SHORT TERM SCIENTIFIC MISSION REPORT

Grantee: Ms Anđela Pepić

Home Institution: University of Banja Luka, Faculty of Political Sciences, Institute for Social Research

Host Institution: Centre for Social Innovation, Vienna, Austria

Title of the STSM: Sharing the best practices – identifying the weaknesses in project cycle management

Action number: TN1302-The voice of research administrators - building a network of administrative excellence (BESTPRAC)

Summary

The main aim of the STSM "Sharing the best practices – identifying the weaknesses in project cycle management" was to share and compare the knowledge and experience between the project managers/administrators from Austria and Bosnia and Herzegovina in planning and implementing European Commission funded projects and other donor funded projects with focus on weaknesses and best practices in administration (management, dissemination activities, communication with partners and coordination of tasks) and finances (budget planning, monitoring and reporting). The envisaged results of this STSM are a list of identified weaknesses and a draft manual with good practices and advice for HORIZON 2020 to be shared with peers through the BESTPRAC network. The results were achieved through the one week visit to host institution – Centre for Social Innovation, Vienna, Austria – an institution with years of experience in implementation and participation in European Commission funded programmes and projects.

Purpose of the STSM

The purpose of the STSM was to exchange experiences and practices in project management and administration between the University of Banja Luka and Centre for Social Innovation. One specific aim of this STSM was to compare experiences between the implementation of an EC funded project of a larger scale and other donor funded projects with focus on potential weaknesses in project cycle management. The identified weaknesses serve as a basis for the development of a set of prevention tools/mechanisms for future projects. Another specific aim was to share and develop examples of good practices from FP7 projects (both in preparation as well as in implementation of projects) and transfer the identified good practices in different stages of project cycle to HORIZON 2020 projects. The identified good practices could contribute to the development of a manual (with specific cases and practical advice) for HORIZON 2020 projects development and implementation to be shared through BESTPRAC.

Description of the work carried out during the STSM

Most of the work during the STSM consisted of meetings with different staff members at ZSI, discussions of project management cycle weaknesses (based on the experience from different projects), of what has worked out in those projects as a good practice and should be applied in future projects, as well as sharing of different tools for project planning and implementation (financial planning tool, reporting tool, quality assurance tools etc.).

Day 1, Monday, 30 June 2014

- Work and discussion with Katharina Buesel, Researcher and Project Manager
- Meeting with Gorazd Weiss, Project Manager and Researcher
- Work on drafting of list of identified weaknesses and best practices

Day 2, Tuesday, 01 July 2014

- Work and discussion with Katharina Buesel, Researcher and Project Manager
- Meeting with Kaisa Granqvist, Researcher and Communication Manager
- Work on drafting of list of identified weaknesses and best practices

Day 3, Wednesday, 02 July 2014

- Meeting with Martin Felix Gajdusek, Project Manager
- Meeting with Elke Dall, Head of Department “Research Policy and Development” and Project Manager
- Work on drafting of list of identified weaknesses and best practices

Day 4, Thursday, 03 July 2014

- Meeting with Klaus Schuch, Strategic Research Manager and Senior Researcher
- Meeting with Ines Marinkovic, Project Manager
- Work on drafting of list of identified weaknesses and best practices
- Complemented with a visit and tour at the Technical University of Vienna, Martina Pöll, BESTPRAC coordinator

Day 5, Friday, 04 July 2014

- Work on the drafting of report and list of identified weaknesses and best practices

Contribution to the goals of the Cost Targeted Network

This STSM has contributed to the goals of the COST BESTPRAC Targeted Network through the following:

- Networking and exchange of experiences of project managers/administrators from University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Centre for Social Innovation, Austria.
- Sharing of experiences and identifying weaknesses in projects implemented thus far and enabling the development of a list of identified weaknesses to be shared further through the COST BESTPRAC network.
- Sharing of experiences and setting up a list of identified good practices from projects implemented thus far and to be taken into consideration for future projects – the list is to be shared further through the COST BESTPRAC network.

