

ERA-LEARN Report: Workshop on the Administrative Burden in European Partnerships under Horizon Europe

Brussels, June 5th, 2024

Introduction

The European Commission and its Executive Agencies are aware that European Partnerships are facing various administrative burdens under the current Framework Programme regarding the preparation, implementation, and monitoring/reporting of their partnerships.

The Commission wants to engage in a discussion to better understand the nature of these administrative burdens and to collect ideas and suggestions on how to alleviate them, both within Horizon Europe and within the next Framework Programme (FP10)

As a first step to further the understanding of these administrative burdens the European Commission launched a survey through the Partnership Knowledge Hub (PKH). Member States (MS), Associated Countries (AC) and partnership representatives were given the opportunity to voice their comments and concerns on different topics. In addition, the European Commission co-organised a workshop with ERA-LEARN.

The aims of the workshop were to:¹

- Present and analyse the outcomes of the survey on the Administrative Burden of European Partnerships under Horizon Europe.
- Have a more in-depth analysis of the current administrative burdens and a discussion on how these burdens could be limited both in the current and in the next Framework Programme (FP10). The consultation was divided into two main sections: 1) feedback on the current burden; 2) feedback on the possible measures addressing the burden in the future with a long-term perspective.
- Give the participants a forum to express their experiences and concerns.

¹ Agenda can be found in ANNEX 1.

The Participants of the workshop were the members of the Partnership Knowledge Hub (Member States and Associated Countries representatives) and the observers therein (Co-funded, Co-programmed and Institutionalised partnership representatives).

The structure of the workshop consisted of:

- Opening remarks and setting the scene by **Marnix Surgeon**, Deputy Head of Unit Common Missions and Partnerships service, DG RTD, G4.
- An opening session with the presentation of the survey results.
- Administrative Burden case studies from the funding entities perspectives.
- Administrative Burden case studies from the beneficiaries' perspectives.
- Table group discussion on current expectations to lower the administrative burden under Horizon Europe, identifying the three most important needs.
- Table group discussion on a FP10 scenario of high administrative and financial simplification, divided into per phases of preparation, implementation, and reporting.
- Panel discussion with solutions and way forward.
- Final closing messages delivered by **Marnix Surgeon**, Deputy Head of Unit Common Missions and Partnerships service.

This report summarises the key messages that were drawn from the discussions during the workshop. The report of the survey results and slides of the presentations are provided separately.

Setting the Scene

On behalf of the European Commission, Marnix Surgeon welcomed the participants and highlighted the importance of the event to discuss the different administrative burdens faced by the European Partnerships. He explained that by organising this workshop the European Commission aimed in engaging in a discussion to better understand the nature of these administrative burdens and to collect ideas and suggestions on how to alleviate them, both within Horizon Europe and within (FP10).

Presentation of the Survey Results

The first part of the workshop was dedicated to present the results of the Survey on Administrative Burden, introduced by Lucas van Hattem, DG RTD, G4.

The main burden points that the Survey helped identify were:

- Increased administrative burden compared to previous Framework Programme (FP).
- Lack of access to templates and general lack of clarity on administrative issues, double reporting issues.
- Lack of training and guidance, making process too time consuming.
- Lack of budget flexibility and high frequency on reporting.

The participants proposed several recommendations to address the burden points previously identified:

- Simplification of rules.
- Availability of clear and working IT tools.
- Availability of clear guidelines.
- Increase flexibility and lower frequency of reporting.
- Careful selection of synergies to optimise their usefulness.

Several participants provided additional feedback e.g. on the need to consider specific instruments such as Coordinated Support Actions (CSAs) to apply to all Partnerships proposal preparation phase, and the limitation of KPIs to optimise their efficacy. Also, some clarifications regarding the Survey were asked.

