

Simplification of Framework programme Administrative procedure¹

*Preliminary background paper for the Expert Group on Ex-post Evaluation of the 6th
Framework Programmes*

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¹ This paper is still more a collection of raw material on documents and statements related to simplification than an analysis of it.

CONTENT

Sisältö

1	Points of departure.....	3
2	Progress towards improved implementation and simplification.....	3
2.1	The Marimón report.....	3
2.2	An Action Plan for Rationalisation and Acceleration	5
2.3	Issues covered in the annual monitoring and other evaluation reports	8
3	Simplification in the 7th Framework Programme	14
3.1	Main proposals of the Commission for simplification	14
3.2	Some examples of simplification in FP7	19
4	Conclusions and recommendations	20

1. Points of departure

The Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) was designed with the explicit purpose of contributing to the creation of the European Research Area. To this effect, it introduced novel instruments (notably Integrated Projects and Networks of Excellence) aiming to provide a powerful structuring effect and to reduce fragmentation of research efforts and capacities in Europe. In addition, new approaches to facilitate the implementation of these instruments were introduced; these were intended to achieve a move from ex ante to ex post control by the Commission, greater autonomy and flexibility in the management of projects by participants, and simpler financial and administrative rules compared to previous framework programmes.

2 Progress towards improved implementation and simplification

2.1 The Marimón report

The need for a rapid review of problems identified during the implementation of FP6 became clear in mid 2004. An independent panel of high-level experts, chaired by professor Ramon Marimón, which evaluated the effectiveness of the new instruments introduced in the FP6 recommended in its report in June 2004 that “administrative procedures and financial rules should be significantly improved to allow more efficiency and flexibility in implementing participation instruments.”² The evaluation was based on information deriving from the first calls for proposals and feedback received from participants.

² Report of a High-level Expert Panel chaired by professor Ramon Marimón. Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the New Instruments of Framework Programme VI. 21 June 2004.

The specific recommendations to improve the level and quality of the service were as follows:

- Information should be made public well on time, but only when mature and tested for clarity and user-friendliness.
- Adequate training of all EC staff involved is a necessity to avoid inconsistency in communication and interpretation. Staff rotation should not disrupt the efficient handling of the funding process.
- Application forms should go through a simplification exercise to minimise the burden on participants.
- Electronic tools have to be tested and be ready on time. Duplication of efforts by participants is not acceptable.
- Processes should be set in place to monitor and regularly improve the quality of the different service aspects. This involves clear guidance to those in charge, quality control and benchmarking.
- Assistance for elaborating consortium agreements and handling Intellectual Property issues is a necessity, particularly for the smaller and weaker players. The existing IPR help desk is a necessary tool to ensure all types of players have access to expertise and advice and deserves more promotion efforts from the Commission.
- Budget cuts during contract negotiation should always be justified and be part of the Evaluation Summary Report.
- The problems associated with managing large scale projects should be monitored closely and lessons should be translated in action plans.
- The Financial Regulation and the way it is used should be revised in order to ensure that a service-minded approach is feasible. Further simplification is needed to allow for projects, valued on a general cost-based form, to be given enough flexibility regarding the final allocation of expenses. Assistance on such matters could be channeled through a specialised help desk.
- Risk management (rather than risk avoidance) combined with service level standards, should be used to define procedures. Procedures and their interpretation should be common for all Directorates /Directorates- General.

2.2 An Action Plan for Rationalisation and Acceleration

Building on the recommendations of the Marimón report, the Commission established in September 2004 a Task Force on Rationalisation and Acceleration whose objective was to find solutions, in particular in the short term, to the problems. Member States, stakeholders and Commission officials were consulted to identify the problems and the actions necessary to remedy the problems.

The Task Force identified a comprehensive list of issues. Certain improvements were immediately feasible while other suggestions needed more time, or changes to the legal and/or financial framework, to be implemented. A final Action Plan³ contained **six actions** to simplify and accelerate procedures and sixteen actions to improve the quality and effectiveness of procedures. All Directorates General responsible for implementing FP6 participated in the task force and committed themselves to implement, monitor and report on the effects of the action plan.

