



**European Cooperation  
in the field of Scientific  
and Technical Research  
- COST -**

**Brussels, 12 May 2004**

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**Secretariat**

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**COST 270/04**

**NOTE**

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Subject :           Towards a New Partnership between COST and the Commission

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Delegations will find attached the discussion paper "Towards a New Partnership between COST and the Commission" in view of the 159<sup>th</sup> CSO meeting to be held in Bergen on 27-28 May 2004.

**DISCUSSION PAPER**

**TOWARDS A NEW PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN  
COST AND THE COMMISSION**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

COST is one of the longest-running European initiatives for the support of cooperation among scientists and researchers across Europe. Set up in 1971 by 19 countries together with the European Communities, which had only six Member States at the time, COST now has 34 member countries spanning the whole of Europe.

Rather than funding research itself, COST brings together research teams from different countries working on specific topics by supporting networking, conferences, short-term scientific exchanges and publications. Every year, with a relatively small annual financial investment of Euro 15-25 million, COST contributes to research activities with a total value of more than 100 times that amount, bringing together some 25,000 researchers from all over Europe.

When COST was established more than thirty years ago, the objective was to extend research cooperation in Europe both to countries neighbouring the Community, which was then much smaller, and to research topics far beyond the very limited fields that were then covered by Community research programmes.

Since that time there have been profound changes in the scope of Community research. In particular, more technological fields are now covered by the Framework Programme. Furthermore, after 1 May 2004 the EU will have 25 Member States.

Most recently, Member States and the Community have joined forces to establish the European Research Area (ERA) and to step up the co-ordination of research activities carried out at national and European level. Enhancing co-ordination of national research programmes and policies, overcoming fragmentation, and creating an “internal market” for research constitute central axes of the ERA concept. The ERA has become a key component of the Lisbon Strategy for transforming Europe into the world’s most competitive knowledge-based economy.

In this current European research landscape, the Commission is convinced that COST - as a flexible means of enhancing synergies and cooperation between research activities in the Member States, the rest of Europe and beyond - is able to make a strong contribution to the achievement of the objectives of the ERA and to the Lisbon Strategy.

In the conclusions of its meeting of November 2002, the Competitiveness Council welcomed the efforts being undertaken in the context of ERA to achieve closer linkage between the Framework Programme and other European cooperation initiatives, including COST, with a view to creating synergies while respecting their complementary roles. Furthermore, the Council asked the Commission to report on the progress made in integrating these other initiatives into the European Research Area.

The Commission is due to adopt a Communication entitled “Preparing the future: Reinforcing European research policy”<sup>1</sup>. This Communication also addresses the cooperation with intergovernmental research organisations such as COST.

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<sup>1</sup> Anticipated to be adopted on 12 May 2004.

In conjunction with the COST Ministerial Conference in Dubrovnik in 2003, the Commission introduced its plans to develop a new and genuine partnership with COST.

#### **OBJECTIVE OF THE DISCUSSION PAPER**

The objective is to take stock of the current cooperation between the Community Research and COST and to outline further steps with a view to upgrading and reinforcing the partnership between the two frameworks.

This paper will therefore:

- **take stock of the present situation** as regards the recent developments in view of achieving synergy and complementarities between the Framework Programme (and Community research at large) and COST.
- **explore new ways of creating genuine partnership through improved synergies and complementarities** between the two frameworks.
- **identify possible fora for implementing the partnership.**

## **2. TAKING STOCK: FIRST STEPS TO AN UPGRADED PARTNERSHIP**

The Commission was one of the founding fathers of COST and has provided the scientific and administrative secretariat for COST for 25 years.

In 2000, an independent assessment panel of COST was mandated to contribute to the thinking on the future of COST, including its role within the European Research Area. Identifying the need, and calling for reforms, the panel in its report<sup>1</sup> made several recommendations regarding the governance and organisational structures of COST. Specifically, the panel drew the conclusion that COST's relationship with the Commission seemed to be underdeveloped. The high-level panel felt it critical for COST and for the development of ERA that the strategic co-ordination relationship of COST with the Commission be strengthened.

