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REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL

Interim Evaluation of the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA)

{SWD(2023) 169 final}

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1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of an interim evaluation in compliance with Art. 14 of Decision (EU) 2017/1324 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 4 July 2017 on the participation of the Union in the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) jointly undertaken by several Member States[1].

The Decision requires the Commission to conduct an interim evaluation of PRIMA with the assistance of independent experts by 30 June 2022. The Commission has to also prepare a report on that evaluation which includes the conclusions of the evaluation and observations by the Commission. The Commission shall submit that report to the European Parliament and to the Council by 31 December 2022.

The interim evaluation of PRIMA is based on an external study[2]. It covers the period from the inception of PRIMA (2017) until March 2022. A Call for Evidence has been published[3] and the results have been taken into consideration.

This report summarises the main conclusions of the interim evaluation and includes the Commission's ensuing observations.

2. CONTEX AND OVERVIEW OF PRIMA

Water provision and food systems in the Mediterranean area are unsustainably managed. This challenge is being exacerbated by climate change and has important downstream impacts including social and economic stress, instability and migration.

One of the key reasons for the unsustainable management of water provision and food systems in the Mediterranean area is the lack of a set of common innovative solutions that are adapted to the local realities of the region and easily transferable across it, and have been fully piloted and demonstrated on the ground[4].

These solutions are not forthcoming because the overall level of research and innovation investment in the Mediterranean area is not commensurate with the size of the regional challenges; investment levels differ greatly between countries; funding is not well focused on addressing the water and food provision and management challenges; the relevant stakeholders involved – for instance private sector ones – do not always have sufficiently strong research and innovation capabilities; and the research and innovation and collaboration

[1] OJ L 185, 18.7.2017, p. 1.
[2] Evaluation study on the European Framework Programmes for Research and Innovation for addressing Global Challenges and Industrial Competitiveness - Focus on activities related to the green transition –RTD/2021/SC/023 - Interim Evaluation of the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area (PRIMA) (forthcoming)
[3] https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13558-Partnership-on-Research-and-Innovation-in-the-Mediterranean-Area-PRIMA-first-interim-evaluation_en
[4] SWD(2016)332 PRIMA's Impact Assessment

efforts between EU Member States and Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries are too scattered (mostly governed by bilateral agreements) to have a significant impact.

PRIMA was established in response to these challenges, in order to make water provision and management, and food systems more climate resilient, efficient, cost-effective and environmentally and socially sustainable. The initiative follows Article 185 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU)[5] as well as Article 26 on "Public-public partnerships" of Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council[6], the regulation governing the Framework programme for Research and Innovation Horizon 2020. Decision (EU) 2017/1324 of the European Parliament and of the Council- the basic act of PRIMA mandates a high level of commitment by the participating countries to integrate at scientific, management and financial levels[7]. It also implies that the Participating States (PS) voluntarily integrate their research efforts and define and commit themselves to a joint research programme to the added value of the EU.

The PRIMA programme consists of the following Participating States: 11 EU Member States (Croatia, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain); 3 Associated Countries to Horizon 2020 (Israel, Tunisia and Türkiye) and 5 Third Countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Morocco. Bilateral international agreements with the EU were signed with Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco to participate in PRIMA.

The Programme is implemented by the PRIMA-implementation structure (PRIMA-IS)[8], established in Barcelona in 2017 as a dedicated entity, responsible for the direct management of the Union contribution under Article 185 of the TFEU, ensuring through its Secretariat and Governing Bodies, the smooth, efficient and transparent rollout of the PRIMA programme.

PRIMA implementation is based on a long-term Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda (SRIA)[9], which provides the vision and strategic direction for the implementation of the programme and is the basis for setting out the PRIMA Annual Work Plans (AWPs).

With its overarching goal to contribute to the sustainability and stability of the region in the areas of food and water sustainable provision and management, PRIMA aims to achieve multiple objectives. These range from thematic goals to address societal needs in the Mediterranean area and specific objectives that address advances towards an integrated European and Mediterranean Research Area to science diplomacy goals for the collaboration with the EU's southern neighbours.

