



ERA-LEARN

European Partnership Stakeholder Forum -
Summary Results

16/12/2024

Introduction

The third Partnership Stakeholder Forum was organised by the European Commission and ERA-LEARN and took place in Brussels, 4-5 December 2024. The event attracted more than four hundred participants in person and online. Ekaterina Zaharieva, Commissioner for Start-ups, Research and Innovation opened the event, while Giorgio Gori, MEP and Vice-Chair of the ITRE Committee and László Bódis, Deputy State Secretary for Innovation, representative of the Hungarian Presidency, gave the keynote speeches. Fabienne Gautier, Head of Unit G.4 Missions and Partnerships from DG RTD, European Commission, moderated the event. The format of the forum included partnership pitches, panel discussions and parallel workshops, engaging participants in highly interactive set ups.

1.1. *Setting the scene*

Based on the recent [Draghi report “The future of European competitiveness”](#), the [Heitor Report ‘Align, act, accelerate’](#) and the new mandate of Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, it is clear that research and innovation are paramount as key drivers of progress. Closing the innovation gap is a central focus of the new political cycle that Europe is entering. To this end, supporting research and re-focusing on the 3% target is important, as is the focus on cutting-edge technologies to put Europe in a leading position at the forefront of global innovation. Equally important is the goal of promoting gender balance and ensuring equal opportunities for all.

European Partnerships play a crucial role in linking research and innovation with the EU strategic objectives of green and digital transition and competitiveness. Strengthening the EU’s strategic autonomy is also highly relevant for European Partnerships. It is important that the added value of the European Partnerships is maintained in the future and that a substantially higher budget is advocated to achieve the 3% target. While addressing the challenges they face, Partnerships should remain a cornerstone of the strategy to strengthen Europe’s competitiveness focusing on fewer priorities and addressing innovation, policy and societal challenges.

1.2. Main achievements

The more streamlined approach adopted under Horizon Europe has not only attracted increased investment from both the participating countries and industries but it has also strengthened alignment with national strategies, leading to clearer and more impactful outcomes. As documented in the BMR 2024, the total commitments to European Partnerships by actors other than the Union amount to almost €39 billion of which 59% comes from industry (€ 23 billion).

The evolution of certain Partnerships was also discussed with some going back to the ERA-NET early days in FP6 and achieving notable impact in their areas, as in the case of rare diseases. Partnerships have also been crucial in addressing urgent needs like those during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the sharing of research and clinical data, rapidly shifting objectives and the redirecting of resources to deal with the emerging crisis was paramount.

The role of the Partnerships has been pivotal both in reducing fragmentation of the research efforts and in guiding policymaking and alignment at the national and European levels, as well as in accelerating the transition from research and development to market-ready solutions. The main success story is the existence of the Partnerships for over twenty years and the ever-increasing commitments and political support they attract.

The main factors for success have been the sharing of common goals, co-creating agendas and mobilising resources, ensuring transparency and building trust among truly dedicated people.

1.3. Lessons learnt

While the new framework is only now beginning to show its potential, it is important to simplify processes and avoid excessive rule change. In exploring areas to be addressed by Partnerships, it is vital to consider not only the scientific and the foresight dimension but also the commitment of the relevant actors.

Bringing the public and the private sectors together to work cohesively in the global context is key. The need for flexibility and for finding the right balance between that flexibility and simplification is ever more pressing in order not to limit the full potential of the partnership instrument. Partnerships should have clear rules and support to enhance their pace and impact which varies from one thematic area to another.

Partnerships should focus on the strategic strengths of the EU and deployment should be accelerated.

AI in healthcare and societal readiness and outreach - The Cluster 1 Partnerships' perspective

The most pressing issues that must be addressed in relation to AI in healthcare refer to trustworthiness, ethical and regulatory frameworks and data sharing. Importantly, an *overarching AI strategy* needs to be developed, while secure, ethical data sharing practices are paramount to ensure AI technologies can be safely and responsibly integrated into healthcare systems.

Societal outreach is beset with difficulties in relation to engaging the medical community, providing compensation for patient involvement and consistently integrating regulators and policymakers in the partnerships. It is important to work on how to *successfully translate R&I outputs into policy and better integrate the policy community*. Collaboration among partnerships for improved dissemination, as well as financial support and the training of patients, are also relevant. Establishing a formal mechanism for sharing workshops, training and other opportunities (e.g., via ERA-LEARN) would be beneficial.

