

## **Evaluation of SNOWMAN's first call**

**Final version**

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## Summary

SNOWMAN is the ERA-Net on the sustainable management of soil and groundwater under the pressure of soil contamination. In the SNOWMAN consortium the following research funders are represented: BMFLUW Austria; OVAM Flanders; UBA Germany; ADEME France; SKB Netherlands; SEPA Sweden and EA United Kingdom. SNOWMAN has managed two coordinated calls for research projects in the field of soil and groundwater contamination. The first call has been launched late 2006, the second early 2009 and a third is about to be prepared currently. This report describes the evaluation of the first call. For the evaluation of the first call various methods were used, the main ones are:

- Evaluation of the selection procedure of proposals immediately after the final selection meeting of the Call Steering Group
- Lessons learned from peer review process
- Questionnaires to various groups
- Interviews with call secretariat and some funders
- A discussion in the Core Group on the first draft of this report;

Some major conclusions are:

- In general the call was well prepared and most documents are fine, however some improvements are possible. These improvements have been applied in the second call;
- Although funders prefer the Common Pot model, all funders agree that this model is not feasible to apply as long as there are no appropriate agreements and rules;
- The "funders agreement" was almost a breaking point in the cooperation towards the first call. The agreement should be discussed in an earlier stage of the process. A lighter solution with a "letter of commitment" was found for the second call;
- A call secretariat is essential;
- If tests and checks are introduced they should be used in correct way;
- In the view of the reviewers the remote review worked well, some would like a meeting but the time consumption with the remote model is 4 hours and with a meeting it would be at least 2 days;

## Recommendations

- SNOWMAN is appreciated as a success. One of the reasons for this success is the application of a call for joint research projects and the execution of these projects. Future ERA-Nets should focus on these joint calls while these calls improve the cooperation of both the research funding organisations and research organisations, leading to a wider use of research results and a strengthening of the European research Area;
- A research call leads to the start of a network of funders, researchers, reviewers and research results users. This network should continuously be maintained by various communication instruments. For that a communication strategy is essential for an ERA-Net.
- The procedures and rules of the first call were rather mature. The improvements have been applied in the second call. In the preparation of the first call the SNOWMAN Core Group has made an attempt to tackle all kind of problems by making rules, procedures and contracts. In the call itself it became clear that it is not possible to tackle problems only with rules and procedures, the partners should cooperate not only on a basis of contracts but mainly on a basis of trust and agreed decision processes to jointly solving problems;
- Due to the wish to be an open network of research funders it is important to continuously work on harmonisation of procedures etc to keep the process open for new funders;
- The EU funding of SNOWMAN was essential to start the cooperation among funding organisations in the field of soil and groundwater. This led to a self sustained network of these organisations. However for some new funders EU funding is essential to enter this network. It is recommended that the EU makes funding available not only for new ERA-Nets but also for the growth of existing ERA-Nets.



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### Annexes (available separately)

1. Evaluation of call procedures at Call Steering Committee meeting
2. Lessons learned from peer review process
3. Results of the "online voting" for the call
4. Evaluation of the questionnaires to the applicants regarding the call procedures
5. Evaluation of the questionnaires to the peer reviewers regarding the call procedures
6. Evaluation of the questionnaires to the call steering committee regarding the call procedures
7. Telephone interview with the secretariat regarding the call procedures
8. Interviews with representative from funding organisation and member of the call steering committee regarding call procedures
9. Evaluation of the questionnaires to the researchers regarding the whole call
10. Evaluation of the questionnaires to the core group, call steering committee and funding organisations regarding the whole call
11. Management challenges for environmental ERA-Net's for transnational research - Recommendations for best practice

## 1 Introduction

SNOWMAN is the ERA-Net on soil and groundwater. In the SNOWMAN consortium the following funders are represented: BMFLUW Austria; OVAM Flanders; UBA Germany; ADEME France; SKB Netherlands; SEPA Sweden and EA United Kingdom. SNOWMAN has managed two coordinated calls for research projects in the field of soil and groundwater contamination. The first call was launched late 2006, the second early 2009.

