

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

**COORDINATION OF NATIONAL RESEARCH
PROGRAMMES**

**European Commission
DG RTD**

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the key objectives of the European Research Area (ERA) is to reduce fragmentation of research efforts in Europe. Considerable progress had been made at project level (enhancing cooperation among universities, research centres and industry across Europe) under previous Research and Technological Development Framework Programmes (FP), but very little as concerns the crucially important coordination of national/regional research programmes. This was first tackled in an explicit and concerted way under FP6 through three main new initiatives:

- a) the CREST action on the **mutual opening of national programmes**
- b) the **ERA-NET scheme**
- c) use of the **Article 169** of the Treaty

Based on the hitherto positive experience derived from these initiatives, the Commission is preparing a number of proposals in the context of the Seventh Framework Programme, aimed at consolidating the hitherto obtained concrete results and pushing this coordination to a higher level. As already indicated in the Communication from the Commission on the Future of European Research, two concrete measures in particular are envisaged in order to do this:

- the further development of the ERA-NET scheme (“*ERA-NET+*”)
- the launch of further initiatives under Article 169 in an improved overall framework

This paper aims to take stock of the existing situation and elaborate briefly on the envisaged new actions.

2. CURRENT STATE OF PLAY

In this section, the current status of each of the above-mentioned initiatives will be briefly reviewed and an inventory of lessons learnt will be made.

A) CREST ACTION ON THE MUTUAL OPENING OF NATIONAL PROGRAMMES

Current status

Under the impulse of the recognition by the research ministers of the importance of the mutual opening of national research programmes (informal ministerial meeting of Girona in early 2002), the CREST launched in March 2002 pilot actions for the mutual opening of national programmes in five identified promising areas (marine sciences, plant genomics, chemistry, astrophysics, complexity and complex systems). With the financial and logistical support of the Commission, working groups were set up in each of the five areas with the participation of a significant number of member states (but a different configuration for each one).

Lessons learnt

It became clear that the mutual opening of national research programmes constitutes a strategic decision by those countries which wish to engage in it, and is inscribed in a long term perspective. In practical terms, partner countries need to ensure at the outset ample mutual access to information on their national research programmes (including on overall priorities and strategic orientations) and exchange best practices on existing actions of mutual

opening (a small number at present and usually of limited scale). Experience has shown that it is easier to ensure this mutual opening if it is inbuilt in the definition of the programmes from the very start, rather than trying to engineer it in existing ones. The effort required can only be justified if a sufficient number of national programmes are involved so as to achieve significant impact. It also soon became evident that the creation of meaningful mutual opening requires an appropriate legal and organisational frame, already from the early study and evaluation phases. For this reason, in the course of 2003 CREST came to the conclusion that the ERA-NET scheme is the most suitable mechanism to pursue this exercise (at least for the first stages of coordination), and by 2004 ERA-NET projects were actually set up in four of the five pilot areas.

B) THE ERA-NET SCHEME

Part of the “third pillar” of FP6, the ERA-NET scheme aims at the networking of research programmes carried out at national or regional level, including their mutual opening, and at developing and implementing joint activities (including joint calls or even joint programmes).

Current status

By general admission, the ERA-NET scheme is one of the most innovative aspects of FP6 and with perhaps the most direct bearing in the creation of a genuine European research policy. A large part of its originality lies in the fact it addresses exclusively public bodies managing or financing national research and innovation programmes (ministries, national research councils, national/regional research agencies, etc.), rather than research performing organisations, as is the case with the mainstream FP projects. Endowed with a total budget of approximately € 150 million over the duration of FP6, it has met with a healthy response of many high quality proposals. To date, 55 projects (32 ERA-NETs and 23 preparatory actions) have been selected and funded, following evaluations after the first cut-off dates (June 2003 and March 2004). The scheme follows strictly a bottom-up approach, covering any area of research and innovation. It can also be used in the context of Thematic Priorities, as was the case of three measures in the context of IST. It espouses a step-by-step approach, recognizing four distinct levels of increasingly stronger cooperation and encouraging consortia to aim at reaching the highest ones possible (namely, implementation of trans-national research activities through joint calls or joint programmes). Despite the novelty of the scheme, several ERA-NETs set from the very start quite ambitious objectives, going all the way to implementing joint calls and preparing the ground for integrating parts of, or whole programmes, which may involve in some cases the use of Article 169 of the Treaty.