Responding to industry needs, developing a project portfolio and synergies – The Cluster 4 Partnerships' perspective

It is important to involve industry in the SRIA development as well as having regular input to the operation of a partnership via specific structures and processes. *Close and continuous engagement of industry and more generally, the relevant stakeholders and end-users are key factors for the success of a Partnership.* Teaming up with various industries can be facilitated by the development and preparation of joint white papers or joint calls. There is clear potential for *collaboration with EIT-KICs or the EIC* to support the follow-up of projects and prototypes with high innovation potential. Engaging with the venture capital sector may also be an additional step in the right direction. Creating *synergies should be an integral part of any partnership work-*

programme, rather than an add-on element that might lack the necessary resources. Several examples of effective synergies exist that are worth documenting and sharing among the partnership community.

Partnership governance, impact, synergies and internationalisation – The Cluster 5 Partnerships’ perspective

There is high value in bringing together the diverse communities of climate, energy and mobility, to facilitate discussion and develop joint SRIAs. Translating SRIAs into technology roadmaps, work programmes and concrete projects through a participative approach requires time. Therefore, there is a need for capacity building for stakeholder participation. *Joint road mapping is key to achieve impact*. A simple process to facilitate this, along with the fusion of different funding sources and collaboration with other communities, would be beneficial. Synergies began to be formed in Cluster 5 Partnerships from the outset, with joint conferences and joint coordination groups leading to joint programming activities and joint roadmaps. The Cluster 5 Partnerships are committed to *internationalisation* as this is crucial to stay competitive.

Joint activities, stakeholder engagement and partnership implementation – The Cluster 6 Partnerships’ perspective

Fostering co-operation among Partnerships is crucial. This can take the form of joint calls, other joint activities and co-participation in the governance and bodies of the related partnerships. While it was possible under H2020, the implementation of joint calls between Partnerships is believed to be too difficult to organise for Co-funded European Partnerships for several reasons. Other possibilities for synergies and collaboration include project clustering, joint living labs, data sharing, joint monitoring activities, joint communication and dissemination and joint policy briefs. Yet, there is lack of resources and time for joint activities. To develop effective stakeholder engagement strategies, continuous communication is essential for keeping stakeholders informed and encouraging ongoing feedback. Tailored consultations can be useful to address the needs of businesses, institutions and citizens. The Co-funded Partnerships face significant difficulties in their management and implementation, as they are regarded as Horizon Europe projects and so the proposal templates, and grant and consortium agreement models are not fit for purpose. These need to be revised, with consideration that relevant training and tools would be extremely useful, especially for newcomers.

Partnership portfolio building: how to develop a coherent and strategic Partnership landscape?

Thematic focus: broad or narrow. While both approaches have specific pros and cons, the focus should start from a broader perspective and then narrow down into the call topics. *Deciding on the focus of a Partnership depends on its long-term vision, goals, objectives and the impact it aims to achieve*. The potential for synergies, attractiveness for industry and addressing a sector should also be considered.

Identification of thematic priorities: Bottom-up vs. Top-down. The focus should be on where industry needs and EU strategic objectives meet, rather than a top-down or bottom-up approach. A more impact-driven approach backed by strategic alignment between countries and the EU is key.

Justification for the partnership approach: added value. Partnerships have a clear added value in terms of efficiency and efficacy of research and innovation policy at EU and national level. *In line with their strengths, the criteria to justify their added value includes* capacity for collecting funds and attracting diverse types of stakeholders (inclusiveness), capacity for transmitting the political priorities through a bottom-up approach and interpreting the industrial needs.

Coherence: Synergy vs. Overlap with existing initiatives. At the *candidate stage it is important to map existing activities and check the landscape of the ongoing initiatives* (beyond the Partnerships, i.e. Horizon Europe pillar 2 and other initiatives) considering the TRL level. While some overlap is normal at the topic level, it is crucial to delve deeper to *avoid overlaps at the activities level*, through both bottom up and top-down approaches. Building up on what already exists is important and working in constant close contact is essential to maximise synergies, not only at the candidate stage.

Stakeholder interest: Targeted vs. Inclusive participation. Relevance is crucial in attracting and retaining stakeholders. While being open to all can foster inclusivity, financial contributions ensure dedicated engagement, balancing openness and true interest. Open calls facilitate inclusivity but on the other hand, limiting openness in partnership activities builds stronger communities and may reduce administrative burdens. *Partnerships should independently decide their openness and contribution models.*

Instrument design: how to foster simplification and effectiveness/efficiency?

