National Coordination Centres Workshop – 30 September 2022

On 30 September 2022, a workshop was organised for the National Coordination Centres (NCCs) to share and discuss best practices in preparing project proposals for the Digital Europe Programme (DEP) Call reserved to NCCs, implementing Financial Support to Third Parties, and perform 'National Contact Point'-like functions for DEP Cybersecurity.

Best practices in preparing project proposals for the DEP NCC Call

The first session was dedicated to best practices in preparing project proposals for the NCC DEP Call. Allard Kernkamp from the National Coordination Centre (NCC) of the Netherlands and Costas Efthymiou from the NCC of Cyprus presented the main lessons learned from their experience in designing their proposal.

Allard Kernkamp explained that he wrote the proposal himself in two months, surrounded by a small team with previous experience in writing proposal for EC grants, also to help with financial details. Among the main lessons learned, he stressed the importance to be guided by the proposal the template, and respect it, to thoroughly understand the modalities of the funding, including co-financing requirements for all parts of the project, and to ask questions to the European Commission officials to clarify uncertainties when in doubt. Allard also highlighted the Call requirements of deployment and implementation, and the service orientation towards the Community. (The presentation slides are available on the ECCC website).

Costas Efthymiou advised NCCs to submit a proposal tailored to the NCC needs at national level. He also stressed the benefits of working with other stakeholders who can bring relevant input to the proposal, especially if some skills and expertise are not available in-house at the NCC. He argued that small countries are not at a disadvantage, as they can more easily establish close links with different stakeholders. Developing a communication platform can be a good way to engage with the Cyber-community for example through a website, social networks and the organisation of conferences. Finally, it is always useful to get a fresh perspective on the project during its preparation (The presentation slides are available on the ECCC website).

A discussion followed, allowing Member States to ask questions and exchange further on their practices. The importance of properly assessing the capacity to manage funds was stressed as well as the plans to deploy it. It was also an opportunity to clarify that there is no formal requirement for the size of the team needed to run the NCC, that the bulk of the funding will go to staff costs, and to reiterate the need to give details in the proposal on how collaboration between the NCCs and the Digital Innovation Hubs will be ensured and made operational.

The Financial Support to Third Party scheme (cascading funding), best practices

With regard to the Financial Support to Third Party funding scheme (cascade funding), Ryan Goodman discussed his experience with incubators and accelerators, and implementing FSTP in H2020 projects. He advised on best practices to adopt. He stressed the need to have a solid plan before launching the project: finding the right incentives for the companies to apply; deciding on the amount of funds to allocate, and whether they should be allocated in one go or in several instalments; defining how many companies to support and for how long. He highlighted the importance of planning ahead and be predictable. He mentioned the existence of platforms that can help NCCs in the evaluation/selection process (without the need to create brand new ones). He recommended to be fast and agile in the evaluation process. He stressed the exercise is not only about distributing funding, but it is also about supporting/counselling the companies receiving the funding. He also mentioned the need of promotion/marketing of the competitive calls to get sufficiently large numbers allowing (good) choices, not to underestimate the logistics required by the selection process and the negotiation of contracts, as mission critical for a successful exercise. Questions from the NCC representatives were an opportunity to discuss the selection process more in details, including the application form, the size of the cohorts and how to ensure a fair and transparent selection. The issue of how to deal with the possible failure of some projects was also raised.

The role of NCCs to act as points of contact at the national level and the provision of technical assistance to stakeholders for EU funded projects managed by the ECCC

The last session focused on the role of the NCCs as contact points at national level and on the provision of technical assistance to stakeholders for EU-funded projects managed by the ECCC. Jeannette Klonk from the Austrian NCC presented its activities. Jaenette Klonk outlined the services of the Horizon Europe National Contact Point (NCPs) network, serving as an example for the NCCs, such as: providing information on the funding programme, its objective and its implementation rules, including financial rules; trainings; organization of Info Days; workshops, training, newsletters, websites and social media; awareness raising campaigns; build up synergies amongst stakeholders; cooperation with regional innovation support agencies. She also presented the resources and structure of their NCP. The NCCs should act as a national contact point for DEP Cybersecurity. Jeannette stressed the importance of community building. NCCs should ensure that expertise is shared, and promote exchanges with stakeholders and relevant actors at national level. They can develop a website to provide relevant information to the Community, manage a newsletter and organise events. They should also provide technical assistance, build synergies and support SMEs innovating in the field of cybersecurity.

The NCCs can build on existing national experience. For example, the Dutch NCC presented the Dcypher platform. It then complemented of the Austrian NCC by stressing the importance of bringing universities and innovation research centres closer to business. They argued that Member States can benefit from their expertise in several areas, such as cryptography or other emerging technologies. Finally, they recalled that projects do not necessarily have to start from scratch, but can build on existing programmes.

Miguel Gonzalez-Sancho, Interim Executive Director of the ECCC concluded the workshop by expressing his enthusiasm to see the NCC network taking shape, and recalled the importance of establishing a network of NCCs, where exchanges and sharing of best practices can stimulate the Community and, in turn, strengthen cybersecurity in the EU.