The Research Directorate General reported in April 2006 that “the Action Plan has now been fully implemented to the extent possible within the current legal and financial framework”.⁴ All operational directorates within DG RTD were asked to indicate how the action plan was being implemented in their directorates as of April 2005. An overall view of the Action Plan’s implementation according to the order of each action can be summarised as follows:

1. **ACTION PLAN:** A road map with deadlines for each instrument for each step of the process will be introduced in Guides for Proposers and a clear timetable for the steps up to contract signature (evaluation, selection, negotiation, decision and contract

³ Research Directorates General. Task Force on Rationalisation and Acceleration. Action Plan. 2004.

⁴ Synthesis of Research Directorate Generals reports on the implementation of the FP Action Plan on rationalisation and acceleration. Annex 2. RTD/A3/BH -25 April 2006.

signature) will be defined. This information will accompany each call for proposals. Model letters to coordinators of proposals selected for negotiation will be amended to provide more details of the Commission's internal procedures and the timing of the related steps with clear indication of what is expected from proposers by when. This will be combined with earlier provision of information in negotiation meetings between coordinators of selected proposals and Commission staff on the requirements (by end-November 2004).

IMPLEMENTATION: Commission services had introduced and/or improved the negotiation timetable in the Guide for Proposers. Some had already well-defined timetables, and others had introduced more detailed and specific roadmaps. Model letters and all other necessary information and references was made available to proposers at an early stage.

2. **ACTION PLAN:** Commission services will identify the areas in which specific reductions in each process can be made for each call under their responsibility and will ensure that all possible efficiencies are introduced to shorten each step in the process for that call. This will be followed up by senior management within each Directorate General.

IMPLEMENTATION: The Commission services identified the areas in which further improvements can be made in order to reduce the time spent on each process within a call. It seemed clear to the Commission that most of the delays were dependent on the post-evaluation stage during the negotiation and the contract production. Several minor measures were implemented.

3. **ACTION PLAN:** Monitoring of progress, delays and unmet targets will be reported to each Director and each Director will in turn report to each Director General. Management will ensure that actions taken in each of the areas identified are implemented in their areas of responsibility and will report quarterly to the FP6 Steering Group on discrepancies that come to their attention. Programme committees will be informed of progress at appropriate intervals.

IMPLEMENTATION: One directorate indicated that a template for the procedural steps in the call-to-contract-signature process had been set up. Another directorate indicated

that it records in a local IT system all data related to each step of the process, and for each project. Some directorates indicated that the reasons for unnecessary delays are not entirely on the “directorate side”.

4. **ACTION PLAN:** Further efforts to simplify and streamline all existing administrative procedures as well as identifying all administrative processes with the objective of reducing any duplication of effort and demand on proposers and programme staff time will be taken within each Directorate or Directorate General to ensure the most efficient and effective implementation of priorities and programmes.

IMPLEMENTATION: All services indicated that they had given particular attention to avoid duplication of efforts and demands. Many had introduced standard check-lists. One directorate indicated that it had installed a framework that provides a clear overview of all the negotiation steps, provides templates, and identifies responsibilities.

5. **ACTION PLAN:** The Commission’s position will be clarified and all participants will be clearly informed of this position. The Commission will monitor the mechanisms put in place for participants to ensure that they provide timely and continuous support to them in FP6. In addition, certain additions and clarifications to the Guide for Proposers and Guidance notes for Negotiation will be introduced (by mid-December 2004).

IMPLEMENTATION: Services indicated that participants are well informed about the FP6 legal framework and “consortium agreements”, through the negotiation guidelines, the website on contractual issues and during the kick-off meeting or any related workshop on contractual aspects to which the project officers participate.

6. **ACTION PLAN:** In addition to the finalisation of the negotiation vade-mecum, focused and detailed workshops to exchange best practices will be undertaken to ensure complete and full understanding and consistent application of FP6 rules by the Commission staff, at the same time they will provide any supplementary updates on specific instruments. Special attention will be given to the provision of the new instruments (to begin during the month of November 2004).

