

ERRIN paper series

Towards the 10th Framework Programme

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Widening

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This document is based on findings, dedicated exchanges and co-creative bottom-up work on the topic with ERRIN members to date. However, given the diverse views represented by ERRIN, it is not endorsed by all network members.

Widening and tackling innovation divide post-2027

Rationale

European competitiveness and strategic autonomy are some of the key issues on the table when talking about the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), geopolitical context and Europe's performance at global level. R&I is one of the key elements to ensure them, as reiterated in multiple country positions¹ as well as in the Letta² and Draghi³ reports.

At the same time, reaching **the full R&I potential of Europe requires unlocking the potential of all its territories**. As some of them lag behind, there is a need for actions that would contribute to building research and innovation capacity in these places, empowering their institutions to become project leaders, encouraging systemic reforms, and supporting the use of existing talent, to make sure Europe is moving forward at one speed. Ultimately, through increased overall competitiveness, this will be to the advantage of all European territories.

Participation of widening countries in Framework Programmes (FPs) has increased during the last years. According to Commission statistics, on average, as of February 2021, 5.1% of the total Horizon 2020 budget was allocated to widening countries (an increase from 4.2% in FP7 and 4.8% in 2018)⁴. According to the European Court of Auditors report⁵, while the progress may be gradual, large-scale impact of widening can only be visible in the longer term and change depends to a large extent on national R&I investments and reforms.

While the widening sub-programme thus seems to demonstrate some progress, **better measures to evaluate its outcomes, value and impact should be put in place, to provide evidence if the actions are delivering and identify any needs for changes**. This would allow to check to what extent (if any) the increase in participation of widening countries in FPs can be attributed to the widening scheme or if there is stronger correlation with other factors like national investments and reforms. It would also be worth assessing whether the widening scheme can show any effect on the position of widening countries on the European Innovation Scoreboard.

Unlocking the full R&I potential of Europe – set as an objective for widening – requires an assessment and possible rescoping of the overall scheme. Its eligibility criteria and structure in terms of value and impact within the Framework Programme should be improved, and its coherence with other European policies should be enhanced.

¹ See e.g. German discussion paper in preparation for the 10th Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, May 2024; Latvian Position Paper on the future EU Framework Programme for research and innovation (FP10), May 2024

² "Much more than a market", Enrico Letta, April 2024, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/ny3j24sm/much-more-than-a-market-report-by-enrico-letta.pdf>

³ "The future of European competitiveness", Mario Draghi, September 2024, https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en

⁴ Widening participation and spreading excellence, European Commission, https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-europe/widening-participation-and-spreading-excellence_en

⁵ ECA Special Report no. 15, 2022 https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR22_15/SR_Horizon_2020_Widening_EN.pdf

Widening scheme today and the way ahead

So far, widening measures have been included in the “Widening participation and spreading excellence” sub-programme under Horizon Europe. Looking forward, some alternative proposals have been raised, which suggest moving widening to a separate new EU scheme for capacity building⁶ and/or funding widening measures under cohesion funds.

However, **widening measures still have their place under the Framework Programme in the future.** Including widening measures under FP is seen as an important bridge for the involvement of the widening actors in calls under other parts of the Framework Programme. The learning process provided by widening is perceived as an important step towards exploring calls and creating partnerships under other parts of the programme.

Furthermore, while cohesion policy funding naturally contributes to building capacities and bridging the innovation divide by focusing on reducing disparities within the EU, it does not necessarily encourage the R&I actors to collaborate beyond their local contexts. This is because the funding is largely limited in scope to particular countries and its attribution is decided at the national level.⁷ In the meantime, FP10 funding is attributed at the European level and includes the international cooperation component. Moreover, including widening under FP10 offers a relevant point of reference in measuring R&I excellence at the EU level, which could otherwise be lost.

Importantly, **all FP participating territories can benefit directly from funding under widening** and no funding envelopes are specifically allocated to widening countries. Looking at the recent statistics of projects funded under the “Widening participation and spreading excellence” actions under Horizon Europe, Belgium has been the biggest beneficiary, with 17.8% of total net EU contribution as of 14 June 2024, Portugal being second with 9.1% of the funding. In total, widening countries received 58.2% (over EUR 555 million) and non-widening ones 41.8% (over EUR 397 million)⁸ of the funding so far, which shows the spread of financial benefits is relatively balanced.