One of the main reform issues, which the assessment panel recommended, focused on the need for a new administrative arrangement for the scientific secretariat. This followed on from the stance taken by the European Commission in mid-2001, whereby it proposed that beyond the end of the Fifth Framework Programme the secretariat of COST could be more usefully and more efficiently executed outside the Commission. The first step towards implementing this important reform was taken when the COST Committee of Senior Officials decided to designate the European Scientific Foundation (ESF) as its implementing agent. Consequently, the ESF and the Commission concluded a contract in August 2003 for the ESF to provide and manage the administrative, technical and scientific secretariat

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<sup>1</sup> 'An assessment of COST', report prepared by a Panel chaired by Prof. Niels E. Busch, and presented to the COST CSO Committee on 7-8 March 2002

for COST, its Technical Committees and Actions. The ESF COST Office was established in Brussels and became fully operational on 1 January 2004.

This first Commission contract for COST under the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) is for a duration of 18 months with a financial provision of Euro 22 million. With subsequent contracts for COST under FP6, it is foreseen that the total Community financial contribution to COST might rise up to Euro 80 million, subject to successful implementation of reforms in COST. This would represent a significant rise compared to the support provided under FP5. It has to be pointed out that the financial support for the scientific co-ordination activities of COST is borne entirely by the Community.

The recommendation of the assessment panel of a strengthened relationship between COST and the Commission should now be pursued in earnest.

In conjunction with the COST Ministerial Conference in 2003 the Commission had expressed an opinion on its future role within COST<sup>1</sup>, the essence being that **the Commission would like to change its role from that of being a rather passive service provider to one of being an active partner.**

The following possible activities to achieve this goal were proposed:

- **The COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO):** The Commission could participate actively in the work of the CSO.
- **Developing synergy between COST and the Framework Programme:** Within the CSO and the COST Technical Committees, the Commission would take on the important role of developing useful synergy between the Framework Programme and COST.
- **Participation in COST Actions:** The Commission would reflect over possible ways to strengthen its linkages to individual COST Actions;
- **Cooperation with COST Office:** The Commission would establish a close cooperation with the COST Office, particularly through its contract with the new implementing agent.

The Declaration of the COST Ministerial Conference<sup>2</sup> in Dubrovnik addressed in positive terms the relationship between the Community and COST under the European Research Area and welcomed the new partnership. The following paragraphs are worth full quotations:

- **WHEREAS** the European Commission has expressed its intention to become an active partner in COST;
- **FIND** that COST must continue and should be encouraged to develop as a European initiative and as an intergovernmental mechanism of prime importance for the implementation and strengthening of the European Research and Innovation Area;

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<sup>1</sup> Commissioner Busquin's letter of 9 April 2003 to the Croatian Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Gvozden Flego, prior to the COST Ministerial Conference in Dubrovnik on 27 May 2003

<sup>2</sup> COST 221/6/03 REV6, Dubrovnik, 27 May 2003

- **FIND** that COST should continue to strengthen links with relevant European RTD organisations and initiatives;
- **STRESS** the importance of the European Community maintaining a strong and active involvement in all aspects of COST through both the Council and the Commission **RECOGNISING** the advantages that COST has through cooperation with the European Community and its RTD programmes;
- **WELCOME** the initiatives taken by the Commission to become an active partner in COST particularly with a view to further developing synergy between the RTD Framework Programme and COST;

### 3. SHAPE OF THE NEW PARTNERSHIP

The Commission fully recognises and respects the autonomy of COST as an intergovernmental framework. Acknowledging the recommendations of the assessment panel, the COST Committee of Senior Officials is in the process of deciding upon and implementing reforms of its governance and organisational structures with the aim of increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of COST. Moreover, the constantly changing research landscape may also force COST to adapt its objectives and methods, but its fundamental characteristics are not called into question.

The new partnership between the Commission and COST is guided by the ultimate objective of integrating COST into the European Research Area through closer linkage and reinforced co-ordination between the Framework Programme and COST, and seeking complementarities and synergies between the two frameworks. Being a partner in COST would mean that the Commission could bring the activities of the Framework Programme closer to COST– just as the COST Member Countries bring their own national activities more in concordance with the Framework Programme.