IMPLEMENTATION: DGT RTD informed that it has centrally organized training courses and workshops on DG level and some informal workshops aiming at a full

understanding and consistent application of FP6 rules. Services indicated that all concerned officials had participated in the courses relevant to them.

2.3 Issues covered in the annual monitoring and other evaluation reports

Five-Year Assessment of the European Union Research Framework Programme 1999-2003⁵

The assessment panel suggested that the administration of the Framework Programme should be streamlined and simplified. The streamlining and simplification of the application procedure, management and financial control of projects must be vigorously pursued. There is a need to improve procedures, including the establishment of permanent panels in some thematic priority areas or actions for the evaluation process throughout the duration of a Programme, concluded the panel.

In its comments⁶ on this recommendation the Commission pointed out that starting in 2004, there have been substantial achievements towards improving, simplifying and streamlining administration for the 6th Framework Programme following the adoption of an action plan on rationalisation and acceleration of the implementation of the programme. From an initial focus on instruments the scope was broadened to cover the simplification of

⁵ European Commission. Five Year Assessment of the European Union Research Framework Programmes 1999-2003. December 15,2004.

⁶ Commission of the European Communities. Commission Staff Working Document. Annex to the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the European Economic and Social Committee of the Regions, responding to the Five Year Assessment of Community research activities (1999-2003) carried out by high level independent experts. Brussels, 24.8.2005. SEC (2005) 1054.

all aspects of submission and procedures such as management, financial control and communication. Many of the issues will be taken into account when designing the entire legal framework of new Framework Programme. More detailed comments of the Commission were as follows:

- Although relevant to all Framework Programme participants, those likely to gain most from simplification are the small research entities such as smaller companies and university teams, as well as those groups that have not been very present up to now, such as researchers from young universities, from less advanced regions and from new Member States, although all these categories are already well represented in successful Framework Programme projects.
- Of particular interest for them is the 'sounding board' composed of representatives from small entities (small and medium-sized enterprises, research teams...) which has been set up by the Commission. The aim is to consult users of European Union research funding in a structured way on what can be done to simplify research funding under the 7th Framework Programme and thereby to make participation easier and more rewarding for all. Emphasis will be given to identify at an early stage any potential barriers to the participation, including for SMEs and small research teams, which are to be encouraged under the 7th Framework Programme.
- Simplification is a watchword for the new Framework Programme. The new proposals are accompanied by a separate paper which outlines a first set of means for simplification of Framework Programme implementation. Among these, the establishment of an electronic registration desk for rationalising requests for information addressed to participants – only once during the Framework Programme (except updating) -, assessment of financial viability based on a single public list of criteria, a more extended use of lump sum financing, especially for the Networks of Excellence, removal of cost-reporting models as well as simplified calculation and payment procedures of EC financial contribution are some of the examples.

- In a wider context, the Commission will pay particular attention in negotiations on the revision of the Financial Regulation to the positive effect on research activities. Furthermore, at the level of the Programme Committees, it is proposed that the request for an opinion of Programme Committees before concluding individual contracts could be replaced by a simple information procedure which would enable a reduction in time between the opening of negotiations and the effective entry into force of the contract.
- The Commission services can only to a limited extent follow the Panel's recommendation of establishing permanent panels for proposal evaluations. In the particular case of the European Research Council, it will be for the Scientific Council to determine the most appropriate procedures for peer review of proposals. For the remainder of the Framework Programme, the current approach has also offered stability in cases of repeated use, sometimes up to four years, of the core team of an evaluation panel which has been particularly effective. However, there are several arguments against turning this into a permanent panel, notably the need to maintain flexibility to take account of new research areas, to avoid further layers in the proposal evaluation process which would conflict with the move to simplification of administration, and above all, to ensure precisely through a process of rotation, that there is no suspicion of 'insider-dealing' in a process which is crucial to ensuring the trust of the wider scientific community.

Monitoring reports

Monitoring reports 2003⁷ and 2004⁸ did not include any comments and recommendations on simplification issues. Instead, **Monitoring 2005⁹** highlighted several aspects related to simplification, particularly the following:

⁷ European Commission. Monitoring 2003. Implementation of Activities under the EC and EURATOM Framework and Corresponding Specific Programmes.

