



Call for Proposals for Projects within the Framework of SystemsX.ch

In its Message on Education, Research and Innovation for 2008-2011, the Federal Council has proposed to provide funds to the SystemsX.ch initiative. Subject to a positive decision by the Swiss Parliament (expected in October 2007), SystemsX.ch will support, starting in 2008, a range of projects defined in this call for proposals.

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1 What is Systems Biology?

The primary objective of systems biology is to attain a **comprehensive understanding of biological processes** with the ultimate goal of identifying quantitative parameters for modeling and simulating biological systems on the basis of the relationships and interactions of their constituent components whose characteristics depend on the system studied. The projects should connect various biology-related disciplines and methods of exact sciences (see examples in footnote¹).

Proposals will be considered that demonstrate the potential to significantly advance systems biology research in Switzerland. The proposed projects may either focus on one organisational level or study a system that vertically encompasses several levels. The successful projects should allow to understand, to model and to simulate the dynamic interactions of the components resulting in measurable properties. Further, they should describe the dynamic behaviour of the system as a whole. Consequently, they are expected to be inter- and trans-disciplinary in their approach. They should involve scientists as equal partners from various disciplines including biology, biophysics, bioinformatics, mathematical modelling, computer science, engineering science, physics as well as chemistry and medicine. Since systems biology research requires highly advanced technologies, interdisciplinary research projects with a technological focus on biological research are also encouraged.

2 What is SystemsX.ch?

SystemsX.ch has been established as a “simple partnership” which enables institutes, competence centers and scientific projects to interact and cooperate by establishing common technological platforms and sharing the data collected. The members of the partnership, i.e. the partner institutions², intend to position Switzerland among the world leaders in systems biology. SystemsX.ch will enhance and extend interdisciplinary research and education at the highest level in this field. It will develop and use the knowledge and tools necessary to expand our understanding of and ability to teach biology as an integrated quantitative science. It will foster the ongoing design, development and application of advanced technology and the training of scientists and engineers in the special skills required to understand biological systems. To achieve its goals, it is relying on the creative talents of its scientific and professional staff and its ability to initiate and nurture partnerships between the projects associated with the program and with other academic institutions, the private industry and the society.

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<i>Types of systems</i>	<i>Constituent Components</i>
Molecular biological systems	Genes, proteins, metabolites and other bio molecules
Cellular and supra-cellular systems	Macromolecular assemblies, organelles, cells and cell clusters
Organismic and complex systems	Organs, circulating fluids, intra- and interspecies interactions (e.g. host-pathogen and social groups)

² Presently ETH Zurich, EPF Lausanne and the Universities of Basel, Bern, Geneva, Lausanne and Zurich (as of August 2007)

Goals of SystemsX.ch

SystemsX.ch, the Swiss Initiative in Systems Biology, aims at:

- gathering scientific competences on a national level to establish Switzerland at the forefront of the systems biology research;
- setting up and developing the cutting-edge technology required for systems biology research;
- implementing a truly interdisciplinary research culture by assembling complementary disciplines to stimulate mutual fertilization;
- establishing collaborations with the private industry and SMEs in flexible forms of public private partnership;
- educating PhD students and young researchers accordingly.

SystemsX.ch will support large integrated research projects that implement the mentioned aspects of systems biology. In addition, SystemsX.ch projects should allow sufficient room for training PhD students. Recognizing the current technological limitations, SystemsX.ch will also promote the development and implementation of new technologies enabling systems biology research. Moreover, it will support pilot projects which explore new directions in systems biology research and encourage interdisciplinary education of PhD and post-PhD trainees.

The present document is the first call for proposals for SystemsX.ch projects. The scientific community is invited to submit proposals for:

- Research, Technology and Development Projects (RTD Projects)
- Interdisciplinary PhD Projects (IPhD Projects)
- Interdisciplinary Pilot Projects (IP Projects, IPP)

Submitted proposals for RTD and IPhD Projects will be evaluated by an international, interdisciplinary review panel of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) and for IPP Projects by the Scientific Executive Board (SEB) of SystemsX.ch.