Description of the main results obtained

As planned per STSM application, the following results were obtained:

- Set of identified weaknesses ("what not to do" or "on what to pay specific attention" during the project planning and implementation).
- Draft manual with good practices and advice for HORIZON 2020.

The results are provided as Annexes to this report.

Future collaboration with host institution (if applicable)

An added value of this STSM is the opportunity for future collaboration between University of Banja Luka and ZSI. The University of Banja Luka sees ZSI as potential partner for future projects planned for Horizon 2020 calls given the experience and knowledge of ZSI in project management.

Foreseen publications/articles/dissemination tool or document resulting or to result from the STSM (if applicable)

The following documents result from the STSM:

1) List of weaknesses in project planning and implementation.
2) Draft manual of good practices.

ANNEX I

Confirmation of the host institution on the successful completion of the

Short-Term Scientific Mission

ZENTRUM FÜR SOZIALE INNOVATION
CENTRE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

Confirmation of the host institution ZSI on the successful completion of the Short-Term Scientific Mission

To the Grant Holder of the COST Targeted Network TN1302 – BESTPRAC

Vienna, 15 July 2014

The host institution **Zentrum für Soziale Innovation (ZSI)** hereby confirms the successful completion of the STSM stay of **Ms Andjela Pepic** from **30 June 2014 to 4 July 2014.**

Yours sincerely,

W. Michalek

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Managing Director

ANNEX II

LIST OF WEAKNESSES IN PROJECT PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

- Not knowing your partners and partners not knowing the rules of a call: If an organisation preparing a project proposal as coordinator is not fully aware of who its potential project partners are, i.e. what their structure and organisation is (e.g. are they acting as a network, have they third parties included) or what the rules of a call are, it can result inan inadequate input in project proposal, weak budget planning and potentially cause difficulties later on in project implementation. Similarly, if the partners are not fully aware of the rules of a certain call and what the eligible costs are, what is justified and how the grant provider treats different structures/organisations and engagement of persons from other institutions, then it can result in project implementation issues and difficulties later on. This can result e.g. in problems in project administration and initiates changes in the budget (i.e. if the inclusion of third parties is needed later on). It can also present a problem in the financial reporting and justification of funds for reimbursement.
- Inexperienced project coordinators: Sometimes institutions acting as project coordinators do not have sufficient experience in project management (or leading projects). This can negatively impact the implementation of the project, create flaws in internal communication as well as implementation of project activities (weaknesses in coordination due to lack of experience in project coordination).
- Preparing a project in short period: If an organisation prepares a project in a hurry (2-3 weeks) it can create problems in the implementation afterwards because there was not enough the time to think through all the aspects, plan each part of the project activities in detail and it can also create problems in the communication between partners (not having clear picture of which partner does what and to what extent).
- Delay of deliverables: It is problematic especially in cases where work packages (WP) depend on one another and project can't move forward with the implementation of next WP until deliverables from previous WP are finalised.
- Delay in submission of financial report: If a project partner is delayed in submitting the financial report then it also causes delay for the entire consortium in receiving the further instalments from the grant provider.
- Internal communication between partners: Relying much on the tools such as the "internal" zone for partners on project website is problematic since it sometimes doesn't function (depends on partners, their available time and dedication to the individual project, knowledge on use of ICT etc.) so it's sometimes better to use email correspondence (e.g. with setting up an project-e-mail list to reach all project partners at once) and direct communication (phone, skype, face-to-face).
- Indicators are sometimes not fully developed so it is difficult to measure the impact of the project and its results.