⁸ European Commission. Monitoring 2004. Implementation of Activities under the EC and EURATOM Framework Programmes and Corresponding Specific Programmes.

- The monitoring panel congratulated the Commission for the reduction in the number of audit certificates (up to 25 %) which alleviated the financial costs incurred by project participants.
- Operating the administrative and technical aspects in parallel during contract negotiations has been perceived as a very positive approach to improve the overall negotiation process and reduce the TTC (Time to Contract).
- One concern of the Panel was about the degree of responsibility and autonomy entrusted to consortia (the same objective is included in FP7).
- The experience gained of the new instruments, that is, IPs and NoEs, suggests that the internal procedures established by project coordinators in Consortium Agreements have included extra management work and administrative burden for the sake of potential risk management reduction strategies.
- The Panel suggested that the Commission prepares a final report on the results of the Action Plan on rationalization and accelerations with statistics per instrument, priority and specific programmes with respect to the declared objectives.
- The Panel recommended that the Commission retains and further increases the two-stage submission under FP7, to include an outline proposal submission stage, particularly in the case of calls addressed to SMEs, to encourage the participation of “new comers”. Efforts to ensure the TTC is appropriate should continue.
- A better use of IT tools could facilitate some of the processes addressed in this section. The general application of RIVET, extra functionality for SESAM, increased use of videoconferencing systems and multimedia databases could improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall implementation.
- The Panel believed that there is room for improvements in the Commission’s databases and recommended the use of a common information structure to avoid participants having to submit the same information more than once.

⁹ European Commission. Monitoring 2005. Implementation of Indirect Research Activities of the Sixth Framework Programmes of the European Community (EC) and of the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) : October 2006.

The Monitoring 2006 report¹⁰ which represented the results of a survey carried out among the Brussels-based Research Liaison Offices (IGLO – Informal Group of RTD Liaison Offices in Brussels for EU R&D) on their assessment of the FP6 implementation in 2006. Lengthy time to contract was mentioned by numerous IGLO members. The move towards providing clear ‘time lines’ for the time-to-contract in each Guide for Proposers was welcomed. However, communicating delays and the reason for these was seen by participants as an area which could be improved. The Marie Curies Programme was mentioned as best practice by **providing on-line information** about the status of negotiations, which was considered extremely helpful to participants.

There seemed to be agreement among IGLO officers that the year 2006 was particularly troublesome for project management, one of the cited factors being internal reorganisation within DG Research having an adverse impact on maintaining contacts with the relevant Commission staff, and even in some cases in terms of the consistency of messages. Several IGLO officers argued that changes in scientific officers during a project had had negative influences on management.

The Monitoring 2006 report also pointed out that the three instruments which had shortest average time to contact (TTC) at roughly one year were *Specific Support Actions*, *Marie Curie Actions* and *Coordinated Actions*, while both *Networks of Excellence* and *Specific Actions to promote research infrastructure*, on average had a time to contract above 400 days. While the basic statistics on TTC raised concerns, the real picture was more complex. Some examples showed that delays occurred due to Project Coordinators’ failing to respect deadlines. Legal and financial aspects of the project negotiations represented by far the biggest set of issues deemed to have caused delays. Details mentioned included internal Commission problems such as the availability of trained staff, and insufficient access to dedicated financial/legal advice.

¹⁰ European Commission. Monitoring 2006. Implementation of Indirect Research Activities of the EC and EURATOM Sixth Framework Programmes.

Evaluation of the effectiveness of Information Society Research in the 6th Framework Programme 2003-2006

The high-level panel invited by DG Information Society and Media to carry out an ex-post evaluation of the IST Thematic Priority of the 6th Framework Programme for Research (IST-FP6)¹¹ has concluded that the research investment has been well managed and has been effective in reaching its goals. However, the panel points out that the administrative burdens have not been reduced under FP6. Indeed, the burden is perceived by participants as heavier than in previous FPs, mainly due to the introduction of the new instruments, and changes in implementation. Some improvements have been made in the transition to the 7th Framework Programme, but there is still a need for further simplification and increased flexibility, states the Panel. This is necessarily needed, because more flexibility in programme administration can help attract more new high-growth companies.

