AGORA 1998 – 2003

An independent review of the Belgian Federal Office for Science Policy's programme for scientific support of the construction and valorisation of the informational contents of federal databases for socio-economic use

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1 Introduction

Throughout Europe, a certain *rapprochement* has taken place between social policy and social research by the turn of the millennium. On the policy end, there is an increased interest in evidence based policy making and performance accounting. Politics and the public want to make sure that society gets what it wants, or at least what it pays for. On the research end, there is a growing tendency to use data from administrations in addition to, or even in place of, data from survey samples. Administrative data are relevant, electronically available in growing abundance, and cheap, but not easily accessible – if at all. They augment, or sometimes even replace, sample survey data. In comparison with administrative data as a source for social research, the latter are much more flexible and are suited to capture information on an unlimited set of variables. But they are expensive to collect, and may be hampered with (high and growing) non-response, and potentially resulting biases.

The policy perspective of this mutual approach is symbolised by the Lisbon agenda for the European Union. A score of policy indicators and targets has been agreed upon by the Lisbon Summit of the European member states in an effort to make the European Union the most competitive economy of the world by 2010. The research perspective of the relation between policy and research is best expressed by the Scandinavian countries. The 2001 round of Scandinavian population censuses is fully based upon administrative registers.

Somewhere between Lisbon and Scandinavia, Belgium has its AGORA program to bring about the reconciliation of social policy and social research. The program intends to enhance the availability of administrative data for social research. It brokers between administrators and researchers, who both have multiple roles. The administrators collect, process and hold the data for the primary purpose of their administration, and are in need of the policy information resulting from research on these data. The researchers need data for their own research, and have special skills in converting data into research data. In Belgium, the AGORA program brings together administrators and researchers.

In this report we review the success of the AGORA program, with due attention to the objectives, the procedures and the outputs of the programme. A panel of international experts was engaged to perform this review, consisting of, in alphabetical order:
- Dominique Joye, S I D O S, *Service suisse d'information et d'archivage de données pour les sciences sociales*, Switzerland;
- Ekkehard Mochmann, *Gesellschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen e.V. GESIS*, Germany;
- Joris Nobel, *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*, Netherlands.
- Gaston Schaber, CEPS/INSTEAD, Luxemburg.

Our terms of engagement can be found in the first Annexe.

For our review, we have based ourselves on the available policy documents as well as a score of interviews with administrators and researchers involved. The documents were made available by the AGORA programme staff, headed by Messrs. Bogdan van Doninck and Aziz Naji. The interviews were performed by Ms. Anne-Marie Prieels, a Belgian research consultant from Tech-Know Consultants. She as well as the AGORA staff also provided us with useful background

information. We kindly acknowledge their proficient and efficient contributions. The panel met in Brussels on a number of occasions:

- in December 2003 to discuss the schedule for the interviews
- in February 2004 to discuss the results from the interviews.

The report was drafted -with some delay due to personal circumstances - by Joris Nobel.

Our report is structured as follows:

- In the first section, we summarise our understanding of the ambitions and the organisation of the program. This is derived from a number of constitutive documents, the internal evaluations, and reports from meetings, in addition to the information publicly available on the Internet.
- In the second section, we present a summary factual description of the outputs of the programme. We augment this description with some of our comments.
- In the third section, we describe the body of our work, the interviews with a number of key players taken from public administration and the research community. We describe the methodology employed and we present our findings from the interviews. These findings are based to some extent on a quantitative summary of the answers to a number of closed and structured questions. But we rely at least as much on the rich contents of the interviews as they build upon more qualitative questions. In fact, one member of the review panel, Ekkehard Mochmann, performed a content analysis based on a frequency count and MultiDimensional Scaling of words in their contexts. Both a summary of this analysis and, whenever appropriate literal quotes from the interviews contribute to our empirical findings in addition to the quantitative summary.
- In the fourth section, we draw our conclusions from the interviews and the background documents. These conclusions pertain to the principle, the process and the output of the programme. We also formulate our recommendations for the future of the AGORA programme. We take the liberty of expanding our recommendations to the wider context, including the AGORA strategy, the structure of the Internet site, administrative databases and reports for the AGORA program, and the organisation of the next evaluation.

Ms Anne-Marie Prieels made an extensive report about her eighteen interviews on behalf of the review panel. The panel in turn has made intensive use of this report, as can be seen from the third section. We have decided not to include her report as another Annexe to our own. It is virtually impossible to keep respondents anonymous. We thought it effective and fair to concentrate our report on findings rather than on identities. To enhance this ambition, the interviews themselves will not be distributed any further, as was promised to our respondents from the outset anyway.

2 The AGORA Programme

On April 2, 1998 the AGORA programme was launched by the Belgian federal government under the responsibility of the Belgian Federal Public Planning Service for Science Policy. The objective as stated in the proposal to the Council of Ministers is in summary:

> "to facilitate access to the contents of the federal administrative databases, to provide measures for the scientific support of their exploitation at the request of the institutions concerned, and to supplement the useful information with the collection through questionnaires of socio-economic data of a non-administrative nature."

The proposal to the Council of Ministers including the Annex mentioned the following ambitions:

- to meet the needs of the governmental institutions by making permanently available scientific expertise for the construction, amelioration or exploitation of their databases;
- to meet the demand from researchers to access the contents of these databases;
- to continue the collection of useful non-administrative data for federal policies;
- to consider the need to exchange comparable data on the European and the international level.

The AGORA programme builds on similar earlier programmes since 1989, all trying to build a bridge between the federal administrative data and the research community. An annual budget is made available to the amount of € 2 500 000. Of this budget, about one seventh is spent on the administration of the programme, including personnel. A significant sum has been spent on the third (and fourth) of the objectives mentioned above, i.e., on the Panel Study on Belgian Households as part of the European Community Household Panel survey (ECHP) under the auspices of Eurostat and on the Belgian Election Panel which fits in an international series of academic electoral surveys. The remainder, i.e., by far the largest part of the overall budget, has been spent on projects aiming to valorise administrative databases for social research, the first two objectives stated above. This part may be called the AGORA mission "*sensu strictu*".[1]

An Interdepartmental Coordination Committee (ICC) is responsible for the AGORA programme. It consists of representatives of the participating institutions, some thirty in total (half government departments, half agencies). And it is chaired by the Chairman of the Federal Science Policy Office. The federal departments and agencies submit their proposals.[2] The ICC reviews these proposals and selects the relevant ones. The Federal Office then launches a call for tenders for raising interest in the academic and other research institutions. International experts assess the proposing research teams on a scientific basis. The ICC then submits its list of teams amongst those that were evaluated positively to the Minister in charge of Science Policy for approval. A calendar for the timing of tenders is published in advance. Programme management is in the hands of the Federal Office and the ICC. Every two years a progress report is wanted, every four years an external evaluation is required.