Over the last few years, PRIMA has succeeded in establishing a trust-based and effective collaboration between Northern and Southern Mediterranean countries. As the main EU initiative in the Mediterranean to deliver on these key research and innovation challenges, PRIMA is bridging the research and innovation and socio-economic divide in the Southern

[5] Consolidated version of the Treaty on the functioning of the European Union , Title XIX Research and Technological Development and Space, Article 185

[6] Article 26(2), point) (b), of the Regulation (EU) No 1291/2013 of the European Parliament and of the of 11 December 2013 establishing Horizon 2020 - the Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020) and repealing Decision No 1982/2006/EC (OJ L 347, 20.12.2013, p. 104)

[7] https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32017D1324

[8] The PRIMA Dedicated Implementation Structure is a private body under Spanish law set up in Barcelona on 19 June 2017 charged by the PRIMA Governing Body to undertake all managerial, administrative, supporting and, monitoring activities necessary to the implementation of the PRIMA Programme

[9] The Ministers of Research and Innovation endorsed PRIMA SRIA during the Ministerial Conference on Strengthening Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation through Research and Innovation in Malta on 4 of May 2017 and adopted by the PRIMA Foundation Board of Trustees (BoT) on 16 November 2017

and Eastern neighbourhood and enhancing health, peace and stability for the region's societies in the long term.

PRIMA implements activities in the form of calls for proposals in three sections:

- Section 1 calls are organised by PRIMA and funded exclusively by Horizon 2020.
- Section 2 calls are also organised by PRIMA but funded by Participating States
- Section 3 calls are organised and funded by Participating States

PRIMA's total budget for 2017-2028 is EUR 494 million, with EUR 220 million coming from Horizon 2020[10] (approx. EUR 30 million/year for three thematic areas) and EUR 274 million from national resources to target research and innovation needs and align research and innovation policies across its Participating States.

3. INTERIM EVALUATION FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS/OBSERVATIONS

3.1 Interim evaluation findings

The interim evaluation confirms that the added value resulting from the PRIMA partnership compared to what could have been achieved by individual Participating States acting independently at international, national and/or regional levels can be considered high and will be even higher for the future.

The following key achievements have been highlighted by the independent experts:

- PRIMA is currently running efficiently and there are no delays in the implementation of the annual work plans and its calls;
- Between 2018-2021, four calls have been launched successfully and 168 projects have been selected for funding;
- The total funding for PRIMA, including EU and national funding (excluding in-kind contributions), is EUR 353 million for the period 2018-2021. This represents already 71% of the overall funding awarded to PRIMA;
- A wide range of beneficiaries has been involved in the selected proposals. Most of them come from the public sector of the participating states. Higher education establishments represent the highest number of beneficiaries in PRIMA. This category includes universities, institutes, laboratories and research councils, and accounts for 41.3% of all beneficiaries for the period 2018-2021. Other research organisations represent 28.8% of the beneficiaries. Private for-profit organisations account for a bit less than 20%, most of them (5 of 6) being Small and Medium Sized Enterprises;
- Italy and Spain are ranked first among the various beneficiaries, followed by Tunisia and France. Non-EU Participating States' participants represent 38% of all beneficiaries in Section 1 and Section 2 calls. Next to Tunisia, Morocco, Türkiye, and Algeria have the highest number of beneficiaries among the Southern Mediterranean Participating States (SM PS);
- Concerning financial contribution, SM PS received around EUR 62 million or 28% of the total funds. Of these, EUR 35.9 million were obtained from the EU financial

[10] The entire EUR 220 million was committed at EU budget level at the end of 2020.

contribution budget (Section 1). This presents a share of around 32 %, exceeding the target share of 25%, foreseen in the basic act of PRIMA;

- Since none of the projects was finished at the time of the evaluation, it was too early to conclude on the contributions of the expected results of these projects to the societal needs of the Participating States. However, data collected from 53 projects that have passed their mid-term review indicates promising progress to achieve operational objectives.

