

INRA contribution to the reflection on the instruments of the 7th Framework Programme

Paris, 23rd June 2004

Introduction

With FP6, the European Commission hoped to take a decisive and, to a certain extent, irreversible step towards building the European Research Area (ERA) by putting in place long-term structures, in particular Network of Excellence in research and Marie Curie training networks.

It is too early to give an opinion on the pros and cons of these new instruments. Two years after the launch of FP6, the first NoEs and IPs to be financed are only just starting up and any analysis of these instruments could only take into account the call for proposal and negotiation stages of a project.

Nonetheless, INRA wishes to support the general process by proposing that the rules for the instruction of projects be made more transparent and the Commission investigates any possible simplifications of the project preparation and negotiation processes.

The Commission has also tried to encourage Member states to be more engaged in building the ERA with measures to reinforce political collaboration. Finally, it has tried to take into account, in a holistic manner, various industries through the creation of Technological Platforms. INRA is already involved in various ERA Networks and platforms and will continue along this path as soon as the instruments in place lend themselves better to these types of activity and allow INRA to undertake the missions it has been entrusted with.

Current suggestions for FP7 are by in large in continuation with those actions engaged in FP6. The principal new initiatives are “*Stimulating the creativity of basic research through competition between teams at European level*” and the programmes “*safety*” and “*space*”. INRA is in favour of the introduction of competitiveness as long as the research budget can cater for it. The Institute is prepared to take an active role in the programme on bio-security.

The position of INRA, instrument by instrument, is as follows.

1. “Stimulating the creativity of basic research through competition between teams at European level”

The Commission and DG RTD must maintain overall control over this new instrument even if its management is entrusted to an external executive agency. Indeed, it does not seem desirable to risk creating a rift between “fundamental” research and “competitive” research, which is what may happen should DG RTD not be in overall charge¹.

It should be widely accessible to all forms of research. Its success will rest on the ability of the Commission to target a wide audience with its calls, including young research teams, and ensure the transparent administration of project proposals.

However, funding for this activity should come from an increase of the FP7 budget and not from a reduction of those funds dedicated to the other instruments. One should not risk compromising the momentum generated with FP6 by reducing the budget dedicated to the pursuit of the ambitious objectives set out by the Commission at its launch.

Moreover, it seems undesirable to bring within this instrument, in its entirety or in part, the “Marie Curie mobility grant” activities as it appears to have been envisaged.

The objectives of the Marie Curie programme are very important and must also be pursued (see §4), whilst continuing to address all areas of research. Its unity must be maintained.

2. “Creating European centres of excellence through collaboration between laboratories”

INRA is of the same opinion as the Commission in that research through collaboration has proven its worth and must be consolidated. The questions that need to be addressed are not concerned with the principle of the usefulness of the instruments but rather with their implementation.

The complexity of the proposal preparation and project negotiation for Networks of Excellence and some Integrated Projects discourages certain potential project partners, most notably small size research organisations, those from the new Member States and SMEs. Mechanisms to facilitate their integration and reduce administrative red tape for all the partners will have to be sought out. (For example projects accepted for funding could be entitled to a lump sum financial contribution)

INRA wishes to see important provisions, closer to 60% of the budget of FP7 rather than today’s 20%, being made available for STREPs.

Without adding to the debate on which thematic priorities will be supported, INRA would like to emphasize the importance of “priority 8”, research for policy support, which should remain an important element of collaborative research. This is particularly the case for research in the field of agronomy, as in terms of its importance, agricultural policy is the first domain on which the Commission exerts its authority. This commands that the priority be maintained.

¹ The work group set up by the French Ministry of Research recommends a legal entity should manage this instrument intended to stimulate competitiveness. It would therefore be relatively independent from the Commission. Although INRA does not share this point of view, INRA has not wished to object to this position.

It would be interesting for the Commission to put in place a two step evaluation procedure, with the first step consisting of a “declaration of intention”, so as to avoid much time and effort being invested in both the financial arrangements and administrative management section of the project. This comment is valid for all instruments requiring a call for proposal.

3. **“Launching European technological initiatives” (technological platforms)**

INRA is already involved in the creation of a few platforms and regards them as potentially an interesting tool.

This being said, the launch of such projects should be made according to more transparent procedures that are to be defined. The manner by which research undertaken within this scope is to be funded also needs to be clarified: Will Integrated Projects or other instruments in support of collaborative research (STREP, NoE) be the privileged instruments of the research proposals published by the platforms? Will the financing of such instruments be done through a budget specifically dedicated to the platforms?

4. **“Making Europe more attractive to the best researchers” (Reinforcing human resources)**

This is a very worthwhile instrument for the construction of the European Research Area,

- because from the onset of their career it allows researchers to promote themselves and meet with other research groups. This constitutes good grounding for later networking.
- Because they afford centres of excellence in research the ability to further consolidate and implicate themselves in building the European Research Area, especially with regards to the training of young researchers.

This is a dimension of the Framework Programme to further develop, and which must remain accessible to the entire scientific community: Considering the success met by human resources actions, the Community could increase the relative share of budget allocated to them within the Programme. In this particular case, a two stage evaluation procedure would curtail the negative impact of oversubscription.

5. **“Developing research infrastructures of European interest” (Research infrastructures)**

As it is currently defined, this instrument answers too few of the needs of research in the domains of life sciences that are concerned with plant life, animal sciences and, the environment.

INRA would like to see instruments of medium size recognised as eligible, when they are networked. For example:

- Environment observatories for the study of large representative agro-ecological or ecosystems as part of research undertaken over a long term and requiring a comparative approach
- Laboratories for the study of subjects requiring extreme confinement : animal housing, equipments for genomic and post genomic work benefiting a large scientific community on a single site or a network of sites
- Genetic and biological resource centres in plant life and animal sciences

6. “Improving the coordination of national research programmes”

The Commission is increasingly insistent on the advantages of supporting the coordination of national research programmes as a way of encouraging the integration of activities without having to conceive new instruments.

The Commission would also like the ability to mobilise towards these objectives an increased share of Member states financial resources as a complementary contribution to its budget.

INRA subscribes to this policy, but considers that collaboration incentives should be enhanced by facilitating the eligibility of national programmes coordinated by large research institutions, as long as they were commissioned by their respective ministries to do so.

7. Other instruments

INRA views favourably the prospects offered by the proposed programme on the subject of security.

INRA would like to see the further development of programmes relating to international cooperation.

These should be two important elements of European Union policy to make the world in which we live both safer, and one which is aware of the disparities between the Member states and the immediate neighbours of the Union.