As the partnership is driven by several forces, such as the ERA concept, the Lisbon Strategy, the Barcelona decision on the 3% target, and as part of the reform process of COST, it should be perceived as strategically beneficial for both partners. The partnership should be fully assimilated on all levels within both frameworks and both parties should be prepared to invest the necessary resources. Following mutual agreement on the form that the partnership should take, it should be put into practice as a high priority activity by COST and the Commission. For its part, the Commission intends to fully embrace the challenge.

Several Specific Actions, which fall under three levels of co-operation, are suggested below. Some have already been pursued in the past on an ad-hoc basis, but a consistent structured approach is needed.

#### SPECIFIC ACTIONS ON THREE LEVELS

- **Exchange of Information and Best Practices** between the Partners
- Partnership at **Project Level**
- Partnership at **Programme and Policy Level**



### 3.1 EXCHANGE OF INFORMATION AND BEST PRACTICES BETWEEN THE PARTNERS

#### 3.1.1 Exchange of information

The exchange of information between COST and the Framework Programme is a very important first step on the path to closer partnership. It is imperative that all relevant fora in COST and the Framework Programme management be sensitised to this. The objective would be two-fold:

- Coherent up-to-date information on Framework Programme activities within the COST Actions and the Technical Committees.
- Better dissemination of information on COST activities amongst the stakeholders and managers of the Framework Programme.

#### Specific Actions

**1. Commission services to include the relevant COST bodies in their mailing lists when disseminating information concerning specific programmes.**

Although information is normally widely disseminated to the European research community, and therefore researchers participating in COST Actions most often learn about such events, targeting dissemination specifically at the COST community would be useful.

**2. Commission Services of the thematic priority areas and project coordinators to be invited to COST workshops, and *vice-versa*.**

COST Actions normally organise mid-term and final workshops. COST Technical Committees are encouraged to organise strategic domain workshops. Within the Community research, workshops are often organised at the level of clusters of projects. With little additional costs, experts from the EC thematic priority areas could be invited. Such cross-participation would not only enhance the dissemination of information of the scientific activities of each research framework, but would also increase knowledge of the possibilities offered by each.

**3. Joint events to be organised by both COST and the thematic priority areas in specific cases.**

The added value of the joint events would be to facilitate identification by the scientific community of the most suitable form of collaboration for their future research.

#### **4. COST Technical Committees to receive information on Community RTD activities and policy.**

The 12 COST Technical Committees are responsible for the scientific co-ordination activities in the COST scientific domains (e.g. Transport, Medicine and Health, Social Sciences and Humanities). Without adequate and timely information regarding the Community research activities and its future perspectives, the COST Technical Committees are missing the tools to ensure the complementarities and synergies of the COST Actions with the research carried out under the Framework Programme.

### **3.1.2 Exchange of best practices**

Exchange of best practices would be a modality conducive to enhancing the efficiency and efficacy of COST and the Framework Programme activities, while respecting their specific characteristics..

#### **Specific Actions**

#### **5. Exchange of best practices in the area of project evaluation.**

COST has its own guidelines for ex-ante assessment of proposals, project monitoring and ex-post evaluation of finished projects, which aim to achieve uniformity in evaluations across the scientific domains. For its part, the Commission places great emphasis on the quality of its proposal evaluation system, which is based on peer review performed by independent experts. Although the evaluation practices differ considerably, COST could take into account the experience gathered in the Community programmes when developing its own methods and *vice versa*.

#### **6. Evaluation of COST domains.**

Exchange of best practices could also prove useful as regards evaluation of COST domains and the specific programmes of the Framework Programme. This is a new activity for COST which will be carried out in a systematic fashion over the period of the FP6.

### **3.2 PARTNERSHIP AT PROJECT LEVEL**

From the Community point of view it is not only desirable but necessary in the interest of rational use of Community funds that COST Action proposals do not lead to unnecessary duplication of efforts with the research undertaken under the Framework Programme proper. Closer links at project level between COST and the Framework Programme would lead to a strengthened structuring effect of the involved research activities.