The main recommendations of the Panel for simplification and increased flexibility are as follows:

- **At the application stage:** shorter proposals with fewer details of work packages and a focus on the appropriateness of partnerships, in particular the inclusion of highly innovative participants.
- **At the evaluation of proposals staged:** a more complete and helpful feedback to proposers whose ideas are not funded; a test of a new approach whereby proposals are not fully evaluated initially; exploration of expanding the two-step evaluation procedure from the open part of the “future and emerging technology” area to other part of the programme.
- **At the stage of project management:** optimization of reporting; allowance of the refocusing of the research; allowance of more flexibility in the composition of partnerships during the project.

¹¹ Information Society Research and Innovation : Delivering results with sustained impact. Evaluation of the effectiveness of Information Society Research in the 6th Framework Programme 2003-2006. May 2008.

3. Simplification in the 7th Framework Programme

3.1. Main proposals of the Commission for simplification

With his clear commitment to simplification at all levels of EU research support, the Commissioner for Research, Mr. Janez Potočnik, called for the establishment of a Commission inter-services working group (ISWG) to bring forward proposals for simplification under FP7. In addition, a Sounding Board of smaller actors was set up with the aim of removing or reducing the barriers faced by small players participating in FP7. The sounding board will comment on existing ideas for improvements and provide new input. The intention is to identify at an early stage any potential barriers to the participation of SMEs and smaller research teams in the research programmes.

In a report published in April 2005 the working group emphasized that in order fully to achieve the objectives set to the FP7, simplification must not only be pursued through the modification of administrative and financial rules, but also by streamlining the way in which the Framework Programme and individual research projects are managed.¹² In the first instance, the following set of 10 concrete measures for simplification of implementation modalities, both for the participants and for the Commission services, was proposed:

1. A simple set of funding schemes allowing continuity with the instruments of FP6 and providing a broad flexibility of use

The different categories of actions should be implemented through a simple set of funding schemes, used either alone or in combination. This will leave it to the specific programmes, work programmes and the calls for proposals to specify the types of funding schemes proposed to fund the different categories of actions foreseen, participants concerned, and the types of activities able to be supported.

¹² Commission of the European Commission. Commission Staff Working Document. Simplification in the 7th Framework Programme. Brussels, 6.4.2005. SEC(2005) 431.

2. Consistent high quality communication

Information materials will be rationalised in order to be as accessible as possible. A uniform interpretation, in particular of the legal and financial provisions of contracts, will be ensured across all of the Commission services concerned.

3. Rationalisation of the requests for information addressed to the participants

An electronic registration desk will be established in order to prevent participants being asked to submit the same information at the submission, negotiation and implementation stages of each project in which they are involved. In this context, the two stage submission procedure will also be extended to any relevant call for proposals. In FP7, periodic and final reports on project implementation will only require information that is absolutely necessary for a proper and proper follow-up by the Commission services. The systematic use of electronic tools for proposal submission, grant agreement (“contract”) negotiations and submission of periodic and final reports during project implementation will also accentuate these steps towards rationalisation.

4. Guaranteeing the protection of the Community’s financial interest without imposing an undue burden on participants by reducing a-priori controls to bare minimum

During proposal evaluation participants will be assessed by competent external evaluators in order to establish the operational capacity to implement the work and to achieve the results as foreseen. Assessment of financial viability will be based on a single list of criteria which will be adhered to by all Commission services concerned. While the provision of financial guarantees will be made, more flexible and user-friendly solutions will be exploited, such as the financial collective responsibility of the consortium.

5. Full operational autonomy entrusted to consortia

The Commission services will focus their follow-up on an assessment of progressive implementation of the project. In addition to an extended use of lump sum financing, the definition of eligible costs will be based on the concept of actual costs. Principles of sound

financial management will be guaranteed through the periodic provision by consortia of audit certificates provided by independent auditors.

6. Streamlining the selection process

The need for request to obtain the approval of Programme Committee(s) and Commission services before granting individual grants, has represented a substantial drain on time and resources. It was therefore proposed that this step of comitology procedure is removed and replaced with a simple information procedure.