- Partners not fulfilling their obligations / Project coordinator taking over partner's task: If a partner does not do what is expected even after repeated requests from project coordinator (with some kind of pressure methods used) then there is no other option than that the project coordinator (or some other project partner) has to take over the task and complete it instead of the initially responsible partner. Sorting out the financial consequences of such actions is an additional challenge.
- Partners participating in all events: Partners are sometimes acting as the project is a travel agency and participate in all events planned within the project (e.g. using the project for travelling purposes without substantial input provided for the event / going to events just because the venue is nice and interesting for touristic visit).
- Person in charge of administration/management does not have the full overview of financial project issues – budget can remain unspent.
- Coordinator working on sub-tasks: if a coordinator starts to work on sub-tasks without enough person-months (PM) planned for sub-tasks apart from the PM for coordination it can be a problem because working on sub-tasks can take up the coordinator's time (up to three times more than initially planned working time of the coordinator for that project) and the coordinating person cannot adequately focus on his/her work as coordinator.
- Problems with the participant portal (FP7/HORIZON 2020): if a coordinator doesn't know at the beginning of the project what is supposed to be submitted via the participant portal (often it is more than what was written in the guidelines) then he/she might end up with problems in submitting the right documents and this results in delays in submission and completion of the project / late final payment.
- Changes from what was planned to what can actually be done in the project – can be problematic with programmes that are not flexible and when a coordinator/partner has to change some part(s) (adjust the planned activities to what's actually possible). In this case the auditor can make problems because changes/adjustments are not stipulated in the concluded agreement/added as annex.
- Unclear division of work in WP or tasks: having everybody doing everything in WPs or Tasks without clear distinction of tasks and responsibilities of each individual partner can in the end result in nobody feeling responsible for doing these particular tasks, shifting the responsibilities from one partner to another and ultimately can result in the delay of implementation of particular WP/task.
- Co-leadership: co-leadership can be problematic because one co-leader can always say that they thought that the other co-leader would do particular activity/task (shifting the responsibility to another co-leader).
- Not adjusting to different communication cultures: for example, a partner prefers communication via phone and rarely uses email and if coordinator mostly communicates via email then it can create problems in communication.
- Change of coordinator and loss of partners' motivation: for example, if another person takes over the project coordinator position in the last year of its implementation from

another person it can difficult to motivate the partners (especially if it was a long-run project) and the new coordinator can end up with having to do more work than initially planned (taking over some of the partners' tasks to ensure the timely completion and submission of deliverables).

- Some partners calculate personnel costs differently. E.g. if, for example, a certain ministry is a partner and the people employed by the ministry work on the project as well, then they might charge personnel costs from the project as an added amount to their salary (or as a reward). This is not just the case with ministries but with other partners as well. When partners charge "overtime" like this, then it seems that these persons work more than what can reasonably be expected (for example "double" full-time – 16 hours per day).
- Sometimes partners are too active in dissemination tasks and forget that they are not a news agency and don't need to publish everything.

ANNEX III

DRAFT MANUAL OF GOOD PRACTICES

Introduction

The purpose of this manual is to provide an overview of identified good practices in project management and administration and to assist project administrators in preventing or resolving possible dilemmas related to the project planning and implementation. This manual is a result of COST Action *TN1302-The voice of research administrators - building a network of administrative excellence (BESTPRAC)* supported short term scientific mission "Sharing the best practices – identifying the weaknesses in project cycle management" hosted at the Centre for Social Innovation, Vienna, Austria. The manual is open for update and additional contributions of research administrators involved in the COST BESTPRAC.

Project Planning

The differences between the Framework Programme 7 (FP7) and HORIZON 2020 (H2020) are not large. Nevertheless, in the project planning phase follow the new guidelines for H2020 but draw from your (or other institution's) previous experiences in FP7. It is important to answer all sub-questions in each section/subsection of the application template (download all documents for H2020 from H2020 Manual and Participant Portal or Reference Documents). Once you/your institution have/has set up a draft concept of the project and identified potential partners, organise a preparatory meeting to get a joint understanding of efforts but don't rely solely on the meeting.

There are two possible approaches in project planning: 1) centralized approach where the project coordinator prepares everything and 2) engaging the Work Package(s) (WP) leaders to develop WPs. If you are a coordinator then divide work packages into tasks and establish inter-linkages between activities/tasks and financial management. Additionally, for each WP, request from partners to set up concept notes so that they would feel responsible and have a sense of ownership for their tasks in the implementation phase. It should be clear to all partners what their framework for what they need to do is.

When writing, write it in present tense (The project contributes to, the project aims to … etc.) instead of future tense (The project will contribute to, the project will aim to …) so that afterwards, in case of changes it is easier to communicate the changes to the Project Officer along with amendments (if any) – for example, activity takes place in month 13 and then it actually happens in month 15.