The institutional setting for the AGORA programme is unique, at least when viewed from our own national perspectives. There is the highly federal character of the Belgian state, in addition to

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[1] Occasionally, other, supporting activities were undertaken with the consent of the ICC described below. Thus, a report was published in 1999 on the *Tariffs of the federal socio-economic data: observations and considerations*.
[2] Only recently a second strand was introduced, i.e., of projects at the initiative of the researchers.

its multilingualism. Some relevant policy domains, such as education, belong to the competence of the regions. Databases and administrations are then held within these regions. Expanding the AGORA programme to such policy domains entails some complications. The federal structure may also explain the unique institutional vacuum in which AGORA has come to exist. In other countries, such as Germany and the United Kingdom, the national data archive takes the lead in exploring and exploiting microdata on behalf of academic research. Often the National Science Foundation and/or the National Academy of Sciences, enhance data collection efforts for the empirical social sciences. In some countries, first and foremost the Scandinavian countries, the production of official statistics is dependent on the use of administrative data. In Belgium none of these institutions seems to be a strong sponsor, and the Federal Office for Science Policy must be complimented for having filled this gap for Belgium.

The contracts for implementing the AGORA projects bind the involved federal government departments and agencies (end-users), the implementing academic and research units, and the Federal Office. The end-users are bound to ensure that the databases will be made available and that they will use the resulting information in their decision making and policies. Projects are monitored at the level of the concerned end-user and the Programme Management Team in the Federal Office.

The number of projects accepted and amounts allotted per year is given in the following table. 51 Projects were accepted and € 9 M were allocated to them. Furthermore, it can easily be seen why the ICC did not meet between June 1999 and April 2001 and why the rules regarding the management of the AGORA budget were changed as of 2001.In the first year of the AGORA programme most of the priorities for the next four years, including a budgetary commitment, had been laid down already. Just about two out of every three proposed projects have been accepted.

	# Projects accepted	€ M allotted for year t+1	€ M allotted for year t+2	€ M allotted for year t+3	Average € K allotted per project
1998	17	2.2	1.8	1.8	340
1999	9	0.3	0.3		70
2000	0				
2001[3]	15	1.8	…	…	130
2002[4]	10	0.8	…	…	80

Some twenty of these projects belong to the broad realms of social security, the economy, and the labour market. The other projects focus on more specific realms such as legislation, agriculture, justice, foreign affairs, demography, health, mobility, and civil servants. After what some might think of as the easy harvests of the first four years, the AGORA approach has shifted somewhat. Two documents have been compiled to make an inventory of the needs and possibilities on two specific domains, health (SP1233) and justice (SP1234), with the intention to focus next rounds of AGORA projects more specifically on these domains.

As might be expected, the end-users come from the corresponding realms, often in combinations. Looking at the research teams, there is a marked presence of the universities of Louvain and

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[3] For 2002 rules of budgeting were modified, with projects accepted up to the limit of the yearly allocation.
[4] One million was allocated to the Belgian Household Panel and the Electoral Panel.

Brussels. No research teams outside Belgium have taken on responsibility for an AGORA project. In view of the close connection of the databases with the Belgian legislation and administration, this is not much of a surprise, although the languages should not be a problem for researchers from neighbouring countries.

The AGORA website contains fact sheets with standard[5] documentation about the contracts. For each contracted research project it specifies:
- the names of the leaders of the research teams
- the duration of the contract
- the names of the supported end-users
- the names of the databases (to be) used
- a verbal description and motivation
- the documents (to be) delivered
- references to further documents and experts.

Over 30 documents[6] resulting from the AGORA projects are available for downloading. In other words, there are fewer documents available on the AGORA website than projects. This is understandable in as far as the AGORA fact sheets themselves refer to other, e.g., university, websites containing such documents. It is also understandable for projects which have not come to an end yet. But even then, more documents should be accessible as AGORA outputs through the AGORA website. *Every project, on which public money has been spent, should be announced with a short description of the project objectives and completed with a published final report.*

Of course, the website itself does not contain any microdata. But unfortunately the majority[7] of the fact sheets do not contain *a pointer* either *to* such *microdata resulting from the AGORA projects*. This is somewhat surprising in view of the objectives of the AGORA programme. A next step might be to *also include references to the papers and other publications based on the analysis of these microdata*. This, after all, is the underlying AGORA objective, a further valorisation of the Belgian administrative databases for research and policy purposes.

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[5] The format has become more explicit and elaborate in the course of time.
[6] As of February 2004, about half of them referring to two AGORA health projects.
[7] Exceptions are the Cross Roads Bank

3 The AGORA end-users and researchers at word

Eighteen interviews served as the main instrument to feed the panel with opinions about the strengths and weaknesses of the AGORA programme. In this section we report our findings from these interviews, starting with the methodology. Basic decisions on the number and origin of the interviewees were taken by the Science Policy Office. A draft questionnaire had been conceived by the consultant already before the first meeting of the panel. Both the sample and the questionnaire were discussed with the panel before they were finalised, however.

3.a The Sample

The budget allowed for eighteen interviews. Both end-users and researchers had to be approached. Given the budget restraint there was no interest in including persons to represent the public at large, neither with the Science Policy Office nor amongst the expert panel. All interviewees were selected because of their position: they all represent authority and expertise. Amongst them there were a couple of women, but in this report we will use "he" and "his" to refer to the interviewees. The ten end-users came from three different parts: from the government departments, from the agencies, and from the Science Policy Office itself. The distinction between the Government departments proper and the Agencies is said to be artificial in the sense that they are not treated differently in the AGORA programme. Also, the nature of the projects does not seem to be dependent on this distinction. On the other hand, in the western world the difference between core departments that develop public policy and executive agencies that collect and process data in order to implement, is well established. Eight researchers came from the academic world, representing various disciplines. Five out of eight university respondents work in Louvain or Brussels. Two of the end-users and one of the researchers had no hands on experience with the AGORA programme. At the other extreme, one of the researchers had been involved in a good number of AGORA proposals. Two end-users and four researchers had been involved in an AGORA proposal which was not accepted in the end. The researcher interviews preceded the end-user interviews. In two test cases (one academic researcher and one end-user) the interviewer let the interviewee talk freely for two hours. Therefore, for systematic analysis only 16 cases are available. Of course, the sample is not representative for any population, so we must be careful with straightforward generalisations. But they do represent a good mix of expertise in the field.

