



SEE IFA Network

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01 | Project background

The SEE-IFA network is a network of South East European national and regional innovation & finance agencies (IFAs), authorities and universities, which collaborate within an EU-funded project. Lead-managed by Austria-based awis, it unites eleven partner organizations from ten SEE countries, joining forces to strengthen the capacity of IFA project partners to effectively provide innovation and technology support to micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs). The project has a budget of EUR 2.7 million; it was started on 11 March 2009 and will (after a project prolongation of 4 months) end on 30 April 2012.

02 | Project Progress

Reporting

On the basis of the validated Partner Reports, a consolidated Progress Report was prepared for Period 5 (1/3/2011 to 31/8/2011) by the Lead Partner awis and submitted to JTS, along with an Application for Reimbursement.

Website

The website www.see-ifa.eu went online in March 2010. The webpage is continuously updated and the intranet section used frequently by the project partners to share project relevant information. An increasing number of host names who visited the website each month demonstrates that the visibility of SEE-IFA Network project is increasing. A video stream of the

final event of the SEE-IFA project held in Vienna in March 2012 can be found on the website.

Instruments

Instrument in Croatia: GARA – The Varazdin County Guarantee Agency was able to secure 75.000,00kn (approximately 9.500,00€) for a voucher scheme, which will be implemented at the regional level. The vouchers will provide SMEs with financial support for business plans and for technical evaluations of innovation. The vouchers were recommended in the pre-feasibility study of WP4. A meeting was held on February 9th in Zagreb with BICRO (Business innovation Centre of Croatia) in order to inform them of the voucher scheme and proposed financial instruments for Croatia. BICRO will provide GARA support in implementing the voucher scheme by connecting GARA with experts within its network.

Instrument in Serbia: On the basis of Seed Fund pre-feasibility study, a negotiation process was started with local stakeholders concerning the possibilities of development of the proposed instrument, with the Development Bank of Vojvodina being identified as the major institution in the implementation process. Several technical meetings were held where the possible establishment of the Seed Fund (including legislative constraints faced) was the main topic. So far no model to be implemented has been able to be agreed upon. However, the consensus has been reached that the Development Bank (with the support of the Guarantee Fund, etc.) would be the institution within which the Seed Fund would be established. The process of identification of economic fields to be supported by this instrument is underway.

Instrument in Romania: At the beginning of WP4 and based on analyses of economic activities, R&D funding structures and available funds, (then) AMCSIT decided on Metadistretti as an instrument to boost innovation, both for “traditional” innovative companies as well as for other stakeholders typically not participating in innovation programs. Metadistretti-RO was designed on local specificities, guided by Finlombards’s experience and expertise. Due to change of institutional system, lack of available funds from public budget and companies’ re-orientation towards other activities, Metadistretti-RO was not implemented during the course of the project though the possibilities of implementing such an instrument (probably in 2013) are to be reassessed. Meanwhile UEFISCDI (the new organisation resulting from the merger of AMCSIT and 2 other organisations) designed and implemented another instrument (innovation vouchers), also based on instruments developed within WP4 (for other partners).

Setting up new IFAs

IFA in FYROM: The National Centre for Development of Innovation and Entrepreneurial Learning (NCDIEL) will represent the new IFA for FYROM. NCDIEL’s goal is not only the participation in the creation of policies in which it already has been actively involved, but also the implementation of these policies (this would be a natural phase with regard to the progress of the organization). The perspective of NCDIEL with regard to innovation is to provide SMEs and innovative entrepreneurs with know-how for project implementation, development of policies and strategies.

IFA in Serbia: On the basis of an agreement reached with project partners and local stakeholders, it was decided to establish (as an alternative to establishing a new IFA) a working body in Vojvodina, to include existing institutions active in the direct or indirect support of SMEs, with the overall title of the cooperation being “Regional Platform Supporting Innovation SMEs in AP Vojvodina”. The Innovation Platform was established by 12 institutions who also signed it, with a view to improve the current support and development opportunities for SMEs. The leading actor in this entire action is the Provincial Government, with a number of representatives coming from different fields: agriculture, labour and employment, finance, inter-regional cooperation etc. Apart from the Provincial Government, partners of the Platform are three regional development agencies, the Guarantee Fund, the Development Bank of Vojvodina, the University of Novi Sad etc. The role of the Innovation Platform is to align the various types of support for innovative SMEs, in compliance with the provincial development strategy.

Internships

As planned, a third internship for a trainee from FYROM (Ljupka Mitrovska from our partner organization UKIM-FME) was carried out in aws from August to December 2011. In this time, the trainee rotated between various departments in aws in order to obtain insight into the work of the different departments, to learn about the different financial support instruments of aws including assessment criteria used to evaluate incoming projects, as well as assist in the preparation and organization of competitions run by aws. In particular, the trainee got to know various aws programs and instruments concerning innovation support for SMEs, thereby facilitating the know-how transfer between the partner organizations.

