ERANet LAC

Being a Network of the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) on Joint Innovation and Research Activities, the EU-funded ERANet-LAC project published two joint transnational calls:

	1. Joint Call	2. Joint Call
Date of publication:	16.09. - 27.11.2014	01.12.2015 - 10.03.2016
Number of funding organizations:	16 (7 LAC, 9 EU)	25 (12 LAC, 13 EU)
Number of funded projects:	14	27
Total funding budget:	7,6 M€	12,85 M€

The present document structures and analyses significant experiences the ERANet-LAC Call partners and the Call Secretariat made in these joint calls, in order to incorporate them as useful references and orientation in any upcoming EU-CELAC joint activity.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The ERANet-LAC joint calls included a total of 30 Funding Organisations from 25 Latin-American, Caribbean and European countries that formed a highly heterogeneous group, regarding the following characteristics:

- Circumstances in the countries / regions participating in the call: Geography, population, number of actors in Science, Technology and Innovation
- Standards in Science, Technology and Innovation
- Prioritized thematic areas
- Research budgets
- Experience in international cooperation
- Experience in cooperation in EU projects and –contexts
- Objectives for participation in ERANet-LAC
- Different timing for institutional budget allocation according to national priorities (including fiscal- and/or budget years)
- Different holiday seasons and/or peak working periods

Many of the challenges that could have come up among this Group of Funding Parties, however, were avoided through the mere structure of ERA-NETs that has proved its operability in many countries, regions and thematic fields over the past years.

However, some aspects were unpredictable and required flexibility and spontaneous solutions which are described in the present document.

The following report is divided in two parts:

Part I — Describes best practice examples in the bi-regional ERANet-LAC joint calls, i.e. important aspects that were handled successfully and that can be categorized as “best practice” in instruments of this type.

Part II — Describes irregularities or problems that came up during the calls and subsequently presents the “lessons learnt” or proposes adequate measures for a better handling of the situation in instruments of this type.

2 Part I

2.1 Good practices

2.1.1 Alignment of Partners

In the start-phase of the ERANet-LAC project, the expectations of each of the partners, their experiences on ongoing and previous bi-regional activities, their concerns and the reasons for their participation in the call were collected via online-surveys and subsequently analysed. The outcomes were disseminated to all partners. By means of this exercise the funding organizations participating in the calls had the opportunity to learn what the consortium partners (and potential counterparts) considered key success factors for a successful implementation of a joint call.

These factors, among others refer to: Communication, transparency, sharing knowledge on procedures in international cooperation among the consortium in order to integrate partners with little experience. Since all partners participated in this discussion, there was **a common understanding on the rules and conditions to be applied in the entire call period.**

2.1.2 Integration of Funding Organizations with less or without International Experience

In the preparatory phase of the call it became obvious that new funding organizations that have not participated in any ERA-NET before and that have little experience in international cooperation projects have to be specifically assessed in order to build up a successful cooperation with them during the entire call period.

ERANet-LAC partners therefore offered special face-to-face meetings and information sessions to new members. The individual and repeated assessment of new partners is highly important for their active participation in the call.

2.1.3 Topic Identification Process

In case of ERANet-LAC, the topic recommendations for the joint calls were prepared by the five thematic SOM working groups for Energy, Information & Communication Technology, Bioeconomy, Biodiversity / Climate Change, and Health (supported by the thematic coordination and support actions) and documented in the "thematic reports". ERANet-LAC contributed to this process by formulating guidelines for the definition of topics for the ERANet-LAC calls that were included in the thematic reports.

The topic identification process and the support through the SOM working group was a proceeding defined in advance of the ERANet-LAC project start.

However, all Funding Organizations participating in the call had the opportunity, to give their input and suggest modifications in the pre-formulated topic versions and finally to – individually - select the topics they prioritize for funding, before they were published in the final call text. The transparency and collective discussion in the topic finding process lead to a wide consent among all partners.

2.1.4 Funding

The financial conditions varied extremely among the funding organizations. Also the budgets allocated by each party to each of the topics differed extremely.

Irritations regarding the funding procedure can be eliminated through the employment of the virtual common pot mode, a concept where each Funding Party funds its own national scientific teams.

2.1.5 Partner Search Tool

Given the fact that 20 funding organizations from 18 countries participated in the 1st call, and considering the rule that each consortium must be composed of at least four partners from four countries (2 from each region), the search for partners was crucial for all proposals to be submitted. That is why ERANet-LAC when the call was launched, installed a **partner search tool** on the project website. In the course of the submission period more than 230 researchers used this tool in order to find their optimal consortium partners.