Make a good division of roles and ensure that there are different persons for different roles (especially if the project is of a large scale), e.g. financial manager who does all related to finances and replies to financial questions and issues, coordinator, scientific manager etc. If you have the project coordinator team it is important that the division of roles is such that one or two persons from the team have an overview of the content and who should/can contribute; and one person from the team should have an overview of both content and budget.

Plan a kick-off meeting which includes also an introduction on financial management issues. Additionally plan a workshop on financial management (for financial officers) some time prior to the first (internal) financial reporting with details and real life cases plus Q&A sessions.

In case you decide to act as a partner (not as a coordinator), then choose your coordinators wisely and check their previous experience, if possible find out if the past projects implemented by this organisation were successful etc. The same advice stands for selection of project partners if your institution is project coordinator. Identifying the right partners is important but you cannot ensure 100% that each partner will do what they're supposed to. Unfortunately, sometimes you have to include even non-performing partners because they are gatekeepers (desirable either because of the country of origin, having important persons/researchers employed, representing important policy and decision making body in a certain country). In that sense, it is important who the partner you cooperate with is and that you weigh, in those cases where the persons working on the project is not able to deliver results and implement activities as planned (or you had previously negative experience with that person from particular institution), if the institution is really important to have it as a partner although you are aware that it might fail to perform.

Reporting and Communication

Establishing internal/interim reporting deadlines is recommended. Internal reporting can be scheduled for every 6 or 9 months depending on the scale of project, partners etc. Additionally, developing your own (or using someone else's) reporting tools (especially for financial reporting in FP/H2020 projects) with more details provided than required in the Form C can assist in preparing the financial reports as well as monitor the progress in budget spending and activities. Maintaining the monitoring sheet/tool which follows all costs assists in monitoring what is actually spent and to make an update of the estimated budget for the next period. The internal reporting schedule should also count for the narrative part. Each Work Package leader should get the template from the Project Coordinator (PC) for internal narrative reporting. The WP leader then collects the information on the activities in the WP from task leaders and compiles it into the report and sends to PC. In this way, if the formal reporting to the European Commission (EC) is in 18 months from the project start, partners have already parts of the report and it is easier to recollect what was done in the past 18 months. Interim/internal reporting is also a good monitoring mechanism. If a partner is late with submitting the financial report then a possible method for getting the partner to submit the report as per deadline (or as soon as possible) is linking the financial report with payments.

Constantly push and service the partner – meaning that you should push your partners to do their tasks as planned but at the same time service them, help them with advice on project management issues in order to reach common understanding of what needs to be done and how and jointly solve problems.

Internal communication with partners is extremely important. Have a virtual project meeting/video conference discussing the progress per each work package e.g. every 3 months up to 2 hours duration. In such way, each partner can know what the other partners do and how far each partner got with realisation of planned tasks/activities. This can be good for motivating partners instead of just sending emails. Additionally, try to motivate partners by explaining that what you (as project team / consortium) do is important, stick to the planned topics during the meetings (be demanding if some partners have a lot to say – sometimes off the topic) and take minutes from every meeting and then stick to those. It is also good to discuss the tasks regularly with the partners involved in this task (e.g. weekly skype meetings no more than ½ hour) to see if there are problems and to develop solutions.

If a partner is WP leader, then the project coordinator should not get too much involved into his work unless it’s a new initiative of the project coordinator and s/he takes care that the specific tasks are done. Good practice: send every month or every second month a table as a reminder containing the following: partner XY, topic XY, deadline D/MM/YY. As far as the motivating of very difficult partners is concerned – go with clear messages: *“task XY, topic XY, budget/costs XY, should be completed by XX; in case the task is not completed by deadline be aware that the funds will be redirected to some other activity”*. Send reminder(s) to partners before the deadline

You have to find solutions for different communication cultures - for example find a telephone person for communication with partners having a weak email communication. Write shorter emails with couple of sentences and straight to the point to avoid any misunderstanding (especially if you have partners with weak English skills). Additionally, apart from the formal, establish informal communication with your partners (socializing) as well. This can contribute to the social-trust building between partners. Trust/Confidence in your partners plays a great role. Always have plan B for everything including the communication with partners.

