MH distinguished the permanent activities as: Summer School, conference, and call exchange—these are to remain ongoing. Members should consider support for the other activities. The funding streams for the secretariat should then be reconsidered. Overheads require no explanation, and thus can fund the secretariat.

AL recommended different models of activity combinations and the creation of an infographic clarifying means of engagement, support, etc. PR discussed deficits and recommended looking for sponsorship for activities, e.g. conferences; and stressed the need to receive all membership fees, including those that are outstanding. The Alternet contribution to the summer school was reduced significantly in 2022. It is anticipated that costs will be raised again this year due to inflation. MV suggested that since there is now prestige in speaking at Peyresq that the institutions of the speakers could be responsible for funding speaker travel if possible (funding would be provided by Alternet if unavailable from their institutes).

8. Discussion towards agreement & final decisions: What to drop and what to keep in proposal to the council

Activities that represent “opportunity for collaborations” were grouped to include MSR, AHIA, Mobility fund, Call exchange, and Alumni activities. Relevant activities for science-policy interface and capacity building were grouped to include: Conferences, Eklipse, SPI webinars, SPI OSS, and Summer Schools.

Presently, prospective partnership outreach is primarily or entirely done through proactive outreach from the secretariat and networking by the chairs. More promotion needs to be done explicitly within the networks of our members and at the activities of Alternet (for example, announcements with calls for membership at conferences, SPI webinars, etc.). MK suggested that targeted screening of members, consideration of criteria, etc. is needed from Alternet. SJ

volunteered to help lead membership scanning; MK could help define criteria. MH stressed that criteria and strategy are already present in the statutes of Alternet. JY voiced support for a membership/outreach focused activity; MV suggested broadening this activity to “networking,” and noted potential linkage with the ENoN.

MH stated that there is need for an activity focused on implementing the nature restoration law for Europe. Alternet could support an associated knowledge hub. AW noted that there are four major restoration projects started over the past few years and stated that there could/should be linkage with BioAgora, etc.--and that Alternet could play a role in this linkage. He recommended expansion of cost effective activities—such as incorporating restoration law into the SPI webinars, and/or suggested that there could be a second series of webinars on Alternet communication. MV recommended an Alternet info day.

The issue of competition with PEER was raised. AW stated that there is a risk in shaving Alternet activities down to three, as the added value of membership may be questioned. MK suggested call exchange cooperation with PEER.

Budget was further discussed; an income of 72k should ideally be received from partners. It was noted by TK that the OSS and Call Exchange don't require budgets unless new development or radical changes to their operation are needed. A reduction to 15k for the summer school could be visualized. A secretariat cost of 41k is expected. Based on the cost of the 2022 conference, a 6k cost (per year) could be visualized. Collaboration activities can be grouped with a combined budget of 10k, totalling 72k between these activities. Communications costs would need to be added, as well.

It was questioned whether a networking/outreach activity would require a budget. PR stated that 10k for collaboration opportunities (half of present budget) is very small. MH disagreed, noting that a flexible annual 10k used as-needed to support those initiatives that are actually realized is appropriate. Any other ideas for activities are welcome, but must be accompanied by proposed means of the needed income to support it.

AW voiced his opinion that now is not the time to use overheads as we don't yet know transactional costs of projects; and asked what to do with the reserves of 108k. MV stated that a buffer of 80k is appropriate. AW suggested allocating 7k annually above the income which, after four years, would reduce the balance to the 80k limit.

JvD will likely need support for MB oversight work, which should be added to secretariat costs (this was intended to be derived from overheads). Additional work for European projects done by the secretariat is foreseen and is to be funded by these projects.

The first day of meetings concluded at 17:00. All participants were thanked for their active engagement.

Day 2 (13 January 2023)

08:30-13:00

Discussion on:

- Communication
- Membership fees
- Collaboration opportunities
- Summer school
- Conference
- SPI webinar and OSS
- Call Exchange
- AOB
- IT Eklipse
- Alumni and individual membership

9. Budget proposal - including allocation for accountant/lawyer and executive members

The proposed draft budget that was suggested on day 1 was reviewed. The costs of VGD Opwijk accountant items were additionally reviewed; the sum cost of services was estimated at 2,541.00€. Hourly prices of legal services were likewise reviewed. Jiska shared estimates on daily management, in addition to accountancy, secretariat, and Alternet activities.

Per daily management costs, it was noted that the contributions of Maurice, Tessa, and Floris (INBO) and Jiska (NINA) far outweigh the in-kind contributions of any other institute.

At 60% time, 35k is used as a general estimate for the secretariat cost. 3k is estimated for communication; 20k for the summer school; 6k per year for the biannual conference; and 10k for collaboration opportunities. This produces a new net cost sum of 81250€. It was suggested that all of the member income plus half of the remaining account reserve could be used.