## Specific Actions

**7. COST Action proposals to be presented for possible input to the Commission Services in charge of the thematic priority areas in conjunction with the proposal assessment made by the COST Technical Committee. A representative of the thematic activity of the FP could be involved in the workings of the COST Technical Committee.**

COST Actions are proposed by scientists and evaluated by the relevant Technical Committee against specific criteria, which include innovative character, high scientific standard, contribution to the concertation of research efforts in that domain, whether the proposal takes into account research efforts in other fora etc.

COST Action proposals should also be brought to the attention of Framework Programme managers in an effective and timely way, since they are best positioned to assess COST proposals in the context of Community research.

Such examination of COST proposals regarding complementarities and Community interest for the proposed research was carried out rather systematically through the Commission Scientific Secretariat by Framework Programme managers and sometimes also by policy DGs (e.g. research in support of health policies, pre-standardisation aspects). However, for procedural reasons the examination only took place at a very late stage after the proposal had been approved by the Technical Committee, but immediately prior to the final approval by the COST Committee of Senior Officials. The disadvantage of this procedure was that any comments which raised serious concerns about complementarities were, in fact, only transferred to the proposer and/or the Technical Committee for re-orientation of the proposal after COST had positively assessed the proposal.

**8. One or several COST Actions and one or several related FP projects could be “clustered” in order to create mutually reinforcing synergies.**

These clusters could be created in order to assure useful exchange of information and in order to attain critical mass of research.

### **3.3 PARTNERSHIP AT PROGRAMME AND POLICY LEVEL**

Although COST and the Framework Programme have their own specific characteristics - COST being a bottom-up research networking framework where Actions can be initiated in any subject by individual scientists and the Framework Programme being driven by the objectives set out in its programmes - the two frameworks could also have useful discussions at programme and policy level in order to increase the coherence and synergy between their activities.

## Specific Actions

**9. The Commission could solicit COST to launch COST research networks in specific ‘niches’ or domains, which would *a-priori* be complementary and in coherence with the Framework Programme activities proper.**

Due to its specific characteristics, COST rarely takes a strategic approach by identifying the research topics for its Actions. However, due to its flexibility in launching Actions, COST is well suited to act as a precursor and exploratorium of ideas. Moreover, COST has, in the past, been successful in research domains not included as Framework Programme priorities. The programmatic approach should first be tested in some specific cases based on the experience gained in the COST domain of Telecommunications and Information Science and Technology (TIST) and within DG INFSO where it has been used.

**10. The COST Technical Committees to provide their input regarding Community thematic research.**

By virtue of the capacity of the members of the COST Technical Committees, as nationally nominated experts in a specific scientific domain, responsible for the evaluation of COST Actions and charged to ensure co-ordination and exchange of information between its Actions as well as with relevant activities in other European co-operative frameworks such as the Community Framework Programme, the Technical Committees have a specific knowledge of the research activities in each domain. Based on this European expertise, the Technical Committees can make important contributions to the establishment of research agendas at Community level, particularly in domains where COST is a strong player at European level (eg. Chemistry).

**11. The COST bodies to provide their input on horizontal European research policy issues eg. basic research, mobility of researchers.**

In some COST scientific domains there is a strong emphasis on basic research (physics, materials, chemistry). Moreover, COST encourages and financially supports the mobility of researchers, a notion which is gaining interest within COST. Based on these particular examples of specific characteristics of COST, one can conclude that COST could contribute positively, if it were to be solicited to provide opinions on such horizontal European research policy issues when the Community consults broadly with European stakeholders.

**12. COST to define its views on its perception of its future role in light of the ERA.**

In the context of the ERA, COST has sent to the Commission its opinions on its role in the European research landscape. COST could further define this view on its perception of its future role, taking fully into account new developments, such as the new features of the next Framework Programme.

