

Smart Mix Subsidy Programme: Procedure for Mid-Term Review

In April 2007, following a detailed selection procedure, the Dutch Ministries of Economic Affairs and Education, Culture and Science jointly awarded subsidies to seven Smart Mix projects¹. Implementation of these projects commenced in the course of that year or at latest in 2008. Since then, they have been regularly monitored to give government the clear insights it needs into the substantive, organisational, administrative and financial progress of the projects it funds and the effectiveness of the investments it makes in them.

The purpose of the mid-term review is to show whether project consortia are managing their own processes properly and are on course for success. It is an opportune moment to modify or speed up project implementation if necessary. It is important that the mid-term review should produce clear insights without placing any unnecessary extra burden of administration on the parties involved. For this reason, maximum use will be made of existing reports and the expertise built up by the monitoring teams. Use will also be made of experience with the mid-term review of the Bsik (ICES/KIS-3) projects. Paragraph 5.3 of the Annex to the official regulations for the Smart Mix subsidy scheme (*Subsidieregeling Smart Mix*, Dutch Government Gazette 27-03-2006, no. 61) gives further details of the procedure for the mid-term review and final project evaluation. In addition, annual monitoring will continue in 2010, since the results will assist in the conduct of the mid-term review.

The mid-term review will consider two areas:

1. content: the progress being made by the consortium towards achieving the goals formulated by the project partners in the project plan and via the chosen indicators for the “focus and mass in excellent academic research” and “societal and economic valorisation” Smart Mix criteria. Has the consortium created the right processes to enable it to achieve breakthroughs in relation to these two criteria?
2. policy and process, with a key focus on the coherence that Smart Mix is producing on the ground, the form of the Smart Mix scheme and the joint implementation by SenterNovem and NWO.

“Content” encompasses the following aspects:

- academic excellence: the quality of the research being done to implement the project proposal, its coherence and the quantifiable progress being made in terms of the relevant (project-specific and general indicators) indicators imposed on the consortium when the subsidy was granted;
- valorisation: the standard of the work being done to implement the valorisation plan, the strategy for achieving valorisation following completion of the project (embedding the knowledge, organisation and funding concerned so as to maximise the prospects of valorisation during the “post-subsidy period”) and the quantifiable progress being made in terms of the relevant (project-specific and general indicators) indicators imposed on the consortium when the subsidy was granted;
- organisation, including governance and processes;
- indicators: the quality of the project-specific indicators established by the consortium in terms of their current relevance, level of ambition and predictive value;
- implementation of any recommendations made for modifications following previous monitoring rounds.

The first three aspects have already been addressed in the annual reports produced by NWO and SenterNovem monitors. The other two are particularly relevant now, given the nature of the mid-term review.

¹ The official regulations for the Smart Mix subsidy scheme use the term “programmes” rather than “projects”. However, the latter term is so much more usual that this report speaks of “projects”.

“Policy and process” encompasses the following aspects:

- coherence: what coherence is the consortium producing on the ground, what does the consortium see as the success of the Smart Mix scheme, and does its research correspond to a designated key area of research or to stated government policy (e.g. in the ‘Peaks in the Delta’ economic policy document)? This may be illustrated by the development of a common, long-term research vision by relevant knowledge institutes, increased public-private cooperation in the relevant field of research, etc;
- process: can the way the Smart Mix scheme is run be regarded as successful? Smart Mix projects have to clear relatively few hurdles before they kick off. Has this experiment proved successful or is it better in retrospect not to renounce the customary much more demanding preparatory period (with exploratory studies, vision assessments etc);
- cooperation: what obvious added value does the consortium now see (or has it seen in the past) in the cooperation between SenterNovem and NWO?

The tasks and input of the consortia are as follows.

1. To appoint a review committee

Each consortium must appoint a committee to conduct its mid-term review. The membership of the committee must be approved by SenterNovem. Consortia can recruit from the international advisory councils that most of them possess. It is important, however, that the review committee should operate independently. This is guaranteed by the following rules:

- the committee must have between 3 and 5 members, half of them working outside the Netherlands;
- the committee must have a broad membership. Committee members must possess relevant expertise and must have an understanding of the academic value, societal relevance and economic potential of the project;
- committee members must have no direct involvement in the day-to-day management or direction of the project (or any of its sub-projects);
- SenterNovem and NWO monitors must be present as observers during the committee’s deliberations and during any discussions between the committee and the consortium.

