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WORKING PAPER

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WORKING DOCUMENT

From: SFIC Secretariat
To: ERAC (SFIC)
Subject: SFIC ACTIVITY REPORT 2017-2018

Delegations will find attached SFIC activity report 2017-2018 with the view to the plenary meeting on 7 March 2019, agenda item 4.
This document sets out the activity report of the Strategic Forum for International S&T Cooperation (SFIC) for the years 2017-2018.

1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

SFIC is a strategic forum and a dedicated configuration of ERAC that facilitates the further development, implementation and monitoring of the international dimension of ERA, with a focus on the external dimension of the European Union's and Member States' research and innovation activities. Member States and the Commission are members of the Forum while countries associated to the Horizon 2020 Framework Programme have observer status. SFIC's objective is to facilitate the further development, implementation and monitoring of the international dimension of the European Research Area (ERA) by sharing information and by consulting between the partners with a view to identifying common priorities which could lead to coordinated or joint initiatives, and coordinating activities and positions vis-à-vis third countries and within international fora.

The rationale for such framework is provided by the Council conclusions concerning a European partnership for international scientific and technological cooperation of 2 December 2008.

In the past years, SFIC has contributed to the implementation of the external dimension of the ERA, as shown in its previous annual, and recently biennial, reports, mainly by providing strategic advice to Commission, Council and ERAC, and committing to common priorities while developing joint EU/MS/AC - SFIC initiatives.

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1. Doc. 16763/08
2. ERAC-SIFIC docs: 1354/10, 1353/11, 1353/12, 1354/13, 1353/14, 1353/17.
2. STRUCTURE AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WORK PROGRAMME

2.1 Structure: five priorities and areas of action

The SFIC Work Programme 2017-2018 groups SFIC’s seven main activities as contained in its mandate into five areas of action, each one with its specific activities:

– Strategic advice on international S&T cooperation;
– Contribution to the further development and implementation of the ERA Roadmap and cooperation with ERAC and other ERA-related groups;
– Joint strategic approaches and actions for international R&I cooperation, including pooling and sharing relevant knowledge concerning third countries;
– Share and structure information and good practices on international R&I cooperation activities;
– Networking and coordination.

The priority areas reflect SFIC’s strategic mission and balance ongoing SFIC initiatives with new activities, building on work already done and the current international context.

Although many of the SFIC activities contribute to the implementation of the ERA Roadmap, and SFIC members and observers feel that the five areas of action overlap in many respects, the approach followed has been to keep specific activities (e.g. related to information sharing or best practice) under the particular specific heading.

SFIC has matched the level of ambition with the resources available when implementing its Work Programme 2017-2018. In doing so, SFIC always strived to by optimise the use of national, European and global resources and to avoid duplication of activities and efforts.

3. AREAS OF ACTION

3.1 Strategic advice on international S&T cooperation
In 2017-18, SFIC has continued to build on its unique position as an official advisory body composed of nominated national representatives for international cooperation by advising on issues of international cooperation at European and at national level. SFIC provided early strategic advice and evidence for policy formulation on international S&T cooperation and the external dimension of ERA.

SFIC adopted an opinion on international cooperation in the context of the mid-term review of Horizon 2020 and the preparation of the 9th EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (FP9) which took note of the significant drop in the participation of third countries in Horizon 2020 when compared with the participation in the 7th Framework Programme for Science and Technology, identified a number of shortcomings to understand the causes of the lack of involvement of third countries, and proposed corrective measures to increase international cooperation, both in the perspective of the mid-term review of Horizon 2020 and the preparation of FP9.

SFIC adopted an opinion on the second progress report presented by the Commission on the implementation of the strategy for international cooperation in research and innovation which acknowledged the progress made towards achieving the objectives of the strategy, but stressed that more needed to be done to tap its full potential. In its opinion, SFIC encouraged initiatives to boost the participation of third countries in Horizon 2020 actions, in particular by ensuring good framework conditions for international cooperation, such as co-funding mechanisms, reciprocity of access, research and innovation-friendly visa schemes, but also by defining focused topics of sufficient scale and scope specifically devoted to international cooperation and by strengthening the international dimension of innovation actions like public-private partnerships and research infrastructures of global interest.

