

# EEA FINANCIAL MECHANISM NORWEGIAN FINANCIAL MECHANISM 2014-2021

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## ANNUAL MEETING MINUTES

Maritime Museum in Gdańsk, 11<sup>th</sup> June 2019

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### 1. Opening/adoption of the agenda

The Annual Meeting was opened by Ms Małgorzata Jarosińska-Jedynak, Undersecretary of State representing the National Focal Point (NFP), who thanked the participants for coming to Gdańsk. The participants were also welcomed by a Head of the Donors' delegation, Mr Sjur Larsen, who expressed his gratitude for organising the Meeting and the project visits. The Annual Meeting was recorded by the Polish Focal Point using a tape recorder.

The Polish side underlined the workload of the recent months and efforts to conclude 2014-2021 programming phase with a high quality programmes. It was outlined that it is a decisive period in the cooperation and if the Programme Agreements are postponed further, the risk of not achieving the set results is approaching. The Polish side ambition to conclude the PAs within the foreseen schedule, by the end of June 2019, was referred to.

The Norwegian side ensured the time has been well spent by all the stakeholders and outlined the "quality at entry" approach. It was pointed out that many of the programmes are well advanced and constitute a good basis for the final discussions.

The representative of Iceland, Amb.Thorir Ibsen outlined the opportunity to widen the bilateral initiatives in the current period and indicated the energy and education sectors as fields of potential cooperation.

The representative of Liechtenstein, Mrs Helen Lorez indicated the fact of upcoming celebration of 25 years of the EEA cooperation as well as 300 years of Lichtenstein and emphasized international crossborder work and solidarity as one of the main pillars of Lichtenstein foreign policy. Culture sector and education has been mentioned as main fields of interest in the bilateral cooperation with Poland. To make the bilateral cooperation smooth and efficient, the necessity of "cutting red tape" was mentioned.

The agenda of the Annual Meeting was adopted.

### 2. Strategic Report 2018 - summary of the Programmes 2009-2014 – adoption of the document

The NFP's representatives presented a brief overall summary of the hitherto developments and the Strategic Report revised according to the FMO requests. With only 3 programme agreements concluded (two in March 2019 and one on recent Friday), no results are to be reported under this report. Polish Focal Point's aim was to present works on programmes development and milestones to be achieved, identify challenges and address main risks in the accomplishment of the programmes' objectives.

Donor side underlined that Strategic Report is well written and timely delivered. The annex on evaluation plan is to be prepared in cooperation with FMO at the later stage and will be attached to the next Strategic Report, once all programmes are signed, according to the guidelines.

Strategic Report was adopted by the Donors.

### 3. Bilateral cooperation

It was indicated that signing the Agreement on the Fund for Bilateral Relations on September the 4th, 2018 enabled Polish side to start the Work Plan implementation. Focal Point underlined pragmatic JCBF approach and Work Plan flexibility as a useful tool when handling the BF and delivering the most efficient results.

Overview of the BF was presented. At the national level, 8 agreements for predefined bilateral initiatives (including one with the foreign entity) with the overall budget of 837 500 EUR in total (7% of allocation) were concluded and three more are in the pipeline. 2 bilateral initiatives are finished - events linked to European Forum for New Ideas (EFNI) and Trust across borders: State institutions, families and child welfare services in Poland and Norway.

Donor side confirmed that the idea of the Work Plan as a living document is also shared by the Donors. Donors are closely following what is done in Poland and use the best solutions as a good example for the other beneficiaries. JCBF in Poland is working very well, with no excessive administrative or procedural burden. The successful implementation of the first bilateral initiatives and the engagement of all three Donors states was indicated positively.

The necessity of having a strategic view on the use of the bilateral funds dedicated to the individual programs and the involvement of DPPs in planning process was outlined by the Donors. The pragmatic approach of not allocating all funds at once by POs was pointed out. The procedure of requesting an additional funding by PO to JCBF on the justified case by case basis was mentioned.

It was outlined by the Polish side, that the use of bilateral funds by the POs is determined by the status of Programme Agreements and considering current programming burden, the engagement of POs in bilateral activities is to be definitely widen in the next months to come.