2. To plan and conduct a self-evaluation

Each consortium must draw up an action plan and timetable for the preparation of a self-evaluation report, for the review by the external committee, and for the assistance that the consortium is to give the committee. The action plan must be approved by SenterNovem. The self-evaluation must cover the entire period from the submission of the project (2006) to the mid-term review (spring 2010) and must also outline expectations for the subsequent period, through to the completion of the project. It must address both the areas and all the related aspects mentioned above. In other words, the self-evaluation must consider the principal project developments and the current state of play regarding innovation, valorisation and embedding, international orientation, administration and funding. It is important that it should not be simply a statistical analysis. The self-evaluation report should tell the external review committee how the consortium is implementing all aspects of “content” and should also state the position of the consortium in relation to the various aspects of “policy and process”. Here too, the information provided should relate both to the period up to the mid-term review and to the remainder of the project period. The length of the self-evaluation report should be somewhere around 25 pages.

3. To enable an external committee to review the project and to provide assistance for that review

Like the consortium, the external review committee should form a view on both of the areas and all of the related aspects. Where “content” and its various aspects are concerned, it should assess whether the consortium is making sufficient progress in this area. At the time of the mid-term review, many projects will not have produced their main results. The external review committee should therefore focus on whether the consortium’s own processes are in order and there is a good prospect of success. In this respect, special mention should be made of the programme-specific indicators. These indicators have been decided by the consortium itself. The external review committee should assess them in terms of their

current relevance, level of ambition and predictive value. Where “policy and process” is concerned, committee members recruited from abroad cannot be expected to know much about the particular situation in the Netherlands. The committee will therefore tend to assess the consortium’s position in this area at meta-level: is its report concrete, relevant to the entire period from the submission of the project to its completion, businesslike in tone, etc.

The external review committee should be in a position to operate independently and should be given access to all the necessary written information on the project (e.g. the project plan, progress reports and, of course, the self-evaluation report). Where necessary, English translations should be made available. The committee should be given sufficient opportunity to speak to those involved in the direction, management and implementation of projects and sub-projects, and anyone else it thinks relevant. It should be free to decide for itself what site visits it wishes to make and whom it wishes to interview. The review by the external committee can therefore be expected to take more than one day. SenterNovem and NWO monitors should be present as observers during the committee’s deliberations and during its discussions with the consortium. This will also give the committee an opportunity to seek any necessary clarification from the monitors. The review committee’s report should address each of the areas and aspects discussed above. The length of the report should be somewhere around 25 pages, including a brief account of the work of the committee and summary CVs of the committee members.

The review committee may report its findings in English if it so wishes.

4. To present findings and plans for the future of the project

SenterNovem’s Innovation Directorate and the management of NWO will invite the consortia to give oral presentations of the review committees’ findings and their own plans for the future of the projects. These presentations will take place either at NWO or at the offices of SenterNovem and will be scheduled so far as possible within a short period. SenterNovem will ensure that the meetings and conclusions are minuted and reported in writing to the relevant consortium. SenterNovem will also notify both ministries of the outcomes of the mid-term reviews.

The timetable for the mid-term reviews and other routine procedures (marked with *) will be as follows.

who	what	when
SenterNovem	inform consortia of procedure for mid-term reviews	1 January 2010
consortia	submit 2009 annual reports to SN	1 March 2010 (*)
consortia	submit plans for reviews and memberships of review committees to SN	1 April 2010
SN/NWO	respond to consortia proposals	14 April 2010
SN/NWO	annual monitoring round	April 2010 (*)
consortia	submit definitive plans for reviews and memberships of review committees to SN	1 May 2010
SenterNovem	approve consortia proposals	12 May 2010
SN/NWO	send monitoring reports to consortia	12 May 2010 (*)
consortia	submit 2009 financial statements to SN	1 July 2010 (*)
SenterNovem	approve financial statements	31 July 2010 (*)
consortia	complete self-evaluations and send them to review committees and SN	Schedule in review plans
Review comm.	submit reports of findings to consortia	October 2010
consortia	submit review committee reports to SN	31 October 2010
consortia	present review committee conclusions and future plans to managements of SN/NWO	November 2010
SenterNovem	send written reports of conclusions to consortia	December 2010