

EUROPEAN UNION  
EUROPEAN RESEARCH AREA  
AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE  
Strategic Forum for International  
S&T Cooperation

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Secretariat

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ERAC-SFIC 1353/17

**NOTE**

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From: SFIC Secretariat  
To: SFIC Delegations  
Subject: SFIC biennial activity report 2015-2016

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## Introduction

SFIC is a dedicated configuration of ERAC which advises the Council and the Commission on the implementation of a European Partnership in the field of international S&T cooperation. SFIC facilitates the further development, implementation and monitoring of the international dimension of ERA, with a focus on the external dimension of the European Union and Member States' research and innovation activities.

The SFIC biennial report of activities covers the years 2015 and 2016. It is in line with Article 7(4) of the SFIC mandate in its revised version from 2016 and will be submitted to the Council and to the Commission. It is also the first biennial activity report and replaces the previous annual reports. SFIC also contributes annually to the ERAC report. The objective of the report is to provide an overview of SFIC activities, highlighting specific actions without covering all details.<sup>1</sup>

The report covers mainly the work under the previous SFIC mandate and the whole period of the work program for 2015-2016. But to allow a link to be made with future work and the work programme 2017-18, the report follows the headings of the new mandate. This allows to connect past activities with future objectives, as SFIC's objective to foster and support international S&T cooperation remains. It should be noted, however, that many of the activities of SFIC are transversal. For example activities related to the implementation of ERA falls under several headings, the activities of sharing information about third countries in different geographical working groups also serves to establish networks, as in the case of the China Working Group, or to develop joint strategic approaches, as with the Working Group on Russia and the strategic research and innovation agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> Details can be found in the summary conclusions of SFIC meetings, as well as SFIC opinions, which are available on the Council's public register at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/register/en/content/int/?typ=ADV> by searching for 'SFIC'

## Summary of activities

In line with its work programme and its mandate, SFIC has

- successfully provided sound and timely advice to the Commission and the Council on international cooperation in science, research and innovation via relevant opinions. For this purpose, SFIC has adopted six formal opinions in the last two years and presented them to Council (Research Working Party and Competitiveness Council) and Commission (DG RTD and Commissioner Moedas' cabinet);
- proactively worked on joint strategic approaches and actions for international R&I cooperation, with Brazil, US, Russia and China, as well as on common principles and on a toolbox for international collaboration;
- appropriately provided input for the implementation and further development of the ERA Roadmap, in particular through its opinion on ERA governance;
- addressed ERA-developments through increasing cooperation with ERAC and ERA-related groups by means of various activities including a joint opinion currently being prepared with the Helsinki group;
- contributed significantly to the development of the Commission's second progress report on international cooperation and the Multi-Annual Roadmaps with constructive input through workshops;
- shared best practice and information on international cooperation among Member States/Associated Countries through presentations of best practices done by delegates and invited speakers during the plenary meetings, SFIC-related workshops, and information communicated by the SFIC Secretariat.

SFIC has also collaborated with national and international research stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental in order to learn from experiences, to have a factual basis to discuss and to share relevant information.

As in the past, the substantive work on the opinions and in the different working groups has been carried forward by rapporteurs from one or several Member States and/or Associated Countries with the regular input of a large number of SFIC delegations in and in between the four annual plenary meetings.

In summary, SFIC considers that it has successfully implemented its work programme 2015/16 in line with its old and with its revised mandate. SFIC has demonstrated its added value in the development of the international dimension of S&T cooperation .

It should also be recognized that some of the planned activities have not yet been fully carried out or fulfilled. The next work programme should take this into account and propose adjustments e.g. on the better uptake of SFIC activities at national level and coordination with national science attachés.

### **Organisational developments**

SFIC's original mandate from 2008 was renewed in 2016 and the new mandate was presented by the SFIC chair to the Council research working party in February 2016. SFIC has also been growing in numbers. To date, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Switzerland, Israel, Moldova, Montenegro, Macedonia, Norway, Turkey and Ukraine are invited as observers to the SFIC plenaries.

