

EUROPEAN INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS

To achieve and maximise the impact of Horizon Europe, regional and local innovation ecosystems are crucial. Innovation happens in places and there are specific local conditions which make such innovation ecosystems flourish. Seeing that the SDGs and the societal challenges at EU level often overlap with Smart Specialisation priorities, it is important to build on the excellence across Europe's regions to bring key stakeholders together to increase critical mass and the knowledge base. As such, it is important to support innovative environments in a local and regional context, this is also a prerequisite for innovative competitiveness to stay in the EU.

The European Innovation Ecosystem (EIE) action has the potential of supporting local and regional innovation ecosystems at the EU level and thus ensuring that the European wide Innovation Ecosystem becomes less fragmented. The EIE action should foster collaboration between a range of different stakeholders – public administrations, universities, research organisations, companies, clusters, and civil society – that is strengthening ecosystems, as well as support strategic ecosystem to ecosystem collaboration. Such strategic and long-term collaboration is not directly supported elsewhere at the EU level.

Collaboration between excellent regional and local innovation ecosystems

This type of action would build on and complement Digital Innovation Hubs, the Cluster Excellence Programme, and the European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs). For example, the structure of [Reference Sites in the EIP on AHA](#) could be replicated in other policy areas. Reference Sites are inspirational ecosystems, delivering creative and effective solutions that improve the lives and health of the elderly population. These solutions can be scaled-up and replicated across the EU.

The Reference Sites are regions, cities, integrated hospitals or care organisations that focus on a comprehensive, innovation-based approach to active and healthy ageing and there is concrete evidence of their positive impact in this field. Reference Sites share an objective and a thematic priority: improve the resilience of health systems to successfully cope with ageing and care challenges in our modern societies. This common policy priority gives them a framework for networking and partnering for European activities, such as calls for proposals, exchange, and capacity building through various schemes including twinning programmes.

Another example which could be applied at a European level, is the Swedish “[Vinnväxt](#)” programme where the aim is to promote sustainable growth by developing internationally competitive research and innovation environments in specific growth fields. Some of the funded projects have been brought together to develop cooperation for sustainable innovation via the national “Strategic Innovation Programmes”, which have been put in place to find sustainable solutions to global social challenges and increase Sweden's competitiveness. To get funding, collaboration and active participation is needed from industry, public sector, research, and political actors. For Horizon Europe, this could mean funding innovation ecosystem collaboration for sustainable growth in areas related to the clusters and/or missions.

An innovation ecosystems accelerator

The aim of the accelerator would be to accelerate the maturity of emerging ecosystems by connecting them with more advanced ones. Newly initiated innovation ecosystems will need time to develop and grow. This time can be reduced by facilitating collaboration with successful ecosystems in other parts of Europe. This action could focus on start-up support, staff exchange, demonstration etc. allowing emerging ecosystems to benefit from more advanced ones and for advanced ones to get new ideas and make new connections.

Such an approach could also be linked with the second strand of the planned Interregional Innovation Ecosystem Investment instrument that aims at supporting less developed regions to accelerate their investments supporting innovations.

Methodology and tools to activate regional innovation ecosystems

Instruments and methodologies can help local and regional innovation ecosystems to tap into their innovation potentials. For example, the [inDemand model](#) demonstrates well what support the local and regional innovation ecosystem need to mobilise the interaction between different actors. Although all regions have organisations that need to innovate (Challengers in the ‘inDemand’ model), organisations that provide funding for innovation (Funders) as well as business support to innovators (Supporters), they are rarely systematically connected and often work in silos. The inDemand model provides a methodology that helps to map who the stakeholders are in the health ecosystem, what their needs are, and make them work together, also with intermediaries such as clusters, business associations, foundations, etc., that foster and accompany the collaboration (ecosystem support).

Support ecosystem connectors or multipliers at a regional level

This type of action would enhance and better target support through ecosystem “connectors” who can work across actor groups and funding programmes at the regional level. Several coordinators at local and regional level already exist. They are responsible for having an overview of EU related funding programmes and for informing the relevant regional actors about current developments at the EU level (providing advice, grant proposal writing assistance, research services, outreach etc). However, today these coordinators are supporting individual actor groups (RTOs, universities, companies). They are well connected to their respective set of regional stakeholders and – in some cases – to EU-level associations or individuals in other regions in their sector. These groups are brought together at a regional level around regional innovation strategies and the identified specialisation areas or certain thematic priorities. What is missing, however, are regional ecosystem connectors who have the time and the skills to set up cross-sectoral links across regions – and to provide the glue which can connect ecosystems on a more sustainable basis. Such ecosystem connectors could facilitate strategic collaboration between regional ecosystems for example based on Smart Specialisation Partnerships, other collaboration schemes (such as [L’Eurorégion Pyrénées Méditerranée](#)) or Horizon Europe clusters. Such strategic collaboration – based on research and innovation – is not yet systematically included in the current partnership agreements.

Coherent policy priorities – the EIC forum

ERRIN also stresses the importance of coordination between research and innovation agendas on a regional, national, and European level to further maximise impact of investments and efficient use of Horizon Europe funds. The EIC Forum can ensure strategic level coordination between European Structural and Investment Funds and Horizon Europe.

Moreover, the European Innovation Ecosystems action can support implementation of synergies and demonstrate how different programmes can complement each other further and increase the impact of innovation. This action could be used in synergy with other ecosystem related initiatives, such as the Interregional Innovation Investment programme.

ERRIN as a network representing a wide range of regional and local actors dedicated to research and innovation would be happy to mobilise its members to support this coordination work under the EIC Forum.