

ERAC-SFIC 1357/19

NOTE

From: SFIC Secretariat
To: Delegations

Subject: Summary conclusions of the 42nd meeting of the Strategic Forum for International S&T Cooperation (SFIC), held in Brussels on 4 October 2019

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

1. Adoption of the agenda

2. Tour de Table

Presentation of recent INCO developments

The traditional tour de table took place. Contributions by delegations will also be circulated to the committee in a dedicated SFIC bi-weekly.

COM reported on the strategic planning process of Horizon Europe. COM is processing the input from the public consultations and the R&I days and will produce an updated orientation document by the end of October. This document will be discussed at the meeting of the shadow strategic committee and will be sent to the Member States for consultation until the end of November. The content of the part of the Strategic Plan relating to international cooperation will be further enhanced. Political priorities will be taken aboard once the new Commission is installed.

COM also reported on the 24th meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean Group of Senior Officials on Research and Innovation that will be organized in the premises of the Union for the Mediterranean in Barcelona, Spain, on Monday 25 November 2019 and will be co-chaired by the Commission and Jordan.

Feedback from the ERAC plenary in Helsinki on 2 October 2019

The vice-chair provided feedback from the ERAC plenary. She first reminded delegations that a conference with the Directors-General of Higher Education and ERAC was organised on 1 October, back-to-back with the ERAC plenary.

At the ERAC plenary, ERAC had endorsed the conclusions and recommendations presented by the Ad-hoc Working Group on the future of the ERA and adopted the final report on the ERAC monitoring process. More information was given by the vice-chair under the specific items on the SFIC agenda.

ERAC also took note of the SFIC statements on its mandate and on its impact under the item relating to the updates from the ERA-related groups. There were no comments on these statements by ERAC. Under this item, there was also a presentation by ESFRI on the monitoring of research infrastructures.

At the 17 December ERAC plenary, there will be two strategic debates on "Quantitative targets for investments in R&I and directionality/sustainability" and "Knowledge circulation linked to inclusiveness". An ERAC workshop preparing the strategic debate will be organised by the Commission the day before the ERAC plenary. Furthermore, the role of COM in ERA-related groups will be discussed in December. In this respect, the vice-chair remarked that in SFIC COM is a full member but not using its full potential in the forum. She considered that SFIC should prepare for the ERAC discussion in advance. As the SFIC plenary will take place only after the ERAC meeting, she will prepare a draft paper which will be circulated to SFIC for SFIC delegates to contribute.

At the request of some delegations, the vice-chair indicated that documents circulated to ERAC in view of the plenary of 2 October could also be made available for delegations in SFIC.

The ES delegation pointed out that ESFRI has international participants in a project that is part of the ESFRI roadmap, and proposed that a presentation could be made in SFIC on this project by the ESFRI Chair. The chair agreed on this.

3. Future of SFIC

a) SFIC visibility/communication

The DE delegation presented the update from the task force on the basis of the draft SFIC Communication and Visibility Plan. Delegations can send their comments on the draft plan by 15/10. The HU delegation added that the task force had aimed to make the draft plan as realistic and practical as possible.

Marc Vanholsbeek, the Chair of the ERAC Standing Working Group on Open Science and Innovation (SWG OSI) and the coordinator of the action in the ERAC action plan related to communication and visibility reported on the work done at OSI and ERAC level. He mentioned the project to create a template for a cover page for reports and opinions that would be used in addition to the official Council one and the efforts to restructure the Council webpage that contains information on ERAC, SFIC, GPC and the Standing Working Groups. He regretted that the number of links that could be used on the webpage was limited and that links to the reports and opinions of the groups could not be included on this page. According to him, the main problem is to find the documents produced by the groups. Work at ERAC level is still on-going.

The chair found the template a good idea and asked if a copy of it could be circulated to SFIC.

AT raised the issue of social media and the responsibilities that go with using it.