2.1 All-SystemsX.ch Day: An Information Forum

To provide further information on this call for proposals and SystemsX.ch in general, SystemsX.ch will be holding an All-SystemsX.ch Day on September 17, 2007, at the EPF Lausanne. The event is open to anyone interested in systems biology. In the morning, ongoing research projects in systems biology will be presented. During the lunch break, a poster session will demonstrate ongoing projects and also allow the participants to get in touch with working groups. In the afternoon, workshops will be offered in which participants can coordinate the submission of research proposals.

A visit to CERN has been arranged for the next day, September 18, 2007.

Please find the program under

http://www.systemsx.ch/silva_docs/All-SystemsX_ch-Day_17-18_09_07.pdf

2.2 Further Information

Further information about SystemsX.ch is available under www.systemsx.ch. Please contact the SystemsX.ch Management Office if you have any questions.

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3 Types of SystemsX.ch Projects

3.1 Research, Technology and Development Projects (RTD Projects)

RTD Projects are large integrated research projects³. They can focus either on the in-depth analysis of a particular biological system using an approach described in Chapter 1, or on the development and implementation of a technology that has clearly the potential of broadly enabling systems biology research, or on both.

A SystemsX.ch RTD Project is to be proposed and led by one main applicant. His/her institution, the so-called hosting institution of the RTD Project, will be responsible for the administration, coordination and reporting of the project. Within one project, several research groups of complementary fields should contribute to reach the main project goals. The main applicant will manage his/her project once approved and ensure that it is carried out in a flexible manner. Projects are encouraged that show an interdisciplinary character by linking research groups from traditionally separated disciplines. In general, the team of a RTD Project should consist of researchers from at least two partner institutions. Scientists from non-partner institutions may also submit RTD proposals (see 3.1.4).

3.1.1 RTD Project Characteristics

Systems biology covers a number of different complementary disciplines, but also a wide range of research methods, technologies and development tools. Therefore, different types of projects can be envisaged:

- Interdisciplinary research projects focusing on biological processes: This type of project will concentrate on the in-depth analysis of a specific biological system using a systems biology approach. Biologically oriented projects must demonstrate that they are implementing an integrated research approach aimed at the comprehensive quantitative understanding of complex processes. Examples include the study of a particular biological or physiological process, or of a disease.
- Interdisciplinary research projects with a technological focus: To overcome the substantial technological limitations of systems biology, SystemsX.ch will support large integrated projects that target the development and implementation of innovative technologies. Such technologies must possess the potential to overcome a docu-

³ Similar to small National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) of the SNSF

mented limitation and broadly impact research in a wide range of biological systems. Examples of technologically oriented projects include new approaches to the acquisition of biological data, new technologies for the computational analysis or integration of (quantitative) data sets and technologies for the targeted perturbation of biological systems.

In fact, most RTD Projects might be a mix between the two types described above. However, each project is expected to contain a large part of quantitative computational and/or theoretical research using cutting-edge technology.

SystemsX.ch-Initiated Proposals

Based on the submitted proposals, the SystemsX.ch SEB can apply for infrastructure projects that are critical to the success of the whole SystemsX.ch initiative. These SystemsX.ch-initiated proposals will be evaluated by the SNSF as well.

In the context of SystemsX.ch, in which high-throughput and imaging data from all RTD Projects must be integrated and made available (in general one year later to the SystemsX.ch community and two years later to the public), it is imperative to implement and operate a centrally managed solution. As a typical example of SystemsX.ch-initiated proposals, SystemsX (2004-2007) has tasked the "Center for Information Sciences and Databases" (CISD) to establish initiative-wide access to integrated data. CISD is available to contribute to RTD Project proposals concerning data management aspects. See also

<http://www.systemsx.ch/CISD> .

3.1.2 Duration, Finances

The duration of the projects will be four years, with an outlook of two more years. The annual total budget of a SystemsX.ch RTD Project is expected to be up to 6'000 kFr with an annual contribution by SystemsX.ch up to 3'000 kFr (maximum of 50% as a rule). A typical RTD is a network involving several research groups and has total annual budget of some 2'000 to 5'000 kFr.

