“Taking stock of Horizon Europe SERV projects and TNA/VA delivery”

# Transnational access of Research Infrastructure services under Horizon Europe SERV projects – experience from stakeholders and feedback to policy - Brussels, 30 01 2025 - Workshop report

**Context, objectives and conduct of the workshop**

Transnational access (TNA) to Research Infrastructures (RI) is the core activity of SERV projects and most of the EU funding under the HE research infrastructures programme is expected to support the latter. With currently 23 SERV projects running, it was time to gather from SERV project coordinators, the research infrastructures community and relevant stakeholders (such as ESFRI representative and RI National Contact Points), their experiences, issues encountered and wider views on TNA delivery in HE SERV projects. A one day in-person workshop was convened with SERV project coordinators, REA and RTD staff and relevant stakeholders such as the HE RI Programme National Contact Points and the ESFRI Forum members.

Prior to the workshop a survey was conducted amongst all 23 SERV projects, asking for feedback on key aspects of TNA to be addressed during the workshop. A presentation of the survey results then initiated the workshop.

To illustrate divergent modes of TNA implementation of TNA, Coordinators from selected SERV projects presented their projects with focus on key features of TNA (TNA % of total budget, reimbursement models, TNA vs. VA, consortium architecture for TNA delivery, thematic fields, challenge- vs curiosity-driven SERV).

REA and COM staff moderated thereafter 4 discussions sessions on the above aspects:

- Session 1: TNA at the core of SERV projects

- Session 2: Administrative challenges and complexity of TNA

- Session 3: Sustainability of TNA

- Session 4: Impact of SERV projects on policies and innovation

Key aspects of the above session topics were discussed with the SERV project Coordinators and comprehensive notes taken on the many contributions received, form the basis of this report.

Annexed to this report are the agenda and all slide presentations.

The following Executive Summary comprises the key messages which were derived from the aforementioned four discussion sessions.

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Executive Summary**

**TNA at the core of SERV projects (Session 1)**

* **Dedicating more than 60% of a SERV project’s total EU contribution to TNA is seen as difficult, due to high additional absolute costs linked to TNA user projects (i.e. purchase contract development, TVA issues etc) which are not completely covered by EU reimbursement; in some cases TNA use does require for user travel costs (to remote RI locations).**
* **SERV projects’ training measures targeting potential TNA users, as well as Joint Research (JRA) to upgrade/expand support services and dedicated work towards making TNA more sustainable, should continue to be supported, as incentives to maintain TNA and keep SERV projects attractive.**
* **Coordination/networking/administration activities inherent to current cluster nature of SERV projects are too complex; mechanisms are needed to develop & spread guidance documents and best practices which could simplify administration and free more budget to support.**
* **Centralisation & harmonization of modes of TNA management and delivery within, and across SERV projects, would free management costs and allow to balance TNA demands and available budget; yet it would put more responsibility on Coordinators or other TNA delivery hubs in the project.**
* **Longer duration of SERV projects would make the efforts to set up TNA in a SERV project more cost efficient.**

**Administrative challenges and complexity of TNA (Session 2)**

* **While a coherent and hierarchically structured RI terminology is needed, the current use of vaguely defined and sometimes discretionally used terminology is found confusing; it needs to be simplified, standardised, and then be uniformly communicated and applied.**
* **Participants perceive TNA schemes under SERV projects as very complex, resulting in a need to simplify SERV projects in general and TNA management, delivery and reimbursement procedures in particular.**
* **The current 3 TNA reimbursement models (ac/uc/combined) are still considered useful by many, while some voice that the combined model may not be needed.**
* **The very high administrative burden coming with the management of TNA comprising SERV projects needs be relived, as demand-driven dynamic SERV projects entail too many amendments, have not clearly segregated cost category(ies) for TNA causing issues with reporting etc.).**
* **More harmonised and well communicated programme-wide procedures to manage TNA would facilitate conduct of SERV projects with TNA.**
* **Managing TNA more centrally (as done under a cascade project structure) would simplify TNA delivery; it would also allow to centrally balance TNA budget to meet high demands for some RI installations, and/or to strategically spread use of TNA across alike provider sites.**
* **Handling of TNA user travel reimbursement in SERV projects is diverse and in cases even at the discretion of individual PIs, hence more unified rules are needed, such that award decisions amount of travel reimbursement are more selective (where needs are), more harmonised and TNA user travel is centrally managed in the SERV projects.**
* **Clearer instructions on TNA reporting should be given and be implemented in a harmonised way across projects; requirements should be simple and coherent as to what exactly needs to be reported.**
* **Lump sum reimbursement applied also to SERV project would relieve the administrative burden of financial reporting, but then, the necessary upfront TNA budget distribution to TNA partners clashes with the dynamic and needs-driven feature of SERV projects, unless the TNA budget is held/managed centrally by one or few TNA managing hub(s).**
* **Online resources offered as VA can be complementary to TNA, but it needs to be clarified what VA reimbursement comprises, e.g. if development and maintenance of an online used data resource qualifies as costs linked to VA-use, or if such resource development should rather be addressed by respective TECH calls.**
* **Setting up de-novo data resources for VA specifically for a given SERV project may lead to undesirable duplication with existing common data repositories that should rather be used.**

