

NEWS 16/06/2010 – The COST CSO President reports to the COST Ministerial Conference.

Professor Francesco Fedi, President of the COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO), reported to the COST Ministerial Conference held on 15 June 2010 in Palma de Mallorca on progress made by COST since the COST Ministerial Conference held in Dubrovnik in 2003.

Palma de Mallorca, 15 June 2010

Mr Secretary of State, Ms Director General, distinguished representatives of the COST Member States and of the European Commission, observers, it is indeed a great honour for me, in my capacity as President of the COST Committee of Senior Officials, to illustrate the activities and the main reforms introduced in COST since the COST Ministerial Conference held in Dubrovnik in May 2003.

The reforms introduced have influenced the whole COST system, have adjusted COST to a changing environment and demonstrate its dynamism and ability to adapt to the changing needs of international cooperation.

They have also allowed COST to pursue its main objectives:

- to contribute to decrease the fragmentation of research in the European Research Area coordinating bottom-up nationally funded research initiatives;
- to open the ERA to a global collaboration in research;
- and to contribute broadly to the competitiveness and socio-economic development of Europe.

The first series of reforms concerned: the strategy, the governance and the science management of COST.

The **strategic role** of the Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) has been reinforced. The CSO has focused on discussion and approval of the strategic and political goals of COST, such as the COST contribution to realizing the ERA and the Lisbon objectives; the communication strategy of COST; the endeavours to reinforce the participation of early stage researchers and to improve the gender balance; the further development of COST as an instrument of integration across Europe and as an asset for the implementation of the European policy towards the rest of the world; and other topics of a strategic nature. A series of strategic documents on these issues have been prepared and distributed by the COST CSO.

The role of the COST Committee of Senior Officials in **COST governance** has been particularly strengthened. The **CSO** decided to continue to stay abreast of developments taking place in each scientific community, this being reflected, in particular, in the nature,

content and number of Actions being submitted to COST and to continue to be informed of the content of the new Actions proposed, proceed to their approval and be informed of the results of the Actions completed. This is in line with the fact that the Member States have to accept the MoU of the COST Actions and that the CSO members, on one side, represent their Governments and, on the other side, link COST with the scientific communities of their respective countries. The role of the "Executive Group" of the CSO – the so called **JAF Group** - has also been reinforced and the devolution of a number of tasks to this group has been introduced. The CSO also introduced the devolution of the management of the Actions to the Actions themselves and adopted measures to reduce the time between the presentation of a preliminary proposal and the launch of the approved Action to less than 8 Months. The roles and decision making powers were well defined at three levels: the Committee of Senior Officials, the Domain Committees and the Management Committees of the Actions. It remains the unique responsibility of the CSO to nominate an implementing agent for COST and select new Actions for funding, whilst the COST Member States ,through their COST National Coordinators, nominate the members of the Domain Committees and the Management Committees of the Actions. Two milestones in the history of COST were introduced: the new voting procedures based on a qualified majority (before only approval of consensus was possible) and a drastic simplification of the approval and signature of the MoUs of the COST Actions.

Important reforms have been decided by the CSO in the **science management** of COST concerning the structure of the COST scientific Domains, the introduction of the continuous Open Call for proposals for new COST Actions and the reinforcement of the scientific quality control of COST Actions.

The profound **restructuring of the COST scientific domains** has proved to be a major milestone for COST. It has launched COST into the future, facilitating the development of new ideas in the most promising fields of science. The restructuring was not obtained by simply reducing the number of COST domains, but by starting from a "tabula rasa" and by establishing a completely new structure based on 9 new scientific domains laying down the very basis for COST's scientific strategy. Now COST is a modern network for European cooperation in science and technology at the service of European researchers. The COST Domain Committees count among their members some of the most outstanding European scientists. Good science management suggests maintaining the present scientific Domains for

a number of years both to acquire experience and to avoid disorientation in the scientific community. A particular approach to better cater for the trans-Domain Action proposals was developed and a **Trans-Domain Standing Assessment Board** created to ensure a fair assessment of such interdisciplinary proposals. This entirely new approach has proved to be very efficient and may inspire similar activities in other funding bodies. The notion of **interdisciplinarity** has been also ensured through the "Strategic Workshops", organized by COST on subjects of intrinsic interdisciplinary nature. A few examples of strategic workshops organized by COST: "Environment and Health", "European Cultural Heritage", "Food and Health", "Benefits of Research Infrastructures beyond Science" and "European Forum on Nanosciences".

