

# Partnership Stakeholder Forum 2023

## Results - Dec 2023

The second Partnership Stakeholder Forum was organised by European Commission and ERA-LEARN and took place in Brussels, 5-6 December 2023. The event attracted more than 250 people that were able to take part in several workshops that addressed important topics namely, synergies between Partnerships and Missions, experiences, achievements and needs of the European partnerships based on the HE interim evaluation, the additionality and directionality of European Partnerships as well as openness and transparency and developing a coherent Partnership portfolio. At the same time, the future of partnerships was also discussed in detail both in terms of their selection process and their design under FP10 considering also their internationalisation and global links under the spectrum of strategic autonomy for the EU.

---

### *1.1. Lessons learnt*

#### **Efficient and simplified implementation under a wider scope**

After two years of implementation of the Horizon Europe Partnerships, some important lessons are starting to surface. Implementation needs to be straightforward and the structures that need to be in place or created anew should not overburden the partners, nor the administrative burden be excessive for the partnership beneficiaries.

Partnerships need to act faster in FP10 and be less bureaucratic. Abiding by the long-term commitment, and the principles of openness and transparency is still relevant, but we need to move forward and start discussing new topics putting partnerships at the centre of the EU goals in the industrial and societal sphere. Political commitment needs to be revived and policy scope needs to be extended beyond research and innovation.

#### **Importance of strengthening European competitiveness and regaining leadership**

After an extended period of getting started and exploration that lasted more than 10 years, Partnerships need now to enter a maturity phase. Partnerships break down silos in industries and create synergies. With the policy alignment they can achieve they help build strong and long-term collaboration.

Their orientation should be better balanced towards economic and societal goals. We need to realise that their impact may extend far beyond research and innovation, to influencing geopolitics and regaining some lost ground in innovation leadership. For such impact to be realised,

however, only creating a partnership is not enough. Partnerships need to escape the bureaucracy trap and set high goals and achieve the scale needed for global competition. Bringing in the right actors still needs work in certain areas.

Partnerships are oriented towards achieving the EU policy goals of the green and digital transitions and the resilience of European societies. Under this framework, it is important to address the competitiveness of European industries and the strategic autonomy of the EU as key dimensions in achieving the overall goals.

### **Strategic autonomy: striking the right balance between openness and protection**

The strategic autonomy of the EU was an additional theme discussed at the Forum amidst the crises that challenge European economies and societies (COVID-19 pandemic, natural disasters, war on Ukraine, energy crisis, etc.). It is widely acknowledged that addressing the current challenges calls for joining of efforts and concerted actions. Yet, it is also important to strike the right balance between openness and protection by cooperating with like-minded actors that respect the EU values and ensuring reciprocity. Cooperation modes can vary according to sector, and it is key to set up risk mitigation strategies and foster preparedness and adaptability. The EU as well as the Member States have an important role to play to achieve an open strategic autonomy through the FP by focusing on the 'strategic competitiveness' of European industries, defining critical sectors, and accordingly pooling experiences and resources.

### **Synergies going beyond the partnership landscape**

None of the partnerships can achieve societal impacts alone – they need to work together with different instruments, initiatives, and actors. Going beyond the Partnership landscape is essential. Building links and synergies needs to be supported by trust building, simplification of implementation, increased communication, coordination mechanisms as well as dedicated fora and meeting places for regular exchange.

### **Additionality, directionality and visibility**

The importance of evaluating the European Partnerships and assessing their impacts cannot be overstated. While the interim evaluation of Horizon Europe is underway, we need to stress that the additionality of partnerships does not include only public or private investments mobilised towards common EU priorities. It also refers to qualitative impacts, such as valuable networks and innovative ecosystems, international visibility, development of standards or regulations that give Europe a leading position in the world. While there are diverse approaches to directionality across countries, alignment of national and EU policies and definition of priorities at national level helps to increase the efficiency of the actions undertaken. At the same time, there is a need for not underestimating the importance of the Partnerships' visibility in Europe and beyond and for developing a strong communication framework.

## Improvement of the selection process

The existing selection process of partnerships involves a series of consultation within the EC units as well as with Member States and Associated Countries, the Strategic Programming Committee, and the Thematic Programmes Committees. Reflecting on the existing process, we need a strengthened and more balanced co-creation process between the Commission, the Member States and Associated or Third Countries, the research actors and the industry stakeholders. The criteria that are in place for partnership selection work well, but we need to ensure flexibility of implementation and focus on identifying the areas where Partnerships are needed considering scientific excellence as well as strategic autonomy. The time needed for decision-making on all sides involved should also be respected and a more evidence-based approach to decision-making adopted.

The methodology suggested by the Expert Group on Support of the SPC for Partnerships for Assessing European Partnerships against European Policy Priorities, is a valid starting point and reflects the value of involvement/co-creation while also supporting a more evidence-based decision making process, although it is always difficult to break from path dependences. Yet, it needs to be simplified and further worked upon to allow flexibility (different partnership foci and features, thematic orientations, etc.) and quantification to the degree possible. Training of actors in agencies and ministries is also central, as is more harmonisation, coordination and transparency in the selection process. The role of the Partnership Knowledge Hub also needs to be strengthened, in this regard, both in the selection and the phasing out of partnerships.

## Openness and transparency

Strengthening the participation of the less-engaged countries keeps drawing attention. While the mutual benefits need to be clearly understood, newcomers need to have strategies, mechanisms and resources in place to support their engagement. Increased visibility of Partnerships and regular exchanges can also play a role here to help newcomers understand their potential and the value of Partnerships by exchanging views with their counterparts in other countries.



### *1.2. Looking ahead in FP10 and beyond*

Looking ahead, the 'business as usual' way is to be avoided, and one single type of partnership would not work. Both the Missions and the Partnerships are important directional instruments for FP10 but are not interchangeable, each of them having their own specificities. Partnerships are an important instrument for achieving the EU policy goals, but their creation needs to be backed by sound justification. Their modular format and governance structures call for caution with regards to complexity, and the legal basis needs to allow for flexibility to accommodate differences in focus, scope and orientation.

It is important that 'form should follow function' in the design of the partnerships. Equally important is to exercise anticipation and set specific goals to regain leadership of European industries in certain areas like 6G or energy, material revolution, etc. Focusing on fewer, top-down priorities may be due in this regard. Constant learning circulation among policy, research and businesses is needed as well as learning from the global best practice. At the same time, we need to manage our expectations about what partnerships and the research communities can achieve.

While the long-term perspective and commitments are key for European Partnerships, the life-cycle approach needs to be addressed allowing for a transition phase to get them through to the next possible format. The EIT-KICs have valuable lessons to share in terms of establishing a route to self-sustainability, as well as synergies within their landscape and with other instruments.

The importance of a co-creation process among Member States, the European Commission, and the industry is undoubted, as is to ensure buy-in from the Member States to keep their commitments. Trust needs to be strengthened while also setting aside funds at EU level and allow for the needed flexibility to address urgent needs.

The event provided a venue for networking, broadening engagement, sharing of experiences and discussing policy and practical dimensions of the partnerships. It brought together 250 on site participants and more than 100 watched the live – streamed plenary sessions.

A detailed forum report will be published on the ERA-LEARN website in January 2024.

*Imprint*

**AUTHORS**

Dr. Effie Amanatidou