3.b The Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed consisting mainly of open questions about experiences with, and opinions about, the AGORA programme. The topics introduced in the questionnaire are summarised in the box on the next page. It started with a profile of the interviewee and ended with an open question for all that remained. To enhance summary comparison between the interviewees closed questions with rating scales (1 (low) … 4 (high), with 2.5 as the arithmetic average) were also asked for almost all of the topics indicated on the next page.

The interviews were done in either French or in Dutch. The interviewees received the question-naire in advance. The interviewer took notes in English, usually directly on the computer. Each

interviewee was invited to correct the interview report afterwards. Our report respects the anonymity of the interviewees.

The interviews were held from December 2003 through February 2004 with generally spoken researchers coming first. They lasted two hours on average. The report is longest for the researchers (1200 words) and shortest for the Federal Office itself (800 words), with the government departments and agencies closer to the researchers. The five longest interviews all belong to the first half of the round, and the five shortest all to the latter half of the round of interviews.

3.c Summary results

Before commenting in depth on the various topics of the questionnaire, we summarise some general impressions. For this purpose we briefly analyse the scores on the rating questions as they have been coded and summarised by the consultant. The very small number of cases obviously makes it difficult to attach much value to any generalisation. This difficulty is augmented because there is a sometimes substantial number of missing answers, for example because some questions have been posed only to a specific group of respondents. Having said that, we conclude that in general the responses convey the impression that the respondents are positive about the AGORA programme. On the rating scales the overall average is 3.1. The generally positive impression is corroborated by the answers to a question about return on investment: twelve out of thirteen responses were positive on this particular issue. The research community seems to be the most happy with the AGORA programme. It averages 3.6, followed by the agencies (3.2), the Science Policy Office (2.9), and the government departments proper (2.7) as last and least. As for the government departments, one out of three interviewees gives consistently low scores. In this case the personal average on all rating questions is 2.0, well below the arithmetic average of 2.5 that all other respondents transcend. By chance, another interviewee comes from the very same government department and gives consistently substantively higher ratings.

The topics of the questionnaire, including average ratings 1…4

1. Measuring the impact of the activities of the Programme
   a. Perception as users of socio-economic databases — 3.2
   b. Using the end-products in your institution — 4.0
2. Assessing the procedure relevance to needs
   a. Principle: did the programme respond to needs
      i. the federal agencies — 2.7
      ii. the researchers — 3.5
   b. Is the process still suited to the current needs? — 3.0
3. Assessing the procedure
   a. Is the calendar adequate? — 3.2
   b. Are the formalities adequate? — 3.2
   c. Is the management approach adequate? — 3.1
   d. Were the changes brought into the contract procedures adequate? — na
4. Assessing the output
   a. Added value for the participating federal institutions — na

b. Added value for the other users	na
c. Quality of the collaboration and contribution of the scientific teams	3.0
d. How did the agencies exploit the output of the programme?	2.6

In general, the AGORA programme seems to serve the demands of the research community better than those of the end users in policy and administration. The scientific contribution is deemed higher than the exploitation of results by the end users. Also the management of the project is better rated by the researchers, and the AGORA staff, than by the end-users. But in view of the limitations of the data, we will not dwell any longer on this quantitative analysis.

Another way of trying to summarise the interviews is to look at the qualitative meaning of the words used by the respondents rather than the quantitative ratings. Even though the sample of respondents can not be considered representative for all stakeholders in the AGORA sphere the interviews may well reflect the cognitive space, in which the challenges and chances are discussed. By counting the co-occurrence of words within the interviews one arrives at clusters with a substantive significance. Synonyms are grouped together. Co-occurrence is then indicated by a Jaccard coefficient which ignores joint non-occurrence. A Minissa type of Multidimensional scaling (MDS) is one technique to arrive at such a clustering. This MDS reflects a cognitive mapping of some of the key issues. The graph below is its result after rotation.
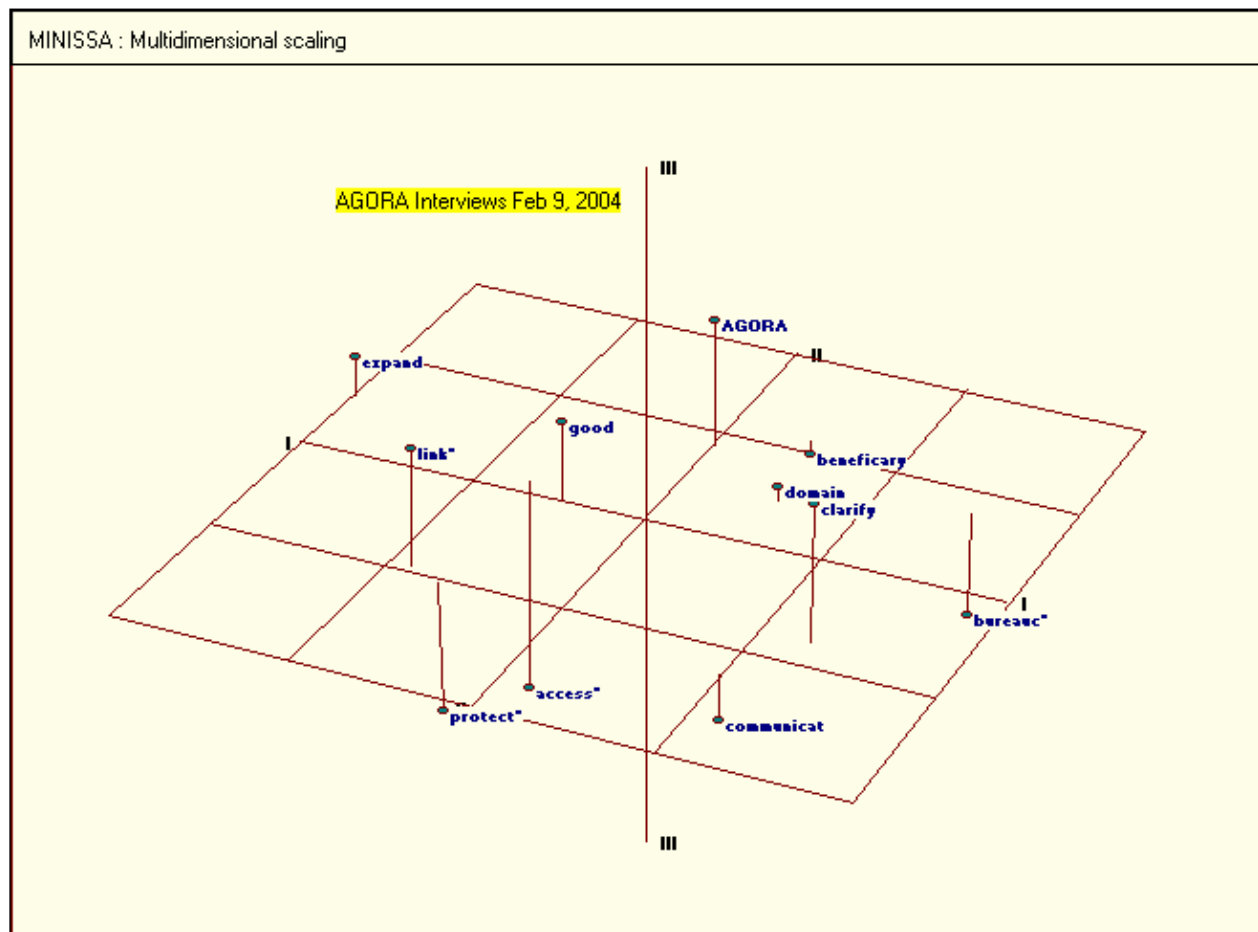
In the graph, as in the matrix of Jaccard coefficients itself, there is one large cluster, two small clusters and one isolate.