7. Most effective possible use of the budget dedicated to the research policy

Proposals in this respect will be considered in the proposal to amend the Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the European Communities and its implementing rules.

8. A more extended use of flat-rate financing within a simplified framework of forms taken by Community financial contributions

The recourse to lump sum financing must be favoured where the conditions for its effective use will be met.

9. Removing need for complex cost reporting models and clarifying definition of eligible costs

The definition of eligible costs will be simplified by removing the need of cost-reporting models. The definition of eligible costs will be simplified.

10. Simplified support rates per type of activity

By removing cost reporting models, the level of support rates per types of activity (research and technological development, demonstration, training, dissemination and use, transfer of knowledge, management etc.) will be linked only to the activity concerned.

Accordingly, the Commissioner for Research, Mr. Janez Potočnik, has made a public announcement¹³ that the Commission is working towards more simplification that will result in fewer delays and less administrative work for participants. In particular, the Commission will be working on the following items:

Calls for proposals

- Improved presentation on CORDIS, meaning researchers will be able to identify areas of interest quickly.
- All calls related to the same theme will be grouped together. For instance, it will not be necessary to look under 3 or 4 programme areas to find calls related to health research.
- Work programmes and calls of all themes will be adopted at the same time, giving more transparency and enabling inter-disciplinary approaches.
- Practical and focused work programmes.

Submitting a proposal

- Once in place participants will only have to submit data and supporting documentation on their legal existence once, under a new 'unique registration facility'.
- There will be a single FP7 helpdesk service to ensure efficient handling of enquiries.
- Background documents will be reduced and streamlined.
- Submission and evaluation rules have been streamlined and clarified.
- A streamlined guide for applicants will be available.

Evaluation and selection

- Projects will be evaluated according to only 3 large blocks of evaluation criteria: science/technology quality, impact, and implementation.
- There will be better definition of the expected impacts, so applicants will know exactly how their proposals will be judged.
- The evaluation procedure will offer good continuity, retaining many FP6 elements.

Negotiation and award

- There will be one single set of rules for all Research Directorates General of the Commission.
- A possible reduction of "time to contract" due to elimination of repeated requests for information.
- Harmonised and simpler ex-ante financial viability checks.

¹³ http://ec.europa.eu/commission_barroso/potocnik/research/simplification_en.htm

- The constitution of a Participant's Guarantee Fund will moreover allow to limit ex-ante financial viability checks to private coordinators and contractors requesting more than 0.5.
- Due to the Participant's Guarantee Fund, no bank guarantee shall be request and no financial securities whatsoever will be imposed to any participant.
- A well-defined and stable "framework for negotiation".
- Harmonisation of the forms for proposal and grant agreement preparation, to help move from proposal to contract more quickly.

Life of the project

- Due to the Participant's Guarantee Fund, a better financial security for consortia and for Commission. Default of a participant will not affect the total grant allocated to a project, thus its implementation and the financial interests of the remaining participants.
- Fewer audit certificates required, in particular for small actors.
- IPR (intellectual property rights) provisions clarified and simplified leading to easier use of results.
- Reduced reporting requirements.

Cross-cutting issues

- Launch events to communicate new rules and first calls.
- There will be consistent communication, with CORDIS fully in line with other communication tools.
- Clear, concise and timely information.
- Internal training and specific training for National Contact Points.
- Eventual introduction of a portal where participants can follow their projects' progress (e-FP7).
- Systematic reporting of "success stories".

3.2. Effects of simplification of the EU Research Programme

A great number of measures have been taken in the 6th Framework Programme and in the transition to the 7th Framework programme to simplify administrative, financial and legal procedures of the EU research programmes. can be mentioned particularly the following:¹⁴