Despite these harmonizing and synchronizing measures some unforeseen and complex situations came up. In the following, these experiences are briefly outlined, and a short description is given on how ERANet-LAC managed them or how they plan to tackle them in the 2nd joint call.

3 Part II

3.1 Irregularities that came up during the Joint Calls, “Lessons Learnt” and Suggested Measures for Optimization

3.1.1 Formulation of topics

- Topics must be described very carefully and precisely. They must be comprehensible by all parties (Funding Agencies, participants, evaluators and panelists). The texts must be very clear. No doubts may arise!
- In case references are given or scientific sources are named, these must be backed-up with concrete references and/or links which will allow the applicant to find further information easily.
- Concentrate on less thematic areas and less topics: The 2nd ERANet-LAC joint call provided 10 topics from 5 thematic areas. However, not all funding organizations had enough funds to participate in as many topics as they wanted. Therefore the number of thematic areas and thus the number of topics must be reduced, in order to guarantee availability of sufficient funds for each topic.
  In addition, with a high number of topics the management of the joint call becomes more complex.

3.1.2 The Innovation Aspect

In case a joint call promotes the innovation aspect and welcomes the participation of innovation actors in the calls, a clearly formulated call text should differentiate between “Collaborative Research Projects” and “Collaborative Innovation Projects” and provide a definition of both types of projects. Otherwise applicants might “mix” both types of projects and submit research projects with a tendency to innovation and vice versa. Lessons learnt:

- The call text should clearly ask for “Collaborative Research Projects” and for “Collaborative Innovation Projects” and set standards that must be responded to, for each type of project. The projects should then be classified from the very beginning as one of these types.
- Concrete evaluation criteria should be set up for each type of project.
- Different types of evaluators (with the respective qualifications) should be identified for both, research and innovation projects.

3.1.3 Dissemination of Call Text

Some countries with little international experience may lack dissemination channels on national level for the call publication and thus cannot guarantee that the call text reaches all relevant national institutes and researchers on time.

Lesson learnt: The partners concerned should be made attentive to the importance of guaranteeing a wide dissemination of the call in their country / region.

3.1.4 Visibility of the National Funding Regulations

In the ERANet-LAC calls, some 30 % of the submitted proposals were considered "not eligible" by one or several of the funding organizations involved as they did not respond correctly to the National Funding Regulations. Most of the ineligible proposals resulted from not having read the regulations carefully. Lesson learnt:

- Include a "short version" of the National Funding Rules (1 page max.) of each funding organisation with the most striking national rules in the guideline for applicants. At the same time draw particular attention to the complete document which is published on the ERANet-LAC website.

3.1.5 Country-specific call contact persons

During the submission period, all partners should establish a national contact person available physically during normal business hours and by mail. Non-availability of a call contact person may lead to disadvantages for the applicants in that specific country. Lesson learnt:

- Draw the attention of the funding agencies particularly to the importance of the country-specific call contact person and the necessity of their existence.
- It should be considered to set up a rule in the Applicants' Guide saying that all applicants must call their call contact person at least once during the submission period, in order to make sure that they follow the national procedures, make sure the applicant is eligible the rules and avoid submission of proposals that are formally incorrect.

3.1.6 Scientific Advisors

In some cases during the call period, the call secretariat, the coordinators and the partners reach the limit of their scientific knowledge. Although they are responsible primarily for organizational tasks, they appear to require scientific support.

Lesson learnt: A panel of independent scientific advisors (e.g. one for each thematic field) should be at disposition during the call period to

- respond thematic queries on the topics,
- match the proposals to the evaluators, and finally
- to constitute the Scientific Evaluation Committees (panellists)

Note: It must be made sure that the panelists are not involved in any application themselves.

3.1.7 Closure of the Submission System

Usually, the submission phase ends on a given day at a given time. I.e. the online submission tool automatically locks up and does not allow some applicants to finish their submission, which may lead to complaints from some of the applicants. Lesson learnt:

- The Call Secretariat should offer technical assistance during and several hours following the closure of the system, in case it fails to administer too many proposals that are being submitted simultaneously.