In reply to a request by the Competitiveness Council in its conclusions of 1 December 2015, SFIC - together with the ERAC Standing Working Group on Gender in Research and Innovation - prepared an opinion on developing joint guidelines on a gender perspective for international cooperation in science, technology and innovation (STI). This opinion aims at providing an input for the preparation of the next multiannual framework programme for research and innovation. The opinion was based on a survey carried out by SFIC between April and June 2017 among government representatives and funding agencies to explore the

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current situation at national and organisational level. The survey results demonstrated the existing difficulties in including gender issues in international STI cooperation and showed the importance of developing joint guidelines on gender aspects.

At the last plenary in 2018, SFIC also adopted an opinion on international cooperation in “Horizon Europe”\footnote{1351/19}. The opinion emphasises international cooperation in research and innovation (R&I) should remain a key priority for future European policies. It calls on spelling out the international cooperation strategy clearly in the context of Horizon Europe and to streamline international cooperation throughout Horizon Europe. The opinion also sets out broad lines delineating the possible role of SFIC in this context.

Beyond the opinions, SFIC held an exchange of view with the Commission on international cooperation in Horizon Europe. As a result the Commission plans to organise together with SFIC workshops on how the latter could provide strategic advice on international cooperation and beyond Horizon Europe, in particular in the context of the top-down driven research activities under pillar 2 of the proposed programme.

However, this activity can be further elaborated, in particular in view of the developments that can be expected in the context of the implementation of Horizon Europe. This is also reflected in the conclusions of the ERAC ERA review report, which called for a clarification of SFIC’s advice function. They were recalled in the discussions within SFIC in 2018 and led to proposals for improving the organization (i.a. through a strengthened steering board, the possible introduction of ‘sentinel task forces’ focusing on topical issues, correspondents with other ERA related groups, new meeting formats etc.). This will form an integral part of the work of SFIC in 2019/2020.

### 3.2 Contribution to further development and implementation of the ERA Roadmap and cooperation with ERAC and ERA-related groups

SFIC has continued contributing to the implementation of the ERA Roadmap\footnote{Doc. ERAC 1208/15} in order to make full use of the external dimension of ERA and its potential for strengthening Europe’s
position in the world. These SFIC activities were in line with the actions included in Priority 6 of the ERA Roadmap.

A strategic approach has been developed on how to strengthen and streamline the external dimension of ERA in line with the ERA Roadmap. In this context, SFIC will continue monitoring, mapping out and benchmarking national roadmaps for the implementation of priority 6 of the ERA roadmap and discuss experiences in implementing them.

In 2017, the vice-chair presented the draft overview on the use of national action plans on ERA priority 6. In 2018, SFIC approved the mandate for a working group to deal with the benchmarking of national ERA roadmaps (priority 6). 9 countries confirmed their participation and the SFIC vice-chair will take the role of rapporteur in an initial phase. Since then, the announcement on the selection of a mutual learning exercise (MLE) on international cooperation reinforced the process and its impact.

The work on indicators for a better understanding of the objectives and the degree of implementation of internationalisation efforts has continued in close collaboration with the Commission. SFIC in this context submitted a service request to the INCO Service Facility in support of the strategic development of international cooperation in research and innovation.

The SFIC working group on a "Toolbox for international cooperation" continued its work on developing a practical overview for Member States, Associated Countries and the Commission on the implementation of international STI agreements and other international STI cooperation activities at bilateral and multilateral level, on the basis of information collected by the Working Group in a survey, as well as a stakeholder workshop organised on 7 December 2017. The working group published a summary of its findings in 2017 and a final report in 2018. Its objective is to provide a source of relevant experiences of other MS/AC and the EC that could serve as input for the design and implementation of own new instruments. The report focuses on strategies and roadmaps, STI agreements, STI counsellors, aligned funding schemes, research and innovation networking activities, international research marketing as instruments in international STI cooperation. The report describes what is commonly understood under the type of instrument and illustrates its purpose, and it sets out the underlying design principles and ways of implementing the instrument described. Based on this general information, the report highlights best practice examples for each type of instrument and gives recommendations based on the available material.
During the 2018 September plenary, the Co-chair of GPC presented the monitoring tool that GPC developed to monitor on a voluntary basis the implementation of the actions as reflected in the national roadmaps. This tool was welcomed by SFIC and work is ongoing to develop a similar tool for SFIC, also in the context of ERAC reporting. SFIC has established a regular link to ESFRI and the Open Science Standing Working Group through SFIC delegations.

