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Title

Advocacy Strategy - Country engagement - DiSSCo RI preparatory phase

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Abstract

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For that, the advocacy strategy establishes cooperation between the DiSSCo CSO and the WP8 leader CETAF to foster the involvement of DiSSCo NNs, and Funders Forum representatives with a twofold objective: (1) to build tailored advocacy strategies at the national level that ensures national commitments for the operation of DiSSCo, and (2) to help shape the strategic and organisational developments of the research infrastructure during its preparatory phase, based on the partnership involved.

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Advocacy Strategy

Country engagement - DiSSCo RI preparatory phase

DiSSCo Prepare WP 8 – Ms 8.7

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Keywords: Advocacy strategy, Country engagement, Funders Forum, Organizational dimension of DiSSCo



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1. INTRODUCTION

The Distributed System of Scientific Collections Research Infrastructure (DiSSCo RI) entered the ESFRI Roadmap update 2018. Since then, the RI has evolved in several different dimensions including its supporting structure. From a projects-based initiative with different partners dedicated to setting the ground, its major components, and aspirational goals, DiSSCo is evolving gradually towards the definition of a thorough and sustainable infrastructure where providers of natural sciences-related data work jointly to provide access to bio and geodiversity knowledge.

In that endeavour, DiSSCo started as an institutions-based initiative supported by the eight largest European museums plus the Consortium of European Taxonomic Facilities (CETAF) as the community behind DiSSCo, by financing the Coordination and Support Office (CSO) to run the whole process of building the DiSSCo RI. Conscious of the need to engage with the larger supporting set of actors, DiSSCo RI moved towards a comprehensive framework under which all relevant agents can participate and contribute to construct the RI that meets their community needs. Over 130 institutions across 21 European countries have signed the European Memorandum of Understanding (EU MoU) to validate their commitment to building together DiSSCo. Such a process also needs to serve as facilitator of the digital transformation that natural history museums, botanic gardens, and other biodiversity centers have started to address and implement to facilitate open access to the information contained and the knowledge produced on top of it.

To make this arrangement effective and united, an interim governance model has been put in place to ensure transparency, inclusiveness, and collaboration, with its operating bodies and the consultancy and operational workflows that allow DiSSCo development. The interim General Assembly acts as the interim governing body that oversees and dictates the strategic line of action for DiSSCo. The Scientific and Technical Advisory Bodies (SAB and TAB, respectively) provide the external advice and guidance that will allow DiSSCo to improve their scientific and technical dimensions while ensuring the breakthrough technology and mechanisms are permanently considered. Other bodies resulting from the DiSSCo-linked project's operation bring in other relevant voices and participation, as it is the case of the Stakeholders Forum (SF) that will function once established as a space for discussion, acknowledgment, and alignment of DiSSCo with the surrounding components of the environmental landscape, including other Research Infrastructures in the field and also industrial agents.

Still, all those components that facilitate and guide the construction of DiSSCo need to operate in direct and close consonance with the funding agencies of DiSSCo. As a RI, DiSSCo will become a national-based initiative with countries committed to its operation, both politically and financially. Those commitments illustrate the support given by the national authorities to DiSSCo as a pivotal element for scientific excellence serving to tackle societal challenges in the environmental field but also beyond. To that, it becomes crucial to engage with country-level representation as early as possible and as fluently as required,

and advocate for the added value of DiSSCo for scientific research. The Funders Forum (FF) will gather countries aiming at formalizing their partnership to DiSSCo RI while the Funders Forum Advocacy Strategy intends to give response to this goal and provide the tools and mechanisms to channel, support, and boost national participation in DiSSCo.

1.1. Principles and Assumptions

DiSSCo RI development goes through a series of phases, starting with its inclusion in the ESFRI Roadmap in August 2018, passing through its preparatory phase first (in which it is currently immersed), the transition to the construction phases, and finalizing with the operation of the RI, legally and structurally.

During the ongoing preparatory phase, a set of principles guide the construction of DiSSCo. From the infrastructure perspective, the RI would have to consider

- Inclusiveness
- Coherence and alignment
- Specialization and Complementarity
- Community enrichment
- Long-term sustainability

On the other hand, content-wise, the RI will:

- provide open access to the data and services built on top of it
- ensure pan-European consistency and collaboration
- guide the implementation of digital transformative change at institutional level
- foster the co-creation of knowledge together with the civil society and the private sector
- facilitate the strategic use of NSCs beyond the environmental-related domain

Similarly, several assumptions are at the basis of the development of the RI:

- a) Contributing environment: DiSSCo RI is operating through a plethora of DiSSCo-linked projects funded by different Calls under Horizon 2020 (ICEDIG, SYNTHESYS+, ENVRI-FAIR, DiSSCo Prepare, and others as the MOBILISE COST Action). Together those are represented in the SAP (Strategic Alignment of Projects) and are thematically streamlined through the so-called Strategic Groups (SGs) that gather representation around thematic areas of pivotal interest to DiSSCo (such as Digitization and Training). Other complementary initiatives add value and actions to

DiSSCo, such as the participation in CoL, Global Alliance for Biodiversity, TDWG, RDA, and many others.

