

The Right Information Matters

Spreading the word about Horizon 2020



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A specific goal of CAAST-Net Plus is to share accurate information about Horizon 2020 widely across the sub-Saharan Africa region. Over the past 18 months we have hosted information sessions in nine countries, interacting with over 650 stakeholders, including researchers, innovation specialists, NCPs, and policy-makers.

Questions: Gerard Ralphs

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This year marks the start of the new Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. How is Horizon 2020 different to its predecessor, the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7)?

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Horizon 2020 is different, in many ways, when compared to FP7. But three key differences come to mind: First, Horizon 2020 has a clear focus on research and innovation and, what I call, “closer-to-the-market” activities. These activities, which might involve prototyping, testing, demonstrating, piloting, scaling-up, are activities that will enjoy much more attention in Horizon 2020 than in FP7. Second, Horizon 2020 focuses closely on industrial leadership and the societal challenges the EU faces, such as health, clean energy and transport (see pages 12-13).

Third, Horizon 2020 represents a great effort to achieve coherence: its single set of participation and financial rules, and its simplicity, really stand to benefit all participants that previously have found programme framework red tape difficult to wade through.

It is an exciting time for many individuals and organisation as there are many new Horizon 2020 funding opportunities for collaboration on offer. What has CAAST-Net Plus been doing to ensure these opportunities are shared widely among interested potential collaborators from Europe and sub-Saharan Africa?

A key focus area for CAAST-Net Plus is raising awareness about these very opportunities among research institutions and Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in sub-Saharan Africa. Since January 2013, CAAST-Net Plus has led information sessions in Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Mauritius, and Rwanda, some of them in collaboration with the European Commission and the IST-Africa project. We have enjoyed excellent participation by and interaction with all of our information session audiences.

In FP7, which ran from 2007-2013, National Contact Points (NCPs) were appointed by many national governments across the globe. They provided valuable in-country information to research communities

about the FP7 thematic areas, but also legal and financial aspects of participation in the programme. Is the same approach advocated by the European Commission in Horizon 2020?

I should say upfront that NCPs in Horizon 2020, like in previous framework programmes, will play a pivotal role, at the national level, in disseminating important information about the available opportunities and the rules of participation. NCP activities are extremely important to country success in terms of fostering engagement and forming cooperation with counterparts across borders in Horizon 2020 calls.

A key element of CAAST-Net Plus activities is to inspire and enhance the national NCP networks in sub-Saharan Africa. To this end, a number of dedicated workshops have been organised alongside our information sessions to showcase the costs and benefits of creating and maintaining NCP networks. It is with great pleasure that we are already seeing a number of sub-Saharan African countries establishing their networks and building the capacities of their NCPs.

What are some of the potential barriers to Horizon 2020 collaboration for researchers and innovators from sub-Saharan Africa?

In my view, there are three potential barriers. First, the lack of awareness about the specific opportunities available to research institutions and SMEs within the first Horizon 2020 round of calls specifically is a cause for concern. However, as I suggest above, this is being mitigated by the actions of the CAAST-Net Plus project. Excellent information is available through publicly accessible web-platforms such as www.caast-net-plus.org, as well as from the European Commission.

Second, the level of simplification that has been achieved by the Horizon 2020 programme is not yet well understood by many applicants from around the world. There is still a perception that it is a “complex” programme, which is not the case if compared to FP7.

Third, a key factor that might hinder participation from sub-Saharan Africa is the lack of networking of research institutions and SMEs with European counterparts. While those that have enjoyed previous cooperation are investing in maintaining their ties with the EU, new applicants find it difficult to get networked and introduced to new project formations. Readers of this magazine should remember that CAAST-Net Plus offers some spaces for this networking to happen, such as our information sessions, consultative workshops and multi-stakeholder conferences.

What advice do you have for researchers and innovators from sub-Saharan Africa and Europe about Horizon 2020 participation?

I have strategic and practical advice. Strategically, I would simply advise readers that Horizon 2020 is open! That means researchers and innovators from around the world can participate in the programme. This is a tremendous opportunity. More practically, participants from the so-called “third countries” (non-EU member or associated countries) should remember three things: First, carefully review the call that you wish to respond to. A successful proposal requires considerable investment (see page 14-15). Be sure you wish to go down the road. Second, partner with leading, experienced and high-calibre institutions from Europe and elsewhere to form a robust consortium. This will help you to secure the foundation of a strong proposal. Third, provide justified evidence of the project’s ability to orient itself to innovation and market-related activities. And do not forget about sustainability and impact!

Tell our readers about the FORTH/PRAXI Network and your organisation's involvement with CAAST-Net Plus.

The FORTH/PRAXI Network started working on international cooperation activities back in 2003, and our dedicated Unit for International Cooperation was launched in 2007. Since then we have both managed and participated in innovation projects in countries around the world, including BRICS and the Gulf countries. Among the services we provide to the global research and innovation community are twinning and staff exchange schemes, as well as training for National Contact Points (NCPs).

Within CAAST-Net Plus, the FORTH/PRAXI Network is part of a team that looks at increasing Horizon 2020 awareness within European and African research and SME communities. We also aim to inspire and strengthen the networks of NCPs in the sub-Saharan Africa region.

At FORTH/PRAXI, we work with a dedicated team of CAAST-Net Plus partners, including the University of Jyväskylä in Finland and the Science and Technology Policy Research Institute based at Ghana's Council for Scientific and Industrial Research.

If our readers would like to contact your organisation for more information, what is the best way to get in touch?

Please write to me: Constantine Vaitsas, Innovation Management & International Cooperation, PRAXI Network (vaitsas@help-forward.gr). I can also be reached by telephone (+30 210 36 11 095 or +30 210 36 07 690).

Dr Hassan Mshinda of Tanzania's Commission for Science and Technology in conversation with the European Commission's Stéphane Hogan during the CAAST-Net Plus and IST-Africa Horizon 2020 East Africa Roadshow (20-24 January 2014). [Image credit: IST-Africa]

Participants from the Uganda event on 22 January 2014. The Roadshow aimed at raising awareness among researchers and the research management community about the EU's new Framework Programme for Research and Innovation. [Image credit: IST-Africa]

