



First reflections on Horizon Europe

The GIURI is the informal group representing the Italian Research and Innovation community in Brussels, the platform gathers the EU Liaison Offices of the Italian R&I stakeholders, i.e. universities, research centres, industries, trade associations, financial intermediaries, regions and local bodies.

As representative of the interests of the Italian R&I community at EU level, the GIURI intends to contribute to the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe. This document is therefore attached to the GIURI's reply to the "Public consultation on the past, present and future of the European Research & Innovation Framework programmes 2014-2027" and presents its views on the following topics: strategies and objectives; priorities and resources; partnerships; missions; European Innovation Council; SMEs; simplification; impact; evaluation. Each section is divided into two parts, the first briefly outlining the state of the art, and the second putting forward a small number of proposals for improvement.

This contribution may not fully reflect the position of individual GIURI members.

A Research & Innovation programme more and more in line with EU strategies and objectives

The EU's major strategic objectives – e.g., Green Deal, digital transition, strategic autonomy – reflect the importance and urgency of changes in the Union's vision, the perception of its role, and its policy and investment choices. These changes have been motivated by a multiplicity of concomitant factors, such as: the geopolitical repositioning among key countries, the acceleration of new countries' entry procedures, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine with the related energy, food and migration crises.

Compared to previous Framework Programmes (FPs), Horizon Europe (HE) has made significant progress towards a greater alignment with the major strategic objectives of the Union. However, those insights need to be further developed in order to make the programme increasingly more consistent with said objectives; also taking into consideration the key role that enabling technologies, manufacturing capacities and advanced skills play in addressing present and future challenges for the European Union.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Deepening Research & Innovation (R&I) missions as an instrument to further reinforce the link between policy (EU strategies) and science (Horizon contents), which would also help to attract newcomers and give visibility to European R&I investment opportunities. At EU level, this could be achieved by integrating missions' actions with the thematic programmes (Clusters), as a result, competences generated by Clusters projects will gain more visibility. Moreover, this integration will help to reduce the risk of duplication between clusters and missions and increase the overall level of internal synergies within the programme.
2. Ensuring that the technology readiness levels (TRLs) of actions defined in the Work Programme (WP) are appropriate and realistic to the FP's orientations and contribute to strengthening the coherence between Horizon's orientations and the EU's strategic objectives.
3. Further deepening the interaction between the Directorate General (DG) for Research and Innovation and other thematic DGs in the definition of R&I orientations and Work Programmes' contents, following up on the co-creation activities among services pursued so far by the European Commission (EC).
4. Deepening the thematic specialisations and competences of the EC's Executive Agencies (EA) – which are responsible for the implementation of EU programmes – so as to enhance their capacity to respond to stakeholders' and applicants' needs in specific sectors (digital, health, energy, etc.). This result could be pursued by increasing the number of thematic experts specialized in specific topics, who would hopefully be capable of managing the interdependence between EU programmes and creating new synergies among programmes.

A flexible and focused budget to respond to old and new priorities

Horizon Europe's priorities and related budget breakdown were identified based on a strategic vision developed 2-3 years before the entry into force of the current FP. This procedure entails a series of risks, e.g., lack of resources to tackle sudden and emerging challenges, calls reflecting an outdated vision and with limited innovation potential, funded R&I producing minimal increases of already-known results. Furthermore, the assessment of the impact generated using knowledge and technologies developed through R&I is difficult, as there are few tools and mechanisms to track ex-post TRL advancements.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Introducing in the Horizon budget breakdown a reserve fund of about 5% of the annual FP budget, specifically dedicated to fund R&I priorities linked to sudden and emerging challenges (geopolitical, health, environmental, etc.). Should the reserve fund not be used during the programming period, the earmarked resources will be recovered and allocated only in the last year of the FP.
2. Using systematic foresight to elaborate priorities and - through *backcasting* - a medium- and long-term R&I strategy, driven by highly relevant socio-economic objectives, in order to facilitate the definition of priorities at WP and call level.
3. Reducing the risk of dispersion by concentrating calls on a smaller number of themes, and by incentivising integration and complementarity, in line with Pillar II intersectoral approach. This change will allow more and more researchers to use the most promising science and technology, without being forced to follow the tracks defined *a priori* in programmes and calls.