The interim evaluation concludes in particular that:

- PRIMA plays a unique role in the Mediterranean research and innovation ecosystem and serves objectives not covered by other initiatives;
- PRIMA has helped foster scientific integration across participating states. In its absence, it would be unlikely they would have cooperated as closely without a clear funding incentive and strategic framework to facilitate cooperation;
- PRIMA allows especially the Southern Mediterranean Participating States to leverage their research and innovation capacities. By engaging in PRIMA, researchers from the non-EU Participating States gain access to the funding opportunities of Section 1, which the EU finances;
- PRIMA contributes to the further completion of the European Research Area (ERA), notably by overcoming the insufficient cross-border cooperation in the Mediterranean area through the funding of cross-border projects, which can be expected to yield larger impacts than uni- or bilateral efforts alone;
- PRIMA values of co-ownership, mutual interest, shared benefit and the principle of equal footing-were considered particularly relevant to enable cooperation between the EU and its southern Mediterranean neighbours as partners;
- The programme can be considered a relevant tool of science diplomacy that helps bring closer the EU and its Mediterranean neighbours building a sense of mutual trust and inclusiveness;
- PRIMA strengthens the cooperation between the Southern Mediterranean Participating States notably in the area of research and innovation;
- Regarding the future, PRIMA Implementing Structure has taken steps to coordinate with Horizon Europe initiatives of similar thematic focus, such as the EU Mission "A Soil Deal for Europe" or new partnerships like the European Partnership 'Water Security for the Planet' (Water4All). Cooperation with EU Mission "Restore our Ocean and Waters" is also foreseen in the PRIMA Annual Work Plan 2023 recently adopted by the Commission;
- PRIMA contributes with its thematic focus to various European Green Deal policy instruments and acts, such as the new EU Strategy on Adaptation to Climate Change, the Farm to Fork Strategy (the role in the area of research and innovation and sustainable food), the Circular Economy Action Plan, the Zero pollution Action Plan, and the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD).

3.2 Recommendations and lessons learned

The interim evaluation report supported by objective data and evidence assesses the current status and achievements of PRIMA, provides impulses to support PRIMA's implementation and informs possible mid-term adjustments. The evaluation reveals that PRIMA is on its way to achieve its objectives, operates according to applicable principles and procedures and achieved coherence with relevant internal and external policies of the EU.

The Commission considers that over the last few years, PRIMA has succeeded in establishing a trust-based and effective collaboration between Northern and Southern Mediterranean countries to develop common and innovative, sustainable, cost-effective and efficient solutions for sustainable food systems and integrated water management. As the main EU initiative in the Mediterranean to deliver on these key research and innovation challenges, PRIMA is bridging the research and innovation and socio-economic divide in the Southern and Eastern neighbourhood and enhancing health, peace and stability for the region's societies in the long term.

Now more than ever it is the time for more collaboration to identify innovative solutions to safeguard water resources, increase food and nutrition security and strengthen the resilience, equity and sustainability of food and farming systems in the Mediterranean region.

In fact, the future of the Mediterranean Basin's key natural resources (water, soil, coastlines, and biodiversity) continues to be threatened by a number of pressures acting simultaneously and, in many cases, chronically, including urbanisation, industrialisation, the expansion of intensive agriculture activities and aquaculture and the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. The fragility of the region is further aggravated by its sensitivity to climate change. According to the 6th Assessment Report of the Working Group II of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the United Nations (published in February 2022), the Mediterranean ecosystems are expected to be among the most impacted ones by the consequences of the progressing climate change.

The Southern Mediterranean region is further facing governance, socio-economic, climate, environmental and security challenges, many of which result from global trends and call for joint action by the EU and Southern Neighbourhood partners. Protracted conflicts continue to inflict terrible human suffering, trigger significant forced displacement, weigh heavily on the economic and social prospects of entire societies, especially for countries hosting large refugee populations, and intensify geopolitical competition and outside interference.

In addition, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, are putting natural resources and agriculture under enormous pressure. Therefore, the transformation to unpolluted natural resources and healthy, equitable, resilient and sustainable food systems needs to be a continued priority for Mediterranean societies.

Consequently, PRIMA objectives are still valid.

Moreover, the President Ursula von der Leyen's "geopolitical Commission" recognises the particular role of the Mediterranean and stresses that it intends to collaborate closely with Mediterranean partners on the EU Green Deal so "we can make the region a leader in climate solutions." The EU, through a wide range of projects and programmes, including PRIMA, supports its Southern Neighbourhood partners in developing and implementing green policies. It promotes cooperation to fight pollution and climate change, offering to help its Southern Neighbourhood partners implement the Paris Climate Agreement and its subsequent developments and works to share best practice and expertise.