Implementation types. There are several benefits and challenges in all types of Partnerships (public-public, public-private, tripartite). While the implementation is still quite complex and needs rethinking, *a more flexible or modular approach could* be beneficial to be able to bring in all partners when we tackle the same challenges. Yet, we do still need to remember that 'one size fits none'.

Additional activities. There is no common understanding of what additional activities are, especially across the different partnership types. These activities are, however, important for exploiting the Partnership potential beyond its role as a funding instrument. There are also concerns about the eligibility and reporting of additional activities. An *additional activities toolbox with clear instructions* would be helpful.

Implementation structures: Common back office vs. individualised structures. While there are several benefits for a common back office, there are many challenges, such as the different national rules, the risk of duplicating certain processes and added bureaucracy, and the lack of flexibility between administrative tasks and additional activities. *Efforts might be worthwhile but the topic needs further discussion.*

Life cycle: built-in exit vs. result-focused approach. *Phasing out planning can be a complex process* as there is a lack of guidance and it can be seen as a ‘tick-box’ exercise by some Partnerships. Allocating *additional time at the end of the Partnerships* to focus specifically on phasing out and strategic next steps (e.g. three years in addition to the seven years for a Co-funded Partnership) would be extremely valuable and allow a more focussed approach to this phase of the Partnership.

Multi-actor engagement: purpose and value, approaches and challenges, robustness and adaptability

There are successful examples of multi-actor collaboration. Approaches include community building activities, strategic engagement in governance and capacity building activities. Creating impactful collaboration takes time as building trust is an essential cornerstone.

Collaboration cannot be an “add-on” – it needs to be embedded into the work of the Partnerships.

It is important to support collaboration through platforms and formats that bring together both established and new actors for continuous dialogue and shared learning. Centralised support or coordination can help establish synergies with other Partnerships and related initiatives. The challenges also need to be acknowledged, especially balancing competition with cooperation. Synergy-building, global engagement and creative outreach to underrepresented groups, are key for reinforcing the role of Partnerships as key drivers of systemic change.

1.4. The way ahead – towards the next framework programme

Drawing on the [Draghi](#) and the [Letta reports](#) *European Partnerships face two major challenges*. The *innovation paradox* related to the failure to translate scientific advances into marketable innovations and the *fifth freedom*, which is concerned with enhancing research, innovation and education and complements the other four freedoms constituting the Single Market: the free movement of people, goods, services and capital. Partnerships have proven their contribution to advancing the ERA, pooling resources and communities together to address common challenges.

The focus should now be on impact, knowledge valorisation and improving connections with the private sector. The EIT-KIC model is a showcase for building innovation communities and can serve as a role model but there is room for further connections with other structures, such as the European Innovation Council.

To address the increasing competition from other regions (US and China), the EU needs an *aligned strategy and roadmap* with clear references on what is done at the EU, the national and regional levels. Building on the community that has now been created and the culture of alignment for solving common problems, Partnerships need to evolve by reducing the administrative burden, improving the portfolio approach and ensuring agility to adapt. *Openness and widening* participation should continue to be high on the agenda as should increasing connections at the regional level.

The identification process of (new) areas to address using the partnership instrument needs to be made clearer. We need to understand the *role of the Partnerships in the overall thematic fields* of the framework programme vis-à-vis other instruments. *Discussions on the Partnership portfolio that we need in the next framework programme should start now*.

A *tailor-made administration framework* is also needed. Simplification remains a challenge and efforts should focus on making partnerships more attractive for beneficiaries. Partnerships need further streamlining and consolidation to *address their transition from reliance on framework programme funding*. The EIT model targeting sustainability may also serve as an example here.

This *twenty-year collaborative experience has generated valuable lessons* on how to build communities and bring diverse stakeholder groups together, how to facilitate synergies among Partnerships, how to design proper governance systems, implement simplification measures and how to increase visibility of Partnerships. *Partnerships have been a success, but there is room for improvement* through simplification and streamlining.

The PKH opinion is valuable because it presents a vision followed by specific recommendations for the future.

All presentations and videos along with the agenda of the forum are available at <https://www.era-learn.eu/news-events/events/european-partnership-stakeholder-forum-2024>

A detailed forum report will be published on the ERA-LEARN website in January 2025.

