

## 4<sup>TH</sup> VIDEO CONFERENCE OF THE R&I DGs ON R&I ACTIONS ON COVID-19

14 MAY 2020

### SUMMARY RECORD BY THE COMMISSION SERVICES

On 14 May, Jean-Eric Paquet, Director-General of DG Research and Innovation of the Commission, hosted the fourth videoconference with the R&I DGs of the national administrations of the EU Member States to continue the discussions about the coordination and implementation of R&I actions on COVID-19. The discussion focussed on the ERAvsCorona Action Plan, with a special focus on the mandate of the ad hoc working group (and sub-groups) on action 1.

As a starting point, Jean-Eric Paquet debriefed the participants of the work done along the **10 actions of the ERAvsCorona Action Plan** (except for actions 1 and 7, see below), complemented by statements from other responsible Commission representatives:

**Action 2:** Irene Norstedt and Barbara Kerstiens (both DG R&I) informed about the state-of-play of discussions on clinical trials; existing trials are being used/repurposed, ensuring pan-European coverage. Any selected trials need to be adaptive to take up new interesting compounds and take out others that are not effective. Criteria for selecting the trials are being discussed in the respective sub-group under action 1. The DISCOVERY trial is ready to open up for broader participation and will get additional funding by ECRIN. Information will be shared via the coordinator. Jean-Eric Paquet added that the Commission is helping in reaching out, but encountered some difficulties as the trial collided with the SOLIDARITY trial conducted by WHO. The problem should be solved now and the DISCOVERY trial can become the basis for ramping up clinical trials in Europe. He underlined that the area of clinical trials is one of the most visible areas with a lot of impact, it is also a priority for Horizon 2020 funding.

**Action 3:** A second expression of interest will be launched soon with an indicative budget of 122m EURO. The Health Programme Committee has been informed and will still be asked to confirm the update of the Horizon 2020 work programme.

**Action 4:** 150m EURO will be added to the EIC call; evaluations are on-going and results are expected for next week.

**Action 5:** The work on the Seal of Excellence is focussed on the EIC call as well (action 4), the Community of Practice met to discuss this work stream and is asked to ensure involvement on national levels.

**Action 6:** The “one-stop-shop” with information about Covid-19 relevant calls has been established and is a rich portal for actors across Europe, including associated countries.

**Action 8:** Discussions about infrastructures (and possible redirecting of parts of the budget) are on-going with the Programme Committee, it has been suggested e.g. to establish one new infrastructure (PHIRI).

**Action 9:** The data sharing platform has been launched; it is operated together with EMBL/EBI and is part of the broader EOSC governance. At the next meeting in this format, a first analysis of how the platform is used could be presented.

**Action 10:** The pan-European Hackathon was organised very successfully in the end of April and brought over 2000 solutions. As a next step a “Matchathon” will be organised to promote the solutions to funders, hospitals, procurers etc. across the Member States. Some Member States are already show-casing solutions.

In addition to the implementation of the action plan, DDG Signe Ratso (DG R&I) informed about a **video conference with 13 associated countries** (all AC except NO, ICE, CH – which participate in these DG calls). The aim of the VC was to inform them about the ERAvsCorona Action Plan and to identify areas of interest for their cooperation. The associated countries provided practical examples of work done at their national levels and showed a lot of interest in cooperation, especially regarding the Hackathon and the “one-stop-shop”. Another meeting with the AC will be scheduled at the end of May.

Cristina Russo (DG R&I) reported that the Commission is also working on the enhanced integration of **international cooperation** in the ERAvsCorona Action Plan, highlighting examples as the pledging initiative, Glolid-R, CEPI and EDCTP. The Commission is reaching out to international partners via the Science Counsellors and by organising dialogues with specific regions such as Africa. Furthermore, on behalf of the Commission she welcomed the recent SFIC report on the issue of international cooperation in the current crisis and stressed that the Commission is looking forward to working with the Member States in a well-coordinated manner.