Lessons learnt

The ERA-NET scheme came to fill a real gap in the field of coordination of national and/or regional research and innovation programmes, as evidenced by the enthusiastic response registered to the first closure dates of the open call for proposals. Projects funded cover a broad range of topics and all Member States and Associated States are involved in the one or the other. However, the participation of the new Member States needs to be further enhanced, as compared to the other Member States which have a longer history of implementing national research programmes and of mutual cooperation in the context of the past Framework Programmes. Also, the participation of regional programmes is rather limited. Although strictly a bottom-up programme, a relative weakness in the representation of certain strategic areas (such as energy and basic research) has been observed and the reasons for this have to be understood. It was clear from the beginning that all key actors in a given area in each of the

participating Member States need to be present in the ERA-NET, if the action is to have a significant impact which would ultimately justify the effort invested. Lastly, it can be remarked that the preparatory actions (in the form of Specific Support Actions) have been very useful for the preparation of full-fledged ERA-NETs (in the form of Coordination Actions).

C) ARTICLE 169

Article 169 of the Treaty allows for the participation of the Community in research and development programmes undertaken by several Member States, in the context of implementing the FP. Never used earlier, it was felt that in the overall context of FP6 it could make a significant contribution toward building ERA, and every effort was made by the Member States (which have the initiative) and the Commission to have it activated, albeit in a pilot capacity.

Current status

Judged more mature among a number of candidate topics, the “European and Developing Countries Clinical trials Partnership” (EDCTP) was formally proposed by the Commission to Council and Parliament in August 2002 as an Article 169 action, and launched following co-decision by the two institutions in June 2003. Fourteen of the then Member States plus Norway participate in this pilot initiative, which has a projected budget of € 400 million coming in equal parts from two sources: the Community and Member States. A common structure in the form of a *European Economic Interest Group (EEIG)* was set for its implementation.

Lessons learnt

A number of important lessons have already been derived: Firstly, proposing an initiative under Article 169 must have a clear political pertinence, good visibility and involve preferably a large number of Member States. The topic must be clearly inscribed in the scientific or policy priorities of the FP. The European added value of the proposed action must be clearly demonstrated. It must have objectives such that cannot be more effectively achieved by the regular instruments of the FP (e.g. IP and NoE) and possess the critical mass necessary to achieve significant impact. Lastly, the time-consuming nature of the required co-decision procedure should not be underestimated.

3. FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The reinforcement of the coordination of national research programmes has been recognised as a major priority for the future of European research, and constitutes one of the six axes identified in the 16 June 2004 Communication by the Commission on “Guidelines for future European Union policy to support research”.

While recognizing the value of what has been achieved by the three initiatives reviewed above, one should not remain contented only with the present state of affairs and assume that the best possible has been done. It is clear that the demand for better coordination is far from being met yet. Not only whole important areas have not been tackled, but many potential actors, especially from the new Member States, are not fully involved. It appears necessary, therefore, that the existing instruments (ERA-NET and Article 169 as applied in its first pilot

implementation) should be continued and reinforced, while CREST should continue playing an active role.

A) CONTINUED INVOLVEMENT OF CREST

Building on the experience acquired in the ground-breaking work done by CREST in the mutual opening of national research programmes, and in line with its reinforced attention to programme coordination in the context of its overall mandate, it would be advisable to request CREST to concentrate on two closely related follow-up tasks:

- a) identifying areas in which the setting up of programme coordination activities becomes an imperative need (e.g. public health emergencies, bio-terrorism, etc), and,
- b) based on the experience acquired on coordination of national programmes, identifying and analysing potential legal or administrative barriers hindering it and offering suggestions to overcome them.

