



Minutes of the 5th ANNUAL MEETING - EEA and Norway Grants 2009-2014

25th May 2016, 10.00 – 11:30 hours

Norway House, 17 Rue Archimède, Room Hallvard Lange (5th floor), Brussels

Participants

Malta National Focal Point (NFP)/ Programme Operator (PO) - Funds and Programmes Division, Ministry for European Affairs and Implementation of the Electoral Manifesto

Mr Raphael Scerri	Director General, Funds and Programmes Division
Ms Carmen Dalli	Director, Programmes and Projects
Mr Nicholas Bugeja	Senior Manager, Funds and Programmes Division

EEA Financial Mechanism Committee (FMC) & Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA)

Ms Thora Magnúsdóttir	Councillor
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Ms Ingibjörg Rafnar Pétursdóttir	Specialist
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Royal Norwegian Embassy

Mr Anders Erdal	Deputy Director General, Chairman of FMC
Mr Sjur Larsen	Deputy Director General, Head of Section
Mr Tom Tjomsland	Senior Adviser
Ms Torill Johansen	Senior Adviser
Ms Henriette Gulbrandsen	Senior Adviser

Financial Mechanism Office (FMO)

Mr Ståle Risa	Head of Department, Acting Director
Ms Ragna Fidjestøl	Head of Department - Country and Bilateral Cooperation
Mr Rune Vistad	Head of Department - Sectors and Funds
Mr Falk Lange	Senior Country Coordinator
Mr Thorsteinn Björnsson	Bilateral and Country Officer (MT, SI, PT)

Welcome and opening address

Donors opened the meeting with Mr Erdal welcoming all the participants, in particular the Maltese delegation. He said he hoped this will be a constructive meeting highlighting the importance of using the remaining time available for the successful implementation of the projects. He then gave the floor to Mr Scerri.

Mr Raphael Scerri thanked the Donors and FMO for the kind invitation to hold this fifth Annual Meeting of the EEA and Norway Grants 2009-2014 in Brussels, back to back with the launch of the new financial mechanisms 2014-2021. Malta is looking forward to this event not only as the beginning of a new era of

projects but also as a continuation and strengthening of our collaboration of these last 15 years.

He then proceeded to thank the Donor states for granting the extension of the final date of eligibility for all projects in Malta to April 2017.

Mr Scerri added that the National Focal Point (NFP) presented the combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report at this year's Monitoring Committee which was held on 20 January. The Committee approved the Report and this was sent for the consideration and approval of the Donors.

Mr Scerri stated that in the capacity of PO, despite all the challenges faced by the projects, it is being guaranteed that national funds have been made available to ensure the completion of all projects in a complete and timely manner. Bilateral meetings with the partners continued to be held regularly on a monthly basis, thus ensuring effective communication with all partners and immediate follow-up of any risk averse issues.

Presentation of the combined Strategic and Annual Programme Report by the National Focal Point

As requested, Mr Nicholas Bugeja delivered a presentation giving a concise update on the implementation of all projects until mid May 2016. It also included an update on expenditure and contracted values for all programmes. A full detailed presentation was also circulated in hard copy (copy attached).

The Strategic Report 2015 included information on risk assessment, bilateral relations and communication. In line with this, Mr Bugeja outlined a risk assessment exercise for all projects indicating that the highest risk concerned the Correctional Facility for Youths project. This was due to the fact that an appeal was lodged against the award of contract, which ended up in the Maltese law courts. However, Mr Bugeja reassured the Donors that a final hearing shall take place on 27 May and the decision of the Court is final i.e. the complainant has no further redress. It was also stated that all proceedings so far indicated a positive outcome in favour of the award by the Evaluation Committee of the relative tender. Once the positive outcome is confirmed, works will be able to start around early June. Mr Bugeja explained that the Project should be concluded by Q2 2017 thus before the closure of the Programme. Furthermore, the PP is also committed to negotiate a reduction in the implementation period. The allocated budget over and above the grant amount has also been committed by Central Government through its budget allocations for 2017.

Mr Bugeja also gave an update on the Bilateral Relations at Programme level, the Communication Strategy by the NFP and the Communication Plan by the PO.