- b) Connection with the community network: same as above applies to the close collaboration and integration of results with the CETAF working groups, specifically the ones focused on digitization and bioinformatics.
- c) Supporting structures: the CSO ensures alignment, cohesiveness, and coherence among all those above-mentioned actions, and oversees the overall functioning to avoid duplication of efforts and to guarantee complementary and effective contributions.
- d) National representation: a pivotal component of the DiSSCo RI that implies financial and political support from those countries aiming to participate in the operation of the RI and to include DiSSCo as a crucial component of its scientific strategy and their biodiversity-related priorities.
- e) Legal arrangements: the interim governance structure (governing, advisory, and supporting bodies) will necessarily be replaced by a legal entity. WP7 under the DiSSCo Prepare project (DPP) is in charge of identifying and putting in place the most suitable and efficient model that meets DiSSCo needs and integrates its components. It will reflect the evolution from an organisation approach to a country-level positioning.

2.2 Country Engagement

During its preparatory phase, the institutions-based model of DiSSCo emphasizes the importance of communities of practice in supporting the RI. It integrates the participation of organizations and experts from over 130 organizations signatories of the EU MoU. All of them are Natural Science Collections (NSC)-based entities, working closely with the CETAF network that ensures the researchers' voice and the community's concerns are heard.

At the end of the preparatory phase, however, DiSSCo will become a legal entity that implies a new governance model based on national political and financial commitments. Essential to achieving this is the need to equip DiSSCo RI with mechanisms to avoid misalignments with the national scientific priorities and guarantee long-term sustainability in the data, scientific, technical, governance, and financial dimensions.

With this objective in mind, DiSSCo is in the early stages of working towards sound commitments at a national level across 21 countries already engaged with the RI by implementing collaborative communication and advocacy strategies through the representation of the national node. The commitment of the national authorities to DiSSCo will depend on how early and consistently DiSSCo engages with national interests and how it is perceived as one of the key facilitators of scientific excellence benefiting socio-economic developments at large.

To ensure the DiSSCo RI effectively fulfills specific national needs and to customise its message, DiSSCo has established a new advisory body, the Funders Forum (FF) with the

objective of keeping national authorities informed and preparing them to take over the responsibility of governing the DiSSCo RI once its legal entity is in place.

2. THE FUNDERS FORUM ADVOCACY STRATEGY

The advocacy strategy for the country engagement presented in this document aims to establish a continuous procedure to ensure national authorities actively participate in both the strategic and operational planning of DiSSCo and commit to supporting it during the construction and operational phases.

The Country engagement strategy describes the activities needed to set up and operate the Funders Forum and the advocacy actions needed during the preparatory and transition phases to guarantee sufficient commitment to the DiSSCo RI construction and operation phases.

This report defines the audiences, expected changes, principles, and actions of the Country engagement strategy. The strategy aligns with ongoing efforts carried out by the Communication and Engagement team of the CSO and complements the Communication and Dissemination Strategy delivered under WP8 (D8.1). It presents the phases of the Country engagement strategy implementation and identifies the most suitable and efficient tools to move further, specifically for the FF operation and growth.

2.1. The Framework

To ensure that DiSSCo's interaction with national authorities is constructive and fruitful, communication, dissemination, and advocacy actions need to be combined and well-articulated. The country engagement advocacy strategy is a piece of the overall DiSSCo's communication and dissemination strategy that acts as an umbrella for all the activities that refer to external positioning of DiSSCo RI, including engagement with Stakeholders.

DiSSCo communication and dissemination strategy sets clear objectives and provides specific tools (including the website, thematic workshops, and international fora) to empower the NNs and support their role in creating bridges between DiSSCo and the national authorities as well as with the institutions participating in each country, in a three-layered interactive communication scheme. Sustained communications will also build on trust among individuals engaged in the DiSSCo mission and ensure transparency of national nodes. All together will serve as a valuable framework for advocacy actions, including the Country engagement strategy.

In the light of achieving partnership of national representation to DiSSCo RI and critical support from DiSSCo RI major stakeholders, two bodies will provide the necessary fora for discussion and engagement, i.e. the Funders Forum (FF) and the Stakeholders Forum (SF).