SNOWMAN is an FP 7 project funded by the European Commission. One of the work packages (WP 7) in this project deals with the evaluation of the first call. The aim of the evaluation is to learn from practise and improve the procedures and guides for the next calls. This report reflects this evaluation. The results of this evaluation are and will be used in the second and following calls.

## 2 Evaluation method

For the evaluation of the first call the following methods are used:

- Evaluation of the selection procedure of proposals immediately after the final selection meeting of the Call Steering Group (annex 1)
- Lessons learned from peer review process (annex 2)
- Online voting on call homepage (annex 3)
- Questionnaires to:
  - the applicants regarding the call procedures (annex 4);
  - the peer reviewers regarding the call procedures (annex 5);
  - the call steering committee regarding the call procedures (annex 6);
  - the researchers who earned a project regarding the whole call (annex 9);
  - the Core Group; Call Steering Committee and funding organisations regarding the whole call (annex 10);
- Interview with call secretariat regarding call procedures (annex 7)
- Interviews with one representative from a funding organisation and one member of the call steering committee (annex 8);
- A discussion in the Core Group on the first draft of this report;
- Minutes of a meeting of various ERA-Nets according their own evaluation (annex 11);

## 3 Results of CSC remarks and questionnaires

In this chapter the remarks from "Evaluation of the selection procedure in the CSC meeting"; the questionnaires and interviews are summarized. The results are structured according the sequences of phases in the call, from preparation to dissemination of results.

Abbreviation used in the text: CG is Core Group, CSC is Call Steering Committee

General remarks about SNOWMAN are:

- SNOWMAN and its first call would not have been possible without EU money;
- The opinion among the CG members is that SNOWMAN is strengthening the EU research area in the field of soil and groundwater;
- All funders feel that they get more value for their money in a coordinated call;
- All those who have been interviewed have a good impression of SNOWMAN;

- SNOWMAN gives confidence in coordinated calls to the research organizations present in CG and CSC;
- Research organisations benefit from SNOWMAN in networking and exchange of knowledge , procedures etc
- Researchers and research organizations will apply again for a next SNOWMAN call if the topics fit;
- CG/CSC members get benefit for their organisation: efficiency in their research money;
- The research funders like coordinated calls of national money, in their view the spending of their research budget in joint calls is:
  - Good
  - Better than national only
  - Better than EU framework programme
- SNOWMAN should focus on strategic research, this means research on needs from a larger group of stakeholders from different countries;
- In the CG/CSC are different opinions on the topic contamination
- Some researchers like focus on contamination;
- New funders should be able to bring their topics to the research programme;
- Most Funders had no big problem to find money for the first call;

General remarks about the call are:

- The first call was too small, experimental work is not possible for these budgets, only desk top research;
- The first projects are short, should be longer;
- The making of a proposal is quite expensive, the total costs for making 23 proposals was estimated to 210.000 euro in a call with a budget of 700.000 euro;
- Most researchers spend more time in projects than budgeted in contracts
- Not much experience with coordinated calls outside EU and SNOWMAN
- Common pot is better than national contributions but not realistic
- It benefits to be a member of the CSC
- CSC is satisfied about the workload

### 3.1 Preparation of the call

Comments from CG/CSC members

- Applicants guide is okay, CSC like most procedures, some can be improved;
- CSC think eligibility test is too complicated and too hard although the instructions were clear;
- Use on-line application to avoid mistakes;
- CSC think that the remit check is not clear, is it a test of quality or fundability;
- CSC think fit to call is not clear and it is interpreted in different ways;
- Number of CSC meetings and TC's are okay, quality was good;

- CG/CSC are satisfied about the topic definition process;
- CG/CSC think topics are relevant and of scientific interest;
- Meaning of letter of intent is different for the various members of CG/CSC;
- Letter of intent was easy to sign;
- It was hard for some organisations to get approval for the funders agreement;
- CG not clear about added value of the funders agreement, neither about assurance given by the agreement;
- After Think Tank workshop all people thought the common pot would be the best option, in first call CSC experienced that is not necessarily the right perspective;
- A common pot is only possible if countries accept that knowledge is not developed only on a national basis.