Administrative Burden – case studies

Perspective of funding entities:

Executive Agency for Co-funded Partnership:

Paul Webb, Head of Department – Green Europe European Research Agency (REA) that deals with many Co-funded Partnerships, recognised that implementation issues were left to the end, which sometimes meant frustration for the partnerships, and especially the coordinators. He also pointed towards the inclusion of new types of partners making administration difficult itself, so it should be considered if “we want flexibility or we want clear standardised rules”.

The goal is to dedicate as many resources as possible to research, keeping administration smaller while staying within the legal framework. He mentioned that he supports simplification within clearer rules.

Joint Undertaking example:

Stephanie Le Berre, SNS JU representative gave an overview of their experience regarding the readiness assessment report, listing the many tasks given that had to be performed without a roadmap or instruction on how to set them up. SNS reached financial autonomy in October 2023 but is still on the transition to IT autonomy. The JU established inner structures, big and multidimensional, to address the process, which allowed to share expertise and save time in procurement procedures. These back offices were efficient yet insufficient and require lots of resources that cannot be dedicated to other tasks.

The following suggestions for improvements were made:

- There is a lack of adequate working IT Tools, there is a need for the establishment of a specific platform.
- Proposed enhanced measures: specific guidelines on different topics.
- More coordination, together with better and faster communication.

Coordinator/partner perspective:

Margit Noll, FFG, Head of department European and International Programmes and Coordinator of Driving Urban Transitions (DUT) representative, stated that the Idea of the 7-year program of the partnerships to overcome the fragmentation of the ERA Nets was a very good one and had the potential to allow one long term framework and plan. However, the reality, with 2-year Grant Agreements and Amendments and related micromanagement, counteract the logic of a long-term comprehensive programme. She focused on the need to include a general flexibility. She emphasised that not allowing shifts in sub-grants and requirements for parallel reporting multiplies administrative efforts. One suggestion to increase flexibility and to reduce administrative burden was that a Lump sum approach should be considered.

The following challenges were shared:

- Not sufficient binding guidelines on finance and eligible costs, which means higher uncertainty and increased financial risks.
- The administration required by the 30% of EU top-up budget is quite burdensome compared to the one for the 70% from national budgets, the GA and amendments approach renders budget unpredictable and therefore affects planning as the budget changes often. Not knowing the budget hampers planning a long-term project and that is what a European Partnership is.
- In-kind contributions interpretation and management is not sufficiently clear.
- There is a limited flexibility to accommodate new formats and topics, as adjustments are considered “bad planning”. However, thematic flexibility is essential, especially in our fast-changing urban eco-system, there is a need for agile project management.
- Less micromanagement and more transparency, clearer communication and procedures are needed from the European Agencies.
- There should not only be monitoring and reports, but dialogue. This workshop is one of the first possibilities for dialogue.
- Changes should not only apply starting from FP10, but adjustments to relieve administrative burden should also be explored under the current FP.

Changing of the rules was a topic addressed in discussions, Paul Webb, stated that in the middle of the Framework Programme is difficult to make changes, but partnerships representatives proposed to introduce a flexible interpretation of the rules to optimise their operations.

Co-programmed Coordinator:

Benedetta Trignani, representative of 2Zero Co-programmed partnership, explained in detail how they work and their project LeMesurier to address the complexity of partnership specific KPIs measurement. The main goal of LeMesurier is to assess the achievement of KPIs outlined in the SRIA and to quantify the impact of the partnership’s projects, identifying those that directly contribute to the KPIs and extracting key products, outcomes, and concrete results. Also, they pointed out the importance of considering the fact that Co-programmed partnerships do not run in calls, do not have access to projects and beneficiaries, no access to data, so they should be included in the reporting process to avoid overdependency of the coordinators replies to calculate KPIs. Her conclusions also remarked the need of simplification and of determining the most pressing needs, summarised to complete a template common to all types of partnerships.

The most relevant challenges reported by 2Zero were:

- The misunderstanding regarding objectives, KPI's, etc, leading to a very complex monitoring framework and the previously mentioned lack of direct access to data.
- Lack of training or clear guidelines about the definition and methodology to be followed to monitor the operational activities that help to understand what exactly needs to be reported and how.