Another information from the side of the Commission referred to the **“top-up” of ongoing grants and projects**. Anna Panagopoulou (DG R&I) informed the Member States about possibilities to repurpose Horizon 2020 grants (while respecting the maximum grant amount) and the option to give top-up funding to ongoing projects in justified cases (based on Art. 195 of the Financial Regulation). In addition, the updated Horizon 2020 work programme will include general provisions stating that throughout the work programme grants may be increased or signed to tackle the Covid-19 crisis; the work programme will also cover the possibility to top-up grants through the upcoming expression of interest in the areas of Health, Infrastructures and ICT.

In their interventions, **Member States welcomed the swift start of the implementation of the action plan**, especially regarding actions 2 and 3. The upcoming expression of interest should go beyond the first one, covering a broader spectrum of topics (e.g. medical technologies, digital tools, disinfection systems, different aspects of public health, psychological processes). Regarding the clinical trials, it was underlined that selection criteria are crucial. Request was made for broad dissemination of information about the planned call for expression of interest, also informing associated countries. Furthermore, the necessity to support developing countries was underlined. In practical terms, it was also raised that Council and comitology procedures should be followed and an updated table of

the action plan including timeframes and estimated budgetary needs (per action) would be useful.

The second agenda point covered more in detail Action 1 and 7: **the Ad-hoc working group (action 1) and a possible ad-hoc High Level R&I Task Force on the Coronavirus (Action 7)**.

Jean-Eric Paquet emphasised the rather unique nature of the Ad-hoc working group and its four sub-groups. They work in a very pragmatic way, across policies and certainly not in a vacuum, which is a strong benefit. He recognized that there might be some overlaps between the groups and that the set-up might need streamlining. He also explained that the sub-groups need to connect to the pledging event to coordinate research on the ground and globally.

**Barbara Kerstiens** (DG R&I) updated on the sub-group on **clinical trials**. The sub-group met twice. It is working on setting up a database for clinical trials that are 'in the make'. Further work is ongoing to come to a true EU wide clinical trials network, and to come up with a system for prioritisation of vaccine candidates. The sub-group also aims to identify different bottlenecks (ethical, regulatory) in conducting clinical trials.

A number of participants emphasised that criteria for prioritising clinical trials is a delicate issue and that the basis for this should always be scientific. The Commission clarified that this sub-group will not decide on such criteria, but merely advise on them.

**Maria Pilar Aguar Fernandez** (DG R&I) updated on the sub-group on **Testing**. The sub-group met on 30 April and will next meet on 18 May. It took stock on testing currently at EU and MS level and especially explained the Commission guidelines on testing methods.

**Carmen De Vicente Coll** (DG R&I) updated on the sub-group on **Manufacturing**. The sub-group met on 8 May and discussed its Terms of Reference. The sub-group will determine the degree of scale-up in manufacturing capacity that will be needed and define associated investment needs, taking in the national investment initiatives to maintain short- and long-term manufacturing capacity for resilience. The next meeting was planned for 15 May where criteria for manufacturing of promising vaccine candidates were to be discussed.

**Stephane Ouaki** (DG R&I) updated on the sub-group on **Financing**. The sub-group has met twice, including with the EIB and national promotional banks. It mainly presented to the Member States the different financial instruments available for COVID-19 related actions. The next meeting will look at possible future financing opportunities.

**Jarek Waligora** (DG SANTE) gave information on the Health Security Committee, which was already established in 2013. The Committee coordinates national preparedness, and is used intensively by Member States to share information. It meets every few days during the current COVID19 pandemic. The last meeting discussed emergency assistance on cross-border health care; exit strategies; vaccination strategy; Kawasaki diseases in children. It is the main interlocutor with Member States health authorities on the COVID19 response.