### 4. Progress of programmes and risk assessment

Focal Point presented current status of programming in Poland and the results of risk analysis Polish side shared with Donors on several occasions: in the Strategic Report, during the meeting in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in March 2018, talks of Minister Jacek Czaputowicz with Minister Ine Marie Eriksen Søreide in Oslo on 8-9 May.

It was indicated that 8 (out of 9) Concept Notes have been officially submitted to the Donors, and with *Health* appraised a week before the AM, 7 CNs<sup>1</sup> received positive Donor assessment. For *Justice* the programming process is still ongoing (CN has not received „green light” from the Donors enabling official submission to the FMO since first CN version of April 2018). *Environment* is still waiting for the decision. The *Education*, *Local Development* and *Research* programmes are the first, where PAs were signed between NFP and the Donors.

Polish side outlined that PA signing is a prerequisite for all other stages (implementation, including open calls, financial settlements, savings management); any delays affect negatively the time schedule and make subsequent steps impossible to be followed. The ambition to sign as many PAs as possible still before summer holidays -to launch the calls in September – remains. It was pointed out that Poland, the biggest beneficiary country (consuming ca. 30% of the funds) is an important partner when it comes to the delivery of expected huge and visible results and expects to be a priority for the Donor side – in both programming and the implementation.

The extension of EEA and Norway Grants eligibility period by 2 years was mentioned as insufficient mitigation measure in the current perspective, when the programming period consumed already half of this valuable time and this time reserve is still diminishing. The risk analyses and programs life cycle model was presented by the Polish side with the conclusion that in Poland each individual programme schedule is tight and there is strong requirement to start implementation promptly.

The Donor side appreciated the Focal Point analysis and confirmed that the Donors had been overly optimistic when estimating the time necessary for the concept note / programming stage. No country had managed to finalize all program agreements within the Regulations deadline. However, the time spent on preparing the programs and

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<sup>1</sup> *Health, Education, Culture, Local Development, Research, Business Development and Innovations, Home Affairs*

ensuring quality will lead to less problems later and a smoother implementation phase. Significant progress has been made in Poland during the last few months and there is still time to conclude the programming stage in line with expectations of all stakeholders. The Donor side underlined that the current implementation period will run until 2024, meaning that the period for the whole financing period is 3 years longer now. There will be no extensions of eligibility period within this perspective of EEA and Norway Grants . Donors looked forward to joint efforts to finalize the remaining programs in Poland and move on into the implementation period.

The adequacy of forecasting of payments was underlined by the Donors and confirmed by the Polish side.

The parties discussed the progress in preparing the programmes and programme agreements, and summed up so far efforts and way forward.

Focal Point made a quick overview of the finances: estimated total expenditures (Polish prefinancing) until end of April amounts to app. PLN 17,2 million that is a bit above 4 million EUR. The low level of spending, below 1% (0,6%) results from pace of programme agreements' signature. Once open calls shall be launched, expenditures will be much larger. The expenditures of the Programme Operators and the Focal Point are pre-financed out of the state budget. After issuing by the FMO positive opinion on the Management and Control System for Poland the process of payments flow from the FMO has been launched. Advance payments have been paid for two programs (Education and Local Development), Technical Assistance and Fund for Bilateral Relations. Total amount of payments from donors to Polish side is EUR 3,2 million.

It was stated that Polish side makes huge efforts to make forecasting accurate, but it is challenging when there is no time schedule for PA signing.

## **5. Country specific points; external evaluations; etc.**

Focal Point expressed high appreciation for FMO engagement in facilitating the programming phase and workshops provided for the Polish POs in November last year and just recently in May. This kind of interaction is beneficial for both sides. Polish entities may better understand the requirements and get clarifications in case of any doubts. FMO receives valuable feedback from the system users, like in case of GRACE modalities. Polish side looks forward to other FMO workshops for Poland - on communication (planned for November) and on results (still to be scheduled). Moreover, Poland is to host all Beneficiary countries POs for the annual FMO communication workshop on October the 22-23.