Some suggestions for improvement were made:

- Provide specific training to fulfil reporting commitments better.
- Dedicated indicators per partnership type.
- Streamline the whole monitoring/reporting process.

Case studies - Beneficiaries Perspectives:

Beneficiary of a Joint Undertaking Call

Judy Martin, AIRBUS representative, provided an overview of the administrative requirements as a beneficiary of a Clean Aviation call and pointed towards some examples.

- Misalignment of expectations during the preparation phase of partnerships.
- Structural misalignment resulting in creation of ad-hoc groups to enable alignment among projects and partners, lack of standard documentation and duplication of data inputs.
- Unclear interpretation of the regulations even with new accounting rules destined to simplify the process.
- Clean Aviation has implemented a meeting and reporting heavy calendar, each report is a contractual deliverable adding to the burden, that's also affected by duplication of data population into SYGMA & PLANES (the Clean Aviation tool).

In line with the previous speaker, she recommended three main points:

- Streamlining of the alignment of reporting and monitoring requirements and tools.
- Need for simplification to ensure that the public funding is dedicated to R&T and not for monitoring efforts.
- Increase the involvement of private partners through the creation of a private partners Coordination Group to support the partnership and increase the synergies among the type of partnerships while keeping each partnership peculiarities.

Perspective from an EIT KIC:

To close the case studies round, **Sonia Muñoz Blanc, Director of Business Operations, EIT Food**, pointed towards the need of always having in mind the need of not being dependant on the EU funding and to be prepared to phase out. The following suggestions were made:

- Reduce the number of external experts and allow a greater mix of internal and external experts to improve the value for money. Increase the impact through expertise and optimal design of the calls. Aim for impact, not withdrawing monitoring that shall be complementary, but prioritise the impact.

- Consider the reality of the partnership when determining the duration of the funding allocation, match rules with the reality of the partnership as much as possible.
- Consider the complexity of rules of cost eligibility for those non-familiar with EU Funding.
- Adopt lump sum philosophy as an operational ideal to achieve flexibility with much needed clear guidelines and guidance on how to set up cascade funding with lump sum.
- Ask for specific guidelines and mitigation measures for the KICs while implementing cascade funding, adapted rules and examples set in the programming period.
- Development of IT, data collection and reporting tools should be aligned and standardised to make it effective.
- KICs perspectives focus on the business approach, which sometimes lean back due to red tape problems. To involve startups and companies' things should be made simpler.

Discussion:

MadInEurope (Co-programmed) made a clear request for tools to perform the data collection for reporting. The private partner of Co-programmed Partnerships need access to project management. The data that is asked is often confidential. The representative pointed out that major companies cannot be asked how much they will invest on specific areas for the next years and an approach closer to industry should be considered. It's imperative to set the required information up in advance. Otherwise, the reporting on specific financing topics will be challenging.

The perspective of beneficiaries on synergies is the need to ensure the stability of a legal framework. Stability and a common framework are needed to allow us to make use of commonalities.

Table rounds

- Six discussions tables were set in two rounds, a first one focusing on the current regulatory framework and a second one offering perspectives on the next Framework Programme. Throughout them the following key topics emerged from the different tables: General points regarding the implementation of the partnership Framework:
 - The focus needs to be on creating impact, not on administration, micromanagement must be avoided.
 - There needs to be a better alignment between the legal framework and strategic objectives, implementation should be planned together with the legal framework.
 - Partnership may not be treated as a regular Horizon Europe project, this prohibits planning and setting up a long-term framework with various activities.
 - There should be one Grant Agreement / one contract throughout the partnership. The fragmented nature of the program stands in contrast to the long-term mission and long-term financial commitments. The administrative burden of the new GAs and amendments is too large.
 - There needs to be flexibility within the contract throughout the partnerships.
 - Flexibility to experiment with new initiatives is needed. The current regulations need to be interpreted in light of the partnership realities.
 - Central Management could decrease administrative burden and save money.
 - Funding for the preparatory period would be helpful (CSA).