**Sustainability of TNA (Session 3)**

* **The concept at the base of the EU research infrastructures programmes is understood and shared: while building and maintaining research infrastructures as such remain in the national remit, creating an EU-level ‘umbrella’ RI composed of these nationally funded RI facilities has been supported by EU funds such as the INFRA DEV calls (in some cases, EU structural funds given to MS did serve to build infrastructure capacities as such).**
* **By contrast, the transnational access (TNA) of researchers from other countries to nationally or EU-level jointly managed RI facilities, requires sustained EU funding for TNA; longer duration of SERV projects, more central roles in TNA management for stable EU-level RIs, or through EOSC-like partnerships, or still more centralised TNA support management, are options for longer-term TNA and/or VA delivery.**
* **EU RIs do participate to EU research projects under the HE pillar 2 clusters, but only in few thematic areas; targeted efforts & mechanisms should facilitate this integration (references to RIs in pillar 2 cluster topics, mechanisms to avoid risk of double funding etc.)**
* **Realistic opportunities are seen to explore mechanisms of national co-funding via the HE Co-Fund Partnership tool, but an attractive % EU contribution for joint EU & MS TNA calls should be foreseen (more than only 30% EU contribution to joint calls).**
* **New partnership models are conceivable whereby EU and MS would jointly set up RIs with an ex-ante agreement on a fixed % obligation to provide free-of-charge TRANSnational access to users across EU.**
* **Industry revenues are frequent for national RIs, but not a realistic option to support sustainable EU-level TNA use: support by publicly funded RIs to industry causes issues for both sides (Open Science obligations to publish results, prohibition to subsidise industries).**
* **A planned CSA topic under the upcoming research infrastructures work programme 2025 should give the RI community an opportunity to develop and suggest concepts as to longer-term sustained TNA access schemes.**

**Impact of SERV projects on policies & innovation (Session 4)**

* **More coherent guidance should be given with respect to reporting on impact generated from SERV projects, and in particular also from SERV supported user projects.**
* **Central TNA access portal managed across SERV projects would be useful also for output/impact reporting.**
* **SERV projects provide data evidence and coordination/harmonization efforts to support EU policies, the JRC and EU agencies in their mandates (including EU regulatory actions), as well as challenge-driven HE Missions and partnerships.**
* **And vice versa, policy stakeholders (EU agencies, JRC, Partnerships, etc. ) contributed in some cases to shape TNA calls so as to better align SERV projects’ outcomes to what is needed in terms of supporting EU policies or identified societal challenges.**
* **International collaboration is implicit in particular for large RIs, but specific calls under the research infrastructure programme requesting collaboration with identified non-EU target regions or countries according to EU international policy objectives are still needed (e.g. topics to enhance collaboration with Ukraine).**
* **Global research challenges (such as Covid) require by their nature always global cooperation, including between RIs.**
* **Collaboration framework and rules are needed to ensure reciprocity in collaborations with Third Country EU partner countries, but also to restrict undesirable collaborations that go counter EU international policy objectives.**
* **Impact from SERV projects is difficult to track, as it peaks only after the end of SERV projects, and is in particular difficult when it indirectly derives from SERV supported TNA projects; more guidance from EU as regards follow-up on impact after the end of projects is needed.**
* **Under SERV projects, RIs are only scarcely used by industry, though European industry indirectly benefits from cooperations with the academic researchers who are supported through TNA projects.**
* **A controversial debate took place on the formation of potential ‘access bubbles’ around existing ‘excellence’ communities, where too much focus on the excellence criterion alone for selection of TNA user projects may need to be complemented by incentives to explicitly support new users, thus truly addressing different criteria as defined by respective call topics.**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Workshop Proceedings**

**Welcome, Introduction, Objectives**

Sari Vartiainen-Mathieu (Head of Unit REA.C4 – Reforming European R&I and European Research Infrastructures) opened the meeting by explaining the context and objectives of the workshop. With the externalization of the HE research infrastructures programme to REA, the need of urgent simplification of the programme became clear. The workshop aimed to hear from SERV Coordinators & TNA programme managers of currently running HE SERV projects, which experiences were made and what could be improved for the future.

Agnès Robin (Head of Unit RTD.A4 - Open Science and Research Infrastructures) informed that, from RTD side, several consultations on the state-of-art of TNA implementation had been undertaken. The outcome of these studies should allow to draw lessons for the future (ESFRI access drafting group, TNA access study, consultation of H2020 projects), with the aim to keep RIs well on the agenda for the FP10 planning.

Andrea Hutterer (Head of INFRA Sector in unit REA.C4) chaired the entire workshop.

**Results from survey on SERV projects and TNA**

Antonio Ventura (REA.C4) gave an overview presentation on the outcomes of the survey undertaken prior to the workshop with the participating SERV projects (see slides). Key findings were highlighted for the following topical discussion sessions, including:

* **Unbalanced thematic area coverage:** no projects exclusively dedicated to Data, Computing & Digital RI, and only very few on Energy or Social Sciences & Humanities.
* In most projects **TNA provider entities have the status of full grant beneficiaries.**
* More than half of **projects provide TNA only**, i.e. they do not provide Virtual Access (VA).
* Most projects consider **60% or more of the total budget as an achievable proportion to be allocated to TNA**.
* **Basic terms are not universally clear:** i.e. ‘Research Infrastructure’, ‘Installation’, ‘User Group’ or ‘User Project’.
* **Report requirements are not universally clear**, in particular concerning VA.
* **For sustainability of TNA delivery**, most projects see national contributions as a realistic option, only some mention revenues from commercial entities, and **none reported to tap into other EU programmes**.