The only caveat of the widening scheme is that solely widening territories’ stakeholders can take on the role of project coordinators, a criterion justified by the aim and expected impact of the actions. This rule should stay in place also in FP10, to enable the achievement of programme’s objectives while respecting the principle of excellence and the competitive nature of the programme.

⁶ Danish Position Paper on the future EU Framework Programme for research and innovation (FP10)

⁷ One exception here is the Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) instrument that focuses on connecting regions to European value chains, and is implemented by the Commission under direct management.

⁸ Horizon Dashboard, EU projects, 14 June 2024,

https://dashboard.tech.ec.europa.eu/qs_digit_dashboard_mt/public/sense/app/d58f3864-d519-4f9f-855e-c34f9860acdd/sheet/KVdtQ/state/analysis

Eligibility

Under Horizon Europe, the eligibility for the widening sub-programme is based on the relatively low participation rate in FP7 and H2020 projects, mainly at the country level⁹. This eligibility criterion is also under discussion. There are strong arguments in favour of keeping widening oriented towards the **country level**, which helps to unlock excellence where national R&I frameworks and institutional structures are weak. These national frameworks are often seen among the decisive factors when it comes to building the R&I capacities at regional and local levels, including successful engagement in the Framework Programmes. Furthermore, the country-level approach contributes to bridging the innovation divide between the countries, and offers an impulse to introduce needed national reforms and increasing national investments in R&I.

While some higher performing innovator regions within widening countries may be most benefiting from funding, it is important that the right environment is created at national levels to provide opportunities for all territories to realise their R&I potential. Thanks to that, underperforming regions in widening countries may gradually increase their R&I potential thanks to collaboration with higher performing regions from the same country.

Alternative proposals are raised to aim widening at **regional level** instead of country level. Possible targeting of the widening actions in this way follows the logic of extending support to all regions that are struggling with their R&I capacity. In this way, actors in all lower performing regions would be equally eligible as coordinators of widening actions. In fact, already now there are regions that are considered as widening “countries” under Horizon Europe due to their specific conditions, i.e. the Outermost Regions as defined in art. 349 TFEU.

Adopting such an approach would require a thorough assessment of which regions should be recognised as widening ones and according to which criteria. Potential risks should also be considered, including actors in countries with stronger national R&I systems being potentially more successful with the proposals, leaving stakeholders from the current widening countries further behind and thus potentially leading to exacerbating the innovation gap at the EU level. Nevertheless, while support for such an approach currently remains limited, a debate on the focus / target group of specific widening measures would be welcome by ERRIN members and could open avenues for broader reflection on the direction of widening and optimising its impact.

A **hybrid approach** could also be considered, focusing widening on eligible regions within eligible countries, thus targeting the measures to lower performing regions in countries with generally weaker national R&I frameworks. This would make the actions even more focused while requiring increased support for collaborative initiatives (joint research projects, knowledge transfer programmes or cross-sector collaboration).

When it comes to the **criteria according to which the specific territorial levels should be eligible for widening**, these should be **objective** rather than based on political decisions. These criteria could be the participation rate in FP projects to date, as in the current programme, or the R&I performance, as measured by the Innovation Scoreboard.

⁹ Beyond the less R&I advanced countries, widening currently targets also the Outermost Regions, as defined in Art. 349 TFEU.

The majority of countries with lower participation rates in FP projects to date are emerging or moderate innovators according to the Innovation Scoreboard. However, using the participation rate in previous FP projects as eligibility criterion directly aims to increase the involvement and success rate of participants from the Widening territories. At the same time, relying on the Innovation Scoreboard could nuance the eligibility with the angle of research and innovation performance of a given territory, moving the emphasis more towards improving R&I potential in more general terms.

Irrespective of what criteria are decided to be used, **territories should be systematically phased out from the widening group** as they reach a certain threshold defined in relation to this criterion.