- The expansion cluster to the extreme left is the isolate. There is significant room for improvement. It has the smallest number of occurrences throughout the interviews, anyhow.
- The small clusters consist of clarification and communication (right down), and of access, linkage and protection (left down).
- The large cluster consists of *AGORA* itself and the remaining substantive qualifications. It contains all those words occurring most often. Amongst them *bureaucracy* stands out because of its low score on the third dimension whereas *AGORA* has a relatively high score on it. *AGORA* and *good* have similar scores on all three dimensions. Similarly *beneficiary* and *domain* are quite close.

Speculating on the graph, one could ask such questions as the following:

1. The *domain* of AGORA activities should be clarified, is it for the Federal level databases only or should it include regional, European and international data bases?
2. Who shall profit from AGORA activities (*beneficiary*)? Shall it be the agencies, research, politicians or public at large? Perceptions about priorities vary drastically.
3. The culture of cooperation between science and official statistics/ public administration is an important field for development in many countries. This also shows clearly in the data from these interviews. Communication and cooperation (*communicat*) between the academics and the teams in the agencies are not free of conflict and prejudices.
4. Obviously there are needs and additional desires what Agora should do, which do not result in negative criticism but rather in strong pleas for expansion (*expand*) of the program.
5. Overall there seems to be a positive perception (*AGORA good*), which is closely connected with data linkage activities, less directly with data access and protection (*access protect*) which, however, also forms a cluster in the cognitive space.

Clues for answers to these questions will be derived in the following from the replies given by our respondents.

3.d Detailed findings

In the remainder of this chapter we analyse the interview reports in more detail. We begin with the AGORA principle as such. There is a wide-spread - but not unanimous - support for the program as a whole. If it comes to the process and the outputs opinions are more heterogeneous. The opinions can be related to the respective roles of the interviewees quite easily. At the same time there is a definite feeling that better communication could contribute considerably to the AGORA programme. This latter feeling seems to be shared between the various roles.

The reader be reminded that the following is based on reports from interviews. The replies constitute the reality as perceived by the interviewees with their own backgrounds, interests and perspectives. Phrases from the interviews will occasionally be used without quotation marks. They will be attributed to the research community and the end-users, but occasionally we will also make mention of the agencies, the Science Policy Office, and the government departments proper. Some of the following more specific remarks contain suggestions for improvement. They should be interpreted as such, not as the prevalence of criticism.

3.d.1 The principle

The researchers find the AGORA programme interesting in its principle. It is considered a good and valuable initiative without a substitute at national or international level. It is deemed completely different from any other programme in the social sciences because it is applied basic research aiming to governance. The valorisation of existing information is not supported by any other funding mechanism in the country. Thus, the AGORA programme facilitates the overcoming of barriers between governmental end-users and social scientists. At the same time this might be the very reason why the programme is not extremely popular amongst all researchers.

In particular, AGORA undertakes what the statistical institutions do not undertake. There is no other funding mechanism than AGORA for making available new microdata. Some researchers are quite outspoken in their qualifications for the statistical landscape in the country. It has developed into a nightmare because of the institutional and political set-up. They talk about a statistical deficit in the country. Belgium does not have any statistical governance. These qualifications are not brought forward as a reproach towards the National Institute for Statistics, however. There is a need for a forum for all partners involved in the provision and use of statistical data for governance. The Belgian politicians themselves do not have this in mind yet. It seems that the political level does not want to use statistical data. The solution should be a clear political signal from the government that statistical data are a priority for the government. And NIS, at the crossroad between providers and users, could be associated more closely with the AGORA activities.

The institutions seem to agree with the AGORA ambitions from a pragmatic point of view. Useful things get done for the public good with their data, in spite of the somewhat administrative culture and focus of the agencies. Some interviewees are less convinced of the principal advantages of AGORA. If the government departments really feel a need to improve databases and have research performed on them, they could launch the projects and collaborations themselves, they think. Costs are not considered a real problem. If there were a real need, they would find and free the resources. Their support and use of the AGORA programme seems mainly pragmatic. The procedures are suited and bring relevant expertise to the institutions. At the same time, there is some criticism of the results from the programme, because of a certain fear or even empirical experience that the transfer of the databases after the projects are finished does not take place properly. There is a sentiment that the AGORA programme seems better suited to the needs of the research community than to the needs of the institutions.

For the Federal Office itself, the AGORA programme is the odd one out. It is a service rather than a research activity. As a consequence, it is somewhat isolated from the other programmes undertaken by the Federal Office. Communication within the Federal Office about the AGORA programme is open to improvement. There could be more interaction between the various programmes undertaken by the Federal Office but there does not seem time to do so. But precisely because it has a permanent status it might be suitable to have the ICC upgraded and decide on a mid to long term strategy rather than the Minister.

3.d.2 The procedures

In general, the evaluation of administrative processes is positive for the initiation and execution of the projects. If it comes to the exploitation of the results and the follow-up with the end-users, there is ample room for improvement, however. We will come back to that later. The start of the procedure, the selection of projects, could be more transparent according to some researchers. One researcher questions the quality of the selection procedure of the projects within the ICC: it may look like decisions on public money are made within a circle of privileged members of a closed club. The relevance and appropriateness of the needs, the justifications provided, the intention and the political will (i.e., the budget provided for the maintenance) to continue, develop and maintain the tools, could be rather better discussed, documented and checked. Another researcher even argues that the federal institutions themselves are not necessarily in the best position to identify the needs. Input from academics might be needed at that stage as well. In the Panel's opinion social policy and social research benefit from a broad, non-parochial perspective. On the other hand, there is some doubt about the value added from the use of international experts and, indeed, the translation of proposals into English: "If you are not Belgian, you cannot understand the context properly." One respondent from the institutions does not see why international experts are used who do not understand the specificity of the federal administration problems for selecting the projects – the only criteria that should apply is whether the projects meet the actual problems. It is even suggested that the project and the team identified for its implementation be submitted together by the federal institutions. The advantage would be a better *a priori* collaboration between the institution and the scientific team. The evaluation of the scientific teams by the expert panel should be more transparent, according to one of the agencies. They complain about a lack of information on that process.