**3 example projects presented on different dimensions relevant to TNA**

**The CanSERV project (slides Manuela Pausan & Thomas Steger, BBMRI ERIC)** is a challenge-driven SERV project (focus on HE Cancer Mission) coordinated by BBMRI ERIC. A cascade architecture with TNA budget holding beneficiaries and distributed, purchased-in TNA providers is implemented, offering both unit costs (uc) and actual costs (ac) reimbursed TNA, but no VA. Challenges were setting up a common TNA access management tool, de-novo development of contracts for external TNA providers, and managing cross-RIs/cross-community integrated RI services. In addition, liquidity problems were encountered for the TNA holding nodes due to EU-payment mode that faces budget holder nodes with problem to pre-finance external TNA providers from own institutional resources.

**EURO-LABS (slides Adam Maj, IFJ PAN Kraków)** is a curiosity-driven SERV project in the physics domain, coordinated by INFN. Most beneficiaries are also the TNA provider entities (flat architecture), offering both TNA (mostly access to beam lines) and VA. Addressing synergies between their 3 TNA requiring thematic communities (nuclear physics, accelerators, detector technologies) is challenging. TNA is in very high demand, only part of full costs is EU-covered. Diversity between TNA providers is tolerated e.g. in terms of TNA call success rates and user follow-up. Sustainability largely depends on the next EU call offering again to a communities-spanning relevant topics.

**Infra4NextGen (slides Rory Fitzgerald, ESS ERIC)** is a challenge-driven SERV project in the social sciences field, coordinated by ESS ERIC. Project has foreseen no TNA, and shows only a small VA budget, as use of social sciences data does not entail additional expense as per use case. Yet, Virtual Access to social science data resources does need support to prepare data use for virtual access. The project has direct impact on EU Youth Policy through data provision for relevant policy consultation/co-creation.

**Presentations on available views on TNA: ESFRI, TNA study report, SERV community feedback**

**ESFRI Vice-Chair Elena Hoffert (see slides**) presented the ESFRI drafting group’s Report on Access to Research Infrastructures (slides). The report responds to ERA action 8, referring to research infrastructures, and is based on surveys querying both RI stakeholders and the RIs themselves. As challenges for sustained TNA, the following were identified: legal aspects regarding IPR, data protection, liability; distributed RIs having issues with TNA cost reimbursement to TNA providing RIs (e.g. for their Third Party in-kind contributions); the general challenge to maintain TNA as EU funding is needed, but this far depends on project support; lack of wider awareness of RIs and the TNA they offer. The ESFRI group hence recommends a central platform for legal guidance related to TNA; exploration of how different funding streams could support longer-term TNA; EU-funded TNA support should balance curiosity- and challenge-driven TNA; to enhance impact on innovation, cooperation with SMEs and industries should be encouraged; and revision of the Charter for Access to RIs should promote a ‘priority-driven access’ mode with respect to addressing societal/policy needs.

Reactions from the audience confirmed institutional financial/legal barriers for TNA, as mechanisms and scope of TNA and possible implications for national funding of RIs were not well understood. RICH-Europe project referred to an already existing central TNA platform under the RICH-Europe project, but a fully-fledged RI portal including a common platform for TNA access would go beyond.

A comment from the ERIC-Forum 2 project related that at least for ERICs such a more comprehensive TNA platform exists.

**Contracted expert Audrey Richard on outcomes of commissioned TNA Access Study (see slides).**

COM/REA services had commissioned a TNA access study conducted by an external expert (Audrey Richard) on TNA in H2020 IA and HE SERV projects, of which key findings were presented by the contracted expert (Audrey Richard, also Coordinator of the ISIDORe SERV project).

The H2020 TNA containing IA projects were successful in terms of inclusivity of use of RI facilities, as in particular users from Widening Countries benefitted from access to RI installations across EU. In HE a trend was observed that larger EU level RIs (ESFRI ERICs, European International Organisations) delivered a larger fraction of the access services, probably due to lifting earlier restrictions on these RIs with respect to offer EU-funded TNA. Gender imbalances persist, with more than 2/3 male RI users. Well beyond 90% of TNA users come from universities and research organisations. TNA data provided through EU services’ tools were in general useful, except for sometimes unclear and inconsistent terms and reporting, in particular on TNA users and the output from user projects. Reporting on critical aspects e.g. underutilization of RI installations is not duly provided for, hence extracting negative information e.g. on gaps or redundancies is difficult. Follow-up with, and feedback from, TNA users after the end of project is done by only some SERV projects, hence longer-term impact of SERV projects is difficult to catch.