Another major reform was the introduction of a **continuous COST Open Call** for proposals for new Actions, together with a strengthened and consistent use of external peer reviews. This continuous Open Call is based on a two-stage process, reconciling the advantages of the COST tradition and the need for a highly transparent process of presenting proposals for new Actions, at the same time raising visibility within the research community. The Open Call is **continuous**, i.e. the scientific community can present a proposal for a new Action at any time and on any subject, following the successful tradition of COST. The Call is **open**, i.e. the selection process follows the `bottom-up` tradition of COST. Preliminary Proposals of limited length are submitted to an initial pre-selection. Only those deemed to be of sufficient interest, potential intrinsic quality, and European added value - in accordance with the criteria established by the CSO - are invited to submit a Full Proposal. This two-stage process reduces the disadvantages Calls generally have to face, such as the problem of oversubscription (i.e. a large number of new full proposals, frequently not of sufficient quality), a huge workload in processing proposals and the disillusion which may arise within the research community due to the rejection of a large number of full proposals.

The CSO has given particular attention to the **quality control of COST Actions** continuously reviewing its **Guidelines for the assessment, monitoring and final evaluation of COST Actions**. These guidelines which represent an outstanding example of best practises are followed by all COST Domain Committees with the involvement of external reviewers, both in the assessment of new proposals and in the final evaluation of completed Actions.

The COST CSO has given also particular attention to the **utilization of results from COST Actions**. The CSO has made it mandatory to prepare at the end of every Action a Final Evaluation Report. The objective of the final evaluation is to identify and describe how well

the Action has reached its stated objectives, including the initiation of any follow-up activities and its impact in the area covered by the Action. Reports highlighting outcomes and impacts of all completed Actions, and other “ad hoc” documents drawing the public attention towards noteworthy achievements of COST, are routinely published as part of the COST dissemination policy introduced by the CSO. The close cooperation pursued by COST with EUREKA also facilitates the direct application of research results obtained in COST Actions.

The legal status of COST has also been a subject carefully considered by the COST CSO. The lack of legal personality of COST was put in particular evidence in 2003, when the European Commission (EC) ceased to provide the scientific secretariat and the financial administration of COST. With no legal personality, COST could not become a contractor of the European Commission and receive funds from the Framework Programmes. Therefore the CSO started discussions with the European Science Foundation (ESF), which led to the establishment of a **COST-ESF Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)**, according to which ESF would act as the Implementing Agent to provide and manage the administrative, technical and scientific secretariat for COST, its Technical Committees and its Actions. The COST Ministerial Conference in May 2003 endorsed the MoU between COST and the ESF. A contract between the EC and the ESF was concluded in July 2003 for the entire period of the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6).

In October 2006 COST and ESF approved an Addendum to the COST-ESF MoU with the objective of strengthening COST and ESF as two actors fostering the ERA and further developing the synergy between them, while maintaining a clear distinction between their individual characteristics and their complementary roles. The ESF was invited to continue to act as the Implementing Agent for COST during the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7). In January 2007 negotiations between the EC and the ESF for the grant agreement for COST in FP7 were started.

In June 2007 the "Final Review of COST in the Sixth Framework Programme", the so-called "Monfret Report", made the following recommendations on the governance of COST: "either COST should create an independent legal entity or the ESF should take over the full operation of COST including the strategy formulation and the linkages with the Member States".

The recommendations on the Monfret Report notwithstanding, COST confirmed its decision to appoint ESF as its implementing agent for FP7, in order to ensure the continuity of COST activities for the benefit of the European scientific community. The ESF-EC Grant Agreement

for FP7 was signed in July 2007.

However, the COST CSO took the recommendations of the "Monfret report" into very serious consideration. In 2007 the CSO started the re-examination of the COST legal status and appointed Professor Raoul Kneucker as Rapporteur on this question. Based on his report, released in September 2008, various possible solutions were examined. The solution that appeared to have the strongest support from the CSO delegations, the "COST Office Association", was given particular attention.

In June 2009 the COST CSO commissioned a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis on COST-ESF Relationship to Technopolis, who built their report on the assumption that it would be desirable for COST to establish a legal personality, whatever the future relationship with ESF would be even in the case ESF would continue providing services to COST.

In December 2009, 26 COST Member States voted in favour of establishing an independent COST Office Association and confirmed this position in February 2010. Recently, the number of Member States reached 27 that is the qualified majority needed in COST for approval.