As required by law (University Law, Art. 13) and in accordance with the Message of the Federal Council on Education, Research and Innovation (p. 1353, German version), participating institutions must provide matching funds (in cash and/or in kind). Letters of commitment must be attached to the proposal.

Moreover, additional third party funds both from competitive research foundations (SNSF, CTI, EU, NIH, etc) and from the private industry are expected to be secured for RTD's. Such additional funding is, however, not a necessary condition for SystemsX.ch funding. Hence, the budget of each RTD Project consists of the following four funding sources (s. Excel sheet in the application forms):

Funding requested from SystemsX.ch (up to 50% of the Partner funding as a general rule);

- Partner funding: contributions from the partner institutions: (1) in cash **and / or** (2) in kind (see below for definitions);
- Private industry: collaboration with partners from the private industry and SMEs;
- Others: funds directly linked to the project from competitive research institutions such as SNSF, CTI, EU, NIH, etc.

The present call makes available a total amount of 45'000 kFr for funding a relatively low number of large integrated projects over a period of four years. A second call for RTD proposals will be published in approximately two years.

Matching Funds

The matching fund principle is a mandatory prerequisite (see above). The funds can be in kind and / or in cash.

Definitions

“cash”: funds which are invested strategically to support SystemsX.ch projects and made available to the research groups whose project proposal has been accepted by SystemsX.ch. They are to be transferred to the account of the research group in question and reported in the annual accounting statement of the institution.

“in kind”: resources from the institutions' operating budget allocated explicitly to SystemsX.ch projects:

(1) Personnel paid from the institution's operating budget involved in SystemsX.ch projects according to the following table:

Table “in kind”: lump sum per category (including salary, social charges, overhead services, infrastructures) to be calculated pro rata (max. of 20% for professors):

Professor	250 kFr
Assistant Professor	180 kFr
Senior Researcher*	150 kFr
PostDoc*	120 kFr
Technician*	120 kFr
PhD student*	50 kFr

*) only if salary is paid from the institutions' operating budget

(2) From 2008 onwards: large equipment purchased from the institutions' budget is eligible for SystemsX.ch purposes on a pro rata basis.

(3) Earlier investments (e.g. infrastructure platforms made available to SystemsX.ch): the Scientific Executive Board will determine the eligible amount on a case-by-case basis.

3.1.3 Letter of Intent

In order to assist the applicants, SystemsX.ch offers to check an outline of the proposal before it is fully elaborated. A letter of intent at most 4 pages long, describing the main goals and the methods and technologies used in the project as well as the involved research groups and the tentative budget, can be sent to SystemsX.ch Management Office by **October 15, 2007**. An informal feedback will be given by the beginning of November 2007. This procedure is optional and will not be part of the selection process itself.

3.1.4 Who May Apply for RTD Projects?

Faculty members of SystemsX.ch partners are eligible as main applicants.

Experienced senior scientists from other Swiss research institutions are eligible as co-applicants (i.e. not main applicant). However, only SystemsX.ch partners and cooperating partners (according to the revised Research Law Article 7, No. 4; cf Message p. 1448, german version, e.g. SIB and FMI) are eligible to receive SystemsX.ch funding.

After approval by the SNSF, the RTD's hosting institution must become a SystemsX.ch partner prior to initiation of funding.

3.1.5 Documentation to be Submitted

The RTD proposals are to be submitted using the official form (cf. RTD Proposal Form) that consists of two parts:

Part 1: General Information

Part 2: Scientific Information

1. Summary (1-2 pages)
2. International standing of all applicants in their field of research (2-3 pages in total)
3. Research plan (approx 30 pages in total)
 - 3.1. Overall research questions, framework of the whole project, expected added value (max 5 pages)
 - 3.2. Research plan of each subproject: state of the art, questions, methods, milestones (max 6 pages for each subproject)
 - 3.3. Outlook for the next two years (1 page)
4. Justification of the systems biology approach, significance of the planned research for SystemsX.ch and eventual users (private industry, economy, medicine, etc.) (1-2 pages).

