Proposal for a Position paper on the Green paper on the European Research Area: New Perspectives

Background

In April 2007, the Commission presented the “Green Paper on the European Research Area: New Perspectives” (COM (2007) 161 final). This Green Paper launches a wide-ranging institutional and public debate with the aim of drafting initiatives in the course of 2008. As part of this process, on-line consultation has been set up on the Internet and will remain open until 31 August 2007. The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) represents the governmental, professional and employer-related interests of all the local authorities, county councils and regions in Sweden. SALAR has not formally been asked to give its opinion on the Green Paper but wants to contribute to this debate by this position paper.

This proposal for a position paper has not yet been adopted by the Board of SALAR

SALAR has striven for a number of years to influence the research policy of the EU. The R & D Council of SALAR is responsible for coordinating issues regarding Swedish and EU research policy. Since the R & D Council of SALAR was established in the spring of 2007 and hardly had the possibility to meet between the release of the Green Paper and the deadline of the consultation on the 31 August 2007, the R & D Council adopted this position paper on its meeting on the 23 August 2007. Therefore, this position paper has not yet been adopted by the Board of SALAR which will meet on the 21 September 2007. Accordingly, the content can be changed and eventual changes will be complemented later.

/Mr Jonas Andersson, chairman of the R & D Council of SALAR

Appendix: Proposal for a position paper on the Green paper on the European Research Area: New Perspectives
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Summary
SALAR welcomes the Commission’s Green Paper on the European Research Area (ERA) and believes, in brief:

• that a discussion of the so-called Social Platforms, which are innovative attempts to formulate and implement strategic research agendas concerning major European social challenges, such as the environment, the ageing population and integration, is lacking,

• that organisations and operations in the public sector, not just those in the private sector, also need innovations and to share knowledge with various research organisations,

• that a more innovative perspective on sharing knowledge is required in which the actors who are affected by, and are responsible for, the various social challenges (local and regional authorities, civil society etc.) are involved in different ways in different phases in the research process, and

• that the links between structural fund programmes and research and development programmes can be strengthened and that good examples of this should be highlighted.

SALAR’s work on EU research policy
The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions represents the governmental, professional and employer-related interests of all the local authorities, county councils and regions in Sweden. As a support for its politically-composed board, the organisation has an R&D council made up of politicians, officials and researchers. One of the tasks of this council is to co-ordinate SALAR’s work on both national and European research issues. SALAR worked actively for a number of years to present its views ahead of the current Seventh Framework Programme for Research, Development and Demonstration (FP7), for example by submitting position papers and providing support to the Swedish Members of the Committee of the Regions.

SALAR’s comments on the Green Paper
The Green Paper has six headings/dimensions and three overall priorities. SALAR will limit its response to general comments on the three overall priorities and then to more concrete comments concerning three of the headings: first-class research institutions, effective knowledge sharing and optimising research programmes and priorities.
Overall comments

Like the Committee of the Regions in its statement on the Green Paper (CdR 83/2007 rev. 2, which was adopted by the EDUC-commission on 27 June 2007), SALAR feels that the Green Paper lacks a discussion of the so-called Social Platforms, which in fact represent an innovation in the attempt to formulate and implement strategic research agendas on major European social challenges such as the environment, the ageing population and integration. In the work programme of the Co-operation programme, on the theme of Social Sciences and the Humanities, in December 2006, there is however a call for Social Platforms for cities and social cohesion, which is positive. It is important that the Commission continues to develop this innovative approach to formulating the research issues of the future, a process that will probably be conducted in a dialogue with researchers, actors in the public sector, companies, organisations in civil society etc.

Develop world-class research infrastructures and first–class research institutions

SALAR agrees with the Committee of the Regions that efforts must be made to work in networks and to develop existing research institutions within the ERA in order to safeguard and promote the international competitiveness of Europe. The EU’s structural funds can make a significant contribution to funding the setting up of new research infrastructures (CdR 83/2007, rev. 2). Efforts should also be made to strengthen the links between the FP7 and the structural fund programmes. It should, for example, be possible to co-ordinate them to a greater degree so that measures that promote innovation relating, for example, to incubators, funding and intellectual rights, can also be stimulated. Apart from removing administrative obstacles as far as possible, it is probably also important to highlight good examples of how this can be done in practice in order to further stimulate the work. This aspect and the role of the structural funds in connection with the setting up of the ERA have not been adequately addressed in the Green Paper.

Effective knowledge sharing

Although the heading in the Green Paper refers to knowledge sharing, a traditional approach can still be discerned based on at least two aspects concerning the transfer of knowledge: first, that knowledge is produced in the academic sphere and that research results are then transferred in different ways to business and industry for the development of various products; second, that this transfer is above all a problem between the academic sphere and business and industry.

SALAR would instead like to highlight a more innovative perspective for knowledge sharing in which the players affected by, and responsible for, various social challenges (local and regional authorities, civil society etc.) are involved in different ways in different phases. It is usually most effective if those affected by a problem are involved already in the problem-formulation phase. The second aspect is of course that also public organisations and operations, not just those in the private sector, need innovations and the exchange of knowledge. We also believe that new, and sometimes better, subjects and areas for research can be developed in the course of such co-operation.
The concept of the social platform as mentioned above represents a new approach to the attempt to handle this. This is something that SALAR and its members, primarily those in South Sweden (an association for local authorities and county councils in the six southernmost counties of Sweden), have promoted for a long time.

It is gratifying that issues regarding the utilisation of knowledge have been highlighted in various ways within the current FP7. SALAR believes, however, that much more can be done to ensure that the major research investments actually lead to practical benefits.

Optimisation of research programmes and priorities

This section discusses the so-called Technology Platforms as a means of addressing the major social challenges. In this context too, SALAR feels that a discussion of the participation of other actors, for example those in the public sector, is lacking. Of course it is important that industry is the driving force in the Technology Platforms and that it is possible for local and regional authorities to participate too, but industry is expected to be the driver here. However, when it comes to other major social challenges, for example the ageing population, the environment and integration, it is rather the authorities in the public sector that can be expected to act as the driving force. Complementary initiatives such as the Social Platforms are therefore needed for this reason too.