- The number of audit certificates has been substantially reduced in FP7 compared to FP6. Only beneficiaries receiving more than € 375 000 will have to provide a certificate. This would mean that 82 % of FP7 participations would never have to provide certificate on financial statements.
- The introduction of the guarantee fund in FP7 has allowed the abolition of ex-ante financial viability checks for the majority of participants. These checks are now only necessary for coordinators and participants requesting more than € 500 000 contribution.
- Repeated requests for the same documents on the existence and legal status of participants were a major cause of complaints in previous framework programmes. Since mid-2007 legal documents have to be provided only once and validation by the central team holds for all future participation in FP7.
- Since the beginning of May 2008 the participants themselves can access and change their legal data online through a web-based system (Unique Registration Facility, URF).
- A new web-based electronic system for negotiation, used by all DGs, was introduced by the end of 2007. The system allows online interaction between participants and Commission project officers.
- With regard to project reporting, the reporting guidelines and structures of reports have been streamlined. The Commission strives for an extension of average reporting and payment periods from 12 months (FP6) to 18 months. The amount of data collected in reports has been reduced.

¹⁴ FP7 Project Reporting. NCP Meeting, Brussels 10 May 2008. European Commission, DG Research-A1.

The results of the survey of the NCPs (National Contact Points) on FP6 indicate that the respondents are fairly satisfied with contract negotiations and particularly the management of FP6 projects by Commission Services, whereas conceptions of NCPs of progress made in simplification in terms of administrative procedures were more critical. In the survey, FP6 was compared to previous Framework Programmes. The results for simplification could have been better, if FP7 had been compared to FP6. Many of the actions mentioned above, have been initiated within FP6 but implemented in FP7.

The time to contract (TTC) is considered to be a significant indicator of the level of simplification of administrative procedures of the framework programmes. The average FP6 time to contract is 348 calendar days.¹⁵ Half of FP6 contracts were signed within 365 calendar days from the call deadline, and 75 % within 454 calendar days. The performance of the new FP6 instruments (IP and NOE) is not different from that of the other instruments.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

In recent years, a lot has been done within the Commission for simplification of the administrative, financial etc. procedures in the Framework Programme. Many actions were initiated and implemented during the FP6, and they have been continued and intensified within the FP7. The proposal for the EU Seventh Research Framework Programme emphasized more than earlier proposals the need for simplification of procedures and rules for participating in the Framework Programme. To that end the proposal was accompanied by a working paper on proposals for simplification of FP7.

However, the year 2006 seemed to be particularly troublesome for project management, one of the cited factors being internal reorganisation within DG Research having an adverse impact on maintaining contacts with the relevant Commission staff, and even in some cases in terms of the consistency of messages. Research Liaison Officers, in

¹⁵ FP6 Final Review: Subscription, Implementation, Participation. Brussels, June 2008.

particular, have argued that changes in scientific officers during a project had had negative influences on management.

Among the corrective measures which have been adopted by the Commission to make it easier to manage the projects can be mentioned the following:

- rationalising the funding schemes – a new approach based on a simpler set of funding instruments
- introduction of the guarantee fund
- reducing the number of audit certificates
- reducing the number of size of documents
- reducing the number of requests to participants
- increasing the autonomy of consortia
- streamlining the selection process
- exploring new modes of funding and simplifying the cost-based funding system

All these measures have increased flexibility in project administration, and most likely, decreased bureaucratic burden perceived by participants. There are reasons to believe that these outcomes have had positive impacts on performance of projects, and improved the image of the management of EU projects. This, for its part, may have helped to attract new participants from companies, research institutes and universities to take part in the framework programmes. Even if these must be considered as weak indications, they show how important an issue the simplification is for the overall success of the Framework Programme.

Regardless of improvements which have been made in the transition to the 7th Framework Programme in managerial procedures, there is still a need and a lot of opportunities for further simplification and increased flexibility. One natural line of action is to develop different mechanisms through incremental improvements on a continuous basis. In addition, there are topics which require more concerted actions from the Commission:

1. As mentioned before, a lot of actions have been made by the Commission in recent years in the name of simplification, and there are indications that positive results have

been achieved. However, the general view is fragmentary and mainly communicated and interpreted by Commission Officials. Therefore, more independent information is needed on how proposals have been implemented, what have been the results, and how the users comment and evaluate various aspects of the bureaucracy. Because of the centrality of the issue of simplification and because of its complexity (financial, legal, and administrative aspects), a decent study with a specific task force should be started. As part of this, clear targets and service level standards for main procedures related to simplification should be defined.