On the administrative side, Dan Andrée (SE), chair since 2013, has concluded his extended tenure as SFIC chair in October 2016. Sandra Oliver (SE) served as assistant to the chair during this period. SFIC elected as his successor Rozenn Saunier (FR) as chair in the October 2016 plenary meeting for three years. Iulia Mihail was elected in 2015 as co-chair for a period of two years. The General Secretariat of the Council has provided the SFIC secretariat.

## **Stocktaking of the state-of-implementation of the SFIC Work Programme**

SFIC has taken measures to implement all aspects of the work programme<sup>2</sup> in the appropriate form. In some instances this took the form of more concrete deliverables, such as opinions or events, in others it was implemented through more intangible means, such as regular exchanges within and beyond SFIC or sharing of information by email.

SFIC considers that it has attained the majority of the goals that it set itself in the 2015/16 work programme. Certain aspects are still ongoing and will be either concluded soon or continued in the next work programme period.

The following pages provide an overview of activities in support of the above statement, highlighting particularly noteworthy aspects. The annex contains all opinions delivered by SFIC in 2015/16.

### **Progress and impact of the main activities of SFIC**

#### **a. Strategic and timely advice on international S&T cooperation**

Providing advice is one of the core activities of SFIC. It has been very active in this regard and has provided advice on a wide variety of topics. SFIC has proactively and in response to requests from Council and Commission, provided sound and early strategic advice and evidence for policy formulation on international S&T cooperation and on the external dimension of ERA. To this effect SFIC has advised the Council and the Commission, which were also taken into account at national level.

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<sup>2</sup> ERAC-SFIC 1353/15, as adopted on 12 February 2015

Of notice is the SFIC opinion on the Commission's '**Open to the World**' agenda in March 2016<sup>3</sup>. In it, SFIC considers that strengthening the external dimension of the European Research Area (ERA) is a key element towards a more coherent and efficient interaction in research and innovation at a global level, expresses its belief that Europe, its Member States and Associated Countries should benefit from and engage more in already existing or planned specific R&I initiatives and clarifies that SFIC is ready to continue to play an active role by supporting external policy, contributing to science diplomacy, serving as an exchange platform to discuss implementation of S&T cooperation agreements and strengthening its networking with stakeholders. The opinion was drawn up proactively and transmitted to the Commission and Commissioner Moedas. The SFIC chair also discussed the opinion with the Commissioner's cabinet.

On the **strategy for international cooperation in research & innovation (R&I)** SFIC has constructively and fruitfully cooperated with the Commission on its biennial implementation reports. SFIC has been contributing proactively to these reports and the related Multi-Annual Roadmaps. In 2015 SFIC adopted an opinion on the first progress report.<sup>4</sup> SFIC recommended to systematically include Member States in the further implementation of its strategy for international cooperation and the Multi-Annual Roadmaps. SFIC also held an exchange of views based on a background paper prepared by the Commission in March 2015, in which the bilateral and bi-regional policy dialogues undertaken by the Commission, Member States and Associated Countries were highlighted as a standing point on SFIC's agenda. The Commission also invited SFIC to consider a more practical approach to propose activities in support of these dialogues in connection with the new INCO Service Facility. During 2016, SFIC provided written and oral input to the Commission during the preparation of the second progress report and commented on the draft report. A formal SFIC opinion on the final report on how the insights from the progress report could be used to foster international R&I cooperation will be issued in 2017. This process clearly demonstrates the good partnership between Member States and the Commission.

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<sup>3</sup> ERAC-SFIC 1354/16

<sup>4</sup> ERAC-SFIC 1352/15

SFIC also responded to the call for ideas from the Commission on the **European Innovation Council** (EIC) by a letter from the SFIC chair, highlighting the need to focus on the international dimension of a potential EIC and cautioning about making the funding landscape even more complex. In the view of SFIC an EIC could be a complement to existing structures in the area of research, such as Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions, aiming to attract and support (international) entrepreneurs.

The ongoing discussion within SFIC about the setting up of **thematic working groups** in order to be able to address emerging and horizontal issues in a dynamic manner has produced first results in the collaboration on the gender dimension in international R&I cooperation, which is being addressed jointly with the Helsinki group.

