

ERAC-SFIC 1351/18

NOTE

From: SFIC Secretariat
To: Delegations

Subject: Summary conclusions of the 35th meeting of the Strategic Forum for International S&T Cooperation (SFIC), held in Brussels on 8 December 2017

The meeting was chaired by Ms Rozenn Saunier (SFIC Chair, FR).

1. Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted with an additional sub-item under "Any other business". Item 7 was postponed to the next meeting.

2. Tour de table of national and Commission activities

Member States informed about core developments and major events in their countries.

The Commission provided an update on recent meetings relating to international scientific and technological cooperation notably with Japan, Brazil, the United States, the African Union, Eastern Partnership and Southern Mediterranean countries, as well as in the context of Euratom international research cooperation. The SFIC Chair underlined the importance of a participation of SFIC representatives at the meetings organised by the Commission, whenever possible.

Furthermore, the Chair summarised the outcome of the ERAC Plenary meeting held on 5 December 2017 in Brussels. She mentioned in particular ERAC's intention to improve its interaction with the Council Presidencies, the rather short exchange of views on the cooperation between ERAC and the ERA-related groups, and the creation of an ad-hoc Working Group on Partnerships (whose mandate has been published as doc. ERAC 1211/17). From now on, information from the Chair about recent ERAC meetings will be a regular agenda item at all SFIC Plenary meetings.

3. SFIC opinion(s)

Gender aspects in international cooperation

The SFIC rapporteur (Austria) recalled that the amended report on exploring the current situation at national and organisational level regarding a gender perspective for international cooperation in science, technology and innovation (STI) had been circulated (doc. WK 13642/2017). Delegations did not make any remarks. The Chair therefore concluded that the report was adopted.

The rapporteur then presented the draft joint opinion of SFIC and the ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation (SWG-GRI) on "Developing joint guidelines on a gender perspective for international cooperation in STI" (doc. WK 13940/2017).

Some Member States expressed concerns about the suggestion in the draft opinion to include gender aspects as one of the criteria used for the selection of projects, and asked to point out more clearly that it concerns both gender equality and gender-related research elements in the proposed projects.

The Commission supported these comments. It also pointed out that, due to a lack of resources, it would not be in a position to take the lead in bringing together the expertise from all over Europe e.g. by organising a related expert workshop or ad-hoc expert group, as suggested in the draft opinion, and therefore asked to remove this recommendation. The Commission considered that activities to further prepare the ground and advance the knowledge base on a gender perspective in dialogues with third countries in the area of STI could only be initiated by SFIC and SWG-GRI, as requested by the Council in its conclusions of December 2015.

The rapporteur invited delegations to provide their comments to the draft opinion in writing by 15 December 2017. The same deadline would also apply for the members of SWG-GRI. After that date, the joint opinion would be finalised and adopted by both groups in a written procedure.

4. State of play of working groups

Toolbox Working Group

The SFIC rapporteur (Norway) informed about the outcome of the workshop that had been organised on 7 December 2017 in Brussels.

Some delegations regretted the lack of progress in the suggested development of a technical tool for making international research and innovation cooperation results more visible and publicly available, given that this was a central part of the recommendations prepared by the Toolbox Working Group whose mandate would soon expire.

The Commission informed about its intention to bring together expertise of DG RTD and the Joint Research Centre in order to develop a solution, and to present concrete proposals at the next SFIC Plenary meeting.

5. The future of SFIC working groups

The SFIC Vice-Chair summarised the draft set of conditions for the establishment of working groups (doc. WK 13939/2017), highlighting and opening the discussion on the frameworks of the working groups such as clearly specified objectives and timetables as well as a minimum number of participating countries.

Member States and Associated Countries generally welcomed the proposal. However, they indicated that they would prefer to keep the rules as flexible as possible, both as regards the number of participants and the duration of the mandate of a working group. They made several suggestions for new cross-cutting thematic and geographical working groups, mentioning in particular innovation, higher education, science diplomacy, Open Science, relations with Asia, and a working group dedicated to examining the Member States' international strategies.

It was also proposed for SFIC working groups to cooperate more closely with similar initiatives undertaken by ERAC and other ERA-related groups.

The Vice-Chair invited delegations to submit their concrete proposals for new working groups (including suggestions for chairing or participation) by the end of January 2018. SFIC would then continue the discussion at its next meeting.

Finally, SFIC concluded that the mandates of the Brazil and China Working Groups had ended and that their activities had formally come to a close.

6. Service Facility

The Commission gave an overview of the types of services foreseen in the INCO service facility, the available budget and the contracts established so far or to be signed in the near future. It promised to provide more detailed information about the existing contracts and the current requests to the service facility in writing.