**SERV community feedback from ReMade-at-ARI’s TNA workshop: Barbara Schramm (HZDr, see slides)**

The ReMade-at-ARI project (on Circular Economy) has recently held a TNA stakeholder brainstorming workshop to explore with stakeholders perspectives for sustainability of TNA. Outcomes from that workshop were reported. RIs as a backbone of EU innovative research play a role also in other EU programmes (e.g. ERC). The European portfolio of RIs offering TNA is key for structuring the RI landscape in ERA, as TNA pushes researchers beyond comfortable home zones and supports international and interdisciplinary collaboration, of particular interest for widening countries. SMEs can benefit from EU-funded TNA as it de-risks innovation. Improved service navigation and simplified access pathways would enhance TNA’s reach, making RIs more visible and accessible. TNA requires additional effort, hence needs incentives for RIs to participate. True costs of TNA need to be better compensated for. Sustained TNA funding including new co-funding models are vital for long-term TNA continuity, as well as smarter communication to raise more awareness with a still wider range of researchers using the RIs. Transnationality and open data requirements constitute barriers for some, in particular private players. The diversity of the RI landscape along with complicated access models make it difficult for users to get to the most suitable resource for their needs. Commonalities of RIs’ governance, training measures and data handling could be exploited by having a central access platform with AI assistance to help users find the right RI - whether single-site, distributed, physical, or virtual, by giving precise information and advice on respectively needed RI features. To explore national co-funding models for TNA, established levels of sustained (co-) funding by EU are needed.

Comments from audience ask to enable better findability of the various TNA offers by RIs. Others state that some projects do have such easy-to-find TNA platforms. Others point to EOSC as the natural starting point for findability of TNA; the EOSC framework should thus include a mandate to ensure RI findability and accessibility.

REA services state that to better assess the extent of transnational TNA use by SMEs, corresponding national benchmark figures are needed.

**Compilation and aggregation of input received from workshop participants:**

**Session 1 TNA at core of SERV projects**

***How should we aim at a higher % of EU budget devoted to TNA?***

***Is the ‘clustering of clusters’ approach in SERV topics useful and can joint ESFRI/ERIC entities play an operational role for TNA management?***

Views heard:

Devoting 50-60% of total EU contribution to TNA is doable. In addition to TNA, training of potential users as well as Joint Research (JRA) to upgrade/expand support services & sustainability efforts are necessary incentives to maintain TNA and keep SERV cluster attractive.

Centralizing the management of TNA by a Cascade Consortia architecture (actually already in place for few SERV projects) rather than a flat architecture could lead to efficiency gains. However, Centralised TNA management, however, means more responsibility for central TNA managers (Coordinators, cluster hubs. Centralised TNA budget management managed e.g. by an ERIC, can lead to liquidity problems for TNA delivery, as such EU-level ‘umbrella’ RI entities do not have enough own resources to advance full TNA costs to e.g. external providers (as EU cash from pre-financing/ interim payments does not fully cover for total costs of ‘purchased-in’ TNA).

Some consortia find TNA provision by many beneficiaries not problematic, as it allows for more flexibility in view of diverse TNA services; it mitigates also possible liquidity problems as each TNA provider beneficiary may need to pre-finance TNA costs only as incurred in their own institution.

More standardisation of TNA schemes and guidance on implementing TNA should be available from start of project (templates e.g. for implementing specific partner roles for TNA, e.g. for ‘purchasing’ TNA service provision), which frees administrative/governance budget to allow for more TNA; a cross-project central platform/portal where collection of best practices is available, seems useful.

A point is made that the smaller the project is the less administrative efforts should be needed to set up such smaller TNA project de novo, as otherwise the cost efficiency ratio of TNA-linked content work versus required administrative effort decreases.

Generally, administrative requirements imposed by EU are too heavy: amendments for change of unit costs could be avoided by e.g. on-line adaption to changed CPI or changing energy costs.

Centralised TNA management could allow to ‘level up’ TNA delivery across provider partners, to balance between over- and undersubscribed RI sites/services. However, such balancing should not be managed by more EU-imposed rules but rather be left to consortia themselves. National RIs forming the physical infrastructure of an ERIC may not accept ERIC-managed central allocation of TNA to national ERIC members.

TNA costs are for many RIs only partially reimbursed by EU, and TNA providers thus need to ship in own resources.

Multi-partner ESFRI RIs such as ERICs as a central TNA provider, or having a standing capacity to operate TNA management, is seen by some as a means to save time and costs. Setting up new governance and implementation structures with each SERV project is tedious and eats up administrative overhead. Also, longer project duration helps, along with provisions allowing to benefit from lessons learnt, best practices etc. Central TNA management role may not be restricted to EU-level types of RIs, could be other e.g. international facilities or experienced national players.

More centralised longer-term TNA management should not exclusively be done by ESFRI RIs or ERICs which would need incentives to take on such roles. Also, other appropriate RIs may want to develop into such more central roles and should not be impeded.

With respect to centralising or not TNA management, consider separating evaluation of TNA user applications (that could still be done de-centrally at distributed TNA provider hubs) from centralised TNA budget management (e.g. shifts to respective partners so as to level use of different RI sites offering similar/same services).

**Session 2 Administrative Challenges and complexity of TNA**

***How can we address complexity of RI terminology?***

***How can TNA reimbursement models and VA be simplified?***

Views heard:

Terms ‘TNA’ and ’**access** to RIs’ are misleading, as not only covering physical access to RI but also receiving RI services (‘remote access’) or access to data (as VA).

With respect to “access”, it should be clarified if the term extends also to data sharing, or even just collaborations.

Hierarchy of terms from research infrastructures down to installations, services and units is needed, but needs to be clearly and consistently communicated, as problems arise (e.g. for reporting) if terms are understood differently by partners, which results in communication problem for Coordinators.

Guidance on use of terminology should be centrally available for TNA access provider entities and installations as well as for users; it must comprise guidance to set up access schemes, as well as instructions for well termed and interpreted TNA reporting sheets.