Partnerships: focused priorities, facilitated access, reinforced governance

The new approach to European partnerships is one of the most significant novelties of Horizon Europe. Partnerships are an important instrument to gather Member States and private players around common themes, allowing them to define common research and industrial targets, and therefore contributing significantly to supporting industrial policy and achieving the Union's objectives.

The GIURI particularly welcomes the effort made by the Commission to streamline the plethora of different instruments - previously included under the 'partnership umbrella'

- around the three new typologies of partnerships (institutionalized, co-funded and co-programmed). However, some criticalities remain, and they prevent the potential of this instrument from being fully unlocked. For example, the high number of existing partnerships leads to fragmentation of resources and lack of quality, clarity and transparency in the role of each partnership. Moreover, it does not foster synergies or coordination among the different partnerships.

As far as co-funded partnerships are concerned, the different sizes and capacities of each participating Member State – or associated country – result in widespread inequalities and different levels of engagement in the implementation of the partnership instrument.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Streamlining the number of public-private partnerships by further deepening the new approach to partnerships and the already-existing monitoring exercises introduced in Horizon Europe, with the final aim of reducing fragmentation and dispersion of resources, enhancing quality and clarity, and fostering internal synergies among partnerships.
2. Strengthening and improving communication and dissemination activities towards potential members of the partnerships. For example, to increase transparency in the overall process and facilitate participation of newcomers, more information on the legal framework of opportunities and specific roles could be disseminated among relevant stakeholders.
3. Creating a new European stakeholders forum – while preserving the role of the Partnership Knowledge Hub – involving relevant players of the R&I community to share experiences and define possible solutions in various fields: governance structures, communication, advocacy, and synergies with other EU programmes.
4. Establishing a Commission service capable of coordinating the dialogue and potential shared activities amongst partnerships in a more synergetic way. All concerned DGs should be involved in the process.
5. Harmonizing the internal procedures and services of the different private associations leading the co-programmed partnerships.
6. Foreseeing the full integration into official EC tools and databases, e.g., Funding & Tenders Portal and Cordis, of the life cycle of projects funded by co-funded partnerships (call publication, proposal submission procedures, project summary and results) in order to contribute to increasing the visibility of the FP.

Missions: monitoring, integrating and harmonising

The mission-oriented approach to R&I adopted in Horizon Europe is a powerful instrument to address social, economic and environmental challenges faced by citizens in their daily lives. From an R&I prospective, it provides the opportunity to reduce policy fragmentation, enhance interdisciplinarity and cross-sectoral collaboration, and strengthen public engagement through the involvement of regional and local innovation ecosystems.

However, the cooperation between the R&I community and national-regional political authorities – one of the most ambitious goals of the missions – is hard to achieve and implement, due to the difficulties faced by several research teams in engaging with public authorities. At the same time, Member States and regions possess different coordination tools and governance models, thus affecting at European level consistency and harmonisation in the implementation of missions.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Implementing the monitoring process so that greater care is put in checking if missions respect their founding principles, e.g., clear R&I content, ambitious but realistic, measurable and time-bound objectives, involvement of citizens and stakeholders.
2. Better aligning and integrating the Missions' Work Programme with Clusters' WPs in terms of R&I priorities, as mentioned in Section 1, in order to reduce the risk of duplication between clusters and missions and better direct applicants' efforts.
3. Harmonising and simplifying the overall missions' governance and related managing bodies (EC services in DG R&I and other DGs, Strategic Programme Committee working groups, thematic PCs, boards, assemblies), and ensure a better coordination among the five missions, and the activities assigned to each one of them, e.g., by collecting in a single web page all the relevant information on resources, data, instruments and opportunities.
4. Foreseeing more information sessions and trainings aimed at a better understanding of missions' approach and logic, in order to increase the low number of submitted and eligible applications for missions' calls. Increasing the number of eligible submissions could be achieved through strengthening and enhancing communication and dissemination of best practices and results of

missions-funded projects, and by considering the creation of exchange and mutual learning communities and platforms like TRAMI project.

Synergies with structural funds: from design to implementation

In the current programming period, the Commission has made significant progress to further promote synergies between the multiannual financial framework's ordinary programmes, structural funds and NextGenerationEU's initiatives, by aligning regulatory provisions and simplifying those knots which in the past hindered a more effective implementation of synergies.

