

Opinion on the proposal for a Council Decision concerning the implementation at Community level of the main phase of the strategic programme for innovation and technology transfer, SPRINT (1989-1993) ⁽¹⁾

(89/C 23/04)

On 9 August 1988 the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 198 of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community, on the abovementioned proposal.

The Section for Industry, Commerce, Crafts and Services, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its Opinion on 9 November 1988. The Rapporteur was Mr Nierhaus.

At its 260th plenary session (meeting of 23 November 1988) the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following Opinion unanimously.

1. General comments

1.1. The Committee supports the Commission proposal for the implementation of the main phase of the programme, since it regards its aims as extremely important for the Community's ability to hold its own in worldwide competition, given the dynamics of technological change and the considerable innovation requirement. Above all, with a view to the planned large internal market of 1992, it is high time that steps were taken to promote innovation potential which can be mobilized across national frontiers with the cooperation of the various institutions in the areas of industry, science and service infrastructure.

1.2. It is, however, in the nature of things that the real aims of the programme, i.e. strengthening innovation capacity, promoting the advance of new technologies and increasing the efficiency of instruments and policies in the field of innovation and technology transfer, can be pursued only indirectly with the instruments available to the Community. Hence measurement of the success achieved with the means employed is particularly difficult in this case. The Committee once again calls on the Commission to give its special attention to evaluating the assisted projects by applying effective, quantifiable and verifiable criteria and assessment methods.

1.3. Since, given its budget, the programme can make only a small contribution to national efforts to promote innovation potential, the Committee welcomes the Commission's planned concentration on promoting the Community-wide cooperation aspect. Existing national structures should therefore be purposefully placed at the service of these Community policy aims. The Commission should give very special attention to overcoming the persistent organizational and legal obstacles in individual Member States which impede implementation of the programmes.

1.4. Within the framework of these aims special priority should be given to including in the programme those regions and economic sectors which do not yet have a highly developed infrastructure for promotion of innovation and technology transfer. Cooperation with the national authorities and industrial associations would obviously be appropriate here, too.

1.5. Within the framework of the planned basic objectives of SPRINT, however, this programme can only be one more component in the mosaic of Community activities. Should it not prove possible to achieve coherent coordination with other projects such as COMETT, ESPRIT, RACE, BRITE, PEDIP, etc. in terms of a comprehensive promotion strategy, then efficiency in the use of the resources allocated could in the Committee's view be seriously impaired.

2. Specific comments

2.1. As regards the promotion of pilot projects the Committee notes the difficulty that on the one hand it is particularly the most promising projects that are to be supported, while on the other hand it is precisely these projects which could be nearest to the market, with the risk of undue influence on competition. The Committee therefore welcomes the plan for particularly flexible use of the various promotion instruments, especially since experience so far with the first phase of SPRINT suggests that this is advisable. Consideration should be given to whether in individual cases an interest subsidy by the Commission in the case of financing via the capital market would be appropriate, particularly for the implementation of important growth technologies very near to the market.

2.2. The Committee considers that there will be a risk of the funds being spread too thinly unless it is clear from the start which technological fields should have priority. Thus, in addition to e.g. data-processing, laser technology, electronics and biotechnology, energy technology above all should have a special place in the scale of priorities, in view of the importance of new alternative energy sources.

⁽¹⁾ OJ No C 268, 15. 10. 1988, p. 3.

2.3. The Committee particularly welcomes the fact that the Commission is especially aiming to involve small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) in the programme. Since large-scale industry generally has the know-how and an operational technology transfer infrastructure, the main emphasis in promotion must be on SME, including the smaller research and consultancy firms. The involvement of large-scale industry in the projects and cooperation agreements should not, however, be neglected, as it is an effective way of implementing and broadening development projects.

2.4. Since the programme is not primarily intended for the direct encouragement of research and development, but is aimed at promoting an effective cooperation infrastructure for the purpose of innovation and technology transfer, the Committee proposed that the aid ceiling of 50% be exceeded in individual cases in part A of the programme, especially if economic sectors without existing infrastructure can only be involved in this way.

2.5. The Committee particularly welcomes the intention to build up a project data bank which will be accessible to all participants. With regard to the cost of setting up and operating this information pool, the Committee suggests that this data bank be made available as an information source on potential providers of capital, technologies and operators of innovation projects—accessible at a fee, via existing data networks, to all interested parties in the Community or indeed the world.

2.6. The Committee welcomes the laying down of

selection criteria and suggests as further criteria labour market impact and environmental compatibility.

2.7. The development and testing of training and further training plans for innovation management seem to the Committee to be an especially useful project and one which can be carried out in the short term. Close cooperation and coordination with the DELTA programme projects would also be necessary and potentially beneficial.

2.8. With particular reference to part C of the programme, the Committee thinks it important for there to be close cooperation and exchanges of experience between the Member States and the Commission. A necessary result of SPRINT must be the analysis and exposition of the legal, economic and fiscal problems that still stand in the way of an effective innovation and technology transfer policy, with an indication of possible ways of solving them. The Committee expects the planned final report to deal with this matter.

2.9. As many as possible of the groups involved should be represented on the Innovation Committee—without prejudice to nomination by the Member States. In other words, in addition to government representatives, there should, if possible, be representatives of industry, scientists, consultants and representatives of the social groups.

2.10. As in its Opinion on the first phase of SPRINT, the Committee stresses the importance of rapid expansion of the comparative register of European standards (ICONE).

Done at Brussels, 23 November 1988.

*The Chairman
of the Economic and Social Committee*

Alberto MASPRONE
