



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
RESEARCH DIRECTORATE-GENERAL

Directorate B - Structuring the European Research Area
Strengthening cooperation in research and the European scientific base

Brussels, 11 09 2006
RTD/B/2/Gio D(2006) 528524

**SUMMARY REPORT OF WORKSHOP:
"Networking the European Research Area through Joint Calls"
Brussels 14 June 2006**

I. INTRODUCTION

The Commission has proposed to continue and reinforce the ERA-NET scheme under the 7th EU Framework Programme (FP7), by providing support for new ERA-NETs, as well as providing Community funding to those participants that pool resources for the purpose of organising joint calls for proposals (ERA-NET PLUS). The wide-ranging and deep knowledge gathered or developed by ongoing ERA-NET projects launched during FP6 is crucial for the preparation of this future ERA-NET scheme.

In this context and as follow up of the Manchester Presidency Conference on coordination of national programmes in October 2005, several dedicated workshops have been organised in 2006 to exchange information and experience of participants involved in ERA-NETs. Towards the end of 2006, a panel of external independent experts will review the outcomes of the aforementioned dedicated workshops, to take stock of the conclusions with a view to improving ERA-NET in FP7.

This report describes the outcome of the workshop held in Brussels on 14 June 2006, focusing on the contribution of joint calls launched by ERA-NETs in networking the European Research Area. The workshop gathered 67 ERA-NET project representatives and dealt with experience and lessons learnt from the design and implementation of joint calls. Also, the approach, synergies and complementarities with national and Commission research programmes was discussed.

II. STRUCTURE OF THE WORKSHOP

The workshop was structured in four sessions :

1. Presentation by the Commission of the benefits and opportunities offered by programme co-ordination;
2. Review of 3 case studies, where call co-ordinators presented experience gathered from projects which organised joint calls;
3. Analysis of the lessons learned by participants in launching and managing joint calls. This was facilitated by inputs provided by the co-ordinators of four joint calls.
4. A final session focused on discussing together synergies and complementarities of the joint calls with FP7 and with national research programmes.

III. BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PROGRAMME COORDINATION

The presentation was given by Mr. Warras (Commission, Head of Unit ERA-NET). He recalled the main drivers for coordinating research at programme level, such as reducing the fragmentation of the research efforts, achieving critical mass, addressing common problems, developing common approaches, ... These reasons for programme coordination were illustrated with examples of running ERA-NET projects.

Before listening to presentations, Mr. Clarotti (Commission, ERA-NET unit) gave a brief overview of joint calls as it can be gathered from the first project reports and from reviews undertaken as part of some project's tasks :

- He started with a word of caution, mentioning that the situation is evolving fast as more and more ERA-NETs see the benefits of learning by doing and launch full or pilot joint calls. Whilst 32% of ERA-NETs foresaw to launch joint calls in their workprogrammes end of 2005, 15 joint calls have been launched to June 2006 and 20 more are planned : therefore some 50% of the 68 running ERA-NET projects are now planning such calls. On the other hand, some 20 projects have decided, for the moment, not to launch joint calls or cannot as their research area does not feature such calls (e.g. Hospital emergencies, Phytosanitary research).
- The calls launched can be very different ranging from major calls for transnational joint projects impacting on given sectors of the ERA, such as biotechnology, to small pilot calls mainly aiming at testing the principle of joint collaboration and identifying barriers and enablers to collaboration in real situations.
- The calls launched to date total some 200 million Euro in commitments of national research programmes (over some years), but 80% of this sum comes from just 3 major calls.
- Some 15% of the programme owners (the research policy makers) or programme managers involved in ERA-NET projects are participating in the 15 calls launched. Most countries involved in FP7 are involved and, therefore, starting to build experience on if, when and how to launch joint calls.

IV. PRESENTATION OF ERA-NET CASE STUDIES

1. Eurotransbio – A joint call using a “virtual” common pot

Mr. Lampel from the German Projektträger Jülich explained that the project aims at fostering the competitiveness of research intensive SMEs through three EU wide joint calls for RTD projects to be launched between 2006 and 2008.

The first of these calls was launched in January 2006 with a total commitment of 30 million Euro. It will fund partnerships of at least 2 SMEs from different countries, addressing all biotechnology fields in projects with strong innovation content and good economic potential for the companies involved.

