External borders, visas, asylum and immigration: action programme 2002-2006 for administrative cooperation ARGO

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This is the first annual report of the European Commission to the Parliament and Council on the functioning of the ARGO programme. It covers the year 2002 plus part of 2003. A full evaluation of the ARGO programme will be launched in 2005 as specified in the Decision setting up the fund. The first annual report provides a narrative description of the ARGO programme plus some statistical tables of the actions proposed by the Member States following calls for proposals announced under the 2002 budget. The Report also provides information on eligible actions submitted in response to two calls for proposals published in 2003. A total of EUR 3 million was available to the ARGO programme in 2002 of which EUR 2 million was earmarked for shared actions between the Member States; EUR 700 000 was destined for Community actions and the remainder was set aside for specific urgent actions. There was no request for funding for this last measure and as a result it was put at the disposal of the Member States. In total the Commission received 15 proposals five of which were declared ineligible. Eight of the ten remaining proposal obtained the highest scores following an assessment by the evaluation committee whilst two proposals scored low marks. These two have been put on a reserve list. Some of the approved projects are yet to be completed with the final reports pending. As far as Commission activity is concerned the Commission sponsored two studies. The first examined how the EU could control its sea borders. It was submitted in July 2003 and cost EUR 300 000. The second was a feasibility study on a visa information system and cost EUR 400 000. When assessing the overall impact of ARGO for 2002, the Report emphasises that many of the projects selected for funding in 2002 are not complete and it is therefore impossible to offer a comprehensive analysis of the programme to date. What has become evident, however, is the "underperformance" of the ARGO programme. For example, the response in 2003 from the Member States to the calls for proposal was below expectations. Although reasons differ the Commission feels that one of the main causes for the low up-take are the difficulties national administrations have in adjusting to the financial rules and in particular their relationship with Community grants. Two further factors could help explain the scarce uptake of EU ARGO funds. The first is the lack of publicity for the programme. The Report, therefore, proposes stepping up work on publicising the programme with interested parties. The second problem being the failure of national administrations to foresee the necessary ARGO funds when submitting their annual or multi-annual financial planning. In order to address these shortfalls, the Commission proposes closer co-operation between the Commission services and national administrations. In return the Commission asks Member States to co-operate closer with each other for joint operations and foresee these in their financial planning commitments. One way forward would be for Member States to submit their plans and allocated resources for 2004 to the Commission. The Commission would then be in good position to pool this information with other Member States in a bid to boost co-ordination.