A list of definitions specified by EU could be added to the Charter for Access, such that the latter would become a reference document to resolve any questions regarding definitions of certain terms.

Glossary of EU terminology used for RIs and TNA must be defined but then be translated into commonly used language.

Even experienced Coordinators have problems to understand and apply correct nomenclature; clear description of terms is needed, synonyms are to be avoided; note that terms ‘actual’ and ‘unit costs’ reimbursement are not the usual terms used in real world cost accounting, where rather terms and economic concepts based direct & indirect costs are used; indeed there is a need to have an easy-to-find-glossary of terms related to TNA.

While the term ‘Transnational Access’ makes sense to some, others find the term ‘RI services’ useful; and some only find the use of the different reimbursement models for both TNA and VA adding to confusion.

Current cost models are conceptually useful, but standardisation of implementation of access methodology is needed, such that TNA models become auditable.

In particular large single-sited RIs’ central accounting systems do not allow for separating specific TNA-linked costs from their other institutional costs; also, specific issues with counting towards uc-TNA Third Parties’ in-kind personnel contributions made available to support TNA users at the central RI facility.

TNA actual costs model is seen as more universally applicable, while unit costs are preferred mainly by RIs e.g. in the field of physics, that operate services with standardised time units of use of the large instrumentation anyhow (e.g. beamline hours).

The combined ac/uc reimbursement model could possibly be redundant by dissecting a combined model service into two complementary service components, that operate with different cost models.

Operating unit cost TNA may always entail a loss, as rising costs are not dynamically catered for by historically fixed unit costs; here, the application of the ac-TNA model as part of combined model can cater for dynamically changing cost items. The ac-TNA model will also be needed by e.g. smaller facilities that do not have a sufficient and constant number of users and thus lack the data needed to underpin the calculation of fixed unit costs. Here, the application of flat rates (instead of historical real costs), fixed for different cost categories as per country, could facilitate the calculation of unit costs.

If tables for calculating uc-TNA costs could be easily updated in real time during the course of projects, other than via amendments (e.g. by indexing unit costs with CPIs or rising energy prices), the combined cost model may not be needed. COM services reply that the current legal situation requires strict application of the calculation rules as laid out in the COM decision rules on unit cost use for RIs.

There should be ways to adjust unit cost prices during the runtime of a project, by applying an inflation correction, or by updating the unit cost using last years’ costs. Where possibly, the use of lump-sum would remove the financial reporting burden, that has the potential of simplifying also TNA reimbursement model.

RIs are diverse and need the flexibility that the 3 TNA cost reimbursement models for RIs offer.

Reimbursement of TNA user travel costs overlaps with other EU support (REA services point to overlap with mobility support through the MSCA programme), yet in specific cases travel reimbursement is needed to enable TNA (e.g. users travelling to remote RI locations, early career researchers, or those from Widening Countries, are not likely to get travel funds from home institution).

To a request to allow intra-consortium TNA use by users linked to project partners, in particular in cases where SERV consortia comprise almost all research actors in a given field, REA services respond, that this is in principle already possible in GAs, but should not lead to closed-shop internal TNA use.

Central TNA travel cost management across the SERV project could be entrusted to the Coordinator, but that means more responsibility for Coordinators; and centrally kept, only partially.

Centrally kept liquidity problem if only partly prefinanced TNA budget is kept with COO;

TNA user-linked travel costs are always an element that requires actual cost reimbursement, as uc-TNA must not comprise user travel.

Reimbursement of TNA user travel often clashes with institutional rules, particularly in EU13 countries; hence there is a need of unified European rule for TNA travel reimbursement in SERV projects.

Simplification of TNA schemes is much up to COM/REA services, in particular through clearer guidance (e.g. on reporting) and more flexibility (e.g. amendments to update unit costs).

More centralized TNA budget management/distribution by Coordinators or some few TNA hubs bears advantages, some already ‘ringfence’ all or part of the SERV TNA budget with the Coordinator or cluster hubs, to be released to partners according to demands/needs.

Relieving EU’s cumbersome requirements regarding TNA reporting can mitigate administrative complexity, yet less reporting obligations vis-à-vis EU means more responsibility for Coordinators/hub partners who centrally manage TNA budgets.

With actual cost TNA reporting, TNA related costs fall into different actual cost categories where they get mixed with same actual cost types incurred as provider’s own costs in these respective cost categories (e.g. beneficiaries own travel costs get mixed with TNA user travel); clean separate cost category is needed for covering all TNA linked actual costs.

REA services state that the general trust-based COM approach should apply also to how TNA budget is spent in a SERV project; quite generally should a trust-based approach be used.

SERV project partners know best how to most efficaciously use and distribute TNA funds, in particular when managing TNA budget centrally, e.g. by the Coordinator operating through a cascade funding architecture.

Simplification by considering lump sum reimbursement for SERV projects is currently unrealistic as in such case TNA funds are distributed to partners upfront, without knowing how demand develops; would impede to implement TNA budget distribution according to beneficiaries’ TNA performance.

According to the survey conducted with SERV projects prior to workshop, VA was used only by a minority of SERVs (<50%).

VA running in parallel to TNA is considered correct, as in some cases TNA generates the data subsequently utilised through VA services.

REA service points to the risk of double funding: generation of data reimbursed as TNA, then utilisation as online VA usually not entailing use-case linked extra, still reimbursed a 2nd time?