#### Comments from reviewers

- Peer review feedback sheet is okay
- Peer review guide and the criteria were clear
- Application form okay for reviewers
- No info was missing in applicants guide
- Don't change guide, it is okay
- Reviewers don't have suggestions for improvement

#### Comments from researchers

- Researchers don't have a problem with national contribution funding;
- Topics are okay according to the researchers (eventually narrow the question);
- Eligibility test no problem for researchers, but hard for secretariat especially the budget: use on-line forms
- Guidance for budget insufficient
- Project researchers think topics are relevant and of scientific interest

## 3.2 Call

#### Comments from researchers

- Researchers use existing networks to make proposals;
- Researchers have good networks;
- National contact points are important and good;
- Secretariat operates quite well and was frequently used;
- Information on call the should be done by different communication lines as SNOWMAN did;
- To get signatures on one paper is very complicated;
- Why researchers apply for SNOWMAN:
  - The topics;

- International cooperation;
- Researchers like the application process (however too less money, too short time for projects)
- Both national and central contact points are used
- For universities, research only possible by PhD or post-doc, then they need at least three years and 500.000 euro projects
- All projects should be presented in the final confirmation, so all researchers know who are their "SNOWMAN colleagues"
- Contact with call secretariat is good and helpful;
- Information on call mostly came from
  - National funders (about 50 %)
  - Rest by various ways

### 3.3 Selection of projects

#### Comments from reviewers

- Reviewers had the right expertise;
- Topics description was okay for reviewers;
- Information about the call not bad but should be improved;
- Peer review process was well understood;
- Time for review:
  - Okay
  - Differs from 1 – 8 hours
  - Average 4.1
- Amount and quality of info is okay;
- Communication with secretariat was okay;
- Peer review should get a honorarium if there is a meeting;
- Remote review makes an unwanted difference while the basic attitude towards proposals is different for different reviewers;
- SNOWMAN should thank the reviewers;
- SNOWMAN feed back after review is poor.

#### Comments from CSC

- CSC very positive about final meeting;
- Tools in final meeting are important but not always reliable;
- Having a remote review process did not cause discussion leading to review result, difference between best ranked proposal and lowest was 16,5; the difference would have narrowed, if their would have been a discussion meeting

### **3.4 Contracting**

Comments from researchers

- Consortium agreement is needed and used;
- The SNOWMAN contract model is useful;
- National funding contracts no problem only problems with starting date;

### **3.5 Ongoing projects**

Comments from researchers

- Collaboration in international consortia works very well;
- Researchers are satisfied about projects and want to continue their collaboration;
- Not many problems in projects;
- Most contacts between researchers and funder are national to national;

### **3.6 Reporting**

Comments from researchers

- Information on report requirements are okay;
- Transnational reporting no problem;
- Comments on midterm reports are appreciated, good and helpful;

Comments from CSC

- Mid-term reports are okay
- Outcome mid-term reports okay however only two funders think they are useful ( note author: probably is meant that national translation is necessary)

### **3.7 Dissemination / Communication**

Comments from CG/CSC

- SNOWMAN homepage is useful, but not used by all (30% of CG/CSC/Funders don't use it);
- CSC is well informed;
- Homepage and restricted area are well used and helpful, but some have a problem to find documents.

Comments from reviewers

- Half of reviewers knew SNOWMAN before their involvement. Mostly by national funders.

#### Comments from researchers

- All researchers were aware of the need of a dissemination plan;
- Dissemination plan was discussed in all consortia;
- SNOWMAN communicates well in announcement phase;
- National contact points does not always work;
- The call is very good communication instrument towards researchers.

## 4 Evaluation of ERA-Net calls made by SKEP

Within the ERA-Net project SKEP there has been an evaluation project. The project has included questionnaires and interviews with participants in three different ERA-Nets. There has also been a workshop with participants from 10 different Environment ERA-Nets. Information and conclusions from all these activities are summarised in a report from SKEP "Management Challenges for Environmental ERA-Nets for Transnational Research – Recommendations for best practice" (annex 11).