Views on contracts and budgets are heterogeneous. One researcher calls the contracts simpler than with other programmes. Also, budgets do not need to be detailed as much as with other funding agencies at the Federal Office. Another researcher calls the procedure heavy in comparison with the limited budgets involved. The length of the funding period, up to three years, is mentioned as an advantage in comparison with the usual programmes in the social sciences. It is also important for the researchers themselves: a PhD is possible within this frame. The Panel considers this time frame a definite advantage for the AGORA programme. The contract might be more simple and easy to understand. The fact that there are three partners does not really pose any problem by itself.

A number of remarks relate to the timing in particular. Most respondents consider the calendar fast enough although it might allow for a longer period between the time a call is launched and the time it is closed. Some, however, say that the calendar could be shorter than 18 months for decision. Indeed, one respondent comments: "There is a minimum of 2 years between the time a proposal is submitted by a federal institution and the time a project starts – this is too long." One month is considered too short to write a good proposal. If there is some delay somewhere in the process, there is a risk of the loss of a whole year, due to the annual cycle. In the frame of other research programmes there is a possibility to modify the contract by way of amendments for a continuation of the activity. This is possible in the frame of AGORA only given a fixed budget. For an increase of the budget, one needs to go through the whole process – this may lead to at least a one year gap and uncertainties. What is difficult to manage is when more resources

(budget) are needed in the middle of a project - and how to control the activities and resources allocation by the university scientists. At the very least, calls for tender should not be launched during the vacation period. During the project, time may be lost looking for authorisations to obtain and use the data, to find out the relevant metadata, and the like. The Federal Office considers it positive that the calendar is fixed: people know when it is the time to look for calls. There is room for improvement, however, in the management of the ICC meetings: "Sometimes we receive the documents for meetings where decisions have to be made on the Friday before the meeting (on the Monday). This is not manageable."

Management at the Federal Office is considered "excellent". This qualification is used by various researchers. It is personalized, flexible, rigorous, and adequate and the Federal Office people in charge are motivated. The Federal Office was very efficient and supportive – one researcher explicitly mentions the role of the Federal Office as a leader and catalyst in the process. The role of the federal office in the selection process is an added value. The fact that the federal office provides links with international activities is considered a positive factor as well. But they have to deal with specialty fields they do not necessarily master very well. If things do not work as wanted, it is usually the other party that is to blame, not the Federal Office. This is the very reason why the Federal Office could be more involved in the management of the individual projects. It should be more actively involved at the project level. As one of the respondents states: "When problems arise between the three partners in the process, it is not really clear who is in charge of resolving possible conflicts and how to solve these problems. The Federal Office should normally take this charge but they do not seem to be in a position to do so." But not everyone agrees. From one of the government departments it is said that it would be much better if the Federal Office would provide the funding and the service, i.e., selecting the best research team, but if the projects were then directly managed and implemented in the concerned administrations directly, without a direct role for the Federal Office. We are tempted to conclude that a more (pro)active stance from the Federal Office might be in place, but that most important is transparency about the roles and deliverables for the researchers and end-users (see below).

3.d.3 The results

In an abstract sense, the AGORA projects all contribute to the production of knowledge. If we break down this knowledge, it may take on very different shapes, however. The primary interest of the researcher is in the publication of research papers in scientific journals. The agencies want to improve their databases, in part to enhance research on such data. And there is a shared although not always outspoken objective in making these databases available for research at large, i.e., outside the agencies and primary researchers. From the Federal Office the exploitation of output is considered to be the crucial question – but it does not know an answer yet.

Several researchers are quite content with (the number of) articles they have published. For them, this is the return on investment, even though it is not financial: "cost effective – we could train 10 PhD's – many publications – development of our core expertise." The output of the AGORA programme has contributed to significant improvements in the availability of statistical information for the researchers and to a significant reduction in the costs of the data (e.g. reduction by a factor of 100 in terms of costs and 10 in terms of delay for obtaining data). Progress has also been made in terms of the quality of the data. One researcher remarks that the

programme did not help his institution (academic) but did aim at helping doing better work, in order to improve decision making at the political level.

The agencies, in turn, do not have the means for getting involved in research themselves. Their mission in terms of statistics is secondary. They do not have the means for getting involved in research projects. They lack the culture or mentality for doing this properly. The AGORA programme provides them with immaterial services and intellectual input. At the same time it is difficult for them to control the activities and resource allocation by the research teams. There is a fear that the researchers give priority to their own objectives. In their eyes, the AGORA programme seems better suited to the needs of the research community than to the needs of the federal government. "In practice and in our experience the transfer of data bases does not take place properly - it is like if the researchers take the resources provided for improving their own data and not for improving the data in the federal institutions. For instance, the programmes used are sometimes not even compatible."

Some researchers, however, have quite the opposite experience. In one case, it is said that valorisation of the data base was excellent, but not the transfer. There is some doubt amongst researchers about the intentions of the institutions. Are the institutions asking for AGORA funding really prepared to make the databases available to the researchers and to the public? Are they in a position and ready to invest in the maintenance and development of the tools? The institutions do not always seem to be aware of the financial and other means required for the maintenance and exploitation of the resulting databases. A lack of involvement of the institution is mentioned as the explanation. An explicit advance commitment in this respect would be helpful. The appropriate budget for exploiting the results of the project should be defined and decided in time. This in turn implies that the projects are said to have higher chances of being exploited and incorporated in the federal institutions decision making if they are proposed at a higher level in the hierarchy in the institution. However, some departments may lack in the proper experience for monitoring and managing such situations. The Federal Office itself could organise the follow up and monitor the valorisation of AGORA projects as well. Another suggestion for improvement is the organisation of workshops for the "valorisation" of the results of the AGORA projects. We will come back to that later as communication is vital to the valorisation and further development of AGORA.

3.d.4 The roles

The definitions of the respective roles and the corresponding expectations seem to be crucial in the above. There are two different cultures within the administrative and the research institutes. These two cultures need to learn about each other and the AGORA programme facilitates the overcoming of these barriers. "We belong to different cultures and need to learn how to cope"

The offices in some of the "users" federal institutions do not seem to have a clear indication of the exact role and mandate of the scientists they "hire" in the frame of the programme. The lack of culture on how to deal with subcontractors is obvious in some federal departments. Collaboration with the federal agencies is bureaucratic, even though individual, interpersonal contacts are good. For instance, it is difficult to find out who is entitled to send a letter to whom for obtaining data. This culture seems to be internal to the world of administration, which does not look overly dynamic. According to one respondent from the agencies: "We do not have time

for managing the research projects. We do not have either the "culture" or the "mentality" for doing this properly. We have an administrative culture."