Create a general office address for every project (office@projectsite.xyz) which redirects to the addresses of each office-team member at the coordinator organisation. Each partner should make sure that persons from its team are on the redirection list from general team@... or all@... mail. But do not rely on email communication only - discuss important things via phone or face-to-face / skype.

Activities and Deliverables

If another institution/partner is WP leader and project coordinator wants to be involved to make sure that everything is being done as planned (monitor the progress) then the project coordinator can request from WP leader to be in CC of the correspondence related to that WP. If WP leader is not doing the job (e.g. at some point PC sees that no news are coming related to the WP even though the activities should have started), then PC could withhold the next instalment but only if agreed with the consortium.

It is good to have some additional activities in mind that were not initially planned in a project and be ready, in cases when money is not spent on a particular activity (either the partner did not perform well or force majeure was in place), that you can use the unspent money and reallocate it for additional activities. It also helps to develop the budget per activity (for example, a detailed budget for particular workshop with costs related to accommodation, travel, per diem, meals, coffee breaks, materials etc.) - detailed planning is always good for project management and it's part of the support to micromanagement.

For most important deliverables it is good to write a short Concept Note with objectives, methodology, timeline, budget, person/months, who does what and send a pre-final draft to external reviewers/experts[1]).–The external reviewers/experts then review important deliverables (books, reports) and send their comments for improvements. It's good to have at least one reviewer who is a native English speaker who can then do the proofreading as well (as part of the reviewing process) by which you have lower costs for proofreading. In this way, you ensure better quality of the important deliverables.

It is generally important to have a concept note of some format before the partner starts the task (what is expected output, what the partner should do), 2-3 pages even if it is not reviewed by external experts. Have your partner, who is in charge of the particular task, develop the concept and submit the pre-final version for commenting, to you as a project coordinator and other partners who deal with that work package, in order to achieve the sense of ownership and responsibility with the partner. Before organizing a workshop develop a concept with the aim, rationale of the workshop, who should/will attend it. Sometimes the mistakes are made in

[1] Fees for external reviewers should be included in the budget usually as subcontracting. You can already list the names of potential external reviewers in the project proposal or make a call for external reviewers and do the selection during the project implementation. In any case, it should be justified why the particular reviewer is listed and what the selection criteria is. Also, you should always have in mind that the selection should be in accordance with the national law.

investing too much efforts to bring higher number of people instead of investing efforts in bringing the relevant ones (no matter how small the number in the end is)!

In worst case scenarios, when a partner delays with deliverables, one of the pressure methods for getting deliverables submitted on time is threatening to withhold further payments to particular partner until delivering the agreed deliverables. Another method is to call upon the project officer, i.e. inform the partner that the project officer is the pressuring for deliverables and the next payment to the consortium depends on it. Creating further social pressure by informing more team members of potential default could be another measure of "last resort".

Dissemination

Dissemination should be well thought through depending on the different stakeholders and target groups, expected impact etc. The following list presents possible dissemination approaches, tools and methods that worked out in implemented projects:

- Good thing is to set up a youtube/vimeo/… channel (or if your organisation already has one use that one) and to upload not necessarily videos but slides with photos and some intro text from events organised.
- If there are similar projects funded through the same programme, then it is good to establish synergies with those projects and, for example, share the info on projects on different projects websites or similar.
- Website also has a role for monitoring purposes, i.e. putting the activities/projects updates on the website provides a continuous insight into the progress in project implementation.
- Try to generate more interest by promoting projects through Facebook (FB) and Twitter campaigns (plus press releases and newsletters)
- It pays off to advertise the project (or results) back-to-back with the European Commission events or websites.
- Developing flyers and brochures.
- Interactive map (depending on the project and results) can be interesting as dissemination tool.
- Try to find groups of your project's interest on FB and Twitter and be active in those channels where you find your target groups – try to attract their interest and get them to your/your project's page.
- It's good if you already have a starting point from previous project, meaning connections with targeted audience and if you are already recognized by the audience because of that previous project.