Annexes:

- Four-year full cost budget
- Letters of commitment of the participating institutions (cf. Commitment Form)
- CV and publication list over the past 5 years of all applicants
- Existing contracts, letters of support of existing or potential industry partners if applicable.

NOTE related to SystemsX (2004-2007):

Projects approved within SystemsX (2004-2007), i.e. ongoing "Glue Projects", "Scientific Nodes", have to submit full proposals as well.

3.1.6 Submission Deadline

The RTD proposals are to be submitted by **01 January 2008** both:

1. as unbound hardcopy to:
Swiss National Science Foundation
SystemsX.ch, Division IV
Wildhainweg 3
P.O. Box
3001 Bern
- and
2. electronically (in pdf format) to both of the following addresses:
systemsx.ch@snf.ch and admin@systemsx.ch

It is the applicants' responsibility to ensure timely delivery of their proposal. SNSF and SystemsX.ch reject any responsibility for electronic / e-mail problems or any other problems.

3.1.7 SNSF Selection Procedure for RTD Proposals

The selection of the proposals will be preceded by a formal check by the SNSF administration. Proposals which fail to comply with the formal requirements will not be admitted to the next stage of the selection procedure and will be rejected if the defect cannot be easily remedied. The following formal requirements must be met:

- Compliance with the submission deadline (postmark)
- Use of the official forms and completeness of the proposal written in English
- Eligibility of the main applicant and the co-applicant(s)
- Firm commitment of the participating hosting institution
- Required cash/in kind contribution.

Proposals will be selected by the Systems Biology Panel appointed by the SNSF, consisting of approximately 10 international experts from the relevant disciplines and six members of the National Research Council of the SNSF.

- The Systems Biology Panel will assess the proposals against the criteria specified below while taking into account the recommendations of the Scientific Executive Board of SystemsX.ch.
- The Scientific Executive Board of SystemsX.ch will evaluate the contributions of the submitted proposals to the goals of the SystemsX.ch initiative and forward its recommendation to the SNSF.
- Disagreements between the SEB and the panel will be solved by joint efforts before the panel takes a decision.
- The decisions must be approved by the National Research Council.
- The orders will be placed by the SNSF and sent to the applicant with a copy to the SEB.

For each RTD Project as a whole, the decision will be taken on a case-by-case basis, having regard exclusively to (1) added value to systems biology and (2) scientific quality. If a substantial part of a RTD-project does not meet the criteria, the whole project will be rejected, but may be resubmitted in a future call for proposals.

3.1.8 Selection Criteria

The Systems Biology Panel will select the RTD proposals according to the following criteria:

- I. Contribution to the progress of systems biology and integration into the overall SystemsX.ch initiative;
- II. Scientific quality including added value of the RTD-Project as a whole compared to the sum of all sub-projects;
- III. Financial planning in general and distribution of the funding (total costs, own contributions, federal grant application, third party funding).

In addition to the above mentioned, the standard scientific criteria set forth in the SNSF Rules of Procedure (Reglement über Gesuche SystemsX.ch, 30 Juli 2007) will apply:

- a) Scientific relevance and topicality of the proposal
- b) Originality of the questions
- c) Adequacy of the methodology
- d) Scientific track record of the applicants
- e) Expertise of the applicants concerning the proposal
- f) Feasibility of the proposal.

The strategic evaluation by the SEB will be made in due consideration of the systems biology approach, its justification and the significance for SystemsX.ch.

The decision will be based exclusively on scientific criteria, primarily on (1) added value to systems biology and (2) scientific quality.

3.1.9 Annual Reporting

The annual scientific progress report of each RTD Project is to be submitted to the SystemsX.ch Management Office and evaluated by the SNSF Systems Biology Panel.

In the financial report to the Management Office of SystemsX.ch, the following items must be disclosed according to defined directives (cf. Partnership Agreement Article 38, No. 4):

- SystemsX.ch funds
- Own contributions “in cash” and “in kind” by the involved partners;
- Contributions by the private industry or SME to the SystemsX.ch project;
- Additional third party funds from competitive research foundations (SNSF, CTI, EU, NIH, etc) which support SystemsX.ch.