Each of the five participating countries has committed funds, but this common pot is defined as “virtual” because each country will only fund national partners in selected projects. Mr. Lampel described in detail the two-step mechanism used to first screen

proposals and then evaluate them using a single set of criteria, a single joint office and a multi-national scientific evaluation committee.

Main points arising from the discussion were the following :

- Already in their first call, the level of integration goes beyond the one of the Eureka programme, because of the fixed and dedicated call (vs. open one for Eureka), central office for selecting and managing projects, common evaluation by an international panel (vs. independent national panels) and a co-ordinated funding by national and regional RTD programmes (vs. non-coordinated funding for Eureka).
- The meeting of programme owners appears particularly efficient in increasing the overall output of the call, e.g. by sensitising some countries to the need of possibly increasing national support if many national proposers feature in high quality projects. On the other hand, partnering meetings where to “marry” partners in joint projects, were not much used. This is possibly due to good awareness of partners in the biotech sector.
- The virtual common pot does not require trans-national transfer of funds. It allows each country to apply its own mechanisms and contracts to fund selected partners. On the other hand, it has the main disadvantage of not ensuring an homogenous funding to all partners for all high quality projects.
- The fact that the first call was launched merely 7 months after the start of the project shows that commitment is more important than barriers.

2. Norface – A joint call using a “real” common pot

Mrs. Ervela-Myreen from the Academy of Finland explained that the 12 countries involved in the project aim at developing a durable strategy for Social sciences in Europe with increasing co-operation between national programmes and partner organisations.

A series of joint transnational activities is foreseen over four years : jointly funded seminars in 2005, a pilot joint call on the re-emergence of religion as a Social Force in Europe in 2006, a pilot on capacity building in 2007 and a more complete transnational programme in 2008.

The pilot joint call will support transnational projects for a total of some 5.4 m€ using a real common pot. This is made of national contributions according to an algorithm based on population and GDP per capita similar to one used by the Nordic fund.

Many questions were put by participants :

- The main advantage of the joint call is that all the best projects will be fully funded. Also, decisions regarding theme selection to funding decisions went smoothly. Some difficulties arose for the choice of experts for the international evaluation panel. The most serious concerns relate to the different overheads rates applied by different countries. This could even jeopardize the common pot principle foreseen for the transnational programme.

- Using a real common pot requires trans-national agreements and a central bank account for transferring funds. Management by a single secretariat is a must in this case. Paying for this management role will be an issue for the future transnational programme.
- Having smaller calls with limited funding level makes it easier to obtain agreement from policy makers for transnational calls. This limits however the number of quality projects that can be funded. As a consequence of the high quality of projects submitted, some countries are considering increasing their funding of the call.

3. The European young investigators award

Mr. Marks, from the European Science Foundation (ESF), described how the heads of European Research Councils (EUROHORCs) and ESF select 25 awards each year for performing research in one of their host institutions. The objective is to encourage young EU and foreign researchers to pursue a career in EU research organisations.

Calls have been published worldwide and researchers receive up to 250.000 € a year for 5 years. All areas of research are covered. A first “national” screening is followed by an evaluation through an international panel that selects the awardees. The ESF manages the panels and committees making the final selection.

An external assessment of the scheme highlighted the quality of the researchers selected and the growing prestige of the award, but it also mentioned the need to increase its marketing to the research community in order to reach more of the target group. The second step, international, evaluation was considered more thorough and fair than the first, national, step.

The main points discussed were :

- The funding scheme operates with no “juste retour”. On the basis of the funding it makes available, each EUROHORCs member organisation receives a number of “drawing rights”. This corresponds to a number of researchers which can be proposed to the second step evaluation. In practice, funds are kept within the EUROHORCs member organisations and are used to fund researchers who have applied for a position in the EUROHORCs country concerned (independently from their nationality), to the extent possible. The transnational dimension is due to the fact that if a country is more successful in receiving researchers than foreseen in its available budget, the ESF transfers funds from countries which have been less successful. To date, some 30% of the funds crossed national borders.
- The scheme has allowed benchmarking of research council practices and a general acceptance of using national research budgets to fund some foreign researchers. It has built a base that could serve as a trial run for one of the schemes to be implemented by the future European Research Council. However, some countries have retired from the scheme on the basis of unsatisfactory results of their researchers the year before. Other difficulties are the differing employment and tax conditions which hinder mobility, national advertising which does not allow “branding” of the scheme, and the high overheads coming from low overall success rates.