Maintenance of data for VA does trigger actual costs, including ‘hidden costs’ to maintain data bases, these can then be linked to n°s of uses of the resource. In some cases, in GAs no costs are assigned to VA.

Some argue against VA being an on-line used resource, as even TNA-derived new data should primarily be put in existing data bases (with no extra costs linked to VA); instead of using specific VA provisions, EU should just impose on SERV partners and TNA users to give access to the data produced in context of the project.

Another point is made on VA , namely that challenge driven SERV projects, meant to support policy priorities, should not only populate the existing databases that are used to inform policy makers, but also to put the necessary tools in place that make data with relevance, e.g. for HE missions, easily findable; this would make infrastructures truly contributing to policy and societal challenges and HE missions.

Clarification is needed to discriminate between VA and remote TNA access. It is unclear what sort of actual costs can be linked to a VA use case, although VA does entail a lot of hidden costs (preparation, curation & archiving of data costs money) which cannot simply be presented as part of VA use cases.

COM services relate the history of shaping VA under HE: RTD intended to simplify by removing use case-linked reimbursement of VA, and rather give support only to development of online services. Internal decisions resulted instead in introduction of the additional uc-VA option which can actually lead to an increase of complexity.

ERIC-Forum 2 conducted a survey among 30 ERICs; out of these, about 60% used VA; now, preparations are on-going for hybrid access modes, keeping VA alongside TNA.

Developing data bases for VA is really the remit of INFRATECH and not INFRASERV projects; this speaks against charging/reimbursing costs for development of data resources through VA use cases.

Special case for VA could be VA services supported by openly available AI now, hence a new type of VA being AI driven data services.

**Session 3 Sustainability of TNA**

***How can SERV RIs tap into other EU programmes/projects ?***

***How can national funds be mobilised to make TNA sustainable ?***

***Can commercial revenues generated by RIs contribute to sustainingTNA ?***

Views heard:

REA services explain the baseline rationale of EU’s INFRA programme, namely that national RIs are funded by MS, while only their assembly under new, joint, EU-level RI umbrella receives EU support (DEV calls). Sustaining EU-level umbrella RI entities is primarily done by MS’ statutory contributions to e.g. ERICs. Activities of EU-level RIs/EU networks of RIs, in terms of TNA is fuelled by SERV projects (or H2020 IA). Main issue is long-term sustainability of TNA.

This basic understanding is largely shared: SERV projects confirm that large RI facilities (e.g. polar vessels) are indeed supported by MS, while the transnational use of these vessels require comparatively small money, but the challenge is to maintain this TNA in the longer term i.e. beyond EU project support.

An exception is mentioned, that ‘national’ funds used for building RI can in fact be EU structural funds, so in such a case, EU funds do come in for even setting up RI facilities.

 It must be clear that RIs viability is ensured via other funds, then it remains the TNA access that requires EU support to ensure TNA in a consistent way in the longer term. RI maintenance does not require huge funding to maintain TNA operational.

One model from the field of HPC is that EU co-funds e.g. 50% of RI set-up/maintenance costs so as to have a leverage on user access, such that initial EU support is conditional - that an agreed % of user access is provided later as free-of-charge transnational access for users across EU.

REA services point to survey results that none of the SERV projects reported to tap into other EU programmes e.g. cluster 2 research projects.

SERVs project report that preceding H2020 were heavily involved with EU cluster research projects, while current SERV projects are not yet ready.

A perceived risk of double funding can be addressed by devising proper mechanisms for cross-sources funding, e.g. with RIs/proxy beneficiaries of RI networks joining research projects with low or 0 own initial budget, while during the course of the project, other project beneficiaries needing RI services would then shift the respective shares of their own research budgets to the RIs. A further challenge lies at the level of eligibility of TNA cost categories (uc-TNA) under EU programmes other than the RI programme.

Commission should improve awareness mechanism and communication about possible mechanisms, possibly also the applicability of the uc-TNA COM decision should be expanded to other programmes. Explicit reference to desirable inclusion of RIs in research consortia should be made at the level of topic text in e.g. HE pillar 2 cluster work programmes and calls.

Also, ensuring sustained EU support towards user travel & subsistence costs should be a mode to sustained EU support to TNA, at least for users’ travel expenses.

EOSC has developed mechanisms to fund online RI services via a unique user’s gate operation tool giving access to a catalogue of many EOSC-linked online services; to be explored if this EOSC model can serve also as a functional model for the delivery of RIs’ TNA services, while currently it serves for further development of the EOSC nodes, not to deliver research support to users as done in the context of TNA. EOSC may indeed help with respect to VA access, but it is not the right place to manage physical and remote TNA.

REA services point to EOSC Partnership-like Joint Undertakings as a model where EU, MS and/or industry ship in funds, this could also be a framework for sustained TNA delivery.

In particular distributed RIs/RI networks significantly rely on EU funds reimbursing costs of TNA access. Absence of such operational support could make RIs/RI networks disappear. EU should decide based on case-by-case assessments if TNA operations of these RIs should be sustained; fixed EU- versus MS-budget shares should be established in advance to ensure continued national budget support (in essence a Public Public Partnership model).

REA services focus discussion on the survey outcome that about half of the survey responders consider national support towards TNA delivery possible.