- Communication and guidelines:
 - Guidelines, training and a prompter reply from the European Commission to the partnerships are needed.
 - Less micromanagement is needed and a more regular communication with European Agencies.
 - A better communication between agencies is needed (the same information should be given regarding the same questions independent of the European Agency).

- Financial security:
 - Clear guidelines regarding financial models need to be provided upfront.
 - Lump Sum philosophy in reporting to decrease the administrative burden.
 - Guidelines regarding cascading funding are needed.

- Reporting and Monitoring:
 - Avoid double reporting.
 - Streamline the monitoring and reporting processes.
 - Optimise the IT Tools and establish them well in advance.
 - Centralise or connect IT Tools. Data needs to be transferable.
 - There need to be unified reports together with a reduction of non-standard processes and reduced financial risks.
 - KPIs need to be clearly defined. The exact reporting needs regarding KPIs need to be established upfront.

- Synergies
 - Potential synergies need to be identified early on in the partnership life-cycle.
 - A discussion forum for existing partnerships could be set up.

Final Panel Discussion.

Lucas van Hattem introduced the panel discussion which included participants from the previous sessions, such as Paul Webb (REA), Margit Noll (FFG & DUT Partnership) and Stephanie Le Berre (SNS JU). Marion Jamard (EC G4) and Member State Representative Ewa Kocińska-Lange (PL) joined the panel as well.

The moderator, Marnix Surgeon, started the panel by asking the participants what their takeaways were from the workshop.

- Stephanie Le Berre stated that although the partnerships are very different, there are common topics that can be discussed further such as KPIs, coordination, timing of the reporting, the need of a differentiated treatment considering the type of partnership, and the need for a tailor-made approach from the Commission services to the specific requests of each type of partnership.
- Margit Noll recognised this common ground and pointed towards the importance of the workshop that allows for conversation between the partnerships and the European Commission to deal with the administrative burden issues. She asks for keeping this path of debate in the future.

- Paul Webb highlighted the implementation, reporting and financing challenges, stating that the set up needs to follow the objectives of the partnerships rather than the objectives of the Partnership being constrained by the administrative set ups.
- Ewa Kocińska-Lange noticed the efforts to address duplication, misalignments, complexity, new roles, etc. and remarked the importance of gathering the Commission and partnerships to share ideas on finding common solutions that are feasible to be implemented.
- Marion Jamard picked up on the different identification of issues, the mentioning of the BMR, and found it interesting to hear the partnerships their challenges and views on how to define the path towards lowering the administrative burden for future BMRs and while building an FP10 that includes a minimum of problems arising from design.

As a follow-up to the BMR being mentioned, Marnix Surgeon asked Marion Jamard on the possibilities of channelling the reporting requirements in light of drafting the report. She shared that efforts by the Commission have already been made in this regard and that the Commission will continue to improve the process in the next editions with a view to reducing the burden on MS/ACs and partnerships. An example concerns the timeline that has been streamlined with the HE interim evaluation. This way data only needed to be requested once from the partnerships.

Marnix Surgeon carried on by asking Margit Noll about the co-fund management implementation and the organisation of more continuous interaction between the Commission/External Agencies and the partnerships. She pointed towards the different layers in a partnership, the need to understand them, and the issues hindering the full potential in strategic terms of cooperation, corresponding to the European objectives. On the operational side, she proposes a regular interaction to streamline the processes, to reflect and improve on common grounds. She emphasised that dialogue is needed to ensure that both parties gain a better understanding of each other's restrictions and potentialities.

Paul Webb commented that there is willingness from the Agencies to achieve that better interaction and mentioned the idea of breaking down the different implementation processes to examine if and how different issues can be resolved.