### **13. COST input to lists of experts.**

The Community relies on high-quality independent experts in the evaluation of proposals following the calls in the Specific Programmes. For this purpose, the Commission maintains databases which contain names of thousands of experts. While researchers are normally well aware of the possibility to be included in the evaluators' databases and the usefulness of being an expert evaluator, further dissemination of relevant information through COST could mean that additional high-quality experts would be at the disposal of the Programmes. This conclusion can be drawn based on the breadth of the COST networks: the 25-30,000 researchers in 35 countries involved in the 160 COST Actions constitute a wealth of expertise in a large number of scientific domains.

Considering the wide scope of COST Actions, their researchers could also contribute to Community programmes in other domains (CULTURE 2000, INTEREG, LIFE..) and they could be informed of the possibility to be included in the relevant databases.

## **4. FORA FOR IMPLEMENTING THE PARTNERSHIP**

As evidenced above, the new partnership involves various activities which necessitate a multiple approach on different levels of existing fora. Moreover, for the efficient management of the partnership, new fora are also needed. These fora, which can be used in the implementation of the partnership, are delineated below.

### **4.1 EXISTING FORA**

#### **4.1.1 COST Ministerial Conference**

The intergovernmental COST framework was constituted by an exchange of letters<sup>1</sup> between the President of the Council of the European Communities and Ministers for Foreign Affairs of European States in 1969 and 1970, and supplemented by a general resolution adopted by the European Ministers for Research attending the Ministerial Conference in Brussels on 22-23 November 1971.

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<sup>1</sup> 4 November 1969 and 24 July 1970; Letters from the President of the Council of the European Communities inviting other European Countries to participate in scientific and technical cooperation.

Subsequent COST Ministerial Conferences have been organised in 1991<sup>1</sup>, 1997<sup>2</sup> and most recently in 2003<sup>3</sup>. In all Ministerial Conferences, the Commission has been represented by the Commissioner responsible for research and/or the Director General of DG RTD.

As one of the founding fathers of COST, the Commission finds it natural and very useful to participate at the highest level when COST Ministers meet.

➤ *The Commission will continue in the future to contribute to the exchange of views at COST Ministerial level.*

#### 4.1.2. COST Committee of Senior Officials (CSO)

The European Commission has been present every time the COST Committee of Senior Officials has met through the years from the inception of COST in 1971. Clearly, with the role of the Commission now changing from that of simply providing the scientific secretariat to that of an active partner, its role in the COST CSO is to be adjusted accordingly.

In order to take this change into account, the Commission's participation in CSO meetings has recently been reconfirmed in the "Working Methods of the CSO"<sup>4</sup>.

The Commission looks forward to COST placing the development of links with the Framework Programme high on the agenda of the CSO, since it is of utmost importance that this matter be discussed and managed at the highest operational level.

➤ *The Commission is determined, in its new role, to participate actively in the workings of the highest decision-making body of COST, the CSO, through its permanent representative.*

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<sup>1</sup> Vienna, 21 November 1991. The MC marked the first enlargement of COST from its initial 19 countries to 23. The Commissioner, Mr Pandolfi addressed the MC.

<sup>2</sup> Prague, 27 May 1997. The MC focused on evaluation, enlargement and future prospects. The Commissioner, Mme Cresson addressed the MC.

<sup>3</sup> Dubrovnik, 27 May 2003. The MC dealt in particular with the new perspectives provided through the new secretariat arrangement and the partnership with the ESF. Mr Mitsos, Director-General, DG RTD represented the Commission.

<sup>4</sup> COST 295/3/03 REV 3, 2 February 2004, approved by the CSO at its 158<sup>th</sup> meeting in Skopje on 16 February 2004. "The European Commission is to be represented at meetings of the CSO"

#### 4.1.3. COST Technical Committees (TCs)

COST Technical Committees are the operational cornerstones of the scientific co-ordination activities of COST. Technical Committees are responsible for assessment, monitoring and evaluation of COST Actions and they also address co-ordination with other ongoing activities in and outside of COST.

Owing to their scientific delimitation, COST Technical Committees are the best-positioned interface with the thematic activities under the Framework Programme. Therefore, the Commission proposes that it nominates well-informed representatives to attend relevant COST Technical Committees from within the thematic activities, with a view to working closely towards developing positive interactions between the two frameworks at the appropriate thematic level. This is one of the recommendations of the Assessment Report of COST, laying the foundations for the reforms of COST.