As outlined in the European Court of Auditors' report, several factors can determine success or failure in establishing synergies. For example, the degree of alignment of rules and regulations, cooperation between relevant players at EU and Member State level, availability of relevant data, and/or administrative capacity at national and regional level are all factors that play a key role in this process. In this regard, the GIURI elaborated a toolkit to facilitate the implementation of synergies providing successful showcases in Italy "[Vademecum](#) – le sinergie tra fondi strutturali e altri programmi di finanziamento UE”.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Extending the Seal of Excellence Community of Practice – a DG R&I-led stakeholder forum and structured dialogue – to all the six typologies of synergies (Seal of Excellence, transfers, cumulative funding, partnerships, combined funding, upstream and downstream synergies).
2. Considering the creation of a Commission service/technical assistance service to support operationally managing authorities and other actors (e.g., universities, research centres, private sector, partnerships' representatives) in the implementation of synergies between Horizon and other programmes and advise applicants on existing opportunities.
3. Favouring the use of downstream synergies with Horizon Europe projects, e.g., by promoting the European Regional Development Fund's potential for deployment and commercialisation of project results among Horizon's beneficiaries, in line with specific smart specialization strategies.

4. Increasing the level of interoperability and information available for identification upstream synergies, while improving the current text mining tool (CORTEX).
5. Extending the duration of the Partnerships for Regional Innovation (PRI) Pilot Action initiative, that helps strengthening regional ecosystems and their linkages, as it relates to both R&I programmes and cohesion policy.

EIC: criticalities, complexity and the way forward

The European Innovation Council (EIC) was created with the aim of combining research support for emerging technologies with acceleration tools for start-ups, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and scale-ups, making the European Commission the largest deep tech investor in Europe.

However, a series of criticalities have emerged: cumbersome European procedures clashing with EIC initial ambitions; the nature of the EIC as a co-investment fund contrary to its original design; a high level of complexity in the bureaucratic procedures; inconsistencies in the evaluation process (e.g., AI-based IT platform); absence of effective support at national and regional level for proposals receiving the Seal of Excellence.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Aligning the approach of the Work Programme with legislative texts provisions by ensuring support and orienting investments to *all kinds of innovation*. However, this approach would not prevent us from recognizing the relevance of disruptive, breakthrough and deep tech innovations to achieve EU major strategic objectives.
2. Harmonizing and simplifying the governance of the EIC to facilitate the identification of both political and operational reference points.
3. Proceeding rapidly with the selection and adoption of a final management model for the EIC Accelerator, thus assigning clear and compatible roles to the actors involved (e.g., Member States, European Innovation Bank (EIB), external manager *Alter Domus*).
4. Achieving a more balanced division of funding shares between *EIC Accelerator Open* and calls *EIC Accelerator Challenges*, in line with the original intention.

5. Facilitating access to support services and simplifying the new three-step evaluation procedure, which requires a large commitment by the applicant without proving effective in terms of supporting potential beneficiaries or reducing the time-to-grant (e.g., by introducing an executive summary helping the evaluator to have a concise outlook of the project).

Fostering SMEs participation through new tools and dedicated measures

Horizon Europe has so far performed well in terms of private sector participation in the programme. However, smaller actors, like SMEs, are facing new difficulties in the current programme, leading to an overall decrease of SMEs participation if compared to Horizon 2020. The different types of support provided by Horizon Europe do not always meet SMEs' needs, and the absence of targeted instruments incentivizing SMEs participation, the type of innovation funded, and the proposal submission procedure further discourage SMEs from participating in Horizon Europe's calls.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Considering the introduction of a budget target of 20% dedicated to SMEs at Work Programme level, similarly to what was foreseen in Horizon 2020, and envisaging tools putting enterprises on the project's "driving seat" instead as considering them as mere end-users.
2. Foreseeing the establishment of mechanism and incentives aiming at fostering SMEs' participation in public-private partnerships.
3. Considering the introduction of new and dedicated supporting measures for SMEs and micro-SMEs, which should be easily accessible and manageable, market oriented and bottom-up, and with a strong industrial vocation. This measure could build on successful instruments implemented in previous FPs, in order to support essential development phases, such as feasibility studies and creation of business plans.
4. Supporting and boosting the use support measures through cascade funding in order to enable SMEs and micro-SMEs to launch projects in a short time and at lower costs. Which will overall facilitate the first access of small organisations to the FP.