To strengthen the long-term outcomes of PRIMA, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Further streamline the implementation of the three PRIMA Sections. The evaluation revealed that PRIMA partnership constitutes the right ecosystem to enable tailored approaches for the joint issues of the Mediterranean region in terms of topics and funding levels. However, PRIMA's attractiveness has led to a low success rate[11]. In fact, the success rates for Section 1 are below 5%. Similarly, the success rates for Section 2 vary from 6.6% in 2018 to about 20% on 2021. This oversubscription could discourage in the future submission of high-level proposals. PRIMA implementing structure should address this issue and propose ways to increase the success rates of proposals selected for funding. For instance, the possibility of more tailored calls and further refinement of the application process in the two stages of the calls could be assessed;
- Section 3 seems to receive a different degree of awareness and importance from Participating States. Therefore, there is a need to increase its effectiveness. PRIMA implementing structure should devote additional efforts into sensitising the Participating States about the importance of the Participating States Initiated Activities, to unlock the full contribution potential of this section towards a more integrated research area. PRIMA may benefit from facilitating the reporting requirements of the Participating States Initiated Activities as much as possible so that they cater better to the limited resources of National Funding Authorities. Another option for increasing the strategic relevance of the Section 3 would be a greater emphasis on exchange, networking and training;
- Although stakeholders are satisfied overall with PRIMA's implementation, additional efforts from PRIMA implementing structure and the Participating States are needed to further increase the efficiency notably of Section 2, by reducing the complexity caused by different national funding schemes and work towards streamlining of national administrative procedures, to reduce time to grant, strengthen the reliability and improve the speed;
- To fully exploit synergies between the projects and to foster building longer-lasting communities, PRIMA implementing structure should intensify its efforts to boost the exchange between individual projects with a view of identifying their complementarities and their potential synergies. Corresponding means could be, e.g. organising events for early-stage projects to learn from those further advanced, events for exchange between projects with a similar thematic focus, or networking and brokerage events;
- Participating States and PRIMA implementing structure need to further invest in outreach activities and capacity building to enable actors from the Southern Mediterranean Participating States to engage more actively in PRIMA. The interim evaluation report valued that since the inception of PRIMA, there have been different activities to support stakeholders from different countries which has led to some progress in their research and innovation systems. However, there is still untapped potential to enable even more active participation in PRIMA. This relates to the overall number of beneficiaries from Southern Mediterranean Participating States, which could be higher, and to their roles in the projects. Therefore, additional

[11] A so called « success rate » is the ratio of the number of proposals funded vs a number of eligible proposals

outreach and capacity-building activities and support to better connect with the transnational community are needed to intensify their participation;

- PRIMA is using several indicators to monitor progress and efficiency of the implementation. However, a more systematic monitoring of the outcomes and impacts arising from the different actions is needed. The interim evaluation report highlighted that there have been significant efforts and progress towards the continuous improvement of the PRIMA Key Performance Indicators (KPIs. However, current Key Performance Indicators still leave room for improvement regarding their usefulness in judging the achievement of the specific objectives and the impact of projects. This concerns, e.g., the lack of Key Performance Indicators to effectively measure research and innovation strategy alignment beyond the procedural level. Moreover, it has to be ensured that the impact of projects will be monitored adequately, beyond the mid-term review or the end review of a project, i.e. some kind of regular monitoring or follow-up after the end of a project. PRIMA implementing structure should then work on the adjustment of Key Performance Indicators;

- PRIMA implementing structure has already devoted strong efforts towards dissemination and communication activities (e.g. dedicated section in PRIMA website, PRIMA magazine, various brokerage events, section on web, Water- Energy-Food-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus Conference. PRIMA Implementing Structure is also aware that a key focus of future outreach activities should especially communicate project impacts as soon as these are available. However, there is a need to ramp up communication and dissemination to sustain the high political commitment to PRIMA in the long term. Moreover, there is a need for better internal communication within the project consortia;

- Facilitating cooperation between the EU and its southern neighbours as equal partners is one of the key achievements of PRIMA. However, the evaluation report revealed that cooperation between Southern Mediterranean Participating States (southern-southern cooperation) is less strong. A further increase in cooperation among the Southern Mediterranean Participating States would be beneficial, as it could contribute to an improvement in the relationships between those countries. Hence, PRIMA Implementing Structure should increase efforts to bring corresponding communities together, e.g. by specific events to broker consortia participation among Southern Mediterranean Participating States. Another possibility would be to consider adapting selection criteria to favour proposals (maybe for certain calls) where several participants from Southern Mediterranean Participating States are actively interacting with each other.