In their interventions, **Member States raised several concerns on the mandate of the Ad-hoc working group and the terms of reference of the four sub-groups:**

- Some Member States pleaded for a broadened mandate of the Ad-hoc working group, namely to monitor all actions of the Action Plan, to function as an information hub, to organise the participation in the sub-groups, and to prepare the work of the DGs.
- On the other hand, several Member States indicated that the **mandate of the Ad-hoc working group** is too broad, possibly going beyond R&I, and therefore difficult to coordinate nationally.
- Most Member States emphasised that the membership of the Ad-hoc working group and **sub-groups** should be expert based, and not formal Member State representatives, and that decisions on funding and policy should be taken in the formally established configurations such as the Programme Committees/Council.
- Most Member States indicated that they would like to see a **(limited) time frame** mentioned in the mandate of the Ad-hoc working group and the sub-groups.
- Most Member States were concerned of overlaps between the sub-groups and indicated they would like to see a more structured written reporting on the work of the sub-groups, and that the chair of the Ad-hoc working group reports on a regular basis on progress to the Council (Research Working Party).
- The setting-up of an **ad-hoc High Level R&I Task Force on the Coronavirus** (Action 7) did not find broad support, but could be further reflected when discussing longer-term preparedness.

Jean-Eric Paquet appreciated the different interventions of the Member States. He emphasised that this novel way of working also implies that the Commission is opening up for more intense cooperation with the Member States, because it brings benefits for all sides in the response to the current situation. On the members of the different groups, he agreed these should be **experts**, which includes R&I policy experts that can connect the dots over several policy fields. He agreed that an **indication of timing** should be included in the mandate of the Ad-hoc working group (for example to take stock at the end of this year) and that it is certainly not the intention of the Commission to prolong this structure longer than needed. However, at this moment in time these coordination efforts are proving their added value. The Commission will review the mandates of the Ad-hoc working group and sub-groups also to **avoid overlaps** and be more precise on the deliverables. The Commission is of course available to **report to the Council** when the Presidency deems fit. Jean-Eric Paquet asked **Member States to react to the Austrian proposal** for the broadening of the mandate of the Ad-hoc working group. He preferred to **maintain a strategic role for the R&I DGs group**. He agreed with the proposal of the Croatian Presidency to take stock with the Ministers on the Action Plan at the video conference of Research Ministers on 29 May.

Under the third agenda point, Jean-Eric Paquet informed on the pledge, which started on the 4<sup>th</sup> of May and was already a **real success with €7.4 billion registered**. He highlighted that the pledge will run until the end of May and that it can also consist of declared national-based COVID-19 R&D funding. He underlined that the full scope of EU pledging is not yet available because **most MS have not allocated their national public R&I investments against COVID-19**. As a consequence, Jean-Eric Paquet encouraged Member States to update their contributions in order to give a comprehensive view on their national

public **COVID-19 R&D funding**. He concluded that from the estimations of non-declared national-based COVID-19 R&D funding, the European Pledge could be increased with a minimum value of around €360 million. Once all the information is collected, the Commission will pass an update to the Coronavirus Global Response organisers to ensure that the information on the common European effort (Team Europe) is properly reflected.

Several questions were raised: Participants wanted to understand the role of the Member States (especially those who were not co-hosts) in the future process of allocating the money, which should be transparent. They wanted to know if they can join the partnerships and if conditions can be attributed to the spending of the national contributions (e.g. stressing the principle of open science). Furthermore, they asked how the European funds in the pledge will be monitored and audited, and whether benefits for vulnerable regions like Africa will be ensured.

Jean-Eric Paquet answered that the Commission is ready and available for representing the 27 Member States in the overall coordination of the partnerships, but that the details have not been worked out yet and some questions are still under discussion.

At the end of the meeting, the Croatian Presidency informed the participants that the role of R&I in the post-Covid-19 recovery will be on the agenda of the meeting of Research Ministers on 29 May.

Jean-Eric Paquet suggested to schedule the next meeting of R&I DGs in mid-June, following the meeting of the Research Ministers and ERAC, and when further information (e.g. on the implementation of the pledge) is available.