In March 2010 the representatives of the 35 COST Member States unanimously rejected the possibility of ESF taking over COST. In May 2010 the CSO confirmed its wish to maintain the ESF as COST implementing agent until the end of FP7, reiterating the need for continuity of the Directorate of the COST Office in Brussels.

On 8 June 2010 at the initiative of Germany and Spain a meeting to set up the COST Office Association (COA) as an independent legal entity in the form of an international non-profit making Association under Belgian law was convened in Brussels at the Permanent representation to the European Union of Germany. The Statutes of the COA has been approved and 7 COST countries have already signed the Statutes which are now open for signature for all COST countries. The registration process of the COA would be launched on 1 July 2010. Countries who would have signed by that date would be the "founding members" of COA.

When registered, the Association will give COST access to legal personality, but will leave the COST structure (CSO, Domain Committees, Management Committees) unchanged. The COA may become the implementing agent of COST if and when the COST CSO so decides. In any case the CSO has been of the view that the scientific synergy between COST and ESF should continue and increase.

The **acknowledgements** received by COST have been numerous. The reform process pursued by the CSO was fully recognized by the Panel for the Mid-Term Review of the EC-ESF contract for COST in FP6 (Kneucker Report). The Panel recognized the important role of COST for achieving the Lisbon and Barcelona objectives and recommended to the European Commission to release the entire sum of EUR 80 million from FP6, the upper limit of support for COST within FP6, and, particularly important, to continue to support COST in the future with increased support within FP7.

The Final report for the evaluation of COST at the end of FP6 (Monfret Report) recognized the important role of COST and underlined the high customer satisfaction of the current users of COST.

The European Commission showed an important sign of renewed confidence in COST. A more effective cooperation with the Commission was introduced, supervised by a High Level Group. Which. This has enabled the development of a strong partnership between COST and the European Commission, reinforcing coordination and thus assuring complementarities and synergies.

At the political level, COST has been acknowledged on a number of occasions. The Competitiveness Council of the EU has stressed the importance of reinforcing the ties between the Framework Programmes and European intergovernmental organizations such as COST; and underlined that European technology initiatives should achieve synergies with existing schemes such as COST taking into account its important contribution to R&D.

The COST CSO has also built links with the European Parliament. COST has been explicitly mentioned in the Report of the Rapporteur to the European Parliament on FP7. A successful COST exhibition in the European Parliament was held in 2006, with the participation of the Research Commissioner Dr Janez Potocnik, of the Chair of the Committee on Industry, Research and Energy (ITRE) of the European Parliament, Mr Chichester, and of Professor Jerzy Buzek, at that time Rapporteur to the European Parliament on FP7.

The FP7 Specific Programme 'Cooperation' regarding the financial support to COST reads " at least EUR 210 million and up to EUR 250 million should be given to COST, subject to the mid-term evaluation. This financial support will be provided through a grant which will be paid on the basis of a grant agreement between the Commission and a legal entity designated by COST as its implementing agent "

Last and certainly not least very recently in May 2010 the Horvat Report on the mid-term evaluation of COST in FP7 recommended to allocate the additional EUR 40 million reserved in FP7 for COST.

The increase in FP7 of about 50% of the annual financial support to COST with respect to FP6 is a reward of paramount importance for the entire COST community.

We may conclude that it is certainly very satisfactory to note how COST has improved since 2003. Somebody called this six year period the “renaissance” of COST following the rather difficult times of the immediately previous years. The following figures speak by themselves. From 180 COST Actions in 2003 to the more than 280 Actions of today. From the 70 Institutions from non-COST countries participating in COST Actions to the more than 350 Institutions in 2010. From a contribution to COST of 50-80 M€ for the four years of FP6 to the contribution of 210-250 M€ for the seven years of FP7. From 2003 when somebody wanted to give “an honourable funeral “ to COST to the present situation in which nobody could dispute that COST is one of the most effective instrument of the European Research Area. From the strong criticism toward COST in 2003 to the “chorus of praises” for COST - as it was reported in the press - during the COST exhibition in the European Parliament in 2006 or during my presentation of COST to the EU Research Working Party in 2009.

If COST will continue to receive the same high number of proposals for new COST Actions and if the same high number of Institutions of non-COST countries will continue to participate in COST Actions then COST should not have any problem for its future. An extremely efficient mechanism under the direct control of the COST Member States to contribute to decrease the fragmentation of investments in research in Europe coordinating bottom-up initiatives and to open the European Research Area to a global collaboration.

I do hope that this Ministerial Conference will continue to support COST for the benefit of the entire European research community. With this hope in mind I conclude this presentation and thank you very much for your kind attention.

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