At the same time, experience shows that regional working groups are on the one hand highly useful instruments to connect SFIC delegations interested in a specific region. This can be attested by the successful work as described below. On the other hand, the working groups require a certain level of commitment from SFIC delegations, which is not always available, and there is no natural point at which to suspend them. A sustainable solution needs to be developed in the course of the next work programme. Finally, the separating line between the policy advice as provided by SFIC and the implementation of actions by the EU or by Member States must be more clearly defined.

**b. Develop and implement joint strategic approaches and actions for international R&I cooperation**

SFIC has been focussing its work on a number of countries where SFIC considered special attention to R&I cooperation was warranted. This was primarily done through the work of dedicated working groups on Russia, the USA, China and Brazil.

The SFIC Working Group on Russia had the objective to advise SFIC on jointly developing a coordinated approach towards a more coherent science, technology and innovation (STI) cooperation strategy with the Russian Federation. The Russia WG was chaired by BMBF, Germany, for two years (May 2014-May 2016). As a final deliverable, SFIC adopted an opinion, containing a strategic research and innovation agenda (**SRIA**).<sup>5</sup> This paper drew on the experience in conducting R&I activities with Russia and proposed a strategic research and innovation agenda. With this activity the WG also contributed to the EU's roadmap for STI cooperation with Russia. This opinion fulfilled its mandate to 'jointly develop a coordinated approach towards a more coherent STI cooperation strategy with the Russian Federation.'<sup>6</sup> Work on Russia continues in various formats (e.g. workshops, ad hoc meetings, one-off activities, etc.) outside a formal working group.

On the **USA**, several events were organised, including a workshop on innovation issues in EU-US research cooperation in 2015, a workshop on marine litter and ocean literacy in December 2015 and its follow-up workshop to develop a global outreach campaign on marine litter in March 2016. As such, the initiated campaign is a direct contribution to the implementation of the G7 Action Plan on Marine Litter. The campaign is a joint effort of G7 states, the Commission and Member States (in variable geometry). The basis has been set in follow-up of the G7 Science Ministers Meeting 2015 in Germany and in the SFIC USA working group, as marine research has been a core field for the group. The campaign planning and realisation is currently continued with the interested states involved (Germany, Ireland, Italy, USA, EU Commission), even though the WG mandate expired and the WG is currently suspended.

The mandate of the WG on **China** has been renewed until June 2017. It organises annual follow-up of EU and Member State STI cooperation initiatives with China, advises on targeted joint and coordinated actions (within Horizon 2020 or Member State-China activities) and promotes the organisation of and input to EU/Member State -China workshops and conferences in the priority areas of common interest. In particular, the WG has built up contacts with the DragonStar+ projects as well as established a regular exchange with national S&T **attachés** in China.

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<sup>5</sup> ERAC-SFIC 1356/16

<sup>6</sup> ERAC-SFIC 1356/14



The WG on **Brazil** has been very active and has a renewed work mandate until Jun 2018. It has been particularly active in promoting the Tour of Brazil events, a bottom-up, menu-driven approach, which promotes all possible ways of cooperation. The WG has also focussed on making Europe visible in Brazil and on an exchange of practices. This complements the 'Destination Europe' event, which is driven by the Commission.

All regional working parties aim to identify ways of cooperation with the newly set up INCO Service Facility by the Commission.

SFIC also had exchanges of information on **bilateral dialogues** and the role of SFIC therein. SFIC received information on cooperation with South Africa, East Asia and India, though information on senior officials meetings and seminars related to these countries/regions. For South Africa (SA) a questionnaire was used to collect information on Member States activities with SA and it was followed up in a workshop that demonstrated an alternative from the setting up of a standing WG. Delegations agreed that SFIC as a connecting forum between national science attachés and the EU level can play a role of facilitating contact. This work is closely linked to the development of the ERA Roadmap.

### **c. Input to the ERA Roadmap**

In line with SFIC's objective to facilitate the further development, implementation and monitoring of the international dimension of ERA, it contributes actively to the implementation of the ERA Roadmap through all its activities. An opinion on the ERA roadmap has been adopted in 2015 and in 2016 SFIC has started the work on monitoring the implementation of priority 6, international cooperation. This work is ongoing and will continue in 2017.

