

Conclusions – Recommendations from PLATON Final Dissemination Workshop

*“Innovation & Socio-economic research for SMEs: Experiences &
Future Initiatives”*

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1. Actions supporting SMEs participation in EU-funded research

Based on the experience from support actions aiming to enhance SMEs participation in EU-funded research (ETIs, other FP6 SSA actions and FP7 CSA)

Conclusions

- ✓ Best practice in one sector does not necessary constitute best practice for another sector.
- ✓ Roadmap exercises (especially sectorial ones) may provide valuable information to SMEs in their effort to set their research priorities / objectives.
- ✓ New EU research priorities (e.g. Security) tend to attract the interest of SMEs; though it is not always easy to find projects that meet their needs.
- ✓ Not all SMEs are suitable to participate in EU-funded research; on the contrary only few of them (as a percentage) meet the requirements and have relevant business objectives.
- ✓ SMEs need support throughout the lifetime of a research project (generation and formation of the idea, project implementation and post-project exploitation).
- ✓ Personal relationships play critical role in SMEs. SMEs tend to form strong relationships with the experts they receive support from; they do not care about from which project they get support; they trust the person(s) they collaborate with.
- ✓ Late start of the support actions / ETIs (e.g. due to long negotiation period) or non availability of the workprogramme of the targeted research themes / programmes may induce significant changes in the projects' timetable and approach.
- ✓ Web-databases of collaboration profiles (of SMEs and generally interested organizations) and matching web-tools are used from quite a few support actions / ETIs. These DBs usually continue to operate after the end of the projects' duration.
- ✓ Collaboration with European Technology Platforms (ETPs) is quite difficult as it has been proved difficult to talk to them, while their decision making process is rather slow (due to their large size and standard operational procedures). However, when established such collaboration may proved to be quite valuable.
- ✓ Tailored services – support to individual SMEs can have higher impact. However, the beneficiaries (SMEs) should be carefully selected. The selection process should take into account their motivation – commitment, their competences and available resources.
- ✓ The collaboration with the NCPs network and the IRC network can be most valuable for the success of the support actions / ETIs. However, the level and type of collaboration is heavily depended on the country and organization.

Good practices

- ↪ Train the future trainers / experts: experienced organizations (from EU-15) may train experts from less experienced organizations in New Member States, Candidate or INCO countries so that they can support / assist SMEs in participating in EU-funded research (WE-Mentor)
- ↪ Innovation workshops to individual SMEs: a tailored 2-day workshop held within the premises of carefully selected SMEs (1 workshop per SME). (Media-trans).
- ↪ Where research results are usually applied at regional level (e.g. health and healthcare), regional stakeholders are good to involve. (Sincere)
- ↪ To build partnerships between support actions and people that prepare research proposals may result in both (i) high SME participation in proposals and in (ii) high success rates of the SMEs proposals.
- ↪ Post-project continuation may be better served through new projects or the creation of membership based organizations that continue part or all project activities.

Recommendations

- (1) Creation of EEIG to participate – coordinate support actions may provide the solution of enlarging and enriching the consortium without the need of Contract amendments. EEIG are membership-based organizations and thus by involving new members (organizations) they can widen the geographical or sectorial scope and impact of a support action.
- (2) Organisation of a conference / workshop / meeting of projects and networks supporting SME participation in EU-funded research is most helpful in various ways (to share and exchange experiences and good practices, to discuss on future actions, to draw policy-relevant conclusions and recommendations, etc.). Timescope: May – June 2008.
- (3) Elaboration of a collaboration framework defining the general collaboration context - rules between EU-funded support actions and the NCPs and IRC networks.
- (4) Development and operation of a web-engine that will perform partner searches in all available web-DBs of the support actions / ETI projects.
- (5) Allow for the development and implementation of support actions with horizontal / cross-sectoral focus (to address issues that cut across two or more research themes of FP7). The future workprogrammes of FP7 may include relevant objectives. Such actions may also be used to (a) map organizations that provide services in the area of research support and technology transfer / innovation, (b) further clarify the role and complementarities between organizations / networks of different type.

2. Socio-economic Research and SMEsConclusions

- ✓ The importance of socio-economic trends in the competitiveness, growth and generally in the future of SMEs is high and 'undisputable'. Issues such as the EU enlargement, increasing globalization, environmental concerns & social claims, immigration, changing consumer behaviour, teamwork and internal organization, etc. consist of only a tiny part of the SSH spectrum that affects the business (macro and / or micro) environment.
- ✓ Low interest to participate in SSH research from SMEs: they are not familiar with SSH research, it is not technological research and it can hardly lead to new products / services (that is difficult to transform into commercial value) and is of a longer-term value when compared to technological research.

- ✓ SMEs actually are quite interested in SSH research¹. However, the topics (priorities) in the work programme for the FP7-SSH theme are not that SME relevant. If topics could be (partially) changed, SME would become more interested in participate in SSH research.
- ✓ SME groupings fit better to SSH research projects. Nevertheless, SMEs of the service sector with a clear socio-economic relevance (e.g. consultancies, survey companies, companies performing studies for policy makers, etc.) comprise a target group where potential partners for SSH projects may come from.
- ✓ Though some of the SME groupings and SMEs generate SSH research ideas, they can hardly prepare a potentially winning research proposal without the significant involvement (leadership) of experienced SSH researchers.
- ✓ The role of SMEs / SME groupings as partner in SSH research projects may include the following tasks: to compliment requirements – research objectives, to support field research, to enhance dissemination to the business community, etc.
- ✓ SSH researchers do not feel confident with the participation of SMEs or SME groupings in SSH research projects (questions on the added value created by the participation of SMEs / SME groupings are raised, as well as about the ability of the latter to provide the necessary resources).
- ✓ A large number of SSH-related research priorities / objectives are incorporated in the FP7 technological research themes and programmes.

Good practices

- ↻ Awareness creation events (info-days / workshops, etc.) are valuable to familiarize SMEs / SME groupings with SSH issues and research agenda. Practical examples – case studies should be given – analysed.
- ↻ Provision of highly personalized services – support to individual (carefully selected) SMEs / SME groupings aiming to provide them with specific suggestions and reach tangible results (participation in SSH research proposals and projects).
- ↻ Collaboration with the SSH NCPs through events, circulation of partner searches, exchange of info, etc.
- ↻ Encourage and provide support to join efforts between SSH researchers and SMEs / SME groupings to be involved in SSH research.

Recommendations

- (1)** Popularise selected SSH research results and disseminate them to the business community (awareness creation).
- (2)** Popularise EC SSH research priorities (under the new workprogramme of FP7-SSH) and familiarize the business community with them (by giving examples – presenting potential future projects and their relevance to the business world). (awareness creation and training).
- (3)** Network selected competent SMEs / SME groupings from the business community with experienced SSH researchers. Organisation of international SSH conference and networking event.
- (4)** Introduce actions aiming to increase the participation of SSH researchers (with experience in FP6-CITIZENS and FP7-SSH) in SSH-relevant projects under technological research themes and programmes of FP7.

¹ According to a Danish study elaborated by DEA. This conclusion concerns SMEs rather from all European countries and not only the Danish ones