Structure

Regardless of the “place” and eligibility of widening measures, the structure of the widening sub-programme and its measures should be rethought. We advocate for **separating the “widening participation” and “strengthening the ERA” pillars into two work programmes**, which would allow determining the necessary support measures separately. Currently, developing these two parts of the sub-programme under the same programming committee is not optimal due to the distinct priorities of each sub-programme. Such division should be done in a way that would allow the widening sub-programme to complement well the national reforms.

The question then arises whether widening should continue as a separate horizontal sub-programme or rather be divided into pieces implemented across the FP, with the same total budget. To better embed widening and facilitate participation in non-widening calls as the R&I capacities are built-up, instead of a separate horizontal sub-programme, **there could be a distinct widening component integrated in each of the FP pillars**. This component would include calls in line with the current widening principle i.e. where only actors from widening territories could take the role of project coordinators, being additional on top of the regular calls in each pillar. In this way, coherence of widening and the rest of the FP would be strengthened, and more research and innovation-oriented activities would be encouraged beyond capacity building, working towards excellence.

Bridging the innovation gap in FP beyond widening

There are several cross-cutting points that can contribute to bridging the innovation divide in FP10 more indirectly, going beyond widening, while creating an improved context for widening measures’ implementation and making the programme more inclusive. These include above all the **calls for further simplification and increased overall accessibility of the Framework Programme as a whole**. Reduced complexity would lower the entry barrier to the FP for institutions, particularly newcomers, stakeholders with less familiarity with the programme, and organisations with limited experience to understand and navigate the bureaucracy, including in countries with stronger R&I performance. Even in these countries, the main beneficiaries of the FP tend to be concentrated among a limited number of strong stakeholders.

The **co-design of widening measures should be reinforced, involving R&I actors from widening territories, and considering the broader context of FP as a whole**. As mentioned, there should be individual programming committees for “widening participation” and “strengthening the ERA”, which would allow to discuss their distinct priorities and most relevant support measures separately, while engaging a broader representation of stakeholders.

Additionally, the **introduction of tailored positive discrimination criteria should be considered in selected calls across the FP** to foster accessibility and better engagement of stakeholders that are usually less involved in the programme such as public administrations and SMEs. Examples of Regional Innovation Valleys under EIE sub-programme and EU Missions calls show how cooperation between regions and their R&I ecosystems with higher and lower innovation performance levels can be fostered through consortium eligibility criteria and call requirements. Including less experienced regions as demonstrators or pilots in the projects allows to put all the territories at the same level. Widening and demonstration aspects were combined, for example, under the HORIZON-MISS-2021-CLIMA-02-04 call, which promoted the engagement of regions and ecosystems with different levels of innovation capacity, fostering cooperation and learning between stronger and emerging innovators.

Coherence with other European policies

To realise the R&I potential of Europe as a whole, widening supports research and innovation capacity building for countries that lag behind. Through its actions, it should contribute to spreading access to excellence and bridging the innovation divide. This can in turn translate to helping reduce economic disparities between countries. As such, while widening has its specific policy objectives, **both the sub-programme and other policies sharing similar areas of impact would benefit from enhanced coordination** in order to achieve better overall results with their own respective measures.

This relates especially to cohesion policy, which can work with widening in a mutually reinforcing way. As one of the main aims of cohesion policy is to reduce disparities within the EU, it works in parallel to widening to bridge the innovation divide. With the innovation gap and economic disparities between European territories persisting despite widening and cohesion policy efforts, more should be done to coordinate these measures and reinforce their impact. **Widening could benefit from taking into account the smart specialisation strategies (S3) dimension**, which is already considered e.g. in the EIE sub-programme under Horizon Europe. This would allow to establish a stronger link between R&I results from Widening and their further exploitation under ERDF.

At the same time, the **R&I dimension should be increased in cohesion policy beyond its current focus** and contribute to further development of S3 framework by broadening its scope from economic development / “strengths” to also addressing more widely the transformation needs of European societies. Technology-driven S3 can evolve towards challenge-driven S3, with research and innovation contributing to address these challenges. Moreover, instruments that combine elements of both policies, such as the I3 Instrument under cohesion policy which aims to foster innovation building on S3 and interregional collaboration, are very welcome.

