



ANNUAL MEETING
for the
EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AREA (EEA) FINANCIAL MECHANISM
& the
NORWEGIAN FINANCIAL MECHANISM

Date: 23 October 2007

MINUTES

Participants:

Norway

Mr. Per Strand Sjaastad	Assistant Director General, Royal Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs
Mr. Arne Gjermundsen	Minister Counsellor, Royal Norwegian Embassy

Financial Mechanism Office (FMO)

Ms. Stine Andresen	Director, FMO
Ms. Agusta Yr Thorbergdottir	Country Portfolio Officer
Mr. Hjortur Sverisson	Head of Legal Affairs

Malta

Ms. Marlene Bonnici	Director General, Planning and Priorities Coordination Division, OPM – National Focal Point
Mr. Charles Mifsud	Director Corporate Services, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Mr. Stephen Calleja	Assistant Director, Planning and Priorities Coordination Division, OPM – National Focal Point
Mr. Bernard Bartolo	Assistant Director, Department of Contract, Ministry of Finance
Mr. Mario Debono	Internal Auditor Manager, Internal Audit and Investigations Directorate, Ministry of Finance
Ms. Mariel Sacco	Programme Manager, Planning and Priorities Coordination Division, OPM – National Focal Point
Mr. Oreste Cassar	Procurement Manager, Department of Contract, Ministry of Finance
Mr. Paul Farrugia	Programme Manager, EU Paying Authority, Ministry of Finance
Mr. Charlot Pavia	Public Internal Financial Control Auditor, Internal Audit and Investigations Directorate, Ministry of Finance
Mr. Albert Zahra	Payment Coordination Officer, The Treasury, Ministry of Finance
Mr. Alexander Formosa	EU Fund Officer, Planning and Priorities Coordination Division, OPM – National Focal Point

Main points of the Meeting:

1. Opening of the meeting

Ms. Marlene Bonnici opened the meeting by welcoming all participants. She remarked that it was a very full year in terms of activity at the National Focal Point and thanked the FMO for the excellent cooperation between the NFP and the FMO.

Ms. Bonnici gave a brief overview wherein she mentioned that one of the projects has now been concluded and the Project Promoter is now awaiting the NFP's go ahead to start processing payments. This delay has been brought about by the time taken to finalise the Database which will be used and which is now in its initial testing phase. She also mentioned that most other projects are close to launching tenders and some have even concluded the tendering stage.

Mr. Per Strand Sjaastad thanked Ms. Bonnici for the welcome and thanked the NFP for organising the site visit to the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum which took place before the start of the meeting. He remarked about the possibility of visiting all the projects being co-financed by the Grants throughout the lifetime of the programme in view of their small number. Mr. Strand Sjaastad went on to mention that the Royal Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs was very pleased with the progress registered in Malta as it is a fore runner among the EU15 beneficiaries.

He highlighted the general horizontal principles which are to be met by all projects, like gender equality, environment, transparency and Good Governance. Furthermore, emphasis was put on Bilateral Relations between the Donors and the beneficiaries. In this regard he suggested that such relations should not be seen only within the limitations of the projects being co-funded by the Mechanisms but within a broader outlook, for example promoting information on the internal market and the EEA and enquired who would be the contact point in Malta on such issues.

Ms. Bonnici sustained the importance of transparency and openness citing the Project Selection Process which took place through an open call and generated no appeals at the end of the process. Mention was also made of the Organisations like the Malta International Airport and Nature Trust Malta, which even though not legally bound by the Public Procurement Regulations (PPR) have been enjoined to work in the spirit of the PPR, in the spirit of good governance.

Ms. Bonnici agreed with the comments with regard to Sustainable Development and Gender Equality, although she did add that at times it was difficult to think of sound tangible efforts, particularly in the case of equal opportunities. To this effect, Ms. Bonnici remarked that in view of the good contact the NFP has with the National Council for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE), one could seek their guidance on issues relating to Gender Equality. Re bilateral relations, Ms. Bonnici agreed and asked the representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to follow up the recommendation made by Mr. Strand Sjaastad.

With regard to publicity, Ms. Bonnici remarked that all projects have a budget line dedicated to a publicity component. Moreover, the Technical Assistance project envisages an entire publicity component. This component is divided into two: ad hoc publicity actions that are dependent on the different stages of the programme cycle (e.g. launch for call for applications) and a more consolidated information campaign which will be tendered for at a later stage in the programme's lifetime. Ms. Bonnici added that experience has shown that timing of the campaign is critical in order to have tangible not 'promised' results featuring in the campaign.

2. HIGH-LEVEL SESSION AND JOINT TECHNICAL MEETING FOR THE EEA AND NORWEGIAN FINANCIAL MECHANISMS

a. Brief description of the EU National Strategic Reference Framework for Malta.

In her overview of the NSRF, Ms. Marlene Bonnici stated that Malta was the first country to have the NSRF approved in December 2006. Malta's Operational Programmes (OPs) were approved in June 2007. The official launch of the two OPs was held on 18 July 2007 and the Monitoring Committee saw its first meeting on 19 July 2007 where the project selection criteria were approved. Calls for projects were launched end of July and the selection process for this first round is expected to be concluded by end of year.