Mr Vanholsbeek agreed that the use of social media communication entails responsibilities, but considered that communication about public documents should be unproblematic. He also mentioned that the SWG OSI has discussed the use of a "creative common license" to publish its opinions and reports. Council rules allow the reproduction of public Council documents under certain conditions. For example, the content of the document cannot be modified and the source has to be cited.

A discussion followed on the need for SFIC to consider its own target group for its communication. The HU delegation proposed that SFIC prepare a PPT to present itself, possibly also placing this in the context of all ERA-related groups. The chair considered that such a presentation would need an accompanying note to achieve its purpose. She also considered that social media needs should be added in the draft communication and visibility plan, even if it turned out not to be possible to use social media in this respect. Furthermore, she stressed that SFIC should have a coherent approach with ERAC.

4. Election of the new SFIC Chair

The term of the current SFIC chair ends on 15 October 2019. The procedure for the election of the new chair had therefore been launched by the SFIC Secretariat on 13 June 2019, with the deadline of 15 July 2019 for the candidates for the position of the Chair. By this deadline, one candidature had been received from Martina Hartl (AT).

Ms Hartl presented her motivation to become the new chair and was consequently elected unanimously. The vice-chair and the SFIC delegations thanked the current chair for her commitment.

5. SFIC activities in the context of the ERA

a) ERAC monitoring process

The Vice-Chair reported on the ERAC plenary where the final report on the monitoring of the National ERA Action Plans (NAPs) had been adopted by ERAC. The gathering of the information had been very challenging due to the difficulty to map the NAPs for different priorities, and a similar kind of exercise would probably not be repeated in the future.

The report adopted by ERAC would be circulated to SFIC, as well as the table summarizing the collection of the data for the NAPs by SFIC (for priority 6 in particular) in the form of a living document, which would be updated when new or revised NAPs become available. It is not certain if a similar exercise will be done at ERAC level in the future.

b) Update on the work of the ERAC Ad-hoc Working Group on the future of the ERA

At the ERAC plenary, ERAC had endorsed the conclusions and recommendations presented by the Ad-hoc Working Group on the future of the ERA, pending minor adjustments to be made on the text. ERAC had also discussed the idea of "ERA Lighthouses", high priority collaborative strategic policy initiatives that would be highly visible, motivating and guiding for the general public within the scope of creating a single area of knowledge. The implementation of a new ERA paradigm could be

accelerated by the development of these "lighthouses". ERAC had been of the general view that the draft ERAC Opinion to be submitted at the December ERAC plenary on this issue should encourage the Commission to take into account "ERA Lighthouses" with a view to preparations for the upcoming Commission communication on the future of the ERA, including the possibility to launch a pilot project on lighthouses. ERAC had been supportive of the concept under the condition that the "ERA Lighthouses" serve the objectives of ERA, contribute to the branding and the visibility of ERA, are rather structural in nature than thematic and help connecting different elements of ERA. Moreover, the concept of "ERA Lighthouses" should become clear, avoiding confusion, duplications of efforts and an increase in complexity of ERA.

The Ad-hoc WG will continue its discussions, especially on the "ERA lighthouses", and present its final report at the December ERAC plenary. The endorsed conclusions and recommendations would be circulated to SFIC delegations.

The AT delegation wondered whether the discussion on the future of the ERA includes the aspect of the advisory structure and in this respect considered that SFIC should stress the importance of international cooperation and SFIC. The chair referred to the tri-annual review of the ERA advisory structure which is a separate process but considered that it would not harm to stress the importance of the ERA priority on international cooperation, not necessarily SFIC as such, through the channels of the national referents within ERAC or the Ad-hoc WG.

6. Information on the Mutual Learning Exercise

The FR delegation gave an update on the Mutual Learning Exercise on National strategies and roadmaps for international cooperation in R&I. The second country visit took place on 16-17 September 2019 in Romania, and the third and last one will be organised in Sweden on 12-13 November 2019. The final meeting of the MLE will take place in February 2020, following which a dissemination workshop has been planned (which is usual practice for the MLEs).