In the interim governance model agreed for DiSSCo RI, the Funders Forum advisory body will constitute a key body in the overall government of DiSSCo. Its input will ensure the appropriate level of engagement of national authorities and allow DiSSCo to adjust according to (changing) national and international priorities.

Simultaneously, in DiSSCo Prepare, the preparatory phase project, specifically under WP8, a Stakeholders Forum will be settled as a forum for discussion and interaction among all related stakeholders, including RIs. It will provide critical feedback in the overall decision-making process across the five dimensions of implementation readiness of the infrastructure: science, data, finance, technology, and organization.

Both will largely contribute to the efforts and resources dedicated to advocate for DiSSCo, that need to critically address:

Raising awareness

To tackle national commitment, National Nodes engagement is pivotal. For that, CETAF as WP8 leader in DPP, in close collaboration with CSO-CE, works on addressing the different levels of maturity or readiness present in each country. NNs need to be permanently aware and informed about DiSSCo and the state-of-the-art of its progress, so they can develop their arguments to create convincing narratives based on the national specifics. Therefore, communication tools and NN meetings (as described in DiSSCo's communication and dissemination strategy) have been implemented to support the critical role that NNs play in the process as the chain between the DiSSCo structure and the national representatives.

Boosting the readiness to take action

Keeping the audience well-informed, however, does not automatically ensure their advocacy for the cause. It is also essential that NNs develop a strong positive opinion and vision justifying why DiSSCo is critical to the RI landscape and should be supported, and be able to proactively advocate for it. It is, therefore, incumbent to combine communication with advocacy, to instill a sense of need and importance that effectively moves both the NNs and national authorities towards the expected level of commitment.

Advocacy activities need to anchor on those fundamental pillars that will sustain the implementation of the strategy throughout its different phases.

2.2 Objectives

The Country engagement strategy's main objective is to obtain national commitment to DiSSCo's construction and operation phases. This should be a long-term financial and

political commitment based on DiSSCo's position as a large-scale pan-European research infrastructure of national interest.

For that, the **advocacy strategy for country engagement** establishes cooperation between the DiSSCo CSO and the WP8 leader CETAF to foster the involvement of DiSSCo NNs, and Funders Forum representatives with a twofold objective: (1) to build tailored advocacy strategies at the national level that ensures national commitments for the operation of DiSSCo, and (2) to help shape the strategic and organisational developments of the research infrastructure during its preparatory phase, based on the partnership involved.

The Country engagement strategy is defined as a two-stage programme with subsequent phases that will imply the definition of interim objectives to articulate the strategy over time, in accordance with the maturity gained in each country towards the national involvement in DiSSCo. Those interim objectives can be tracked to determine where adjustments might be necessary. Following those interim objectives, activities will be spread over the two phases in approximately four years by when the legal entity of DiSSCo RI will be in place.

2.3 Audiences

Two audiences are identified as subjects of the advocacy actions as either main actors and/or target audiences are

- DiSSCo national nodes (NNs),
- National authorities responsible for NSCs,

National authority representatives with major roles in decision-making processes will be the final target audience while the NNs play an essential role through the entire process of engagement. NNs will participate in defining the advocacy strategy (Phase 1) and act as DiSSCo ambassadors at a national level (Phases 1-2).

2.4 Objectives (Changes)

The Funders Forum strategy's main objective is to obtain national commitment to DiSSCo's construction and operation phases. This should be a long-term financial and political commitment based on DiSSCo's position as a large-scale research infrastructure of European and national interest.

Interim objectives

It is essential that DiSSCo works collaboratively with target audiences in defining interim objectives to tailor them to meet national needs but also to accommodate changing circumstances. Collaborating on interim objectives may avoid the unfair perception that the

strategy failed at a certain moment if the objective is not fully achieved within a certain timeframe. Furthermore, interim objectives can be tracked to determine where adjustments might be necessary. Some possible interim objectives may include: stronger coalitions among institutions without a formed node, increased communication coverage (media coverage), increased advocacy capacity (e.g. DiSSCo champions), better monitoring tools for national roadmap developments, etc.

3. MODE OF OPERATION - A STRATEGY IN TWO PHASES

Implementing the Country engagement strategy consists of two consecutive phases with different objectives, modes of operation, and use of resources.

3.1 Phase 1¹

Timeframe: July 2020 - February 2021

Objective: To create the Funders Forum (once approved by DiSSCo iGA) and organise its inaugural meeting in early 2021 with sufficient representation.