In the past, these links occurred on a sporadic basis, limited to one-off participations in meetings of the COST Technical Committees. In the future, a lasting partnership of mutual benefit should be the objective.

The reinforced interaction between COST Technical Committees and thematic activities under the Framework Programme would address all the elements of the new partnership described above, ranging from exchange of information and best practices, to partnership at project and programme level.

➤ *The Commission will nominate well-informed representatives from the thematic activities of the Framework Programme to attend the relevant COST Technical Committees.*

#### 4.1.4. COST JAF Group

The COST Legal, Administrative and Financial Affairs group (JAF), whose mandate is under review, has a preparatory function for the CSO Committee. Commission participation is foreseen in the JAF Group, which is being reformed into an efficient permanent small core group consisting of the CSO President, Vice-President and five other members of the CSO. The Commission finds it useful to be involved at an early stage in COST discussions, and to have the opportunity to make contributions before issues are raised at the CSO level.

The JAF Group could provide an information and co-ordination forum regarding complementarities and synergy between the two frameworks. Specific JAF meetings dedicated to these issues could involve not only the research Directorates General (RTD, INFOS, TREN, ENTR, FISH) and the Joint Research Centre but also, in specific cases, other policy Directorates General (e.g. AGRI, SANCO, ENV, EAC, REGIO), who may feel that COST activities could underpin their policy development activities.

➤ **The Commission will be actively involved in the work of the new JAF Group through its permanent representative.**

#### **4.1.5. COST Office**

Both COST and the Commission are looking forward to the positive effects of the novel arrangement for the scientific secretariat for COST, provided by the new COST Office, which is expected to be proactive in instigating and putting into practice reforms of COST. The COST Office is also expected to give its full support to the implementation of the new partnership between COST and the Commission. Its contribution should involve all levels, from management to Science Officers, who all have a crucial role to play in facilitating a close working relationship with the COST Technical Committees and the Actions.

The Commission will co-operate closely with the new COST Office on issues related to the new partnership. For example, a Commission official has been put at the disposal of COST with a view to facilitating the launch of the new COST Office and to smoothen the transition of the activities of the scientific secretariat.

➤ **The Commission will co-operate closely with the new COST Office on issues related to the new partnership.**

#### **4.2 NEW FORUM TO BE ESTABLISHED**

##### **Commission/COST Strategic Group**

The new partnership between COST and the Commission is a strategic issue for both partners. Hence, a high-level Commission/COST Strategic Group should be set up, which would regularly (once/twice a year) take stock of the development of the partnership, set out further strategic orientations for the joint work and report on achievements.

It is proposed that the Group consist of the COST CSO President and Vice-President, as well as the Director-General of DG Research, the Director and the Head of Unit responsible for co-operation with COST. The meetings would be chaired alternately by the Director-General and the CSO President. The Director of the COST Office and the Head of COST Secretariat in the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU would be present as observers. The secretariat for the meetings of the Group would be provided alternately by the Commission and the COST Office.

➤ **A high-level Commission/COST Strategic Group will be set up to monitor and steer the partnership.**

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The European Research Area, which has developed into a key instrument of the Lisbon Strategy, gives a new dimension to European research co-operation. In this new dynamic context, the moment has now come to actively pursue efforts with the objective of better integrating COST into the European Research Area. This calls for a genuine strategic partnership between COST and the European Commission.

The Commission has committed itself to become an active partner of COST. In this discussion paper, concrete ways of creating a strategic partnership through improved synergies and complementarities between COST and the Framework Programme are proposed. These include 13 specific actions at three levels of co-operation:

- **Exchange of information** on scientific activities and events, as well as **exchange of best practices.**
- **Better complementarity and closer links at project level.**
- **Strategic co-ordination at programme and policy level.**

The Commission is committed to actively participating as a partner in the existing COST fora.

For the efficient management of the partnership, it is proposed that a **high-level Commission/COST Strategic Group** is created.