Mr. Strand Sjastaad asked how much money Malta has received under the 2007 - 13 programme in terms of ERDF and Cohesion Fund (CF) and what the rate of absorption for the 2004 - 06 programme was. Ms. Bonnici replied that Malta in total received €855M from the EU, which are split € 840M as ERDF, ESF and CF targeting the Convergence objective and €15M as ERDF targeting the European Territorial Cooperation objective. With regard to the 2004 - 06 programme, Ms. Bonnici explained that the n+2 was reached in real payments for both 2006 and 2007 commitments which augurs well for the future, although the amount of funding in the new round has increased substantially and therefore the challenges will be bigger, albeit the learning curve less steep.

Ms. Stine Andresen intervened by giving an overview of how the EEA/Norwegian Grants are performing in the other Beneficiary States. She remarked that all countries (except one) had issued calls for projects and that there has been a general over-subscription for projects. Furthermore, Ms. Andresen said, the FMO has (since Malta's submission which was one of the first) fine-tuned its systems which have made the process much quicker. Some disbursement has also been made and overall things are catching up despite a slow start.

b. An Overview of the EEA and Norwegian Financial Mechanisms Implementation: June 2006 - September 2007

Ms. Mariel Sacco, Programme Manager at National Focal Point gave a presentation on the progress of the projects being implemented under the Grants and the highlights of the annual reports. The section related to project progress detailed the stage at which each project had arrived and respective achievements until the cut off date of the annual reports. During the presentation Ms. Sacco gave updates on progress in order to bridge the gap to the date of the annual meeting. Special mention was made to the publicity measures which each project is undertaking. The second part of the presentation detailed the main points of the annual reports, giving importance to the horizontal issues pertaining to the Grants. The presentation is uploaded on the PPCD (NFP) website in the EEA Grants, Useful Links and Downloads section. The presentation was followed by a discussion during which the main points of the presentation were brought up again. Emphasis was put on the procurement procedures and the respective timeframes which each project was following.

Ms. Ágústa Ýr Thorbergsdóttir remarked that as a general remark the annual reports were of good quality and gave detailed information. Mr. Per Strand Sjaastad said that the presentation gave a good overview of the projects and showed that the NFP has a good grip of the system. He also added that there was a good balance between the variety of sectors targeted through the mechanisms and concentration of funds and projects. Ms. Andresen made reference to a small amount that is still left unallocated but for the time being she felt it would be too early to decide how to utilise these funds, given that the public procurement process is still to be concluded.

Mr. Strand Sjastaad enquired about the publicity planned to cover the programme. Ms. Bonnici explained how the NFP has garnered experience from the other publicity campaigns which PPCD has embarked on with the other EU programmes it manages, such as the EU4U and the ESF 50 Years campaigns. Most projects also get 'free' publicity through Ministers' speeches and press conferences. Ms. Bonnici said that the NFP envisages the possibility of launching the tender for the publicity campaign of the Financial Mechanisms in 2Q 2008 to be implemented in summer stretching to autumn. Given that the objective of the campaign will be to inform the public of the projects implemented on the ground, the exact timing of the tender will depend on the progress achieved by the projects in the tendering process. It was agreed that the campaign should show tangible results on the ground, rather than plans. Mr. Arne Gjermundsen from the Royal Norwegian Embassy offered all the help the Embassy can give during the events.

Mr. Strand Sjastaad remarked that such potential could be used in enhancing bilateral relations. Mr. Gjermundsen sustained this by stating that there are some ideas in the pipeline particularly in the field of environment and renewable resources. Mr. Charles Mifsud, Director Corporate Services MFA asked Mr. Gjermundsen about any meetings held between the Norwegian Embassy and MFA. Mr. Gjermundsen replied that a meeting had, in fact, taken place between him and DG Economic and European Affairs (MFA). The meeting however related to other bilateral issues and did not discuss the projects being co-financed by the Grants. Mr. Mifsud replied that he would follow this up.

3. Concluding Remarks

Ms. Bonnici brought the meeting to a close by thanking everyone for their participation and the frank discussion during the meeting. Ms. Bonnici also made reference to the upcoming FMO workshop being held in Brussels in December and representative of the Paying Authority enquired about the possibility that Treasury would also be invited to attend. The FMO had, in principle, no objection although they added that this was a Malta issue to decide on the composition of the delegation. The Department of Contracts agreed that it would be following up the projects where it was stated that tendering would take place in the coming weeks to ensure that these are carried out in a timely manner.

It was proposed that the next annual meeting would be held in Gozo and the Cittadella project would be visited.

Mr. Strand Sjastaad thanked the Maltese counterparts for the good meeting and agreed to hold the next annual meeting in Gozo.

As there was no further business to discuss, the meeting was brought to an end.

Ms. Mariel Sacco

Secretary