Lead: WP8/CSO/National Nodes with the support of interested National Nodes (NNs)/ Representatives from national authorities.

Target audiences: NNs, and national authorities.

Actions

3.1.1 Reaching out to the target audience

To identify the representatives that need to take a seat at the FF, it is necessary to first count on the most accurate data (of contacts) and secondly furnish the engagement with the most convincing and impactful information. To ensure the right entity and representative is reached out in each of the target countries, prior contacts with national authorities responsible for NSCs, ESFRI delegates and/or research infrastructures in the environmental domain can facilitate this task. All of them are relevant actors in the policy process. The backing and endorsement by senior representatives with an active role in decision-making is essential to address and obtain national funding commitments.

Additionally, the right information needs to be prepared to both encapsulate DiSSCo features and also customize them to the specific circumstances at national level, thus framing the action in each country in the most impactful manner.

To collate the basis on which those messages need to be developed and equally to analyze the specificities at national level, under WP8, two questionnaires to NNs have been circulated with the objective to gather accurate information on national priorities to enable

¹Link to gantt chart:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1oFzZ7log34AGV7Z1r6wqoQQZsnj1Lay_Rc8717k094g/edit?usp=sharing

the positioning of DiSSCo and DiSSCo nodes towards the corresponding national authorities, as the final target audience.

Activities:

- Launching of surveys on national priorities
- Production of DiSSCo key messages
- Preparation of the communication campaign to be launched in September 2020.

Lead: WP8

3.1.2 Identifying underlying assumptions and beliefs

Designing an advocacy strategy requires one to have an in-depth knowledge of how the policy-making process works at a national level and the best way to approach it. In addition, one needs to understand the perception of DiSSCo by both the NNs (science-linked) and the national authorities (policy-based). To that end, and based on the information collated from the surveys, a calendar of bilateral meetings with NNs representatives was arranged to get to an in-depth acknowledgment of the specifics, to identify competing or misaligned assumptions about DiSSCo's services, its position in the RI landscape, or its processes. The final objective is to tool up NNs with the best possible, focused, and tailored information that they could use when approaching their national representatives..

Activities:

- Analysis of NN questionnaire responses
- Establishment of bilateral meetings (or regional meetings as a first stage), to collaboratively define advocacy actions to be led by the NNs.

Lead: CSO-CE

3.1.3 Identifying common practices

In parallel to the specifics, the commonalities are pivotal to convince policy-makers to participate in a joint adventure, and therefore to exploit to its full potential the sum of individual contributions. Those common practices, for instance, regions sharing similar administrative operations (e.g., South-Europe or among the Scandinavian countries), help equally to shaping the communication campaign. Together with common positions, best practices, as well as lessons to be learnt from others, were extracted from the survey's responses to elaborate a Matrix of the different readiness levels across the NNs towards scientific roadmaps, and DiSSCo participation at large. This matrix will complement and enhance the understanding of the NNs of their specific framework for action at national level and thus, how to address the positioning of the country towards DiSSCo.

Activities:

- Elaboration and analysis of a matrix of different readiness levels across the NNs.

Lead: WP8/CSO CE

3.1.4 Tailoring advocacy strategies

The core of the advocacy strategy is to use narratives that speak to specific national priorities and these will be developed in collaboration with the NNs and interested national authorities.

Activities:

- To this end, the first communication campaign launched in September 2020, under DPP WP8 was the starting point. Key messages together with the analysis of national readiness levels have supported the definition of customized national advocacy actions through a calendar of bilateral consultations.

Lead: WP8

3.1.5 Shaping the Funders Forum advisory body

Establishing the Funders Forum is a unique exercise in engaging national authorities to advise on RI development while simultaneously keeping the project rooted in both, institutional support and the actors leading the initiative. This exceptional balance requires an in-depth understanding of the role of the Funders Forum as a precursor to the country-based RI governance model and therefore requires the input of future responsible individuals as early as possible. Participation and engagement of the national authorities rely heavily on this understanding.

Activities:

It is important that the national authorities understand and participate in shaping the role and function of the advisory body. To this end, a Funders Forum information package including a draft of the Funders Forum Rules of Procedure was prepared. This package provides a comprehensive view of the roles and responsibilities of the advisory body and will serve as the basis for communication with the targeted audiences starting with the NNs. Comments and suggestions will lead to a final information package that will then be discussed with the national authorities of the twenty-one countries in DiSSCo in a second round of bilateral meetings.

Lead: CSO

The case of The Netherlands

The Netherlands, as the hosting country of DiSSCo during its preparatory phase, provides significant political and financial support through Naturalis Biodiversity Center.