The call evaluation made by SNOWMAN shows many similar experiences as is shown in the SKEP evaluation report, although there are some differences in procedures and strategy, the Core Group of SNOWMAN can agree to several of the conclusions in that report. These are:

- The overall management was perceived quite positively during all stages of planning and implementation of joint calls.
- As many other ERA-Nets, SNOWMAN used the virtual pot as a funding structure for the call because of national regulations.
- When planning a joint call it is very important to have clear description of funding and research terminology and of the process itself. It is a good practice to start by agreeing on critical path of the call and then the details.
- It is important to agree on funding standards. The rules should be clear, and the partners can decide after this whether they want to join or not. Also important to focus on the budget at the beginning.
- For the selection of topics of the call it is a good practice to first identify the interested funders and ask them what they need and want from research and to create a funding matrix: marking which topic is relevant for which funder, and link to money.
- The finalisation of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) or Funders' Agreement (FA) can only be undertaken after the partners achieve a common understanding of themes and topics. It is necessary to keep in mind that the development of MoU and FA can be a very time consuming process.
- During this process it is crucial to keep the momentum with a lot of partners. It is a good practice to have joint workshops, face to face meetings, teleconferences, a positive atmosphere and frequent communication.
- It is a good practice to have a common call secretariat and committee.
- When planning proposal evaluation it is important to have transparency, a fixed process, a fixed timeline and clear guidelines to the researchers.

The workshop held by SKEP ERA-Net came up with recommendations to the Commission.

The SNOWMAN Core Group agrees on these recommendations:

- It would be good to have large umbrella ERA-Nets. Umbrella ERA-Nets are desired because there is no good separation of topics. Such umbrella ERA-Nets can carry out both large calls as well as smaller focused calls. In terms of the size of the call, focused smaller calls are preferred as they are easier to coordinate and manage. However, no strict rules should be created for the size of the call;
- Funding Agreements (FA) and Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) and certain ancillary rules and documents are common in many ERA-Nets, so there is no need to reinvent the wheel every time. The Commission should provide templates for funding agreements or memoranda of understanding, but also leave space for flexibility;
- The Commission should also accept in the future that for certain calls there is no need to have all funders participating. When the funders are too different, selecting the topics becomes difficult and time consuming. Therefore, calls should be clustered, using sub-sets of funding networks to create a mosaic of joint call strategies and approaches. One size should not be made to fit all.

## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 General conclusions

- All funders agree that they get more value for money in a coordinated call compared to single funded projects;
- Research funding organizations benefit from their participation in the SNOWMAN call, both in networking and exchange of knowledge;
- SNOWMAN has strengthened the European research area in the field of Soil and Groundwater;
- Some SNOWMAN funders appreciate the coordinated call more than the EU Framework projects;
- SNOWMAN should focus on strategic research (research of multi-national and multi-stakeholder interest) and applied research.

### 5.2 General conclusions on the call

- Call 1 is too small and too short. Within the frame of Call 1 only desk top research is feasible and no laboratory or field research is possible.

### 5.3 General conclusions on the preparation of the call

- In general the call was well prepared and most documents are fine, however some improvements are possible. These improvements have been applied in the second call;
- On line applications would be helpful to improve the budget calculations;
- The meaning of the "Remit Check" and "Fit to Call" are unclear. It is extremely important to agree on rules and procedures in such a way that all have the same understanding of them and then to stick to them;
- Funders are not pleased with the national contributions model but the researchers don't have a problem with the model;
- Although funders prefer the Common Pot model, all funders agree that this model is not feasible to apply as long there are no appropriate agreements and rules;

- The “funders agreement” was almost a breaking point in the cooperation towards the first call. The agreement should be discussed in an earlier stage of the process;

## **5.4 Conclusions with respect to the Call**

- A call secretariat is essential;
- Researchers mostly use national contact points to get information on the call however for some questions the secretariat was contacted;
- Researchers use existing networks. SNOWMAN was not successful to create new networks;
- It is important to use different ways to communicate the call.

## **5.5 Conclusions on the Selection Procedure**

- The CSC and reviewers were pleased with the applied selection process;
- The pool of reviewers was not good enough to cover all topics;
- Eligibility test should be managed with care;
- If tests and checks are introduced they should be used in correct way;
- In the view of the reviewers the remote review worked well, some would like a meeting but the time consumption with the remote model is 4 hours and with a meeting it would be at least 2 days;
- If there would be a meeting, costs should be paid and some reviewers also ask for a honorarium;
- It is important to give feed back to reviewers in order to keep interested in the network.