3.1.8 Eligibility Check – Formal Correctness of the Proposals

In order to avoid an excessive number of not eligible (formally incorrect) proposals, a one-week adjustment phase should be set up, in order to allow corrections of administrative mistakes following the submission of the proposals. This option turns out to be beneficial for projects which otherwise must be discarded due to minor administrative/formal mistakes. However, several aspects regarding the eligibility check must be taken in consideration:

- The adjustment phase should start with the entry of the first proposal and end one week following the deadline for the national eligibility check. In no case it should be further prolonged.
- Both, the applicants as well as the Call secretariat (the latter with the applicants' explicit prior approval) can make adjustments. In case of very slight failures it would save time if the call secretariat could perform the adjustment.
- The adjustment phase should be made case by case.
- If a proposal is ineligible – even following the initial adjustment period – the applicants must be informed immediately about the failure of their project.

  (See as well above: Country Specific Call-Contact Persons, bullet point no. 3.1.5)

3.1.9 Evaluators

Remuneration of evaluators:

Finding adequate evaluators in both ERANet-LAC joint calls turned out to be time-consuming and difficult. The ERANet-LAC funding organizations discussed to meet this challenge by paying the evaluators a fee. Offering evaluators an attractive remuneration and cover the costs for the bank transfers would result in an extraordinary high additional budget.

- Pro: Remuneration will guarantee high quality of evaluations.
- Contra: Paying evaluators would have to be realized by bank transfer. Since a bank transfer to 3rd countries would cause high bank fees, any remuneration to the evaluator would be considerably reduced. If evaluators would be remunerated once, it will be difficult no stop paying in future joint calls.

Remuneration of evaluators in topics with a strong innovation aspect:

Proposals with a strong innovation aspect may have to be evaluated by actors from the private sector. In this case, however, remuneration for the evaluation service will be expected by the evaluator.

How to identify evaluators:

All participating funding parties should be obliged to present a certain number of evaluators for each of the topics they participate in. However, two aspects have to be taken into consideration:

- Evaluators who are addressed by the call secretariat may not answer.
  Lesson learnt: At least three evaluators have to be contacted in order to obtain one evaluator who is willing to cooperate.
  Additional sources for evaluators might be: i) H2020 databases and ii) set up a specific EU-CELAC database with those experts that turned out very cooperative and fruitful in the past joint calls.

- Evaluators' Conflict of interest: Some of the evaluators may enter into conflict of interest, as they may have submitted a proposal (or participated in a consortium that submitted a proposal) and, at the same time, apply for evaluating proposals. This is a clear case of conflict of interest.
  Lesson learnt: Verify precisely all evaluators' applications before admitting them to the evaluation process.

3.1.10 Online Submission Tool – Applications following the Submission Period

In case of ERANet-LAC joint calls the online submission tool provided by CYTED in Madrid has proved very successful. Despite this positive experience there appeared some details that should be considered in any future joint call:

- Each funding organization should have access to the online submission tool to be able to download all proposals and evaluation reports.
- The eligibility checks should be realized by the funding organizations directly in the online system.
- Panelists should have access to the online submission tool in order to download the proposals and evaluation reports.
- Provide special areas for specific administrative documentation (letter of commitment for associated partners in a consortium or others).

3.1.11 Budget Commitments

It may occur that the allocated budgets are very much disproportionate to the number of proposals that were positively ranked. That means that one or two proposals consume the entire budget of a partner. The following measures may help to alleviate this problem:

- Ask the funding organizations to fix a maximum funding amount per proposal in their national funding regulations.
- Fix a minimum number of proposals that must be funded in the call notwithstanding the funding amount given in each project (i.e. even very small funding amounts are allowed as long as a certain number of proposals will be funded).
- Set up a fund to which each of the partners contributes a certain sum (amounts to be defined). This fund will balance the funding gaps that may appear if one of the partners runs out of money and the other partners wish to finance the project.

On the other hand, some funding agencies may be tempted to reduce the budget per project considerably, in order to be able to fund a higher number of projects. In this case a rule should be set up to avoid any spontaneous budget cut.

3.1.12 Different Fiscal and/or Budget Years

Fiscal and budget years may be organized differently in the participating countries. So they may not dispose of the budgets at any time of the year. The fact that the budgets are not necessarily available at the time when the projects are planned to be implemented means

- that the time schedule set up in the projects cannot be maintained,
- that the projects may have to be postponed or
- that one of the partners may have to enter the projects at a later time than the others.

Lesson learnt: These irregularities cannot always be predicted and demand a certain flexibility from the funding organizations as well as from the project consortia. On the other hand, the timing and availability of the budgets should be defined - as far as possible - by the funding organisations before the confirmations of funding are sent out to the applicants.

3.1.13 Different Holiday- and Peak Working Seasons

Holiday and working seasons differ in both regions. This point must be considered in the entire call schedule, as they may prolong the entire call period.