Intervening delegations were all generally positive on the MLE. The chair concluded that it was a very useful and inspiring exercise and looked forward to the final results of the MLE.

7. Working groups

a) Benchmarking Working Group

The FR delegation thanked the members of the Benchmarking Working Group for their commitment and presented the current state of play and next steps for the Working Group. The work is now at a final phase, with the draft report being presented to SFIC. This draft report represents the results of the Working Group's data collection and analysis (parts I and II) as well as an outline for a future SFIC opinion (recommendations in part III) according to its mandate. A preliminary version of the draft report had been presented and discussed during the second country visit of the MLE on National Strategies and Roadmaps for International Cooperation in R&I, and the MLE experts had provided useful feedback that had been taken into consideration in the draft report. The deadline for SFIC delegations to comment on the draft report and the draft recommendations is 4 November.

The mandate of the Working Group was originally set up for 12 months in September 2018 and had therefore already expired. In order for the Working Group to finish the work on the tasks of its mandate, it was proposed to extend the mandate for another six months. A draft revised mandate of the Working Group had been submitted to SFIC for its consideration.

The chair thanked the Working Group members for their valuable work and considered that the draft report allows the Member States to have a good perspective about the scale of international cooperation.

Intervening delegations referred to the link between the work of the Working Group and the MLE, also in the context of the dissemination workshop planned at the end of the MLE. The AT delegation pointed out that the MLE will also come up with recommendations and that it would be important to make sure that those recommendations are not contradicting with those of the Working Group. Moreover, some delegations were wondering whether the analysis of the collected data showed the differences in the thematic approaches of the Member States when it comes to international agreements.

The FR delegation agreed that synergies are necessary between the MLE and the Working Group, but clarified that there was no intention to prepare joint reports from the two groups. The MLE experts had already given input to the draft report of the Working Group and vice versa. As regards the dissemination workshop, it will be organised by the Commission and the Working Group had just come up with the idea of it being a joint one. As far as the thematic approaches of the Member States are concerned, it should be possible to give examples of such approaches on the basis of the data collected but this would be supplementary work for the Working Group.

SFIC agreed that it was important for the Working Group to have time finalise its work and thus endorsed the revised mandate.

The Commission indicated that it would reflect on a possible joint dissemination event.

The chair concluded that the extension of the mandate would allow the Working Group to complete its tasks but that in case it seems necessary to analyse the collected data further, a new group should be established. She repeated the invitation for all SFIC delegations to send their comments to the draft report and the draft recommendations that will become a SFIC opinion by 4 November.

b) China

COM first gave an update of the state of play vis-à-vis China. COM is treating China at the same time as a partner in tackling the sustainable development goals, a competitor for technology leadership and a systematic rival, as there is at this stage no level playing field for innovation cooperation. The conclusion at an EU-China high-level meeting in April 2019 was to draft a joint roadmap that would include both sectoral dimensions and framework conditions for cooperation. COM is currently reflecting on the EU position on the roadmap, including the nature of EU-China collaboration under Horizon Europe. It is clear for COM that the cooperation with China needs to be discussed at Member States level, and it is therefore currently looking for a date for a meeting with the Member States and the stakeholders.

The AT delegation then presented its ideas on the possible priorities, joint efforts and potential outcomes of a future SFIC task force on China.

During the ensuing discussion, the intervening delegations referred to their respective national initiatives on China and considered that concentrated action by SFIC is indeed necessary but that the scope should be realistic, in order not to face the same difficulties as the previous China Working Group of SFIC. The ES delegation considered that the current situation is very different from the days of the previous China Working Group but that despite this, the approach of the task force should be clear.

COM considered that the idea to establish a SFIC task force was very ambitious and recalled that the national taskforces already have coordinators. It suggested to create a Working Group with them. The chair considered that a SFIC task force could have added value, not only to the Member States but also for COM. The mapping of the state of play of collaboration with China in different Member States and the difficulties encountered could be the starting point of the task force's work. The vice-chair agreed and added that in most Member States, there are several ministries involved in the collaboration with China and that a SFIC task force could in this aspect help to bring policy coherence.