Some large RIs provide co-funding anyhow, as the EU reimbursement of TNA in any case covers only 20% of the full costs of each TNA use case; such rather moderate EU-contribution could/should be possible to sustain.

Co-funding scheme piloted with 2023 INFRA-SERV-01-03 was a good idea but should indeed explicitly focus national co-funding on cover for TNA, and not just report national RIs’ institutional costs to be contributed as national co-funding.

100% EU support for transnational users’ travel & subsistence to visit and use nationally maintained RIs (e.g. polar vessels) would already make EU-wide TNA use more sustainable.

To make co-funding of TNA by EU attractive to Member States, it should go beyond only 30% EU contribution to joint calls with national funders in Co-Fund partnerships; rather 70% EU-contribution should be given to partnership calls, which could make a Co-Fund Action more successful in terms of getting also national funds used for TNA support (albeit only at e.g. 30%).

Large heterogeneity of conditions for co-funding by MS’ national sources entail a diversity of different national rules to be considered to fund external users from other countries using a largely nationally funded RI, hence very different modes and incentives are needed to lure national funders into EU-wide TNA support. Apart from diversity of applicable national rules, a recent survey also points to differing willingness of countries towards co-funding transnational use of their RI facilities.

REA representatives report that only very few of the SERV survey responders’ services have revenues derived from industry use of TNA, and they focus discussion on how such revenues could possibly contribute towards sustainability of TNA.

The ESFRI RIs’ national RI members are well used by industry, but this does not benefit sustainability of TNA delivered by EU-level RIs.

Industry user projects may have high innovation/exploitation relevance but not necessarily equally so for scientific excellence, which is still the predominant criterion for TNA.

While full costs of TNA should be charged to industry users to compensate that they will not give open access to their often proprietary research results, this is not what is wanted to support SMEs as TNA users, as here TNA should serve SMEs to generate exploitable research results, SMEs using TNA should hence not be expected to generate income for RIs.

As EU-funding of TNA is conditional to readiness to later give open access to data resulting from these TNA projects, TNA is not attractive for industry users. This needs to be accepted, but it means that industry will normally not be the main users of TNA as offered by RIs at EU-level. Industry players do use national RI component facilities, thus generating needed revenues for the latter. Some provider RIs in fact struggle to cope with competing national/industry demand and the delivery of EU-funded TNA.

REA services mention that maintenance of paid-for TNA service modes may still be beneficial if only to sustain principal availability of TNA services during periods of no EU-funding for such TNA.

REA services show up the survey’s interesting brainstorming results on making TNA sustainable:

* TNA instrument to be better integrated with cluster research projects, Partnerships, ERC grants
* TNA budget to be given directly to ESFRI RIs/ERICs (they will then recruit TNA providers) or to other central TNA managing entities
* 1 central TNA scheme/project, harmonised TNA reimbursement, can be partially (only % reimbursed)
* 1 central TNA budget held by EU (RI, MSCA ?), not by projects to flexibly TNA where demanded
* co-funding from national sources possible, but also get contributions from non-EU TCs using TNA
* relieve TNA budget from users’ T&S costs (T&S borne by home inst., special natl. or EU budgets)
* or the contrary: allow for more users’ T&S hence TNA support largely as users’ T&S support
* longer duration of SERV projects leads to continuity of TNA provision, economies on TNA set-up
* no more changes, keep programme as it is, except reshape thematic scope of calls (wider/smaller ?)

The current triangle Networking<>TNA<>Joint Research supported under H2020 IA, and to some extent also in HE SERV projects should remain, as TNA has most impact when it goes hand-in-hand with networking and service development: networking activities foster collaborations and shape research to better align to EU priorities. Joint research on better services ensures RIs are fit for the future and provide best services and scientific support to TNA users.

Presentation from COM/RTD on exploring a future framework for further integrated and sustained TNA access schemes: see respective slide presentation on a planned WP2025 CSA topic.

Audience asks about how relevant the possibility of national co-funding of TNA is for proposing a community approach for sustainable TNA, because national co-funding may only be possible for some countries but not for others. For some countries or communities, having to provide only 20% national contribution to access costs may work, but the current EU co-funding scheme with priorities and rules to be developed for a limited time frame only, may not allow to reach at the necessary decisions to be made with by member states, given the stakeholders and advisory boards that would be needed.

Another question concerns the type of access-related costs which are to be co-financed, as for some RIs the additional personal efforts for TNA would require 100% funding, while national co-funding for other cost items is more feasible for such RIs.

**Session 4 - Impact of SERV projects on policies & innovation**

***How is impact generated ‘in practice’, how to best highlight it ?***

***What is the impact on International Cooperations, how best to tailor it ?***

***What is the impact on innovation, how best to track it?***

Views heard:

A central access portal would serve ideally also for collection and presentation of impact from SERV projects and TNA.

Policy briefs should not need to be produced by the projects, but in fact SERV projects would rather provide respective data to COM/REA services to extract the impact value.

TNA activity is a prime example of successful Science Diplomacy for policies, by promoting international collaboration on important policies (e.g. with respect to polar regions); this becomes visible through European RIs participating to big international initiatives.

A good way to raise visibility and impact is to align/link SERV project meetings to major EU policy meetings.

Challenge driven SERV projects e.g. with focus on global change/biodiversity, or an pandemics preparedness/response, are well involved with pertinent HE Partnerships, or missions, which indeed can be reported in policy briefs.