## **5.6 Conclusions on Contracting**

- The SNOWMAN contract model is useful, the consortium agreement is used and necessary;
- National funding contracts is no problem for researchers there were only problems with starting date;

## **5.7 Conclusions on the Ongoing Projects**

- Collaboration in the SNOWMAN projects is enjoyed by researchers.

## **5.8 Conclusions on the Reporting**

- The mid-term reports were of good quality;
- The final reports are hardly commented by the funders.

## 5.9 Conclusions on the Communication

- SNOWMAN has to apply its own communication strategy to disseminate the results of the projects;
- Reports are too voluminous and a summary with major conclusions and observations is missing;
- SNOWMAN should have a final meeting of researchers and stakeholders on the results of the projects;

Comments on the use of the SNOWMAN web pages

**Only 30% of CG/CSC/Funders use the homepage.**

A clear distinction has to be made between a "homepage" and a group internal communication tool as the "restricted area". The project homepage aims to inform the public on latest developments of the project as they are not deeply involved in the process details.

The SNOWMAN restricted area is not filtered in content as is the homepage. In principle, all information regarding the project has to be stored therein, completely. Extracts from the content, meant for the public, have to be uploaded to the homepage, in addition. If such a restricted area works perfectly, no project team member should need to visit the homepage itself to collect information – it should already be well known. The general use of the project homepage for project team members is to get an impression about the project's appearance to the audience – an image for the outside world.

**Project team members have a problem to find documents at restricted area.**

Beside technical problems in principle (like browser restrictions, company and firewall restrictions in using specific Internet protocols and accepting script language) that can only be solved by IT staff in close cooperation with the homepage provider and administrator, a new tool such as SNOWMAN's "restricted area" based on the OpenSource software "PHPProjekt" needs practice and effort in learning.

Although diverse guidelines have been provided by the administrator of the restricted area and stored in a prominent place in its files' menu, neither the guidelines nor direct contact with the administrator to solve problems has been used very often.

In addition, the restricted area of SNOWMAN includes a very simple search engine. Typing in single words or combinations of words the same way as "Google" always produces a valuable listing of diverse area internal links, even if the files were not linked correctly to folders and tasks. Although the administrator attempted to inform and teach the project team members about the search engine's usage, the team members did not seem to take up the information and continued their behaviour in the area's usage as before – producing the same problems again as they experienced before.

As FAQ (frequently asked questions) files and guidelines, availability by phone and e-mail and regularly information at meetings do not seem to lead to an improvement, the only possibility left for improvement seems to be a workshop of the project team, where they need to solve prepared tasks themselves by using the restricted area - just like a computer seminar. In SNOWMAN, there was unfortunately always not much time available beside other, more important tasks, to realise such a workshop.

## 6 Recommendations

In a meeting of the Core Group the recommendations are settled based on the results and conclusions of the questionnaires. These recommendations are:

- SNOWMAN is appreciated as a success. One of the reasons for this success is the application of a call for joint research projects and the execution of these projects. Future ERA-Nets should focus on these joint calls which improve the cooperation of both the research funding organisations and research organisations, leading to a wider use of research results and a strengthening of the European research Area;
- A research call leads to the start of a network of funders, researchers, reviewers and research results users. This network should continuously being maintained by various communication instruments. For that a communication strategy is essential for an ERA-Net.
- The procedures and rules of the first call were rather immature. The improvements have been applied in the second call. In the preparation of the first call, the SNOWMAN Core Group made an attempt to tackle all kinds of problems by making rules, procedures and contracts. In the call itself it became clear that it is not possible to tackle problems only with rules and procedures, but that the partners should cooperate not only on a basis of contracts but mainly on a basis of trust and agreed decision processes to jointly solve problems;
- Due to the wish to be an open network of research funders it is important to continuously work on harmonisation of procedures etc to keep the process open for new funders;
- The EU funding of SNOWMAN was essential to start the cooperation among funding organisations in the field of soil and groundwater. This led to a self sustained network of these organisations. However for some new funders EU funding is essential to enter this network. It is recommended that the EU makes funding available not only for new ERA-Nets but also for the growth of existing ERA-Nets.