The FI and DE delegations indicated that they would join the task force if it was established.

The Chair proposed that the next step could be to create a "core group" to reflect on a mandate of the task force and invited SFIC delegations to confirm their interest to the SFIC Secretariat to participate in this exercise. She also asked COM to indicate what kind of information it would need at this stage for the reflections on the EU position on the roadmap.

c) Science diplomacy

The AT delegation reported back from the workshop organised on Science diplomacy on 3 October, back-to-back with the SFIC plenary. A full report will follow.

Furthermore, the AT delegation will revise its concept paper on the basis of the workshop results. This revised version will be circulated to SFIC prior to the next plenary on 18 December, and SFIC could then decide on a possible task force on this topic on this basis.

The FR delegation indicated its interest in participating in the task force, if SFIC decides to establish it.

COM informed SFIC on the session on "Science diplomacy" at the R&I Days during which it had received valuable input from stakeholders.

d) Africa

COM gave an update on the state of play of cooperation with Africa. In the case of the High Level Policy Dialogue, the EU Africa senior officials' meeting on Science and Innovation would take place on the 7-8 November 2019 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, at the African Union Commission Headquarter. The invitations to the senior officials were already sent via the Member States' contact points. The Africa-EU innovation Partnership was launched 12-13 September 2019 in Nairobi in a successful event, in which 20 incubators (10 from Africa and 10 from Europe) and a significant number of innovation actors from both continents took part. The first concrete result of this partnership is already impressive, since within the two days of the event, already 7 Memoranda of Understanding between the African and the EU innovation incubators were either already signed or are being finalised. In the coming months, COM will continue to support partnerships among incubators, technology transfer and capacity building. The next high level event will take place in Marseille in the beginning of December 2019, hopefully with the participation of the new Commissioner.

The ES delegation had prepared a concept note for SFIC in view of the discussion on the creation of a task force. The FR, PT and DE delegations had already given their input to this paper. It seemed to ES that SFIC was clearly in favour of establishing a task force. The scope is however very wide (big continent, lots of topics), so there is a need to focus and not to repeat work already done in other instances. The ES delegation considered that the task force should first map the current state of play in the Member States and then concentrate on a specific part of the continent. ES proposed to hold a teleconference with interested countries and to report back to SFIC.

The AT, CH, DE, FI, FR, MT and PT delegations expressed their interest in participating in the task force. COM stressed the need to focus and reminded delegations that science can complement the work done in the field of development. COM would also be interested in taking part in the work of the task force.

The chair concluded that there was clearly a lot of interest to work together on Africa and encouraged the ES delegation to proceed with the invitation to the teleconference in the coming days.

8. Any other business

COM gave an update on upcoming Workshop on a Strategic Intelligence Foresight System. The vice-chair invited the SFIC delegations to transmit the information to the national experts who deal with foresight.

The chair reminded delegations of the message circulated on behalf of the Horizon 2020 GENDERACTION project on a follow-up survey on gender in international cooperation in STI and including an invitation to a Mutual Learning Workshop organized on 7-8 November 2019 in Malta. The deadline to reply to the survey is 11 October 2019.

The RO delegation asked COM to provide information about the Western Balkans Steering Platform on Research and Innovation, the Destination Europe event and the EU-US Energy Council. The vice-chair considered that these were indeed important topics and invited COM to send this information in writing. She considered that it would also be important for SFIC to be informed about other joint meetings and invited COM to provide such information on a regular basis.

Regarding interpretation in SFIC meetings, the chair informed delegations that the usual interpretation regime was still applicable at the current SFIC plenary meeting and also at the meeting on 18 December 2019. She explained that requests for interpretation are usually made by delegations before the beginning of each Presidency and for the whole 6 months, meaning that interpretation had already been booked in advance for these two meetings. She urged delegations to contact their colleagues dealing with these requests at the Permanent Representations before 21 October, which was the deadline for requests for meetings organized under the incoming Croatian Presidency.