Other SERV projects supporting e.g. research on air traffic safety or safety and resilience of building environments are immediately policy relevant by generating important data as contributions to underpin respective EU regulations.

Some SERVs generate policy briefs closely working with JRC where JRC has a mandate, with JRC also giving input to align the scope of TNA calls to identified EU policy needs.

REA services inquire about RI contributions to international collaborations, including bilateral and regional collaborations, and the value of international collaboration focussed DEV calls.

International cooperation is inherent with activities of EU level RIs, but specific EU request to include Ukraine was welcomed.

Most responders to survey consider that the 20% limit of TNA to be allowed for users from Third Countries is adequate, but some find this 10% limit too restrictive, in particular where global research challenges (e.g. pandemics or climate change) are concerned. Common and sustained collaboration frameworks with RIs in Asia and e.g. the US could be useful.

COM services reply that, in such cases, grant agreements can already now well foresee more than 20% of TNA to be allocated to users from Third Countries.

Others confirm utility of the 20% threshold as otherwise users from advanced, R&D intense countries (like the US) may outcompete EU researchers on the EU-funded TNA, without equal reciprocal use of respective Third Country facilities by Europeans.

EU’s international policy objectives should be made clear, as in view of global politics and security concerns, countries like Russia and China should rather be impeded to access European RI facilities.

SERV projects offering EU’s most advanced facilities for use would ‘by design’ spread innovation across EU, but it is unclear to which extent this comes from project partners joint research, or from TNA user projects results, also how such innovative outcomes can be highlighted.

It is acknowledged that industry-driven innovation would not the main remit of EU-funded TNA in SERV projects.

Com services report that, while only 8% of the TNA users are directly industry-linked, very many of academic TNA users work on user projects that in fact are cooperations with industry, hence industry does benefit from TNA indirectly though these cooperations with academia.

Availability of research results in particular from TNA-user projects, but also from beneficiaries’ joint research, peaks only after end of the SERV project, and resulting impact is hence difficult to capture.

Some SERV projects have dedicated innovation committees that systematically identify and highlight exploitable outputs e.g. on industry fairs and exhibitions as part of the agreed activities under the SERV project’s work plan.

Challenge-driven SERV projects should normally design and generate high impact & innovation outputs (addressing e.g. pandemics), but it is not clear, if, how, and to which extent SERV targeted should continue to support innovative TNA-derived outputs in order to turn these into tangible and visible high impact.

The impact session is concluded by a flash presentation by a SERV project Coordinator who also manages a major national physics infrastructure in a widening country (slides from NEPHEWS Coordinator). Challenging statements are tabled that too much focus on the excellence criterion alone may lead to reduced impact for specific challenges to be addressed, such as specific societal issues or e.g. EU coherence in terms of e.g. young researchers from less advanced Widening Countries being less competitive with TNA proposals. Large infrastructures with EU-funded TNA making up for only a small percentage of their total users group, may just select user proposals matching respective EU-requested challenges, thus in fact not triggering the intended extra research focussed on the identified challenge. Large SERV consortia may lead to ‘access bubbles’ populated by the larger ‘excellence’ community linked to a SERV project.

These statements are followed by a controversial debate stating that SERV projects’ TNA selection committees comprising external evaluators would impede formation of perceived closed-shop ‘access bubbles’. Also that excellence must in any case remain the prime criterion for choosing TNA projects.

Others shared the view that such ‘access bubbles’ may form, and that more incentives should be given to attract new TNA user projects that really match the SERV-targeted specific challenges, or target more specific users groups.

External expert reviewers of TNA-comprising projects, though being experts in the field of the project under review, are often not aware of the existence of this TNA-offering project in their field.

There is evidence that TNA selection panels rank proposals from newcomers sometimes lower. Dedicated training for potential early career users is advocated, and priority to be given in case of ex-aequo rated proposals, also twinning schemes are proposed to link proposers from Widening and EU15 countries. Another suggestion for good practice is that if the group accepts a newcomer from the widening country, some incentives can be offered.

TNA use counts normalised to R&D personnel/country do not confirm underrepresentation of TNA users from Widening Countries as seen on the slides shown on the TNA study conducted.

Better and wider advertising of TNA opportunities is needed, to reach the respectively targeted thematic, societal or geographical user communities, so as to enhance impact of the TNA schemes.

**Annex: Agenda of the meeting**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 08:30 – 09:00 | Welcome Coffee |
| 09:00 – 09:20 | Welcome, Introduction, Objectives |
| 09:20 – 09:40 | Survey Results on SERV Projects and TNA |
| 09:40 – 10:20 | Presentations from 3 SERV Projects exemplifying common issues |
| 10:20 – 10:45 | Points of view on TNA: ESFRI, TNA study report, SERV community feedback |
| 10:45 – 11:15 | Coffee Break |
| 11:15 – 12:15 | Session 1: TNA at the core of SERV projects |
| 12:15 – 13:15 | Networking Lunch |
| 13:15 – 14:15 | Session 2: Administrative challenges of TNA |
| 14:15 – 15:45 | Session 3: Sustainability of TNA |
| 15:45 – 16:15 | Coffee Break |
| 16:15 – 17:00 | Session 4: Policy dimension of SERV projects |
| 17:00 – 17:30 | Workshop take-home messages and future directions |
| 17:30 – 17:30 | Closure of Meeting |