Advisory Group Comments

EU Framework Programme 7
Cooperation Programme Theme 8
Socio-Economic Sciences and Humanities
Introduction

The new EU Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, FP7, was decided on and adopted by Council on 18 December 2006. Calls for applications will be issued in accordance with the research agendas decided on in FP7. Dates for different calls for research proposals will depend on the individual time plans of different research themes within the programme. For theme 8, Socio-economic Sciences and Humanities, first calls for research proposals were released on 22 December 2006.

The Advisory group for theme 8, Socio-economics and humanities has given advice to the Commission during the preparatory work of this part of FP7. This group will continue to support the EU Commission with advice during the future developments of theme 8 of the programme. As decisions on the aims, focus and structure have now been taken, the Advisory group would like to give its comments on the programme for theme 8 of FP7. These comments may be used as one input in the continuous deliberations over the development of the programme, both at the general level and in connection to the review processes that will take decisions on project proposals.

Overall Structure

The overall structure of the work programme for Socio-economics and humanities is clear and sound. Placing growth, employment and competitiveness at the top of the research agenda reflects a primary focus on providing knowledge and insights from social sciences and humanities research to the European challenges, as addressed in the Lisbon agenda. A second emphasis is on addressing the issues of sustainable development, which are equally necessary foci related to the future challenges of Europe.

These two topics which are directly related to the aims of the Lisbon agenda are followed by three general themes, which represent major fields of knowledge necessary as a backbone for addressing the challenges outlined above. These three general areas focus on major socio-economic and cultural trends, geographical dimensions placing Europe in a global context and the citizen perspective. Together, these dimensions promise to provide essential insights into important micro and, spatial dimensions together with other general dimensions relating to system dynamics, which need to be understood and taken into consideration for Europe’s future development.

The last two thematic areas of the work programme focus on two highly critical aspects of policy making, the use of socio-economic and scientific indicators and foresight activities. Metrics is a necessary and deeply rooted part of all socio-economic policy-making. Measuring socio-economic de-
Development is however challenging both methodologically and in relation to the use of the resulting metrics in policy processes. Hence, the quality of socio-economic indicators and the use and sometimes misuse of indicators is an important topic for socio-economic research. As such, it is both an issue of the effectiveness and efficiency of policy and the related democratic aspects of policy processes.

Foresight activities are a necessary part of all policy processes, since all policy making is concerned with ensuring qualitative leaps in future developments. Perspectives on the future are often implicit, but increasingly organized in more formal foresight activities aiming for long-term, open and participatory approaches to policy. These generally bring together different competences and knowledge, based on socio-economic research and a contribution of the humanities, together with knowledge from other fields. One aim of such processes is to generate a range of alternative perspectives and scenarios of future developments in critical dimensions of socio-economic development. Another aim is to mobilize common understanding of the challenges ahead and of the capacities and activities necessary to meet them. In this perspective the inquiry into the future of universities, and proposed “blue sky research” identifying a “risk-taking, creative approach” seem very appropriate.

The final area of the work programme entitled Strategic activities, concerns special instruments aimed at contributing to the increased strength and impact of EU research activities and increased horizontal impacts. These kinds of instruments could become important vehicles to generate synergies between different areas of the work programme discussed above. This would transpire if these instruments become effective in integrating the European Research Area, by stimulating multilateral processes, focused on common targets and address them through a common pool of resources. ERA-nets should be particularly encouraged as they stimulate national cross-border knowledge exchange and learning between public research funding agencies, targeting emerging EU research challenges.

Overall the work programme has a focus and logic that promises to provide a good basis for promoting research and knowledge from the socio-economic sciences and humanities to improve the potential for meeting the Lisbon agenda targets. Particularly strong impacts in that direction would be gained if synergies can be generated between the first two targeted areas, the following three general dynamics areas and the final two areas that are more directly related to policy-making processes. The envisaged strategic activities could become particularly influential in promoting such a development.
A Note on Humanities

The composition of the Advisory Group (AG) had been influenced by the important new objective that, after a first, partial opening in some themes of FP 6, this time applications from the field of humanities would have a clear opportunity, on a more equal footing with socio-economic sciences than before. From the discussions within the AG two fields seem to have crystallised where its input could contribute to the realisation of this general (and very welcome) objective.