A strategic approach has been developed in 2015, in close dialogue with ERAC and the other ERA-related groups, on how to **strengthen and streamline the external dimension of ERA in line with the ERA Roadmap**. As an example, the GPC Chair was invited to the SFIC plenary on 29 September 2015 to discuss ongoing internationalisation activities of Joint Programming Initiatives (JPIs) and how and where SFIC could support JPIs in its internationalisation efforts. Furthermore, SFIC collected all national ERA roadmaps relating to international collaboration, as far as they have been adopted, and conducted in June and September 2016 an exchange of views on them. SFIC agreed that its role on priority 6 implementation should depend on national priorities, which are in national roadmaps. SFIC is uniquely placed to bring this together. This work thus has spanned the previous<sup>7</sup>, current and will continue into the next work programme.

Thirdly, SFIC has contributed to the ongoing work on **indicators** to analyse and measure the impact of the external dimension of the ERA, in close collaboration with the Commission and the work in the context of the ERA Monitoring Mechanism and the R&I Observatory. The SFIC Chair has personally participated in the meeting of the ERAC Working Group on Monitoring the ERA Roadmap (Vienna, 8 June 2015), being involved in the choice of a headline indicator for international cooperation (international scientific co-publications with non-EU countries per million of the population). Moreover, the SFIC Plenary has had various discussions during 2015 on the appropriate(s) indicator(s) for monitoring international cooperation, as many delegations expressed dissatisfaction with the current headline indicator. It emerged that delegations would favour the future creation of a composite indicator for such purpose, taking into consideration the notion of impact. Synergies with the INCO Service Facility might be utilised in the future creation of such a composite indicator.

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<sup>7</sup> EUREKA was invited to the December 2014 SFIC plenary in order to have an exchange of views on their cooperation outside Europe (ERAC-SFIC 1351/14).

#### **d. Cooperation with ERAC and ERA-related groups**

Over the last years, coordination and cooperation among ERAC and ERA-related groups has been steadily increasing. SFIC has a dedicated mandate, which addresses a horizontal issue. Therefore coordination is crucial to fostering the international dimension of ERA.

In order to ensure a close coordination within ERAC and ERA-related groups, SFIC has provided input for the discussions on **ERA governance**, including an opinion on "ERA Governance: Review of the status, the mandate and the reporting lines of SFIC". SFIC has also contributed - in line with its mandate - to the ERAC report in 2016. SFIC will also contribute to the ERAC opinion on the interim evaluation of Horizon 2020 in 2017, building on the work done in 2016.

From an operational point of view, SFIC revised its mandate in 2016 in line with the 'standard clauses' agreed by ERAC and Council and as required by the revised ERAC mandate. The new mandate expressly identifies such cooperation as a main activity for SFIC for the first time.

As requested by the Council in its conclusion from 2015, SFIC and the Helsinki group are jointly working on the **gender aspect in international S&T cooperation**. Moreover, they already discussed elements of Joint Guidelines on a gender perspective for International Cooperation in STI. This is a good example on how SFIC collaborates with other ERA-related groups and at the same time an example on how the work of SFIC helps to share good practice.

#### **e. Share and structure information and good practice on international R&I cooperation activities and objectives**

SFIC has created a new working group on a "Toolbox for international cooperation", with the objective to develop a practical overview for Member States, Associated Countries and the Commission in their implementation of international STI agreements and STI cooperation activities at bilateral and multilateral level. It developed from an AOB on the SFIC's agenda to a very active working group, which has been collecting all necessary data and organised stakeholder workshops; it will deliver its output in form of a tool-box document with instruments and best practice-examples of international cooperation in 2017.

The INCO Service Facility will be an important instrument to support the EU's strategy for international S&T cooperation by providing the necessary logistical and financial means to carry out a number of activities based on requests for services received from the Commission, SFIC and other stakeholders. SFIC provided input on synergies between the Service Facility and its own agenda. It also held a dedicated workshop in June 2015. This will be particularly relevant to put in practice the insights gained from the toolbox working group and to propose activities in support of policy dialogues. In fact, a draft background paper comprising SFIC's key priorities for the Service Facility was prepared and is under further consideration in order to be forwarded to the Commission in 2017. In view of the conclusion of the framework contract by the Commission for the Service Facility in January 2017, setting priorities for the annual programme of activities and reviewing them based on the assessment of the outcomes will continue to be on the agenda of SFIC meetings.