2. Individual actions through incremental innovations are necessary but not sufficient. These actions should be seen in a wider perspective, from the point of view of a larger framework which can be called a quality control system of the Framework Programme. It is a set of policies, processes and procedures required for planning and management of all major actions of the framework programme. This approach, well adapted to the specific requirements of the framework programmes, would enable the Commission to improve the processes and procedures (including monitoring and evaluation processes) in a more systematic way than has been done so far.
3. One of the underlying problems in implementation of the programmes and the projects seems to rest with insufficient uniformity on administrative and financial issues within the Commission in general and among the project officers in particular. Due to this, more attention should be given that procedures and their interpretation are common for all Directorates/Directorates-General. The management problems are not only the result of inefficient or inappropriate procedures and processes, but are often also the result of excessive work loads and lack of adequate training of staff.
4. The Commission has made efforts to shorten the time to contract and the time to payment. However, contract negotiations still take too long. The average FP6 time to contract – 348 calendar days on average – is simply far too long by any standards. There are still too many opinions e.g. among innovative SMEs that companies are discouraged from participating in the research programme because of cumbersome procedures for both application and implementation. This is a management problem which has to be handled internally with clearer instructions, guideline and deadlines. There may be a possible trade off between increasing the speed of procedures

(allocate funds efficiently) and increasing the value for public money (to enhance effectiveness), but both of these requirements can be filled in a shorter time.

5. One of the actions of the Action Plan for Rationalisation and Acceleration of the year 2004 was that monitoring of progress, delays and unmet targets will be reported to each Director and each Director will in turn report to each Director General. Moreover, it was emphasized that management will ensure that actions taken in each of the areas identified are implemented in their areas of responsibility, and will report quarterly to the FP6 Steering Group on discrepancies that come to their attention. Programme committees will be informed of progress at appropriate intervals. This recommendation deserves more attention than it has received so far. Closely related to the previous one, it is recommended, as it was already recommended by the Monitoring 2005 Panel that the Commission prepares a final report on the results of the Action Plan on rationalization and accelerations with statistics per instrument, priority and specific programmes with respect to the declared objectives. (cf. recommendation 1)
6. The electronic tools which are available for providing the participants with possibilities to track the status and progress of their projects online, should be exploited effectively and in a service-minded manner. This increases transparency in the processing of proposals, and may even increase patience of participants over different phases of the process. As part of this mechanism, delays and reasons for these should be communicated to the participants. A more complete and helpful feedback to proposers whose proposals are not funded would also be good complement to current practices.
7. The intention to entrust full operational autonomy to consortia and the incorporation of this autonomy and flexibility into the grant agreement provisions has been a good step in right direction. However, the motivation to increase the autonomy of consortia cannot be a delegation of the tasks of the Commission to consortia, but improvements in the their working conditions. For this, more and better coordinator training and help desks as well as modular consortium agreements etc. are needed. The types of problems that are appearing because of higher level of autonomy have to be monitored closely. It is the Commission's responsibility to help participants and particularly the weaker players, as the Marimon panel already pointed out.

8. The framework programme is necessarily a heavy and more or less bureaucratic mechanism, which does not offer much room for maneuvering, and a fair treatment of participants means that participants must be treated as well or badly. However, it would be important that there is inside the common framework more room for experimental approaches in processes and procedures. E.g. the two-step procedure has been a good solution to the problems of over-subscription, high costs of proposal preparation, and quality of feedback to the proposers. There is a lot of potential to improve the use of the two-step procedure, and there are many other similar arrangements which could be developed and tested with an experimental approach.

It is clear that public money must be spent properly, which tends to increase checks and controls. However, the current procedures of the Framework Programme are out of balance in favor of control. This has meant that risk avoidance rather than risk management is the dominant characteristic of the programmes, and this dilemma is very much the ultimate reason to the difficulties to simplify more quickly the financial, legal and other administrative procedures. This is not a simple equation, but in the longer term, the only sustainable solution to this dilemma is to take determined actions towards proper risk management. May this be the new perspective and big challenge of simplification of the coming years.