A 12% inflation rate is anticipated and costs will be indexed. It was suggested that indexing of membership fees should likewise be instituted. Other means of financing should be considered, including sponsorship. One successful sponsorship has already been achieved, in the form of the Biodiversa+ and Summer School partnership. Projects bring in income, but expenses should in principle then support those projects specifically. PR asked why Alternet is participating in projects that advance the initiatives of the projects themselves and not those of Alternet, as Alternet is not a research institute. MH noted that the projects are indeed Alternet initiatives that have specific expenses and targets (e.g. the capacity building of BioAgora advances the Alternet capacity building initiative); and PR said, as such, their expenses should be included in the budget.

It is agreed to suggest to the council that, per their 80k capital limit, we may include membership fees and anything above the 80k capital limit in the budget of Alternet. The 80k issue may be revisited once it is absolutely certain that Eklipse is self-sustaining and no longer requires a safety net.

JY stated that there should be one budget based on the standard Alternet incomes and activities; and a separate one for each project and Eklipse (each likewise have their own accounts). AW noted that there will be confusion with the BioAgora summer school proposal, as Alternet is associated (but the summer school is entirely different from Alternet summer schools).

MV raised the case of Eklipse, which is self-sustaining and has fixed running costs. General costs should not come from requests; she recommends using overheads for things like IT management, social media, etc. As long as there are projects, hosting at UFZ is covered but if there is ever a period without such projects this will become an open question.

A necessary point of discussion that must be resolved is what Alternet agrees it may or may not use overheads for.

10. Activity plan 2023 based on decisions of day 1

ACM shared a proposed communications budget of 4k, which would include IT needs as well as standard annual communications expenses. The action plan would include a revised social media strategy, newsletters, closer collaboration with Eklipse, as well as the proposed IT work, which would increase usability and fix search engine issues. IT needs are proposed to be shared with Eklipse, which have common needs. It was questioned whether 3k would be sufficient. CREAM can offer the IT services of Agusti Escobar, but an estimate of costs is still forthcoming. Three different estimates will be made available and then a final communications proposal can be finalized; for now a figure of 3k€ will be requested.

Activity proposal tasks: An activity for new membership recruitment was proposed; SJ has volunteered to help lead this. MK can help in the definition and determination of criteria. Collaboration activities were grouped together. A proposal to the council on these grouped activities should be prepared; PR, JP, and MF will work together on formulating a procedure and proposal.

Summer School: Planning for the 2023 summer school has already commenced and is expected to proceed smoothly.

Conference: Consideration for planning of the 2024 conference should begin. One or two assigned persons need to take leadership for this activity. LN suggested that she could be one such volunteer. Questions of hosting were raised, and JY stated that an overview of possible models is needed and expressed skepticism about rotating member host institutes. The status of Ghent as an Alternet trademark was noted. MF stated that only some Alternet council

members and members of the Alternet community are participating and stated that removing the Alternet branding might make outsiders feel more welcome. SJ stated that with projects it might be easier to attract attendees because there can be project-related output, sessions etc. AW reinforced the idea that building on projects is valuable; and that Ghent is an important part of the Alternet conference culture. It was noted that the issue is relying too heavily on the service of INBO, and PR said that if other institutes are willing to provide services we should be geographically flexible.

Call Exchange: It was questioned if there will be any proposal concerning the call exchange. No additional budget is needed, but Mart will plan to present the results of his call exchange survey to the Council. This will be added to the Council agenda, along with any relevant preparation docs.

Individual membership: The idea of MH for individual memberships was raised. This would allow alumni and other individuals to join for, e.g. 50€. MK stated that this would cause complications. It was acknowledged that individuals could not represent themselves on the Council. AW noted the self-organized structure of alumni groups and that all former students are alumni, not just those belonging to a particularly organized group. He also expressed support for a kind of honorary membership. SJ and MK can consider honorary and individual membership as part of their recruitment initiative. SJ stated that this discussion can resume later in the year and is not necessary to propose at the immediately upcoming council meeting. MK suggested that individual membership could help bridge the gap regarding communications and the call exchange, as well. MV expressed discomfort between paying and non-paying alumni. PR stated that all students should have the opportunity for membership, not only alumni. Consequences

Alumni proposal: The alumni proposal for an annual assembly for capacity building was shared by TK. Funding is no longer a concern, as Biodiversa+ has (unofficially) pledged 10k in support, which covers the envisioned budget. The alumni are seeking recognition as an official Alternet activity so that official documents, announcements, etc. could be distributed and funding from institutes may be more forthcoming. AW stressed that the major concern is that all alumni have equal opportunities. He stated that any alumni activity should be included in the collaboration opportunities grouping. He envisioned a panel for decision-making on collaborative opportunity funding. A registration form to be entered to an alumni database could be included in the registration for the Summer School; it could also incorporate, in addition to contacts, a newsletter, etc. Any proposals for official recognition should be put to the Council for consideration. AW noted that recognition should likely mean that the activity is open to all alumni. The Biodiversa+ community's involvement in the alumni activity also means that caution should be exercised.