Marnix Surgeon continued by asking Ewa Kocińska-Lange about the relations between national rules and partnerships. She replied that Poland used to advertise the initial partnership programme as an easier way to access the Framework Programme in comparison to ERA-NETs, but that they now doubt this. She pointed towards the needs of finding a solution focusing on a better structure, considering both the implementation issues and the comparison with the ERA-NET experience to take back what used to work well and built upon those reflections.

The next question was for Stephanie Le Berre regarding the additional activities of the partnerships and her views on how it could be improved. She replied that the added value of additional activities and in-kind contributions shouldn't be underestimated. In her opinion it creates a remarkable leverage effect for the partnership and allows to better understand the roadmap and improve the coherence in their activities and the common European goals. She proposed to better

inform partners on how to report, give additional time to report and inform on how to plan additional activities/in-kind contributions.

Marnix Surgeon continued by asking Marion Jamard on her thoughts about the topology of partnership types remaining the same in FP10. She mentioned that having different types of partnerships may actually reduce the flexibility and that it might be worth exploring a single instrument with modular building blocks. This may increase efficiency and harmonisation of implementation while allowing flexibility to cater for specific needs of each thematic making the instrument in the end more versatile. Ewa Kocińska-Lange commented in this regard the difficulty of explaining these substantive changes to the involved stakeholders. She proposed to analyse the data to see what's working and what's not working and then changing the landscape focusing on the impact and keeping the aspects that have worked.

Margit Noll, while acknowledging the good intentions underlying harmonisation, proposed to maintain a sufficient differentiated approach in which there could still be room to explore innovative methods following from the current partnerships' experience. Stephanie Le Berre mentioned caution on this topic since the current differentiation, from here experience with Institutionalised Partnerships, works well.

Another topic Marnix Surgeon raised in the panel was further rationalisation of the partnership landscape and cutting the number of partnerships in half. Stephanie Le Berre believes that an analysis of the added value of partnerships would be needed first and Margit Noll voiced explicit concern in this regard. Less partnerships for her means that they will become bigger, less efficient and even more challenging to manage.

Ewa Kocińska-Lange mentioned that there have been multiple discussions on national level to find a more interdisciplinary approach and that budget optimisation needs to be carefully considered in this regard. Marion Jamard proposed to look at the individual topics and analyse where topics could be more efficiently arranged within the large landscape of partnerships. She explained that gathering some very close thematics under one single partnership (i.e. "rationalisation") would mean joint governance and back-office structures, which would actually facilitate the management and streamline processes. Pooling these aspects would, in turn, maximise the budget available for research instead of process. She added that a potential cut in the number of partnerships should of course be carefully considered as to not highly affect the ultimate goals of partnerships and recognised that merging communities can be a difficult exercise.

Regarding Marnix his follow-up question on what should be considered the deciding factor(s) to reformulate partnerships the panellists responded the following: Paul Webb pointed towards the fact that all current topics covered by a partnership are key research areas, but there might not have to be a specific partnership for each of them.

Margit Noll mentioned the importance of those areas that need national and regional contacts to reach implementation, the importance to mobilise a higher number of communities and bring them together to implement the strategic goals. Stephanie Le Berre mentioned the importance of working together with industry and the efficiency coming from that joint operation. Ewa Kocińska-Lange focused on the implementation, planning and resources aspects of the process. She emphasised the need to compromise and allocate adequate resources to achieve the alignment of national and European goals and policies and to optimise the impact of the Partnerships.

Lastly, Marnix asked every panellist the one thing they would currently like to see/change.

- Ewa Kocińska-Lange pointed out the importance of the lump sum approach and the need for a 7-year contract for partnerships in order to be more operational.
- Paul Webb pointed towards the need of examining what changes could be possible to implement within the current Framework Programme (e.g. lump sum approach).
- Margit Noll highlighted the need to reduce the overall administration and to focus on impact creation. The lump sum approach would be quite helpful.
- Stephanie Le Berre would like a higher political commitment from the European Commission to the day-to-day operative of the partnerships beyond requesting data and reporting. She also mentioned a central management for all the partnerships as something that could be helpful.