One solution might be to introduce a stronger managerial, i.e., financial commitment by the end-users, the agencies. In this solution the Federal Office should finance projects where the involved institutions know what they need and want, where all partners play their role, and where the institution is required to provide a financial input. If the end-user federal institutions participate in the funding of the projects, this might prevent that the "host" institution plays a "passive" role in the undertaking.

On the other hand the researchers should remain aware that they are performing a service for the institutions. The AGORA programme refers to applied rather than fundamental research. One respondent from the agencies has his doubts about the added value from interventions by researchers. It is not an absolute necessity to ask for an input from academics. Launching AGORA projects should be an interdepartmental task to be achieved by the institutions. In fact the agencies do not necessarily need recourse to universities for solving their problems. The implementation phase is the most important and the most difficult one – but there the agencies feel left by themselves. Researchers are not up to the standards. They do not understand the real problems the institutions face. The latter need concrete and practical solutions whereas the researchers only provide theoretical considerations. Furthermore, there is some suspicion about university researchers who use the results for their own benefit without telling the institutions, even though this is not permitted in the contracts.

At greater distance but still important is the role of politics, and its use of statistical information, in Belgium. The Federal Office and the AGORA programme could and should be seen as the expression of a political commitment. But they cannot substitute for the apparent lack of a political will to allocate a high priority to the improvement of federal (and regional) socio-economic databases. It seems that the political level does not really want to use statistical data. According to some researchers institutions and politicians are only interested in "infotainment" and not in data. And if they are interested in reports on the basis of data analysis, the creation of data bases in itself is never perceived as a priority.

There is a need to change the political culture. Politicians should learn to base their decisions on data in spite of their current and apparent lack of political will to address longer term problems, time series, and etcetera. The solution should be a clear political signal from the government that statistical data are a priority for the government. The political, monetary and economic convergence within the European Union is a positive factor in this respect because it increases the need for "benchmarking". Consequently, there is a need for more political backing of the AGORA programme and each of the projects.

Of course, the use of figures and data should not and can not substitute for democratic political decisions and debates. There are negative side effects such as the "religion" of data and the possibilities of misinterpretation. Politicians need to learn how to cope with scientific statistical data. Therefore, at the same time, the voice of the researchers should become stronger. The project is not exactly to be left in the hands of the institutions. The activities leading to the interpretation of the data should not escape from the need to have a proper quality control and a validation by a "peer review process"

3.d.5 Privacy and confidentiality

Some researchers mention privacy and confidentiality as problems in dealing with administrative and research data. The position of these respondents is not uniform, however. At the one extreme, it is said that the Belgian privacy protection law prevents good research to be undertaken. Privacy protection is an important problem between institutions and the research community. This is said to be different in other countries: in Belgium the process of obtaining data is tedious, long and bureaucratic. In the socio-economic domain, the Carrefour project should in principle improve the situation but for the researchers it does not fulfil yet its promises. The privacy protection directive at EU level makes the exchange and combination of data more complex.

At the other extreme, some researchers see the present privacy protection law as sufficiently adequate. It is helpful to have a deontology, a professional code. One respondent has had problems due to privacy only in the frame of the application of commercial confidentiality. As anonymous data even data on criminality did not constitute a problem. And one research group organised a workshop on privacy problems to construct workarounds. It took one respondent up to one year to get permission from the privacy commission to match certain data. But after a change in the procedure, they have promised that it will not take more than 3 months. The institutions submitting a AGORA project could deal with the privacy protection problems themselves for the researchers.

At the very least AGORA did succeed in easing access and integrating even sensitive data. But this is a complementary activity rather than a substitute for the functions that data services in other countries are providing. Compliance with the European Data Protection Directive should be assured on a case-to-case basis.

3.d.6 International perspective

Europeanization calls for a mechanism for undertaking international comparisons. *This could be a new task for AGORA.* There are also additional complications when data refer to different domains and come from different institutions, for instance socio-economic data and health care data. The agencies do not often ask for such multidimensional data yet. The risk is that the scope will remain narrow and limited to applied questions from the administration concerned. There are more global needs and more global approaches than restricted needs in the individual institutions. They are satisfied with what they have. But new needs emerge as society becomes more complex and because of pressure at international level. The federal institutions are not necessarily in the best position to identify these needs. For strategic policy development multidimensional data cannot be missed. If the institutions do not ask for it, the researchers and politicians should do so. For example, there is a lack of proper indicators for sustainable development and social indicators of the impacts of economic decisions. The integration of social and environmental costs in the national accounts ("green accounting") needs proper approaches and methodologies. The decisions and data are currently divided according to sectors and interests. Multidisciplinary approaches and interdepartmental concertations are required. The Federal Office is said to be in a privileged position to arrange for this. Input from academics might be needed at that stage as

well. Consequently, the researchers might be better associated with the definition of the needs in the first step of the procedure (selection of projects by the institutions in the committee). To take better account of what is undertaken at international level international experts could be consulted when the federal institutions (end users) define their needs. What is undertaken in the country should be consistent with what is undertaken in other countries and at international level. At the very least there should be a procedure for ensuring that the federal institutions have put their request against the international perspective. We can easily conclude that there is ample room in AGORA for an enhanced international focus.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

Seen from an international perspective, the AGORA Programme is both unique and sympathetic. It seems to fill in a gap in the Belgian data infrastructure which in other countries looks more developed, by national data archives, national science foundations and research councils, and/or national statistical institutes. The Belgian institutional context, in which the AGORA programme has to operate, may explain this gap. At the same time, it is a given for our conclusions and recommendations. The sympathy from the review panel for the AGORA programme is shared by all parties involved, researchers, administrators, and policy-makers alike. As is shown by the interviews, they -often strongly- support the programme in its principle. The legal status of the AGORA programme as such must be viewed as yet another kind of backing, this time of a more political nature.

Looking at the results of this sympathetic principle, two observations seem warranted.
- In the first place, it looks as though the easy harvesting has been done. The AGORA programme has to innovate in order to perform its mission of improving the Belgian data infrastructure.
- In the second place, and somewhat counter to the first observation, there is a shared impression that valorisation of the results thus far could be improved.

Both these observations touch very much upon the roles of the actors involved in the AGORA programme. We will come back to this later on.