3.2 Interdisciplinary PhD Projects (IPhD)

To support interdisciplinary research and education and to promote the future generation of systems biologists, SystemsX.ch will finance PhD positions for students pursuing research projects that integrate at least two disciplines relevant to systems biology. The students will be mentored jointly by investigators from two different disciplines such as computer science, engineering, nanotechnology, physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, medicine, etc.

Only one (1) PhD student can be employed per project. IPhD Projects are limited in time, to three (3) years as a rule and may be extended for one (1) additional year. SystemsX.ch envisages funding of some 40 IPhD Projects over the four-year period.

SystemsX.ch will grant the same amount to each IPhD-Project: salary and social charges of the PhD student as set forth in the SNSF rules, a yearly allowance of 10 kFr for consumables and a one-time amount of 2 kFr to cover the costs of participating to an international conference.

The present call for proposals will provide funds for up to 16 IPhD Projects. Calls for IPhD proposals will be published every year.

3.2.1 Who May Apply for IPhD-Projects?

Faculty members and senior researchers of SystemsX.ch institutions are eligible as main applicants and co-applicants.

Only institutions represented in the Swiss University Conference (SUK/CUS) and the ETH-Domain are eligible to receive SystemsX.ch funding.

3.2.2 Documentation to be Submitted

The IPhD proposals are to be submitted using the official form (cf. IPhD Proposal Form) that consists of two parts:

Part 1: General Information

Part 2: Scientific Information

1. Summary (1 page)
2. International standing of both applicants in her/his field of research (1 page)
3. Research plan: state of the art, questions, methods, milestones (6-8 pages)
4. Expected impact on capacity building in systems biology (1 page)
5. Justification of the systems biology approach, significance of the planned research for SystemsX.ch and eventual users (industry, economy, medicine, etc.) (1-2 pages)

Annex:

- CV and publication list over the past 5 years of the two mentors

NOTE related to SystemsX (2004-2007):

Project leaders within SystemsX (2004-2007), i.e. ongoing "Interdisciplinary PhD Fellowship Projects" (IPFPs), also have to submit full proposals.

3.2.3 Submission Deadline

The IPhD proposals are to be submitted by **01 January 2008** both:

1. as unbound hardcopy to:
Swiss National Science Foundation
SystemsX.ch, Division IV
Wildhainweg 3
P.O. Box
3001 Bern

and

2. electronically (in pdf format) to both of the following addresses:
systemsx.ch@snf.ch and admin@systemsx.ch

It is the applicants' responsibility to ensure timely delivery of their proposals. SNSF and SystemsX.ch reject any responsibility for electronic / e-mail problems or any other problems.

3.2.4 SNSF Selection Procedure for IPhD Proposals

The selection of the proposals will be preceded by a formal check by the SNSF administration. Proposals which fail to comply with the formal requirements will not be admitted to the next stage of the selection procedure and will be rejected if the defect cannot be easily remedied. The following formal requirements must be met:

- Compliance with the submission deadline (postmark).
- Use of the official forms and completeness of the proposal written in English
- Eligibility of the main and co-applicant.

IPhD proposals will be selected by the Board of the Systems Biology Panel composed of the six members of the National Research Council.

- The Board will assess the proposals against the criteria specified below while taking into account the recommendations of the SEB.
- The SEB will assess the contributions of the submitted proposals to the strategic goals of the SystemsX.ch initiative and forward its recommendation to the SNSF.
- Disagreement between the SEB and the board will be solved by joint efforts before the board takes a decision.
- The decisions must be approved by the National Research Council.
- The orders will be placed by the SNSF and sent to the applicant with a copy to the SEB.

3.2.5 Selection Criteria

The Board of the Systems Biology Panel will select the IPhD proposals according to the following criteria:

- I. Contribution to the progress of systems biology and integration into the overall SystemsX.ch initiative;
- II. Added scientific value due to the interdisciplinarity of the proposal.

In addition to the above mentioned, the standard scientific criteria set forth in the SNSF Rules of Procedure (Reglement über Gesuche SystemsX.ch, 30. Juli 2007) will apply:

- a) Scientific relevance and topicality of the proposal
- b) Originality of the questions
- c) Adequacy of the methodology
- d) Scientific track record of the applicants
- e) Expertise of the applicants concerning the proposal
- f) Feasibility of the proposal.

