

COSIMENA sets the stage for PRIMA Match Making in 2020

Wednesday, March 4, 2020

DAAD Regional Office Cairo, Zamalek

Within the scope of COSIMENA (Clusters of Scientific Innovation in the Middle East and North Africa), the DAAD Regional Office in Cairo hosted a workshop presenting the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) initiative on March 4th at its Cairo Regional Office in Zamalek. The workshop highlighted the funding opportunities available to help combat challenges facing the Mediterranean region.

The morning opened with a welcome address from Isabell Mering, Director of the DAAD Regional Office Cairo, who began by introducing the COSIMENA project—the DAAD’s regional initiative to foster research collaboration—to a gathering of professors, scientists, researchers, entrepreneurs, practitioners, and policymakers. The project was first launched in 2017 with funding from the Federal Foreign Office. It features seven issue-driven clusters, including water, energy, health, economics, urban planning, cultural heritage, and agriculture, which work toward achieving scientific collaboration in the Middle East and North Africa, and South-South cooperation more broadly. Mering then announced that, beginning in April 2020, COSIMENA will add an eighth cluster to its program, which will focus on innovation in education.

After sharing the news, Mering moved on to introducing PRIMA. As an important partner of the European Commission for the implementation of EU-funded projects worldwide, the DAAD have acted as the national agency for higher education cooperation within Europe on behalf of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) since 1987, making it one of the most experienced agencies in Europe and an ideal partner to the PRIMA Foundation and Egypt’s Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR). Financed through a combination of funding from its 19 participating countries and the EU’s Horizon 2020 program, PRIMA uses its €494 million endowment to build research and innovation capacities and to develop knowledge and innovative solutions for water management and sustainable agricultural systems on both shores of the Mediterranean. This workshop, Mering said, was a vivid example of the DAAD’s vision to “change by exchange,” promoting understanding between countries via the free flow of ideas. In its capacity as a funder and independent intermediary, the DAAD seeks to use its global footprint and knowledge base to help develop inclusive, healthy, and prosperous Mediterranean societies, in this case through innovative solutions in agro-food and water systems that contribute to economic growth, stability, and the sustainable use of natural resources.

Following the opening remarks, Advisor to Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Dr. Mohamed El Shinawi took the floor and presented his keynote on the PRIMA program, highlighting the environmental and social challenges— including climate change, population growth, water scarcity, unsustainable agricultural practices, and a lack of innovation—that have put a strain on the development of the Mediterranean region. According to a 2019 report, the Mediterranean region scores near the bottom in achieving its sustainable development goals despite being one of the regions most affected by these challenges, which will have a major impact on our societies if left unchecked. It is now clear, he said, that the increased complexity and multidimensionality of such social, economic and environmental challenges can only be tackled through common efforts and resources with a research and innovation approach. Dr. El Shinawi went on to say that PRIMA is uniquely suited to tackling these issues, as it

provides equal footing to all of its Mediterranean partners through its co-decision and co-funding model and long-term commitment and orientation, while also avoiding fragmentation and duplications in R&I. Additionally, he pointed out, PRIMA focuses on research, innovation, and the adoption of innovative solutions and has several institutional relationships with Mediterranean stakeholders, including end users, communities, enterprises, and governments.

Each year, PRIMA's Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC), which is currently headed by Egypt and Spain, prepares its annual work plan with input, decision-making, and funding contributed by the organization's member countries. PRIMA's annual work plans are developed in compliance with the objectives, provisions, and priorities described in the PRIMA Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA) following a comprehensive consultation process involving multiple stakeholders. Meanwhile, PRIMA program activities, which take into account past and ongoing research, innovation experiences, and best practices, are implemented primarily across two sections: the EU-funded Section 1, which follows a "2+1" consortium model, where a minimum of two partners from the Southern Mediterranean must be paired with at least one partner from the Northern Mediterranean; and Section 2, where grants of up to €150,000 for partners and €175,000 for coordinators will be financed by national funding agencies, such as the Science and Technology Development Fund (STDF) and the Academy of Scientific Research and Technology (ASRT) in Egypt, through an open and competitive transnational Call for Proposals.