The institutional context calls for a narrower cooperation between the Federal Office and other, related organisations. It is important to look for strategic partnerships to strengthen and extend the Belgian data infrastructure. First and foremost, one can think of the National Institute for Statistics and the Higher Council for Statistics. Regretfully, the state of Belgian data archives currently is said to be not such that any potential for significant contribution to improve the data infrastructure were visible. In this report we have repeatedly pointed at the responsibility of Belgian politics for the state of the data infrastructure and official statistics. One of the secondary effects that we aim at with this report is to stimulate political interest for these matters. Their importance for the EU administration as well for national social policy can hardly be overestimated.

In this also special attention is needed for the privacy issue. As is the practice in other countries, first and foremost the Nordic countries, the use of administrative data for statistical and research purposes is on the rise. It requires matching of files using personal (or other) identification numbers, or other variables facilitating matching. For the procurement and processing of data in such manner, a good working relationship with the national privacy authority, the *Commission de la Protection de la Vie Privée,* is required. The Census 2001 has led to some backlash, it seems. However, practices in the Nordic countries and for example also in the Netherlands show that such cooperation is quite well possible within the broader European legal framework of the European Data Protection Directive. In the end, however, compatibility with the European Data Protection Directive can only be judged at the level of the individual databases and the procedures employed to process and integrate the data.

A strict demarcation between statistical processing of data for producing anonymous aggregates on the one hand and administrative applications of matched data on an individual level on the other hand is a *sine qua non*. A servicing or even pro-active role of the Federal Office might help bring about the necessary compromises. Occasionally the Federal Office has written position papers in the past about, e.g., the pricing of data. Even if such papers are not directly successful, they at least will help stimulate whatever public debate there is.

An active working relationship with the national privacy authority is also necessary to promote the further valorisation of the resulting databases by other, secondary, researchers. Here again, one sees a movement within Europe to promote the accessibility of microdata for research purposes, be it under some legal and/or technical constraints. In the end, data infrastructure must be European because researchers and policy makers alike want to make comparisons between member states. Even though one may have some doubts about the level of some political ambitions, the Lisbon process is turning out to be irreversible. The Luxembourg Income and Employment Studies, but also the European Social Survey and the Eurobarometer, have come to be part of the standard instruments for leading social researchers throughout Europe. Even Eurostat, the EU Statistical Office, is now making formal and factual progress in making available official statistical community (Labour Force Survey) microdata. Existing contacts between the Federal Office and the European Science Foundation and other fora of exchange should be cherished, and exploited. The funding by AGORA of European comparative fieldwork for electoral studies and the socio-economic household panel fits in this context very well.

The success of the AGORA programme ultimately depends on the way in which the researchers and the institutions define and fill in their respective roles. Both the researchers and the institutions are involved through AGORA in processes which they do not necessarily see as their primary processes. For the researchers the AGORA programme is applied rather than fundamental research. The institutions are primarily interested in concrete and immediate improvements of administrative processes and concrete answers to immediate questions rather than in research publications in scientific journals. At the same time both parties recognise that the construction of a data infrastructure is a common good. The AGORA funds are the lubricant and the glue that brings and holds the parties together.

The co-operation between the respective parties is served by an explicit recognition of these respective roles. From the interviews it appears that this recognition, or appreciation, is present with many, but not yet with all. Incidents like incompatible software or unavailability of databases after the close of a project should be ruled out by a higher level understanding between the researcher and the institution, objectified in their contract. It looks as though here is a major task for the Federal Office to stimulate and guard this understanding. Some respondents have suggested giving the Federal Office a stronger formal say in the management and guarding of the contracts. In our opinion this authority should be attributed to the Federal Office on the basis of the higher level understanding. The Federal Office cannot do a whole lot more than guarding the contracted objectives, processes, budgets, and terms, however. It can simply not be expected to be at par with the researchers and institutes if it comes to substantive knowledge of the subject matter.

The selection of projects is at the beginning of the AGORA projects. It looks as thought the most obvious administrative databases in Belgium have been touched upon already by the AGORA

programme. If servicing the individual institutions is considered important, it would now make sense to look in depth at the various domains of policy and administration consecutively. A combination of efforts between researchers and institutions in such areas as health and justice may make it possible to make significant progress again. If on the other hand the individual institutions would not be seen anymore as the starting point, but policy and research problems in a more general sense, there would be more room for innovative, strategic projects combining data from different sources. The contribution from the institutions would then consist in making "their" data available for research and the public good without getting direct return on investment themselves. At first sight, researchers and policy makers would profit more from such a strategic (re) orientation. Socio-economic health differences, the longer term consequences of ageing, environmental accounting, and ethnic minorities, are but a few of their strategic policy and research questions. Preferably, such a strategy should be developed in a close co-operation between some of the leading AGORA participants over the past years, from both the research and the administrative world.

If the selection of first projects and then teams is at the beginning of the AGORA projects, the valorisation of results is at the end. To improve the valorisation of results so far, a number of initiatives should be taken by the Federal Office, focussing on communication to both constituencies:

1. The website is a good and informative device about the results of the AGORA projects. Every care should be taken that all papers and all data are documented on the website. There could - and should - even be a full catalogue of microdata available for researchers.
2. The website is a passive device, however. It would make sense to either have a periodical newsletter or to use some other publication for regular communications to the academic and to the governmental world about new results.
3. The organisation of workshops for users can be very rewarding, as is shown by practices and examples in the United Kingdom.
4. Visibility during congresses and other events for researchers respectively administrative agencies would be another way of stimulating the valorisation of results.

Finally, some words need to be said about the administration of the AGORA programme, the procedures, and the calendar. The Federal Office has now started to focus more specifically on domains of administration and expertise. If there is one common denominator in the few more critical remarks they refer to aspects of timing. The call for tenders could be launched at a more appropriate point in time, and decision making procedures should be accelerated wherever possible. The time between the expression of an interest and the start of a project can be long indeed. On the other hand time for researchers to write their proposals is sometimes considered too short.

On the basis of the interviews, there is ample support for the current procedures, and especially the current staffing of the Federal Office. In general, it seems that the Federal Office has been flexible in adapting to criticisms. Indeed, it has become more flexible after the first round of subsidies, when for some time there was no budget to launch new projects. Also, the Federal Office has now started to focus more specifically on domains of administration and expertise.

Annexe **Bijlage I** <u>Bestek</u>

<u>Doel van de evaluatie</u>

Agora is een permanent mechanisme voor ondersteuning en terbeschikkingstelling van de federale sociaal-economische databanken. In de nota aan de Ministerraad van 2 april 1998 staat dat om de vier jaar een onafhankelijke evaluatie dient te gebeuren.

