

ERAC-SFIC 1354/20

NOTE

From:	SFIC Secretariat
To:	SFIC delegations
Subject:	SFIC opinion on “International R&I cooperation in view of the global COVID-19 pandemic”

Delegations will find attached the SFIC opinion on “International R&I cooperation in view of the global COVID-19 pandemic”, as adopted by the written procedure on 6 May 2020.

SFIC opinion on “International R&I cooperation in view of the global COVID-19 pandemic”

The COVID-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented and dramatic health and economic crisis of global scale, with all countries in the world affected. It has severely impacted national health systems and, due to the necessary restrictions of public life, also has profound and lasting effects on the economies and societies affected around the world.

The solution to this crisis can only be found through Science and hence multiple research and innovation activities have started at national, regional and international level with billions of Euros being invested towards the same cause – within Horizon 2020 for example already 18 projects with a volume of 48.5 Mio. Euros have been selected and further calls and activities are on the way¹. Moreover funding for selected multilateral activities has been made available and running EU-funded projects have started supporting activities.

Coordination between the Member States and Associated Countries and the EU level has started and a short-term *ERAvsCorona Action Plan*² has been developed and is now being implemented. However, although such a global crisis would need a coordinated international endeavour, at this stage the Action Plan lacks a clear international dimension. Joint R&I activities as well as coordination of R&I agendas / division of work or sharing experiences with third countries is so far only happening on marginal scale and in the course of the last weeks the pandemic has even exposed risks related to lack of international solidarity (from sharing data to sharing needed equipment and securing fair and equal access to potential vaccines).

The Commission and the High Representative of the Union for foreign affairs and security have published on 8 April 2020 a joint communication on the Global EU response to COVID-19³, setting out plans for a robust and targeted EU response to support partner countries’ efforts in tackling the pandemic. Proposed actions include the support to partner countries and fragile populations as well as dedicated research activities and the promotion of exchange of data between researchers.

¹ For current information see <https://ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/covid-19>

² https://era.gv.at/object/document/5261/attach/ec_rtd_era-vs-corona.pdf

³ https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/joint-comm-2020-eu-global-response_en.pdf

The interfaces between science, science advice and international relations, foreign policies - the science diplomacy interactions, are currently more visible in the media and directly for citizens than ever – as is disinformation. Moreover, COVID-19 exhibits the need for as well as complexity of evidence-based policy making, with far-reaching political decisions to be taken under immense time-pressure while evidence is still being accumulated and analysed. At the same time, supra-national organisations for international public health and science coordination are partly weakened instead of strengthened and Europe’s ability to harness positive effects of international coordination may be threatened by this.

HAVING REGARD TO THIS, SFIC:

1. Underlines the global dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for strengthened international R&I cooperation to tackle the disease and to mitigate the consequences of the health crisis that affects societies and economies and in particular the most vulnerable ones. An international mobilisation effort and dedicated resources are needed to support especially developing countries in their efforts to counter the crisis.
2. Acknowledges the huge efforts of fast national responses as well as at the European level a coordinated R&I Action Plan related to the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Emphasises the significance of stepping up international R&I cooperation and of coordinating actions with third countries and international organisations for fighting COVID-19, including the sharing of research results, relevant data and experiences related to preventing the spread of the virus and fighting it; the sharing of experiences related to preparing national health systems (also with view to supporting countries that may be affected in the coming months and could be especially vulnerable). Moreover, joint research efforts should go beyond the immediate COVID-19 health threat, namely analysing the currently largely unknown short-, medium and long-term economic and societal effects to create support mechanism and be able to take preparatory steps for future crises. Moreover the experiences of the COVID-19 crisis may have a lasting effect also on the future modes, depth and scope of international R&I cooperation itself and hence would be worth analysing.

4. Calls for the complete opening at international level of publications as well as the opening of data whenever possible, resulting from research on the COVID-19 epidemic as this will be an important measure to tackle and mitigate the crisis effectively via research, while respecting the principle of anonymization and ethical standards and the application of the FAIR principles related to data; recognises the efforts made at EU level in that regard with the EU-COVID 19 database launched on 20th of April 2020⁴.
5. Invites the Commission and Member States to consider stepping up the efforts in international cooperation to tackling similar global crises such as this. The pledging conference started on 4th of May 2020 and global response efforts (<https://europa.eu/global-response/>) are welcome and future international activities should include and strengthen:
- launching coordinated and/or joint R&I calls and projects with third countries covering the whole R&I chain and as adequate, ex-post top-up of already funded projects related to COVID-19 to include such an international perspective and partnership;
 - supporting the WHO's efforts to develop global priorities for research and development and division of work for fighting COVID-19 and related health crises in the future;
 - contributing to activities and initiatives such as the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the Global Research Collaboration for Infectious Disease Preparedness, the European & Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) or the OECD etc.;
 - reinforcing capacity building actions for the most vulnerable countries, especially in Africa;
 - seeking synergies with related actions in other policies of Commission (especially those covered by DG NEAR, DEVCO and EAC) and of the EEAS;
 - promoting joint international mobilisation of companies to develop fast and innovative solutions, as successfully initiated via the pan-European hackaton.

⁴ <https://www.covid19dataportal.org/>

6. Encourages the Commission, the European External Action Service, Member States and Associated Countries to make full use of the potential of Science Diplomacy tools. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the necessity to nourish and strengthen bilateral and multilateral S&T relationships for an effective exchange of cutting-edge research, more efficient coordination of joint activities and resources as well as the relevance of scientific advice for political decision-making. In that sense the *ERAvsCorona Action Plan* as a living document could be complemented with measures in a global context.
 7. Asks Member States and Associated Countries to consider integrating and supporting international cooperation activities and possibilities into their COVID-19 funding activities.
 8. Underlines its willingness to support the Member States, Associated Countries and the European Commission in their efforts e.g. by collecting and distributing information, assisting in the coordination as necessary.
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