The Board of the Systems Biology Panel will solicit written external reviews.

The decision will be based on scientific criteria, primarily on (1) added value to systems biology and (2) scientific quality.

3.2.6 Annual Reporting

The annual progress report of each IPhD project is to be submitted to the SystemsX.ch Management Office and evaluated by the SNSF Panel Systems Biology.

Financial reporting including own contributions from the institutions, third parties will be according to defined directives (cf. Partnership Agreement Article 38, No. 4).

3.3 Interdisciplinary Pilot Projects (IPP)

As an emerging field of research, Systems Biology critically depends on new innovative impulses, many of which are expected to come from the interfaces of traditional science disciplines. SystemsX.ch will therefore support IPPs to catalyze the exploration of new research directions and ideas. These projects will bring together research teams from the different disciplines mentioned above to address high risk topics critical for systems biology. IPPs will be supported for one (1) year at most and are non-renewable. The funds granted cannot be used to hire PhD students. The applicants can be employed at different SystemsX.ch institutions.

SystemsX.ch will provide funding to IPPs in the amount of up to 120 kFr for personnel (no PhD students), consumables and equipment. Expenses will be paid directly by the SystemsX.ch Management Office.

For the period of 2008-2011, it is planned to fund 40 IPPs. The present call for proposals will provide funds for approximately fifteen IPP projects. Further calls for IPP proposals will be published every year.

3.3.1 Who May Apply for IPP Projects?

Faculty members and senior researchers of SystemsX.ch institutions are eligible as main applicant.

Only institutions represented in the Swiss University Conference (SUK/CUS) and the ETH-Domain are eligible to receive SystemsX.ch funding.

3.3.2 Information to be Submitted

The IPP proposals are to be submitted using the official form (cf. IPP Proposal Form) that consists of two parts:

Part 1: General Information

Part 2: Scientific Information

1. Summary (1 page)
2. International standing of the applicant in her/his field of research (1 page)
3. Research plan: state of the art, questions, methods, milestones (3-4 pages)
4. Expected impact on capacity building in systems biology (1 page)
5. Justification of the systems biology approach, significance of the planned research for the scientific community and eventual users (private industry, economy, medicine, etc.) (1 page)

Annex:

- CV and publication list over the past 5 years of the main applicant.

3.3.3 Submission Deadline

The IPP proposals are to be submitted by **01 January 2008** in electronic form (pdf) to:

admin@systemsx.ch

It is the applicants' responsibility to ensure timely delivery of the proposal. SystemsX.ch rejects any responsibility for electronic / e-mail problems or any other problems.

3.3.4 Selection Criteria

The Scientific Executive Board (SEB) of SystemsX.ch will evaluate the IPP proposals according to the following criteria:

- Formal criteria (deadline, completeness of the proposal, eligibility of the applicants)
- Focus on clearly defined biological systems and questions
- Does the proposal describe an integrated, interdisciplinary and quantitative project?
- Does the proposal catalyze novel interactions between groups in different fields of systems biology?
- Does the proposal generate new data and knowledge that could not be obtained by traditionally structured projects – what is the added value?
- What are the respective contributions of the different disciplines?
- What is the standing of the principal scientists in their respective fields?
- Does the project have a realistic budget and a clear leadership structure?

In addition, the standard scientific criteria will apply:

- a) Scientific relevance and actuality of the proposal
- b) Originality of the goals
- c) Adequacy of the methodology
- d) Scientific track record of the applicants
- e) Expertise of the applicants concerning the proposal
- f) Feasibility of the proposal.

The decision will be based on scientific criteria, primarily on (1) added value to systems biology and (2) scientific quality.

3.3.5 Reporting

After completion of the IPP project, a scientific report is to be submitted to the SystemsX.ch Management Office and evaluated by the SNSF Systems Biology Panel.

Financial reporting including own contributions from the institutions, third parties will be according to defined directives (cf. Partnership Agreement Article 38, No. 4).