Early in the preparatory phase, representatives of the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science manifested interest in following the progress of and participating in the development of certain documents for the Funders Forum. This has provided an excellent opportunity to strengthen collaboration with the hosting country and set up a model of cooperation that will be applied to other countries.

3.2 Phase 2

Timeframe: March 2021 - establishment of DiSSCo legal entity

Twofold objective: (1) to expand the number of participants in the body and therefore, DiSSCo's role in national roadmaps, and (2) to start bilateral agreements with national authorities for political and financial support to the DiSSCo RI.

Lead: WP8/ CSO/ National Nodes and institutions/ Representatives from national authorities

Actions:

3.2.1 Bi-annual Funders Forum meetings

The Funders Forum will meet twice a year on a regular basis, to advise and report on strategic and organisational planning during the preparatory phase. The CSO to the DiSSCo will report to the interim General Assembly for acknowledgment and will trigger action for the CSO and the DiSSCo iGA.

The Funders Forum meetings may take place in a way that optimizes alignment with the Scientific and Technical Advisory Boards and the Stakeholders Forum. The latter plays a key role in motivating national engagement. DiSSCo's alignment with other RIs and international initiatives will show how cooperation among RIs boost cost-effective national investments while delivering scientific excellence benefiting society.

The CSO act as FF Secretariat.

3.2.2 Monitoring progress through periodic bilateral meetings

The calendar of bilateral meetings is expected to involve changing actors, as the participation of funding agencies evolves, and to address topics as they arise over the DiSSCo evolutionary process. These meetings guarantee a continuous collaborative mode of operation and fluent communication and are an effective tool to monitor the readiness and willingness of the countries to join.

Lead: CSO CE

3.2.3 Preparation of agreements with national authorities

Bilateral agreements between DiSSCo RI's new legal entity and the national authority will guarantee a commitment for at least 3 years, to financially and politically support the construction and operation phases of the RI.

Lead: CSO. It may be necessary to engage external legal advice.

4. NEXT STEPS

The perception of the DiSSCo RI at a national level is directly influenced by how DiSSCo and other RIs and initiatives cooperate to foster scientific advances and generate socio-economic impact, and how synergies translate into wiser investments of resources and policies management. Currently, DiSSCo actively participates in discussions in the research and technical domains at both the European and international levels and works collaboratively with several RIs and other data-driven initiatives. Special reference can be made to the BiCIKL project where several RIs have joined resources and efforts to create a new community that covers the entire biodiversity data cycle, from data generation to data publishing. New initiatives are currently being shaped to allocate DiSSCo RI and its services at the center of the biodiversity data provision, as it is the case of proposals currently being elaborated for different calls under the EU FP Horizon Europe (HORIZON-BIODIV-01-01 and others).

Several actions have already been initiated to provide a better understanding of the consolidated landscape surrounding DiSSCo RI and the potential synergies and complementarities that DiSSCo shares and can benefit from with other RIs operating in the same environmental domain and others related. This is the case of the Task Force formed from the iGA that already acknowledged the need to comprehend and help to navigate through such a complex reality. An still not finalized output is the "Contact Zones analysis" that was presented to the 3rd iGA meeting (iGA3) back in June 2021 by the Task Force chair, Aino Juslén (vice-Chair of DiSSCo iGA). This exercise aims to compare DiSSCo RI and other related RIs to characterise their current and planned activities through a quantitative assessment in a way that describes the dimensions of their activities, and their relative technological maturity. Final results are expected to be presented at iGA4 in 2022.

To consolidate and continue these activities, the SF to be built under DPP WP8 is considered as a relevant body, where stakeholders will provide critical feedback in the overall decision-making process of the preparatory phase across the readiness dimensions of the infrastructure. This feedback will be integrated and duly considered in coordination with the FF input.

To ensure alignment and sound cooperation, the FF and the SF will be invited regularly to attend the meetings of both bodies. It is foreseen that they will report on certain common issues.

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Country engagement strategy stands as a pivotal component of the DiSSCo Strategy which will frame and drive the further development and consolidation of the DiSSCo RI.

Participation of countries becomes not only a requirement to set up the foundational structure of the RI itself. It is, basically understood as a source of information and a driver for discussion with the final aim of building an infrastructure that meets the needs of the research community and responds to the strategic priorities of the national decision-makers in research and innovation that hold the responsibility of implementing the right measures to sustain and boost excellence in science.

The construction of DiSSCo RI can not be inherited by governments but on the contrary, need to count on them. The long-term sustainability of the RI strongly relies on their level of understanding, endorsement, and commitment. National authorities need to support (financially and organizationally) to build DiSSCo up and finally, back its operation over time.