A number of Member States expressed concern about the transparency in the Commission's selection procedures as well as the limited availability of information on ongoing activities and about the support that could be provided by the service facility. They called for more exchange of information between Member States and the Commission on activities in third countries, with the aim of improving the EU's presentation and visibility, and would like to have SFIC more closely involved in the decision-making process.

SFIC then continued its examination of the proposed service request for the International Service Facility (Work Programme 2018/19) on Danube Region Policy Dialogue (doc. WK 10105/2017), on the basis of additional information provided by the German delegation. A number of delegations highlighted the importance of this initiative and the requested support.

The Commission, however, underlined that this request could not be justified due to the missing element of international cooperation with third countries, given that the participating countries would mainly be EU Member States. A coupling with the Western Balkans Platform would also not be feasible. The Commission could therefore not accept this request.

The SFIC Chair, in agreement with the supporting Member States, therefore closed the debate on this proposal.

The German delegation then presented a revised service request for the International Service Facility (Work Programme 2018/19) on a Conceptual Framework for Monitoring International Cooperation (doc. WK 13968/2017). Several Member States expressed their support, notably in view of the preparation of the next multiannual framework programme for research and the necessity to start the preparations for a successor to the current ERA roadmap after 2020.

The Commission withheld its opinion on this service request pending the outcome of the deliberations on the mid-term review of the ERA governance and monitoring.

SFIC endorsed the request. It will now be published as a working paper and forwarded to the Commission.

The German delegation asked the Commission about the status quo of the examination of the service request for a foresight study on the Global Research Area (doc. WK 11632/2017) that was endorsed by SFIC at the last plenary meeting. The Commission informed SFIC about its intention to implement the foresight study as part of a wider frame on Strategic Intelligence in spring 2018. Several countries requested a close cooperation between the Commission and SFIC in the preparation and implementation of the tender, including regular updates by the Commission on its progress at SFIC plenary meetings.

Furthermore, SFIC discussed its internal decision-making process, e.g. for the selection and validation of proposals for service requests, on the basis of SFIC decision trees with two different options that had been prepared by the Chair.

A number of Member States stated their preference for option 2 which they considered more transparent, taking into account the voting arrangements set out in Article 8 of SFIC's Rules of Procedure.

The Chair concluded that option 2 of the SFIC decision tree (as presented in doc. WK 14651/2017) was adopted.

7. EU-CELAC cooperation

This item was postponed to the next meeting, due to the unavailability of the responsible Commission representative.

8. Joint funding schemes

The German delegation gave an update on the implementation of the EU-CELAC joint funding scheme and will provide additional information in writing.

This was followed by a short summary provided by the French delegation on the EU-ASEAN joint funding scheme.

9. Internationalisation of the EUREKA network

The Spanish delegation, the previous Chair of the EUREKA network, and the Finnish delegation, current Chair of the network, presented the "Strategy for EUREKA Internationalization 2025" (doc. WK 13984/2017) and gave an overview on the latest state of play in its implementation. They pointed out that discussions with the Commission on the future role of the EUREKA network in the context of the European Innovation Council were still ongoing.

Some Member States indicated that the dialogue between EUREKA and SFIC should be improved. They suggested to invite representatives of the network more frequently to SFIC Plenary meetings for an exchange of information.

10. Review of ERA governance foreseen in 2018

The Chair informed SFIC about the discussion on ERA governance at the last ERAC Plenary meeting on 5 December 2017. Member States had been invited to provide written contributions by the end of December to the ERAC Co-Chairs, in order to allow them to prepare the follow-up at the next ERAC meeting in mid-March. Final decisions would most probably be taken at an ERAC meeting in September.

In this context, the SFIC Chair also summarised the ERAC Work Programme 2018-2019 (as set out in doc. ERAC 1212/17).

11. Work programme of the incoming Presidency

The Bulgarian delegation informed about the priorities of the incoming Presidency in the area of research and innovation and the relevant high-level events scheduled in the first semester 2018.

12. Any other business

The Vice-Chair highlighted the importance of science diplomacy and indicated that this subject would be discussed at the next SFIC Plenary meeting on 7 March 2017. Several delegations welcomed this initiative.

Furthermore, the Vice-Chair informed about a workshop on scientific ethics that would be organised by the Finnish delegation on 6 March 2017, the day before the next SFIC Plenary meeting, in Brussels. She invited SFIC members and asked for their active contribution, but pointed out that the workshop would also be open to other persons.

Finally, the Austrian delegation highlighted the importance of the European research and innovation centres in the United States, China and Brazil. She asked to include a debate on the progress achieved so far, and on possibilities for deepening their integration and for better defining the services that they provide, in the agenda of an upcoming SFIC Plenary meeting.