- Example: launching a competition by invitation only for researchers to film a short video on their research project and before a Science, Technology and Innovation day publish it on the web/FB to be voted for (videos are working out better than posters).
- Example of WBC-INCO.NET newsletter strategy: when participating at any event take the business cards and put the name on the mailing list. In case someone replies s/he would like to unsubscribe it's not a problem. In this way, you can reach out to large number of people (and thus disseminate project results better).
- Strong dissemination in terms of personal presentation – wherever you go talk about the project and adjust the message to the person you speak to (depending if it's a researcher, policy maker, businessperson etc.).
- Knowing the language of the region you work with can be an advantage for dissemination.
- Make sure that both communication and web page maintenance are led by one partner (if one is doing the communication and another web page maintenance – it doesn't work – loss of information, miscommunication etc.).

Monitoring, impact and evaluation

Risk management is always necessary, if you have high probability of risk and high impact you should look at it carefully and monitor and take action to mitigate the risks. Plan some ways of good documentation for your project: e.g. short non-scientific report for each task (under CSA possible), plan updates of deliverables (follow up on what happened after and update the deliverable with new info). Monitoring WP leaders can be done through development of concept notes (explained earlier) at the beginning of the task. Partner budget sheets are also good as a monitoring tool. If there are changes that can have impact on the budget it is good if you have one person who is at least half of his/her time spent for this project dedicated to financial issues and management and can do micromanagement to mitigate the risks.

Level of demand is increasing, especially regarding the impact – for both communication and impact (exploitation of results – which can sometimes be a problem for social sciences if there is no tangible result or if there is no innovation – investing effort in thinking of what is the "product" of your efforts/project). Thus, a concept should be presented on how the impact will be achieved, how you plan to measure the impact etc. For impact measurement it's good to try to follow up on the people who benefited from the project (e.g. success stories, example of WBC-INCO.NET published success stories), write/make a video or interview as impact stories. Having an impact assessment as a tool for measuring impact: results/findings/outputs and a little bit of outcomes – be aware that you might have difficulty identifying the actual impact because much happens only after the project ends (unless you plan to do some follow-up in future). Be sure to prepare and gather the feedback forms from your events.

Close (couple of months before) to the end of the project, do an interim reporting to know how the overall project budget implementation stands and if there will be an underspending or overspending so that you can adjust the budget and dedicate/invest the leftovers to increase the impact (for example, if some money has left from other activities, then invest it into the already planned event to boost the success – it can be for providing travel costs reimbursements to get more people to come or similar).

It is difficult to measure the impact of dissemination activities. Ensure at the beginning that appropriate statistics are available for your website and social media channels. But statistics show just a small part of the potential impact. Statistics plus event participation lists is mainly how we can measure the impact of dissemination activities. Evaluation is used more for the web page usability (user-friendliness). Having a questionnaire as a tool for measuring impact at the end of the deliverable (for example, a book) asking if it was useful and what could have been done better is useful.

Handling changes

Changes in the team: develop a project handbook (with lists of contacts, templates), handbook on visual identity (logos, templates) and communication plan. Communicate this to all partners and in particular new people in the project. Make sure that the new people are subscribed to the project mailing lists.

Differences from what was planned to what can be implemented: argument is important – for example, if you planned to have a publication before the conference and at some point you realise that it is better to publish it together with the proceedings of the conference then it’s justified in terms of achieving better quality (you have more time to prepare the final publication) and reaching out to larger number of stakeholders. Sometimes it’s justified to be late with the deliverable if it will substantially improve the quality of the deliverable. Also, make a paragraph in the Consortium Agreement that it is allowed for the Project Coordinator to take the money from partner in cases some planned activity doesn’t happen (e.g. Partner X didn’t go to an event and XY euro were planned in the budget for that then those funds can be taken by PC and redirected to other things). Be more practical within the consortium, sometimes you have to take initiative and take the decision if it’s really justified to make some change and it’s less complicated instead of going to the project officer for everything (it can take time). However, if those are some crucial changes then always check with the project officer.