Further simplifying and facilitating access to newcomers

Compared to Horizon 2020 and previous Framework Programmes, Horizon Europe has made significant progress towards simplification: centralized information and application through the Funding & Tender portal, introduction of simplified financing (e.g., lump sum), simplified procedures for Grant Agreement preparation and reporting. However, a series of criticalities persists, such as high entry barriers for newcomers and small organisations; administrative burden for applicants and participants; requirements of transversal requisites (e.g., privacy, gender balance, ethics, etc.) which are not always applicable to the reality of projects; and the sections' page for RIA and IA's proposals.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Extending the lump-sum approach with the aim of reducing administrative burdens and facilitating the access to the programme for newcomers and small organisations.
2. Considering the introduction of targeted tools, mechanism and incentives at Work Programme level to facilitate the participation of newcomers to Horizon projects, as successfully tested in Erasmus +.
3. Further facilitating the overall experience of Funding & Tenders Portal users, e.g., adding some useful filters when searching for calls for proposals (type of actions; Horizon Europe partnerships, etc.).
4. Further promoting an orientation or capacity building support mechanism for matters concerning privacy and ethics.
5. Considering a revision of sections' page limits in the proposal template for Research Innovation Actions (RIA) and Innovation Actions (IA), so as to reach a better balance among the three sections.

Following up on the impact-driven approach

The novelties introduced by the impact-driven approach adopted in Horizon Europe represent a step forward in terms of better valorisation of R&I results and impact maximisation, e.g., the concept of “pathway towards impact”, the “impact canvas” helping the consortium to design more consistent and effective dissemination and exploitation (D&E) measures, the “plan for dissemination and exploitation and communication (D&E&C) activities” as a mandatory project deliverable; the clear definition of the results ownership in the consortium agreement.

Nevertheless, there is still low understanding and awareness of the main concepts related to D&E and their relevance for proper and sustainable implementation of Horizon-funded projects, e.g., low perception among project partners about "long-term sustainability" plans; the excessively high focus of evaluators on IP management to the detriment of other key elements in the impact section; EC's Project Officers frequently undervaluing or neglecting the impact part in the review process and focusing mainly quantitative criteria; a low degree of knowledge of D&E main concepts among project beneficiaries.

Our proposals for improvement

1. Briefing properly evaluators on how to assess the impact and measures to maximise it, e.g., providing them with clear guidelines and concrete examples on how to approach those issues.
2. Training regularly Project Officers on the use of R&I results and generated impact, thus enabling them to properly monitor and assess D&E activities and favouring project monitoring. If the POs have a better understanding of these issues, the review process could turn into an opportunity to focus on exploitation and provide feedback on how to better implement the business / exploitation plan in view of post-project activities.
3. Continuing investment of resources in initiatives, such as IP Booster and Horizon Results Booster, to raise awareness among project beneficiaries on knowledge valorisation and impact generation, to ensure that these concepts become more and more part of the knowledge background of the European R&I community.

Evaluation: increasing quality, testing competences, improving interaction

The evaluation process of Horizon Europe proposals largely follows what was in place in Horizon 2020, highlighting similar criticalities: mismatch between scores and evaluators' comments and insufficient justifications; remote evaluation limiting the interaction among evaluators; ineffectiveness of tools to appeal the Evaluation Summary Report (ESR); mechanistic evaluation procedures favoured by the introduction of indirect aspects in the evaluation criteria (gender, open science, Social Sciences & Humanities (SSH), ethics, etc.).

Our proposals for improvement

1. Improving the selection procedure for panels of evaluators would be a crucial step to ensure the quality of the evaluation, to guarantee specialized expertise in specific areas, and to ensure that non-strictly scientific aspects are considered in the evaluation procedure.
2. Re-establishing continuity in the call life cycle so as to ensure coherence between WP's orientations and priorities, and proposal evaluation, e.g., by strengthening the involvement of Policy Officers in the evaluators' briefings.
3. Further briefing and training evaluators on new approaches and tools introduced in HE, providing them with clear guidelines and concrete examples, and foreseeing the introduction of a learning assessment test for evaluators.
4. Re-introducing a more direct and real (in-person or remote) exchange and dialogue among evaluators, which would help them overcoming the mechanistic evaluation procedures currently in force.
5. Improving the interaction between applicants and evaluators, with the twofold aim of (i) making it possible to discuss proposals' contents and (ii) providing applicants with concrete elements to prepare future proposals.