1) A thorough inspection and critical discussion of the proposed areas and topics, including the priorities set for the first two calls had been done. Besides assessing the general scientific consistence and innovative value of the individual topics, and the scrutiny that the items in the call should not duplicate investments that are already in course from other European resources, we also addressed the special issue whether the proposed topics make a sufficient use of the research potential of the humanities, and we tried to suggest formulations which would enhance the efficiency of attracting the input of humanities to various individual fields addressed by the topics. We could also rely in these matters upon the input of a special “Expert Group” which has worked during the year of 2006 on this same issue. The results are encouraging: there are several areas and topics where there is an ample possibility to mobilise innovative research in the humanities (such as theme 8.3.3. on cultural interactions or 8.5.2 on diversities and commonalities in Europe, including a research on articulating national and European identities, cultural heritage, creativity in the cultural fields of literature, philosophy, visual or performing arts). It must be pointed out, however, that the proportions between the opportunities given to socio-economic sciences and the disciplines of the humanities are still rather unbalanced – if the advertised opening for the humanities is meant seriously, these proportions should be adjusted in the later phase of FP7 – the remaining topics not used for this first call provide an ample opportunity for that and the continued advice of the AG could also be helpful in this field.

2) A second issue could rather be called strategic. As our discussions have pointed out, the outspoken policy-driven formulation of the research agenda, privileging rather “applied” than “basic” research may impair the real scientific outcome and the innovative value of some of these projects, especially in the fields of the humanities, but also in much of the socio-economic sciences. When speaking about “basic” research, we do not refer to the traditional negative stereotype of humanities being allegedly individualistic, fragmented and reluctant to form the kind of international and interdisciplinary teams FP7 intends to support. In fact multidisciplinary approaches have been pioneered a broad section of humanities for quite a long time (such as École des Hautes Études en
Sciences Sociales – EHESS, Paris, Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung – ZIF, Bielefeld). In recent decades many fields of the humanities belonged to the cutting edge of scholarly advancement (such as linguistics, historical anthropology, political philosophy, religious studies, literary criticism, history of images). The preservation and development of this research potential is crucial for the future of Europe, both for sorting out its internal and external problems, and for preserving its immense set of artistic, cultural and intellectual treasures.

**Evaluation and Project Strategies**

Socio-economic and cultural challenges are generally highly multidimensional. So are the policy aspects related to these socio-economic and cultural challenges. Integrating competencies from several fields of knowledge in true multi-disciplinary approaches to the socio-economic and cultural challenges would often be a key issue in dealing with them. Hence, integrating socio-economic research and the humanities should be a general aim of the evaluation and project strategies of the programme.

Integrating different research fields would generally not be enough to generate a profound understanding of the policy dimensions related to the socio-economic and cultural issues addressed. Particularly, it would generally fall short of providing a good ground for policy learning and policy development. Bringing policy makers and societal stakeholders inside research projects both as co-developers of knowledge and as co-learners of the knowledge produced could be an important part of the evaluation and project strategies.

The efficiency of interactive learning compared to traditional “knowledge dissemination” to users at the end of knowledge generation processes has been strongly proven by socioeconomic and humanities research. Therefore, interactive learning between knowledge producers and knowledge users should have a particular place within the proposed social platforms of the work programme, the foresight projects and the ERA-nets. However, this user-producer dimension of knowledge production and use should not be confined to these particular kinds of projects and processes.

An obvious aim of the work programme would be to generate world class research within its field of inquiry. There seems to be potential for improvement in this respect from the experiences so far from the previous framework programme, FP6, within socio-economics and humanities. This objective may be served by the integration of research and policy knowledge discussed above. It has probably also to do with the kinds of project arrangements expected and accepted in the evaluation of projects. And finally, from the point of view of the enhanced input of the humanities, a
more flexible incorporation of cutting edge, innovative “basic” research initiatives would serve this aim.

Experience from the often very large ongoing integrated projects and networks of excellence in FP6 indicates high coordination and administration costs, at the expense of both research quality and policy interactions. There is probably no single optimal scale of projects within socio-economics and humanities with ambitions such as those in the current work programme. Rather, it is important to take the appropriateness of different size dimensions into serious consideration when evaluating different projects.

The specific evaluation criterions to be used, the selection of evaluators and the design of the evaluation processes combining criterions and evaluators will be critical for the real impact of the work programme. As this advisory group is not involved in contributing to this critical design processes, the group would like to convey the importance of considering the importance of combining three critical evaluation dimensions in that process:

1. Target of the research and its relations to the Lisbon challenges.
2. Scientific multi-disciplinarity and real stakeholder involvement.
3. Excellence favouring constellations, organization and project sizes.