SFIC delegations shared relevant information on various regions and countries that Member States or Associated Countries have cooperation arrangements with. This included inter alia South Africa, Ukraine, and South-East-Asia, on which a Joint Funding Scheme (JFS) was discussed in June 2016. Another region that SFIC considered in different meetings was Central and Latin America and the Caribbean (CELAC), where the Commission and Member State/Associated Country delegates provided information from meetings and ongoing discussions. **CELAC** has been discussed at several instances in SFIC plenary meetings. The SFIC chair also proposed specific steps for the preparation of SOMs/bi-regional dialogues to ensure a fruitful involvement of SFIC.

SFIC has helped to build a more open and strategic discussion during plenary meetings on ways to improve structured policy coordination and a more open and transparent approach vis-à-vis Joint Committee (JSTCC) meetings and bi-lateral dialogues by SFIC Members.

A dedicated working group has provided advice to Council and Commission on **common principles** for the conduct of international R&I cooperation<sup>8</sup>, as response to a Council request. This included a mapping of global research standards, a questionnaire amongst Member States and interactions with relevant stakeholders. This action was part of the SFIC work programme and was successfully concluded.

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<sup>8</sup> ERAC-SFIC 1357/15, as adopted on 9 June 2015

**f. Pool and share information concerning third countries and regular consultation among SFIC members**

SFIC has been regularly informed by delegations and the Commission about ongoing developments in international R&I cooperation, e.g. through information on Senior Official Meetings in the context of CELAC, ASEAN, India and China. The SFIC chair and its members also took part in many of these meetings, thus spreading knowledge about SFIC more broadly.

On **India**, SFIC held an exchange of views with the Commission in September 2015 and provided input on the GSO process upon the Commission's request, emphasising the need to have substantive meetings with a specific purpose. SFIC also liaised with national GSO representatives.

Outside of the meetings, the SFIC secretariat has sent the SFIC bi-weekly regularly, with information related to SFIC's tasks and mission to ensure a continuous exchange of information.

SFIC also welcomed the State Secretary for Higher Education and Research from Sweden, Mr Anders Lönn, who gave a keynote speech on the importance of internationalisation, where he highlighted SFIC as 'an excellent forum for exchanging information and best practice, learning from each other and also working together'.

SFIC also closely cooperated with the rotating Presidency of the Council of the EU. In line with its mandate, SFIC submitted all opinions, its work programme and annual reports to the Council. The chair also presented SFIC's 2014 annual report in a meeting of the Competitiveness Council and the 2014 annual report and the new SFIC mandates to the Council Research Working Party). The chair also gave two interviews to Research Europe and Science Business helping to increase awareness of SFIC and its contributions to international S&T cooperation.

## **g. Information exchange and networking with scientific advisors in third countries**

The need to more closely cooperate with national science attachés has been repeatedly raised, most recently in the discussion with the Commission in the context of the second progress report on the international S&T cooperation strategy. SFIC is aware of the challenge that stems from the differences in national structures and priorities. Through the geographical working groups, SFIC has established structures that help to build a link between SFIC and national attachés. This is a first step, but within the 2017-18 work programme this issue will also be on the SFIC agenda. The SFIC chair also represented and presented SFIC to local decision-makers and to science attachés of EU Member States at several Destination Europe events in the US, INCO conferences in China, events in the context of the EU-ASEAN Joint Funding Scheme in Vietnam and Thailand as well as in other countries.

### **Outlook**

This report serves as the concluding document to the 2015/16 work programme. As indicated in the report above, certain actions are already ongoing and will continue in 2017. They will also form part of the new work programme for 2017/18 that has been adopted by SFIC together with this report.

SFIC will continue to contribute to the development and implementation of the ERA roadmap to make full use of the external dimension of ERA; to provide strategic and timely advice on international S&T cooperation to the Council and the Commission; to foster the uptake of this advice also at national level. SFIC will also remain an active forum for the exchange of information and best practices. The future work programme takes into account the lessons learned from past activities and builds on them to further increase the value that SFIC can offer to the field of international S&T cooperation.