Final evaluation

In view of the approaching SEE-IFA Network project end, a final project evaluation was assigned by the Lead Partner aws in February 2012. The aim of the evaluation is to provide the project partners with an independent external opinion on project activities and outcomes. Out of a couple of competitive offers, "ÖAR" – a Vienna-based private consulting company – was selected as the most competitive and competent expert for the realization of the evaluation. The evaluation will be carried out in March and April 2012 and will (amongst others) entail semi-structured telephone interviews with project partners as well as stakeholders.

03 | Events

Partner Meetings

Technical Meetings on Instruments in Sofia, Varazdin and Vienna

Between July and December 2011, meetings were held in Sofia/BG (EPF), Varazdin/HR (AZRA) and Vienna/AT (aws).

In Sofia, stakeholders expressed their interest to have a better knowledge about European "good practices" related to the establishment of innovation platform. They noted the dynamism of the innovation environment in Bulgaria – legal, institutional, financial – and highlighted the need to enhance the cooperation with the EPF team and all SEE-IFA project partners in order to base the actual national activities on European standards and practices.

In Varazdin, HBOR (Croatian Development Bank) reported that they will present the proposed document of the new instrument to the management board, which will decide whether HBOR will support the instrument (innovation loans) or not. If HBOR's managing board accepts the proposed instrument (innovation loans), it could be functional in the 1st quarter of 2012, after the assessment of the reliability and creditworthiness of the regional guarantee institutions. So far no decision could be made.

During the meeting in Vienna it was concluded that AZRA has meanwhile selected and developed an instrument to be implemented, whilst RDA Banat and UEFISCDI are in the process of developing a selected instrument (conceptual phase). UKIM FME has found that at the moment no preconditions exist for a new guarantee instrument, but will keep on investigating preconditions for new efforts.

Technical Meeting on IFA in Novi Sad

In September 2011, a meeting was held in Novi Sad/RS (RDA BANAT) in order to define – with regard to an Innovation Platform – the fields of operation, the role of the members, activities, models, competencies and responsibilities, as well as the designation of members of an administrative-technical support group for drawing up guidelines. It was proposed that all attendants of the meeting should reflect on and write down a vision, a mission and objectives. They will propose fields of priority to be supported by the working group and submit these to RDA Banat. Details regarding technical meetings and reporting will be defined jointly. At the following local stakeholders meeting in March 2012, some specific proposals were defined, which are currently under review and alignment.

Steering Group Meeting in Vienna

A Steering Group Meeting was organized in Vienna/AT by aws on 20 December 2011 for project partners. Apart from general project management issues, the focus of the meeting was on WP4 (the instruments), WP5 (the cross-border patent fund) and WP6 (the IFAs). After detailed presentations on the status quos of the respective WPs, it was concluded that the time had arrived to finish off the individual WPs and start producing the required output within the agreed-upon time limits.

Roadshows in Zagreb, Skopje and Novi Sad

During the months of February and March 2012, roadshows were held in Zagreb/HR (AZRA), Skopje/FYROM (UKIM FME) and Novi Sad/RS (RDA BANAT).

The work on WP4 in Croatia was presented to BICRO (Business Innovation Centre of Croatia) on Feb 9, 2012 in Zagreb. At the meeting, representatives from GARA, AZRA, Finlombarda, and AWS presented the proposed instruments for Croatia. After the presentations, discussions were held with BICRO representatives about how they could be included in the voucher scheme to be

implemented in Varazdin County. BICRO explained that they are able to provide technical evaluations of innovations and provide business plan support through their own offices or through their networks. After the meeting concluded, BICRO provided a letter of support to GARA in order to assist in GARA's efforts to obtain additional financing for the instruments created in the project.

In March 2012 a roadshow was organized in Skopje in order to present stakeholders with the development plans of NCDIEL and get their opinions and input for the further collaboration. Meetings were organized between representatives of UKIM-FME/NCDIEL, aws, Finlombarda and the Agency for promotion of entrepreneurship in Macedonia, Macedonian Bank for development promotion and Macedonian enterprise development foundation. Valuable insights were acquired during these meetings that will be used in the completion of NCDIEL business plan and its future development in general.

Attendants of the roadshow in Novi Sad in March 2012 included - apart from RDA Banat, AWS and Finlombarda - the local stakeholders, AP Vojvodina secretariats, representatives of financial institutions and all other partners of the Innovation Platform. A significant part of the roadshow was dedicated to the roles of and future steps in the development of the Platform. Further, local stakeholders were interested to find out about the experiences of Finlombarda and AWS concerning the instruments applied in Italy and Austria in support of SMEs.

Final Event

On 16 March 2012, aws hosted the final event of the SEE-IFA Network project in Vienna. After a brief reflection on WP3 (the analysis) and WP7 (the trainings), the WP-leaders of WP4 (the instruments), WP5 (the cross-border patent fund) and WP6 (the Institution) each presented an overview of the respective (final) accomplishments, followed by presentations by the individual project partners on the specific results and outputs in the countries affected. The meeting was rounded off with an overall view on the SEE-IFA Network project, including potential future developments. External guests of the meeting were stakeholders from Austria as well as Serbia, FYROM and Bulgaria. A video stream of the final can be found on the SEE-IFA website.

04 | Next steps

The next and final steps will focus on finishing off the individual WPs and the SEE-IFA Network project as well as producing the required reports.

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