B) A REINFORCED ERA-NET SCHEME

The experience acquired hitherto with the ERA-NET scheme has clearly demonstrated two things:

- a) its value and the need to continue it into the next framework programme, with a number of improvements (especially by enlarging its participation base), as a key instrument for the realisation of the coordination axis.
- b) the need to strengthen the scheme by adding a stimulus to the undertaking of joint actions (notably joint calls).

i) Continuation of the present scheme

It is felt that there will be continued need for new ERA-NETs in new areas which broadly encompass the four levels of networking as current ones. Of course, thought should be given to the advisability of reviewing some of the eligibility criteria which could allow, for example, the participation of public bodies which have not yet developed full fledged programmes, but intend to do so. In addition, ERA-NETs should be encouraged to make use of the possibility to deepen and/or broaden their scope in the course of their development, e.g. by extending their partnership, especially toward new Member States.

ii) ERA-NET +

However, as the desire to network national and/or regional programmes picks up momentum and needs to be encouraged even more actively under FP7, it becomes evident that the current scheme does not go far enough. Or, seen differently, that there is a gap between the current ERA-NETs and full fledged Article 169 actions. As indicated in the 16 June 2004 Communication, the possibility of providing as a stimulus Community financial support for the jointly undertaken research activities themselves should be explored (“ERA-NET+”). For example, this could take the form of a Community top-up for joint calls of proposals (to the tune of 15-20% of total costs, provided a number of conditions are satisfied), where participating entities create a common fund for the purpose of the action. As such, the ERA-NET+ mechanism, which will remain a simple and flexible coordination mechanism between national or regional research programmes, could become a more effective bridge toward

Article 169, which provides the framework for the full integration of national research programmes in a given field into a single joint programme (with Community participation). In this connection, ERA-NETs (and in particular the “ERA-NET+” option) can be used to prepare future Article 169 actions.

C) ADDITIONAL ARTICLE 169 INITIATIVES

The EDCTP pilot action has demonstrated both the unique features of Article 169 and the challenges that are involved in preparing and implementing actions under this article. In view of its potential, it is felt that the mechanism merits more extensive use under FP7, in cases where a strict set of criteria ensuring it is the most appropriate instrument are met. It is felt that there is scope for launching up to three or four new Article 169 initiatives, in areas to be identified in close association with the Member States. However, every effort should be made to capitalise on the experience acquired through the EDCTP pilot action and take the appropriate measures that will ensure in future both the smooth implementation and the full utilisation of the potential of the mechanism.

In addition to heeding the “lessons learnt” described above, particular attention should be paid to the following issues:

- The identification process should start early enough, so as to allow the insertion of the themes in the main FP7 legal text. It is estimated that this process requires almost two years. It is very positive that the exploration of certain candidate themes is being carried out in the context of ERA-NET projects.
- It is of capital importance to ensure the solid financial, as well as political and scientific commitment of the Member States involved ahead of any formal proposal.
- The necessary legal and organisational structure should be defined at an early stage.
- Given the time-consuming nature of the co-decision procedure, and the fact that different initiatives will likely involve different configurations of Member States, it seems highly advisable to devise a streamlined approach which will facilitate the whole process. The most promising approach seems to be that of a grouped (“package”) submission of several proposals for Article 169 initiatives, which would be subject to a single co-decision procedure.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The actions for the coordination of national and/or regional research programmes under FP6 provided a significant impulse to the building of ERA. It is strongly felt that these actions need to be reinforced and extended under FP7. The principal means for pursuing this objective would be:

- a broadened ERA-NET scheme (“ERA-NET+”),
- the streamlined application of Article 169 in a small number of carefully chosen cases, and,
- the continued involvement of CREST under its reinforced coordination mandate.