Marnix Surgeon closed the workshop with some key take aways. He emphasised how helpful the workshop was to further identify current problems and challenges regarding the administrative burden that European Partnerships are facing. He stated that an internal follow up meeting will be set up to analyse what could be changed within the current Framework Programme, especially regarding the lump sums. He also recognised the importance of addressing the partnerships' request of more frequent discussions with the European Commission. Lastly, he agreed that this topic of the administrative burden should not be left behind but could be considered an agenda point for the Partnership Knowledge Hub to keep track of what the problems are and what has been done to address them.

ANNEX 1

Agenda

9:30 – 10:00 Opening session and presentation of the Survey Results

1. Introduction and setting the scene, objectives of the workshop.

Marnix Surgeon, Deputy Head of Unit Common Missions and Partnerships service (G4)

2. Presentation of the results: Survey on the administrative burden

European Commission, Common Missions and Partnerships service (G4)

10:00 – 11:00 Administrative Burden - case studies

I. Perspective of Funding entity

- Executive agency for Co-funded partnership (10')
 - Paul Webb, Head of Department - Green Europe, European Research Executive Agency
- Joint Undertaking example (10')
 - Stephanie Le Berre, The Smart Network and Services Joint Undertaking (SNS JU)
- Coordinator/partner (direct Commission beneficiary) (10')
 - Margit Noll, FFG, Head of department European and International Programmes

-> Q&A

11:00 – 11:15 Coffee break

11:15-12:15 Administrative Burden - Case studies (continues)

- Co-programmed partnership (10')
 - Benedetta Trignani, Monitoring and Reporting Officer, 2Zero/CCAM

II. Perspective of (end) beneficiary

- Beneficiary of a Joint Undertaking call (10')
 - Judy Martin, Head of R&T Development & Partnerships Europe, AIRBUS
- EIT KIC (10')
 - Sonia Muñoz Blanc, Director of Business Operations, European Institute of Innovation & Technology (EIT) Food

-> Q&A

12:15 – 13:15 Lunch

13:15 – 14:45 Table group discussion on expectations and looking beyond Horizon Europe

During this session (split in two blocks of 45 minutes) the participants of the workshop will be split up in different groups and discuss different topics.

In the first 30 minutes every group is invited to discuss and go deeper into their current (cross-cutting) administrative challenges and what they expect and/or need from the Commission/Executive Agencies to facilitate the remaining years under the current Framework Programme (e.g. trainings, guidance, additional information,...)

(13:45 – 14:00 Outcome of the first table discussion)

During the second block of 45 minutes the same groups are invited to reflect on possible ways to resolve these challenges under the next Framework Programme. The focus of this session will be on those things that cannot be resolved under Horizon Europe (e.g. legal base).

14:45 – 15:00 Coffee break

15:00 – 15:45 Plenary: Outcome of the second table discussion

15:45-16:45 Panel discussion on way forward/solutions

Moderator: *Marnix Surgeon, (Acting) Head of Unit Common Missions and Partnerships service (G4)*

Speakers:

- *European Agency - **Paul Webb**, Head of Department - Green Europe, European Research Executive Agency*
- *Partnership Representative Co-fund: **Margit Noll***
- *Partnership Representative – Institutionalised – **Stephanie Le Berre**, SNS JU.*
- *European Commission G4: **Marion Jamard**, G4, Common Mission and European Partnerships*
- *Partnership Knowledge Hub: **Ewa Kocińska-Lange** (PL), Director, NCBR Office in Brussels*

Q&A

16:45 – 16:50 Comfort break

16:50 - 17:00 Closing messages

Next steps, key takeaways: **Marnix Surgeon, Deputy** Head of Unit Common Missions and Partnerships service (G4)

17:00 – 18:00 Networking cocktail