Mr Anders Erdal thanked Mr Bugeja for the concise and to the point presentation. He remarked that one could have wished for more progress on project implementation since last annual meeting. He also pointed out that Malta has one of the lowest disbursement rates among all the beneficiary States, which hopefully can be ameliorated this year if Malta speeds up the processes required to implement all the projects. The Donors

consider that Malta underestimated the risks associated with the Procurement procedure. Such a situation should be looked into so as to be avoided in the future. Whilst the extension has definitely improved the prospects, the Maltese NFP was asked to present a concrete plan on how to be able to conclude all Projects by April next year.

With regard to bilateral relations between Malta and the Donor States, Mr Erdal also noted that the Donors hope that these delays will not affect future Bilateral Agreements. The Maltese NFP needs to make further efforts on how to use the bilateral Funds at Programme Level.

Mr Erdal then stated that Malta needs to make the funds more visible. Promotion needs to be improved and Malta needs to take a more proactive approach. The NFP should also make better use of the website to show results and success stories. He also pointed out that the NFP should take the opportunity of the upcoming Presidency of the EU Council To promote the EEA Grants during high level meetings in Malta. Mr Erdal also mentioned the visit in Malta by Norwegian Minister of EEA and EU Affairs, Mrs. Elisabeth Aspaker, in early June, whereby discussions can start on how Malta intends to allocate the Funds during the new programming period.

Mr Scerri stated that Malta is confident that all funds will be disbursed properly and on time. Donors were informed that, considering that the grants are limited additional national funding had to be allocated on some of the projects. He reiterated that the current National Procurement rules in Malta are very stringent and in line with the new Public Procurement Directive new simplification measures will be introduced.

Mr Scerri confirmed that an action plan for all projects is already available and this will be shared with the donors after the meeting. Meanwhile the NFP/PO meets regularly with the Project Promoters and this helps us to get the most recent information on the progress of each project.

Mr Scerri asked whether the bilateral funds can be used for projects related to other Programme areas other than those stipulated in the Programme Agreement with Malta. Another possibility would be to use these funds as preparation for the future Programming Period 2014-2021.-

With reference to the upcoming Council Presidency Mr Bugeja hinted at the idea, put forward by Sustainable Energy and Water Conservation Unit officials, of organising the EU Water Directors Meeting at the newly-built Water Conservation Centre, co-financed through the EEA Grants. This idea was welcomed by the chair as well as the other members.

Mr Erdal turned to the Civil Society Fund, informing all those present that this intervention was a huge success. He quoted that, in total, there has been 94% absorption rate. An Audit was carried out on the fund, finding scope for improvement but nothing drastic. The Civil Society Fund proved to be very successful in Malta

Mr Scerri asked whether it would be at all possible to use the registered savings in this Fund to cover other related expenses like for example the Auditor's certificate or other expenses linked to the projects but considered not eligible in the first instance.

With regards to the Evaluation Plan, Mr Erdal advised the NFP to share any ideas in terms of the Evaluation of the Programme. He also advised to engage Donor Countries in developing the final event. It has been agreed that the Maltese NFP shall revise the Communication Strategy and Plan accordingly. Mr Erdal also encouraged the NFP to send its plan how it's envisaged to use the remaining Bilateral Fund. The NFP will send both requests (regarding the Communication Strategy and the Bilateral Funds) following the meeting.

The donors confirmed that the Strategic Annual Report for 2015 was approved..

Closing Remarks

Mr Erdal reiterated the importance of making use of the Bilateral Funds, to be creative when planning ideas and activities related to the final promotional event. He also encouraged NFP to keep close contact with the FMO.

Mr Scerri agreed with Mr Erdal and assured him that the NFP/ PO will share all ideas and will prepare a request letter to change the Communication Strategy, Communication Plan and also to shift the Evaluation Plan from interim to closure/ex evaluation. It was also agreed that the NFP will request more flexibility with the use of the Bilateral Funds at Programme level whereby Malta can carry out activities under all Programme areas of the current Programme as well as in preparation for the future one.

Mr Scerri thanked everyone present. He then expressed sincere appreciation to the Donor states for their financial support to Malta. He also thanked Mr Bjornsson for his continual support in the day-to-day management of these programmes. Mr Scerri said that he looks forward to building on this relationship and to forging even stronger ties between the Donor States and Malta.