Dr. El Shinawi went on to outline the topics eligible for funding this year, which include water management, agro-food value chain, farming systems, and nexus, and emphasized the importance of highlighting the project's economic, social, and environmental impacts when writing the applied research proposal. He concluded his presentation with figures from the previous year, in which 1,247 total eligible submissions were received and 83 were selected for funding. Of those submissions, 467 came from Egypt and 29 were selected with an average award of €140,000, which placed the country 3rd overall in Section 1 funding. Despite the strong showing, which included not only universities but also SMEs and the private sector, Dr. El Shinawi noted that none of the submissions came from Upper Egypt, something he hopes will change this year.

Dr. Omar Amawi, the Deputy Director for the PRIMA Foundation, spoke next, discussing the PRIMA sections, call topics, and the 2020 Annual Work Plan (AWP). He began by underlining the importance of Section 2 funding, saying that the South needs to have the courage and self-confidence to depend on themselves and their own resources to be independent in the long run. PRIMA, he said, could pave the way toward a sustainable and internal national funding system that could continue after the PRIMA initiative, which is currently only funded through 2028, ends. Dr. Amawi then highlighted the Call for Proposals for 2020, which first became open and available for researchers in February, pointing out that this year's topics have a stronger focus on innovation, social impact, and capacity building. The projects are not about creating knowledge as much as impact, he stressed. PRIMA is not isolated from what is going on in the world; rather, it complements what other initiatives are doing. Despite the relatively high budget of the program, which for 2020 will reach €71m, when you look at the scope of the global and regional challenges that we are facing, it is not enough to come up with solutions on our own, which is why PRIMA works hand-in-hand with other initiatives and local programs to meet the UN's sustainable development goals. Egypt, he noted, has done an exceptional job in the PRIMA program acting as an example for other Southern countries to follow by providing a €25,000 incentive to coordinators. However, he warned, it is important to remember that the idea isn't just to lead a team of researchers, but to identify a problem in one's country, direct the team's attention to it, and lead efforts to solve the

problem. This is the real spirit of PRIMA and one of the major ways it benefits the countries of the Global South.

Dr. Amawi then dove into the particulars of the application process. He started by reminding applicants that the deadlines for Section 1 and Section 2 submissions were due on April 1 and mid-April, respectively, and that results would be announced in December. To submit a proposal, applicants must have an eligible consortium, which requires a minimum of three independent legal entities, each from a different participating state, with at least one partner coming from a participating EU country and another selected from a participating Global South nation. This, he noted, is the real advantage of PRIMA and what sets it apart from other programs, as PRIMA is the only one that requires a partner from the Global South. Don't think of this as a free pass for entering the program though, he cautioned. PRIMA is looking for active and effective participation from the Southern countries, which will still have to meet requirements and thresholds as laid out by the program and Horizon 2020. However, when there is a tie in the quality of the proposals between two projects, the evaluation committee will always select in favor of the Southern countries, he stressed. He added that PRIMA consistently receives more proposals for projects than it is able to fund and that, should a particular project not be funded, it doesn't mean that the project isn't a worthy one. Despite the low acceptance rate, he urged everyone to be brave and submit their ideas and assured that applicants would not be blacklisted if their proposal fails.

PRIMA Foundation Officer Dr. Mohamed Wageih then took the floor and presented the application procedures and gave pointers for a successful proposal. He started off by reintroducing the four topics that PRIMA is funding this year – farming, water, food, and nexus – but quickly highlighted that the farming section has two separate sub-sections this year, one for the conservation and valorization of local animal genetic resources, a research and innovation action that has a budget of €3.5m split across two projects, and the other for alternative animal feeds, an innovation action that will see €7.2m divided between three separate projects. Dr. Wageih stressed that each sub-topic, despite being listed under one main topic, will have different evaluation panels, ranking systems and reviewers.

The starting point for applying for a PRIMA program is the website, a one-stop-shop where applicants can find information about the program itself, the work programs for the year, the call texts, topic details, along with templates and guidelines that can be downloaded. Additionally, the website hosts the electronic submission system, an expert registration tool, and a partnering tool where you can publish your profile with your concepts and ideas and find other potential partners you can join with.