Gezien het permanente karakter van Agora, zal het algemene principe dat ten grondslag zal liggen aan de evaluatie, dat zijn van de relevantie van een dergelijk ondersteuningsmechanisme 4 jaar nadat het opgestart werd. De evaluators zullen niet alleen de intrinsieke relevantie bekijken, maar ook of de werking en de resultaten relevant zijn. Het gaat dus niet om het wetenschappelijk evalueren van het resultaat van de diverse projecten die Agora financiert, maar om het toetsen van de coherentie van die projecten in het algemene kader van Agora.

De evaluatie zal zich toespitsen op de volgende vier onderdelen :

A. Principe:

1. Heeft Agora, in vergelijking met het mechanisme van de steunpunten dat het vervangen heeft, het mogelijk gemaakt beter in te spelen op de noden van de overheidsinstellingen (qua wetenschappelijke ondersteuning bij het aanleggen/verbeteren van beleidsondersteunende databanken) en van de onderzoekers (beschikbaarheid van de federale gegevens) ?
2. Blijft het ondersteuningsmechanisme Agora nu het al 4 jaar bestaat nog altijd actueel ?

B.Werkwijze :

3. De tweefasige selectieprocedure (projecten, gevolgd door wetenschappelijke ploegen) onder supervisie van het Interdepartementaal coördinatiecomité : coherentie van de projecten ten opzichte van de doelstellingen van Agora
4. Stemt de timing van de activiteiten overeen met de noden van de overheidsinstellingen, de onderzoekers,
5. Formele regelingen : protocol van akkoord, website, formulieren van de indieners, formulieren bestemd voor de overheidsinstellingen...
6. Passend management van de projecten (follow-up van de ploegen door de overheidsinstellingen in samenwerking met de DWTC) ?
7. Wijzigingen doorgevoerd in de loop van de tijd : projectfiche ten behoeve van de instellingen, metadatabase ...

C. Realisaties :

8. Meerwaarde voor de overheidsinstellingen met een project Agora
9. Meerwaarde voor de gebruikers : wetenschappelijke gemeenschap, de andere overheidsinstellingen en het grote publiek

D.Aanbevelingen voor de toekomst :

    10. Moet het mechanisme gewijzigd worden ?

Methodologie van de evaluatie

De eigenlijke evaluatie zal toevertrouwd worden aan een panel van 4 experts die over ervaring beschikken op het gebied van de evaluatie van programma's en van de interface onderzoekers/overheidsdiensten inzake sociaal-economische databanken. Het panel zal hierbij uitgaan van de studie van de noodzakelijke documentatie en, zo nodig, van interviews van de bij Agora betrokken overheidsinstellingen en wetenschappers.

De besluiten zullen, samen met de aanbevelingen, door de Voorzitter van het panel in een verslag voorgelegd worden aan de DWTC. Dit verslag moet uiterlijk 1 december 2003 ingediend worden.

Om de experts bij hun opdracht te ondersteunen, zal een externe consultant aangewezen worden.

Opdracht van de consultant

Om de hierboven beschreven evaluatie mogelijk te maken, zal de consultant belast worden met de volgende ondersteunende taken :

- de documentatie verzamelen die het panel van experts nodig heeft ;
- deze documentatie ordenen en synthetiseren in een verslag ten behoeve van de experts ;
- de vergaderingen van het panel beleggen en de gewenste aanvullende informatie produceren ;
- een methodologie voorstellen voor het afnemen van de interviews van de gewenste personen in de overheidsinstellingen en onderzoekscentra en die met het panel van experts bespreken ;
- de interviews afnemen van de gewenste personen en het verslag opstellen.

Alle uitgaven voor het vertalen van de gemaakte documenten zijn voor rekening van de DWTC.

De consultant zal bij iedere fase de staf van de DWTC briefen.

De agenda van de activiteiten van de consultant is de volgende :

- begin juli 2003 : eerste contactname met de staf van de DWTC en kennisname van de documenten ;
- tweede helft van september 2003 : indienen van het syntheseverslag en van de documentatie ten behoeve van de experts ;

- eind september 2003 : uitwerken van het voorstel van interviews dat aan de experts voorgelegd moet worden ;
- midden oktober : beleggen van de eerste vergadering van het panel en bij die gelegenheid bespreken van het door de consultant voorgestelde rooster van interviews ;
- oktober-november 2003 : de interviews afnemen van de gewenste personen en het verslag opstellen ;
- midden december 2003 : de tweede vergadering beleggen van het panel van experts om het verslag van de interviews te bespreken en het stramien van het evaluatieverslag vast te leggen. De consultant zal zo nodig de opdracht krijgen de door het panel gevraagde aanvullende interviews af te nemen.

Raming van de nodige tijd :

- verzamelen van de documentatie, opstellen van het verslag en ordenen van de documentatie ten behoeve van de experts : 10 dagen ;
- voorbereiden van de voorgestelde methodologie voor de interviews : 2 dagen ;
- interviews : 10 dagen ;
- voorbereiden van het verslag van de interviews : 4 dagen ;
- organiseren en leiden van de twee panelvergaderingen : 4 dagen.

Totaal: 30 werkdagen.

Opdracht van het panel van experts

De eigenlijke evaluatie van Agora is voor de experts. Daartoe

- zullen zij kennis nemen van de documentatie die zij van de consultant ontvangen ;
- zullen zij, in rechtstreekse samenwerking met de consultant, alle aanvullende informatie vragen die zij nodig achten om hun opdracht te vervullen ;
- zullen zij uit hun midden een voorzitter kiezen ;
- zullen zij een methodologie bespreken en goedkeuren voor interviews van een staal van door hen gekozen personen ;
- zullen zij het verslag van de consultant bespreken over het resultaat van de afgenomen interviews ;
- zullen zij het eens worden over de structuur en de inhoud van het evaluatieverslag ;
- zal de voorzitter van het panel belast worden met het opstellen van het eindverslag dat bij de DWTC ingediend moet worden.

Agenda van het panel van experts :

- begin oktober 2003 : kennisname van het verslag en van de documentatie samengesteld door de consultant ;
- midden oktober 2003 : eerste vergadering van het panel voor een eerste contactname, de verkiezing van een voorzitter en een bespreking van de door

de consultant voorgestelde methodologie voor de interviews en de keuze van de te interviewen personen. De vergadering zal een hele dag duren ;
- midden december 2003 : tweede vergadering van een dag van het panel voor het bespreken van het verslag van de consultant van de interviews en het vastleggen van het stramien van het eindverslag ;
- het verslag van de voorzitter, goedgekeurd door de leden van het panel, wordt uiterlijk 31 januari 2004 verwacht.

Financiële aspecten

Vergoeding per expert (niet Voorzitter) : 7.000 euros (dit bedrag dekt alle kosten) ; vergoeding Voorzitter van de panel : 8.500 euros (bedrag dekt alle kosten).