Finally, SFIC delegates have undertaken to raise awareness of these opinions at national level, as appropriate.

3.3 Joint strategic approaches and actions for international R&I cooperation, including pooling and sharing relevant knowledge concerning third countries

SFIC continued its work on the different geographic and thematic initiatives. The country-specific working groups on the cooperation with Brazil and China completed their mandates during the year 2017. SFIC took note of the information provided by both working groups on relevant projects and processes. Furthermore, SFIC initiated a discussion in 2017 on the characteristics of future thematic or geographical working groups, underlining the importance of providing them with a clear mandate, realistic and achievable objectives, and for a dedicated limited time span, and developed a set of conditions for the establishment of new working groups. This discussion will find its reflection in the revised mandate of SFIC to be developed in 2019.

SFIC provided regular proactive input for the use of the INCO Service Facility in support of the strategic development of international cooperation in research and innovation. For this purpose SFIC also agreed with the Commission on a procedure for the submission of request via SFIC with clear responsibilities and objective criteria for the introduction of service requests, their endorsement by SFIC and their implementation by the Commission. In the course of 2017, it adopted a number of requests for topical work to be carried out in the margins of the Service Facility, inter alia on a foresight study on the Global Research Area, on a conceptual framework for monitoring international cooperation based on appropriate indicators, on a data repository for international cooperation, and on a new dedicated platform providing programme and country-specific information. In parallel, SFIC members promoted
the requested activities among stakeholders with the aim of creating synergies, if possible, with similar actions at national level.

3.4 Sharing and structuring information and good practices on international R&I cooperation activities

This is a core role of SFIC for its members and observers. For managing and sharing information effectively, SFIC members and observers have contributed to peer-learning activities and to the exchange of best practice, mainly via exchange of information between delegations (e.g. on a bilateral basis, within SFIC Working Groups, via a systematic tour de table of international activities during each SFIC plenary meeting). SFIC has continued to promote presentations during plenary meetings on EU/national STI strategies as well as on R&I cooperation activities and projects. This shall also serve to add a level of analysis to the sharing.

The Commission presented, among other information, core policy activities and data, including the development of international cooperation activities within Horizon 2020, the concept of the Global Research Area, which is used by Commission as a diplomatic tool in discussions with third countries, the EU-Africa High Level Policy Dialogue on science, technology and innovation. Representatives of the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) provided an overview of cooperation in science diplomacy.

In addition, to address the need of having an overview of R&I international cooperation activities and information at the level of the EU and of Member States and Associated Countries, the Commission agreed to include as much as possible of the relevant information identified by the Toolbox Working Group in the online Research and Innovation Observatory website.

3.5 Networking and coordination

To assure the visibility and the effectiveness of SFIC's work, SFIC has continued to pursue close collaboration and exchange of information with relevant national and European/international activities and projects with a strong international focus. In autumn
2017 vice-chair gave a presentation on SFIC to the European network of Technical University rectors in Graz, Austria. The German SFIC delegation introduced SFIC in the OECD in spring 2018.

Representatives from the three ENRICH centres in the US, Brazil and China presented their activities. Their activities focus on supporting research and innovation organisations and companies of all sizes to establish connections and a foothold in these countries. Representatives of the COST Association presented an overview of the COST framework that supports trans-national cooperation among researchers, engineers and scholars across Europe. The Chair EUREKA network presented the "Strategy for EUREKA Internationalization 2025" and gave an overview on the latest stay of play in its implementation and the chairman of PRIMA presented PRIMA activities.

Since 2017 Armenia, Georgia and Tunisia are observers in SFIC.

4. REPORTING AND DISSEMINATION

Details on the activity of SFIC can also be found in the conclusions of the plenary meetings which are published on the public register of Council documents. SFIC activity is also reflected in the reports of the European Research Area Committee (ERAC) about its activities, in particular concerning the implementation of the ERA Roadmap.