Submitting an application is a two-stage process, he continued. In Stage 1, applicants will be required to submit a 10-page pre-proposal outlining the project's objective, relation to the topic, concept and methodology, and expected impacts. If the pre-proposal is accepted, applicants will be invited to participate in Stage 2, where they will submit a 50-page full technical proposal focusing on the measures taken to maximize impact, the project's implementation, the members of the consortium, a budget Excel sheet, and ethics and security.

When drafting proposals, Dr. Wageih reminded applicants to be as precise and specific as possible and to avoid listing overly ambitious goals. The best way to avoid failure, he added, is to keep in mind the most common reasons proposals fail, which include vague project concepts that aren't aligned to PRIMA topics; a lack of technical or management expertise or resources; a weak consortium made up of overlapping partners or unjustified roles; over- or under-estimated budgets, and the lack of a long-term impact or future direction. Instead, Dr. Wageih suggested that applicants submit clear, innovative proposals that

feature a strong coordinator and consortium that complements each member's strengths, within a reasonable, justified budget. As a final piece of advice, he also recommended that applicants register with the ESS and update their information regularly and in a timely manner, carefully read the guidelines and provide all (and only) the information requested, with respect for the provided structure.

Dr. Salah El-Din El-Assal from the STDF then took the floor and began by giving a background of the STDF, which was founded in 2007 as part of an MHESR initiative to strengthen Egypt's science, technology, and innovation (STI) system. Since then, the STDF has worked to "fund the future" through the support and development of Egyptian research and innovation capabilities, ensuring the integration of STI elements in national strategies, bridging the gap between industry and academia, and building up a system of research facilities. The STDF, he continued, is one of the two Egyptian funding agencies, along with the ASRT, that financially supports PRIMA projects and specifically is interested in funding projects about water management, where the progress made in irrigation water methods has yet to reach small-scale farmers thanks to high initial costs and technical skills required to master the technology, and farming systems, where agriculture is supported primarily by irrigation at the expense of sustainable and climate-ready crops, leading to an unsustainable use of natural resources and land degradation. As such, the STDF will be looking to fund projects that prioritize low cost, easy to implement solutions to these problems. Research proposals must be submitted by an Egyptian PhD holder who is affiliated with an Egyptian research institution, he continued, adding that the STDF will be funding universities, while the ASRT will be funding all private entities. Additionally, applicants who are already participating as Principal Investigators (PI) for two other STDF projects or as a team member in three STDF projects are ineligible for funding. He also outlined the funding criteria, explaining that the funds will be divided into instalments that will be disbursed in Egyptian Pounds following the acceptance of periodic technical and financial progress reports.

In the second session of the day, three best practice examples presented their successful proposals and projects in an effort to shed light on the challenges and opportunities when applying for PRIMA. The first success story was presented by Dr. Elsayed Elhabasha from the National Research Center, who spoke about his MEDISMART Project, which was funded in 2019 through PRIMA's Section 2 program, while the second presentation was given by Ahmed Abdallah from ECO Food Hydrators who presented a project on patented food dehydrators that turned crop surpluses into powdered products. The third success story was shared by Dr. Amr M. Helal from Health Tech Integrated Health Solutions, who discussed his innovations in rice bran nutraceuticals from waste material into products that promote healthy aging. All of the speakers outlined their journeys, from proposals to post-funding, and shared their timelines, the importance of highlighting their project's expected impacts, and most importantly, the challenges they faced along the way, which included international partners dropping out due to lack of funding.

The day concluded with a module on proposal writing led by Dr. Mohamed El-Fouly from the National Research Center, capping a matchmaking workshop that saw insights and pointers provided from policy makers, funding agencies, and successful entrepreneurs on the funding opportunities available to universities, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders who are developing research and innovation approaches to address the diverse challenges in water scarcity, agriculture, and food security in the South Mediterranean, a region heavily distressed by climate change, urbanization, and population growth. The day-long seminar offered interactive discussions and an in-depth look into each of the funding organization's guidelines, application procedures, topics, and award mechanisms, providing pointers for successful proposal writing before sharing best practice examples from previous successful proposals in order to shed light on the challenges and opportunities when applying for PRIMA funding.