- The scheme does not fund transnational projects. Even if limited compared to the some 100 m€ mobilised to fund awards in the first four years, EU funding to fund management of the scheme appears to have played an important role in getting the collaboration going. The future of the scheme is uncertain in the light of the launching of the European Research Council.

V. LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE OUTLOOK FOR JOINT CALLS

1. How to ensure management integration? The devil is in the detail

This session was launched by Mr. Brandenburg who presented some of the lessons learned by the MNT ERA-NET project on micro- and nano-technologies.

Like for all ERA-NETs designing a joint call, all participants gathered in depth knowledge of different national systems and benchmarked their own practices, highlighting best ones which have, in some cases, already prompted participants to modify national programmes. An analysis of partnerships using network analysis software has highlighted main actors and clusters.

Issues reviewed can be classified in two main categories :

- Design issues : Definition of the call objective, Target group, Type of projects funded, Type of partnerships envisaged, Focus on a theme or not (open call), Evaluation criteria...
- Implementation issues : Call timing, Ways and means to inform the target group, Evaluation (one or two step..), Contracting, Monitoring, Overall management (Decision making)...

From the discussion, the main lessons learned appear to be the following :

- Pilot calls are recommended to explore and pave the way before focusing on larger ones with higher added value for programme owners and impact for the target group.
- Agreeing on design and implementation appears to be rather easy between similar minded actors (programme owners and programme managers).
- The main difficulties lie in practical details of national programmes such as economic evaluation criteria (applied when evaluating industrial projects), different practices for feed-back to proposers (when and what to feed-back?) and the different structure and level of overheads which affect differently funding levels in various countries.
- For most projects, a single peer review by a common international panel was accepted, but there are still cases where this principle is still challenged by some programmes.

2. How to ensure financial integration? The pros and cons of different mechanisms

Mr. Deppe, from the CRUE ERA-NET on flood risk management presented an analysis of different funding mechanisms resulting from their pilot call.

Discussions in the morning and analysis by the Commission show that calls using virtual common pots are much more frequent. Only a couple of ERA-NET chose a real common pot while some try hybrid models or compare the two models in different pilot calls.

The presentation and the discussion confirmed that virtual common pots are easier as they do not require need for exchanging funds amongst countries and allow each programme to fund national partners according to national mechanisms.

However, this option has the major drawback of not ensuring all best projects to be funded. Various enablers allowing to solve this problem have been described :

- Flexibility by a country that will increase its commitment to fund a high quality project in which its national partner would not have been funded. This could also lead to a fixed commitment prior to the evaluation which could be topped up if necessary depending on the situation after the evaluation.
- Cross-funding by Country A which funds partner from Country B. This happens when the project is considered of high value for the EU as a whole or Country A in particular. Implementing this option is more difficult as it requires re-submission of the proposal to country A or sub-contracting by a partner from country A to the one from country B. The limit case where a single country would fund a whole project has been dismissed as, then, the transnationality of the project might be questioned.
- It was confirmed that evaluation by a joint international panel can allow to identify projects whose added value is higher than the sum of national added valued. This might affect national funding levels and stimulate flexibility or cross-funding. Both solutions imply synchronisation of participating national calls to avoid bottle-neck effects.

Real common pots would avoid all the above problems and allow to guarantee funding to all selected trans-national projects. However the difficulties experienced for ensuring commitment and/or transfer of funds across borders make such calls more difficult to implement.

An interesting option practised by various programmes to fund either virtual or real common pots is to launch a national call together with one having an international dimension. It is then easier in many countries to modify the relative level of “national” and “international” budget according to the results of the calls. This last practice also allows to fine tune the ratio of funding national and international projects, thus alleviating a main concern of national programme owners for not building sufficient national research capacity.

3. How to ensure scientific integration? Selecting topics for joint calls

Mr. Gunnarsson from the SAFEFOODERA project on food safety explained how the project designed the 3 pilot calls it will launch in 2006 to prepare a major call to be launched later.

The analysis of joint calls launched by ERA-NET projects showed that most joint calls are bottom-up, with a 2 step mechanism. A few calls have carefully identified scientific priorities.

The analysis of the topics covered by the 35 programmes co-ordinated by SAFEFOODERA showed that some specific research topics are covered by more than 100 projects. These are indeed topics that would benefit from transnational projects.