SPI Seminars & OSS: LN suggested that webinar/seminars on subjects beyond SPI (e.g. biodiversity) could be held as a new activity. AW noted that this links to the issues of membership and awareness; Alternet lectures would have great potential for visibility. AL proposed webinar/seminars on the projects of member institutes.

It is proposed to continue planning webinars (two are already in planning, hosted by INBO and Hutton). The Council shall be approached for nominees for next webinars. As no further funding is requested, the OSS shall be treated as a repository that is updated on a regular basis. LN suggests rearranging the order of content on the OSS; JY and TK will review this. JvD suggested a more interactive seminar format.

Eclipse: Running costs and IT needs of Eclipse were discussed. UFZ formerly covered many running costs of Eclipse which are no longer covered as Eclipse is no longer a project. This includes costs for: social media work (employment of social media HIWI Hari, who is interested in potentially freelancing—approx. 12k€ annually), IT management (formerly provided in-kind by George Cojocar), and IT development (e.g. new website functions). CREAM is presently simply hosting, not providing IT management. IT management costs are estimated at 2k€. IT development costs from Agusti will be assessed. The chair of the strategic advisory board will also have costs, as this position (provided by Sybille) is paid. Costs such as this naturally emerge with the growth of Eclipse; this is another reason it must be considered what Alternet uses overhead for. Increasing overheads (currently €15k), however, increases request costs. MV proposes that the overheads of Eclipse be used to pay for the above-listed running costs. The present purpose of discussion is to clarify what is needed for Alternet administration and Eclipse operation costs so that these overheads can be allocated accordingly. In the future, MV can simply make a summary of the budget used after expenses if this is preferred.

MH questioned if these costs should be shared with the Alternet Council, as they are aspects of internal Eclipse administration. MH asked how internal operational issues of Eclipse should be communicated with the Council; JvD concluded it should be considered to be under the umbrella of daily operation of the iNGO Alternet; reporting to or approval from the Council is not needed.

New activities: New activities (potentially including alumni activities and initiatives) should be included in the proposal for collaborative activities.

Alternet ethics committee: MV proposed that Alternet should form an ethics committee. Ethics committees of different institutions have been used for Eclipse requests; but it can sometimes take months for an ethics approval. In the future, an Alternet ethics committee for Eclipse, Alternet projects, etc. could potentially handle such matters. This could also provide a service to member institutes that do not have their own ethics committee. We would need further clarity on what would constitute such an ethical committee. For the purpose of Eclipse, approval for certain methods that are not covered by GDPR are needed. JY questioned whether it would be more costly to continue depending on other institutes' ethics committees or to form Alternet's own ethical committee. MH asked whether the existing Belgian ethical bodies operating under Belgian law should be utilized. JY and AL suggested that a single institute could offer consistent access to its ethical committee as an in-kind contribution to Alternet (and Eclipse).

Presently, MV proposes moving forward with consideration of this issue. A written exploratory proposal should be prepared for the Council.

11. Gender equality plan

This is a work in progress with a small task force; a plan is being composed for the iNGO Alternet as requested by the EU. RP, SJ, and MH are leading this initiative. It will not be presented at the 2023 Council meeting.

12. Data management plan

Data management plan development is a work in progress to be further discussed following the 2023 Council meeting.

13. Preparation for pre-Council meeting work – deadlines, task assignments

The deadline for sending Council preparation docs is the 30th of January. If everyone sends their slides to JvD she can assemble them together as an activity overview to share with the Council. The Alternet Council meeting will be 23-24 February at INBO. MB representatives are requested to inform JvD and TK whether they will themselves present or have JvD and TK present for them. Slides should be as short as possible.

14. AOB

Nature Restoration Law: An informal meeting with Hilde is planned. SERC-Europe and Biodiversa+ are presently involved. This is to be further discussed; it could share the experience of Alternet without any associated costs. Alternet is subscribed to two declarations of SERC as the Alternet Association and now considers becoming more actively involved.

15. End of meeting

Chair JvD expressed gratitude for a highly productive meeting. After the Council meeting, a followup meeting of the MB will be held; JvD will distribute a doodle for planning such a meeting.
The MB meeting concluded at 12:50 on 13.01.2023.