As the MoU reserve reallocation proposal deadline (end 2020) is approaching, Focal Point asked for procedure envisaged. Donors informed, that FMO shall provide Beneficiary countries with a proper template early autumn next year and it will be the basis for discussions. It was outlined the discussions between the parties on the reserve need to start end 2020 and the Donors decisions, based on agreement with the beneficiary state, will follow in 2021.

External, risk based or random programme monitoring at the later implementation stage has been mentioned by the Donor side. It shall be announced 2 weeks in advance for PO and NFP

## **6. Management and Control system issues**

On March the 4th, 2019 the NFP received official confirmation, that the description of the Management and Control Systems (MCS) with Audit Report has been approved by the FMO and meets requirements as required by Regulation Article 5.7.5. The FMO recommended revising the MCS during the implementation of the programmes particularly within the parts concerning results monitoring, administrative verifications, payment and reporting process under the Bilateral Fund and also the process established for the irregularities and complains mechanisms. The NFP informed, it is open to introduce necessary improvements on the document when the additional guidelines from the FMO's side for example concerning the irregularities are provided.

Simultaneously, the POs of programmes already accepted by the donors are preparing their descriptions of management and control systems. The first one for the Education programme is expected in August this year, next for Research programmes in November. Local Development shall also be delivered on time.

## **7. Communication**

Polish Focal Point appreciated Donors' acceptance of the Communication Strategy on March 12th, 2019. As is apparent from the Strategic Report, the Polish side has already started the implementation of its assumptions via e.g. (a) designation of a person to be responsible for information and communication in the Beneficiary State and to act

as a coordinator for the POs information and communication activities; (b) creation of a network with the POs on information and communication activities; (c) giving opinions on the Communication Plans of the POs in order to ensure its highest quality and coherence with the communication vision presented in the Communication Strategy of the NFP.

Among numerous activities undertaken since September 2018, the press conferences on the occasion of signing of the first Programme Agreements within the 3rd edition of the EEA and Norway Grants in Poland (Education, Local Development and Research programmes) were outlined.

Moreover, launching a website of the new edition of the EEA and Norway Grants in Poland (PL and ENG) and launching a Facebook profile of the EEA and Norway Grants in Poland at the beginning of June was indicated.

Focal Point invited Donors to i.a. the EEA and Norway grants launching event on September the 12th, 2019 in Warsaw and 19th New Horizons International Film Festival in Wrocław presenting the achievements of the contemporary cinema of Norway and Iceland (to be held end of July).

Donors expressed a wish to link launching event with PAs signing. As website is still not exactly align with the Regulation, Donors expect it to be fully cooperative (and accessible to non-Polish users) by mid July. Donors also encouraged Polish side to use social media as it proves its efficiency.

## **8. Recommendations, discussion and expectations for upcoming period**

It was outline by the Polish side that having concluded Programme Agreements for 3 areas, additional at least 4 are to be finalized in the upcoming months. *Environment* and *Justice* are the most challenging programmes. As they are very important and have huge impact, it was stressed, both sides should work to push them forward.

The Polish side concluded that it should be common - Polish and Donor goal to assure the smooth implementation of the third edition of the Grants.

It was pointed out that after signing all agreements, we shall soon approach the MoU reserve reallocation deadline and decisions taken will have important impact on the programmes scope.

Both sides shared expectation to move forward to the implementation stage. Donors underlined good cooperation with the Focal Point, which coordinates the processes and supports the programme development.

## **9. Conclusions and closing remarks**

Donors informed that Ms Randsborg from the Norwegian MFA has received a new posting, and that her successor was not yet designated. Furthermore, Ms Norstein is leaving the Norwegian Embassy in Warsaw. She is replaced by Ms Anniken Kleven-Gasser.

Donors thanked the Polish Focal Point for excellent organization of the Annual Meeting.

Encl. 1 *List of participants of the Annual Meeting 2019 in Gdańsk*

Encl. 2 *NFP charts (Programming- MoU vs. concept note and Programmes life chain)*