- Today, PRIMA is exploring synergies with EU and Mediterranean initiatives, such as Horizon Europe Cluster 6, Missions and Partnerships. PRIMA has also contributed to the creation of the WEFE Nexus Community of Practice and to the development of the Union for the Mediterranean's (UfM) Regional Research and Innovation Platforms roadmaps on climate change, renewable energy and health, endorsed at the Ministerial Conference on research and innovation of the Union for the Mediterranean on 27 June 2022. Possible cooperation with the thematic territorial framework on blue economy (West Med) and the BlueMed Initiative could also contribute to pooling up resources and increasing impacts. PRIMA implementing structure should further follow these initiatives and propose concrete actions for the implementation of synergies.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The EU recognises the Mediterranean's special role and the European Commission is already collaborating closely with Mediterranean partners helping them to find common solutions to the identified challenges and make the region a leader in climate-resilient solutions.

PRIMA plays a unique role in the Mediterranean research and innovation ecosystem and serves objectives not covered by other initiatives. According to the Ministerial Declaration of the recent Mediterranean Conference on Research and Innovation, PRIMA's Strategic Research and Innovation Agenda and its monitoring and evaluation system enables an effective joint research and innovation programme in crucial sectors for the Mediterranean. It contributes to scientific progress and technical solutions for the water and agro-food areas and their interconnected nexus.

The evaluation faced certain limitations, as none of the projects funded by PRIMA has been finished yet. Therefore, the focus of the evaluation lies less on long-term impacts and more on the structure, implementation processes, and the current progress of the Programme. In particular, it is evaluated whether there has been significant progress regarding the specific objectives, as these are not fully dependent on the exploitation of the achieved results in the projects. In this context, it can be concluded that PRIMA has been successful. The partnership adequately addresses environmental, socio-economic and policy challenges that are crucial to the future development of a more circular and sustainable Mediterranean region. On the other hand, PRIMA contributes to key EU political priorities, objectives and initiatives such as the European Green Deal, in particular Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, Bioeconomy Strategy, Climate Adaptation Strategy and the Circular Economy Action Plan, as well as the overarching SDGs. At the same time, the programme greatly contributes to strengthening the relations and the collaboration between the EU and its southern neighbours. In some cases, it has also encouraged cooperation among the latter.

PRIMA-Implementing Structure successfully established PRIMA as a platform to strengthen research, innovation, collaboration and is coherently embedded into the political landscape.

In contrast to other Article 185 initiatives under Horizon 2020, PRIMA has no legal predecessor. While there have been partnerships between different national agencies in earlier ERA-Nets, and initiatives towards the Mediterranean area existed, the incorporation of PRIMA as a public-public partnership on the EU level was completely new.

The recommendations will be taken up in discussions between the Commission and PRIMA implementing structure and their implementation will be followed up as part of the Commission's oversight of the PRIMA programme.

In line with these recommendations, the Commission will also seek more systematically to acquire and analyse relevant data to improve monitoring of the impacts arising from the PRIMA programme and will strengthen the communication of relevant outcomes towards relevant services within the Commission.

While PRIMA activities are foreseen until 31 December 2028, its last calls will be programmed in 2024 under the Horizon 2020 framework. PRIMA Participating States have started expressing their interest for the continuation of PRIMA. The importance to discuss PRIMA's continuation in line with the Horizon Europe– the current Framework Programme for Research and Innovation approach to Partnerships has also been acknowledged in the Ministerial Declaration of the Mediterranean Conference on Research and Innovation on 27 June 2022.

The representatives of Participating EU Member States during the debate in the Competitiveness (COMPET) Council of 2 December 2022, conveyed also their support to the continuation of PRIMA. The Commission acknowledged the objective of continuation of the PRIMA initiative and has initiated an internal process to assess the options for a possible renewal of the PRIMA programme after the end of its active term in 2024. This process will take the positive results of this interim evaluation of PRIMA into account. In addition, PRIMA was funded out of H2020 (2014-2021), while its calls are scheduled for 2018-2024 (i.e. the programmatic period falls between H2020 and Horizon Europe).The need of synchronising PRIMA with the funding framework timeline, i.e. with Horizon Europe, should be also considered in this process.