From the discussion, some guidelines appeared :

- Focus on some scientific topics is easier for projects involving policy makers (programme owners). Programme managers or research councils have more difficulties to choose between various society driven goals, research communities and technological areas.
- Virtual common pots appear to be more appropriate for topics where much research is ongoing in many partner countries and for internationalising the research community. A real common pot poses less problems when addressing a very relevant but new or less investigated topic.

VI. TOWARDS FP7 : SYNERGIES AND COMPLEMENTARITIES WITH NATIONAL AND EU RESEARCH PROGRAMMES

Some ERA-NET projects are interacting with the Commission to discuss synergies and complementarities with EU RTD programmes (FP7). This is the case of ERA-PG on plant genomics which has launched in 2006 a joint call for some 30 m€ which will be followed by a second one in 2007.

Mr. De Geus explained that the main difficulties encountered were the lengthy discussions required to convince all programme owners to commit funding to the call. Implementation is mainly hindered by different funding and administration cultures. Virtual common pots allow each country to continue with its accepted ways. For him, only when there will be a greater harmonisation of funding procedures across the EU will it be easier to implement calls with real common pots.

Commission contribution to the ERA-NET project is vital in allowing for the travel and meetings required to design and manage joint calls. Allocating some additional EU funding, as foreseen in the future ERA-NET Plus scheme, would facilitate joint calls in some areas. The topping up of the EU to an ERA-NET PLUS call could ensure a more homogeneous funding in case of a virtual common call by “filling the gaps”, i.e. covering for those partners whose country ran out of money.

Mr. Smits (Commission, Director Directorate B: Structuring ERA), mentioned that there was indeed a need for rationalisation amongst the many existing national programmes and also amongst international schemes. During FP6, ERA-NET projects did it in a bottom-up fashion, allowing creativity to generate many projects covering most research areas. These have now generated dozens of partnerships, methodologies, data-base and good practices.

Under FP7, some rationalisation will be undertaken. For this reason the main research Themes of FP7 will fund future ERA-NETs to ensure they have added value with respect to existing ones. Some rationalisation amongst ongoing projects (e.g. in the biotechnology areas where there are at least 4 ERA-NETs ongoing) would also allow national ministries and programme managers to better use staff resources involved in ERA-NETs. Such issues will be discussed on 20 June in a dedicated workshop with EUROHORCs.

The final discussion focused on synergies between joint calls and other trans-national research programmes :

- Many projects expanded already existing bi or tri-lateral calls, whilst others clearly benefited from experience in existing joint Nordic fund project. However, there should be caution in launching too many joint transnational calls in the same area as the co-existence of various schemes, evaluation systems and peer reviews would not contribute to the structuring of the ERA.
- Consortia launching major joint calls are discussing with the Commission and other international activities (e.g. Technology Platforms) to ensure that there is some coherence between the different international activities for the future. For example, the Agriculture, Food and Biotechnology priority will hold a workshop on 15 June.
- A distinct added value of ERA-NET joint calls might be to allow some Member States to undertake joint transnational research on topics which were not selected as a priority in the EU RTD Framework Programme by the 33 countries now involved.

To conclude, Mr. Smits then informed the participants of the status of the FP7 process, stressing that a revised Commission proposal (following interventions of Council and Parliament) was due for end of June. Due to the co-decision (Council-Parliament) process, delays have accumulated; nevertheless all possible efforts are being made for FP7 to be operational in January 2007.

Mr. Wittke (Commission, ERA-NET unit) presented detailed plans for the ERA-NET scheme in FP7 :

- Regarding ERA-NET in FP7 the relevant budget will come from the budgets of the Themes. An assessment of the currently running ERA-NETs shows that 60-65% fall under FP6 Thematic Priorities, whereas the remaining 35-40% are in areas seen as 'non-core' of the thematic areas or not covered at all by FP6 priorities. This is a crucial issue which is also to be taken into account in the future management of the ERA-NET scheme.
- FP7 ERA-NETs should become more ambitious, i.e. aiming at joint calls or other higher level collaborations from their start.
- The ERA-NET scheme will be applicable in the Specific Programmes "Cooperation" (mainly) and "Capacities".
- Finally ERA-NET Plus will be a mechanism for supporting consortia of programme owners and managers that will organise/launch Joint Calls worth at least 5 M€. In this module, the EC will be topping up the funding by some 1/3 of the Joint Call value.