Regarding funding, the European Court of Auditors Report¹⁰ found that projects financed in the context of the widening measures may benefit from complementary funding from other sources, such as the ERDF, especially looking at the example of the Teaming action. However, the **issues of delays with receiving such complementary funding need to be addressed** to ensure effective implementation of projects.

¹⁰ ECA Special Report no. 15, 2022

https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR22_15/SR_Horizon_2020_Widening_EN.pdf

Complementarity should also be fostered between structural funds and EIC, and pathways to access the EIC from local to EU funding should be created. Opening the participation in the Plug In scheme to the EIC Accelerator beyond national level could be one step in this direction.

Finally, **there is a need for a structured long-term dialogue around widening and cohesion policy coherence between all the relevant stakeholders.** Efforts to coordinate the widening and cohesion policy efforts and improve the frameworks to manage the innovation gap, ensure synergies across all relevant funding sources, and boost scientific and innovation excellence throughout Europe, have been taken up since June 2023 by the ERA Forum sub-group on ‘Access to excellence’ – ‘R&I and Cohesion Managing Authorities’ Network (RIMA). The sub-group has aimed to help improve access to excellence and address the innovation divide by tackling issues and challenges linked to the implementation of R&I policies at national and regional levels, fostering dialogue and coordination between the Commission and Member State bodies responsible for R&I and cohesion policy.

This approach should be pursued further while making it more strategic. The composition of RIMA should be reconsidered beyond Member State representatives, to include all relevant actors (who may not yet be involved in the discussions), engaging participants from other governance levels to foster synergies. It should also be established as a permanent body and not only a sub-group responding to one of the ERA Policy Agenda actions (ERA Action 16 “Improve EU-wide access to excellence”), which are bound by a specific time frame (ERA Policy Agenda) and actor / stakeholder structure (ERA Forum governance). This would facilitate a more continuous dialogue and needed debates around tackling the different challenges related to policy and funding coordination.

Widening instruments in the future

Widening instruments should be reworked by further engaging the R&I community in the widening territories to co-design them, thus better respecting the **place-based perspective**. The co-designing of new calls and support measures would in general need to be more open and transparent beyond the Strategic Plan consultations. Furthermore, improved measures to evaluate the different instruments’ outcomes, value and impact should be implemented, to check if they are delivering and identify any areas for change. All this would ensure the proposed measures function and are actually targeting stakeholders in widening countries.

Given the limited budget, **the current portfolio of widening actions subject to calls for proposals should be narrowed to 4-5 instruments**, a process that should again be facilitated by ensuring better assessment of which instruments are most successful in achieving the set objectives of the widening scheme. Based on the experiences so far, **Excellence Hubs, Twinning and Teaming** should be among the continued actions, possibly with **ERA Chairs**. It would be also worth considering an instrument supporting SMEs and start-ups, e.g. similar to the EIC Pathfinder, offering collaborative grants to ensure knowledge transfer.

At the same time, it is important to continue in the “Widening participation and strengthening the ERA” sub-programme some actions that are not subject to calls for proposals. Special attention should be given to **COST Actions** and the **Week of Innovative Regions in Europe Conference**.

Key current instruments

Excellence Hubs, which relate to regional ecosystem thinking and underline the importance of engaging quadruple helix stakeholders in projects, are considered a useful concept for mobilising the broader R&I ecosystem and support the leadership role of actors in the widening countries. As the Excellence Hubs require involvement of various actors from the same territory, this entails mutual support in access to good-quality consortiums – an important aspect, especially for those with less experience in the Horizon Europe Programme and its predecessors. Moreover, the approach applied in Excellence Hubs, not requiring participation of R&I leaders, is very welcome. Collaboration between various widening countries should be encouraged, as it can allow for a more level-playing field.

Twinning is an example of an important standard type of call that could be taken up by partners that do not have considerable previous experience in Framework Programmes. It is also seen by the widening actors as an instrument allowing the possibility to engage in deeper partnerships with leading European institutions, as well as exchange knowledge and skills to pursue excellent R&I. However, more focus on research in addition to networking activities could be beneficial. An increase in the budget per project of Twinning calls should be considered, and a separate budget for the top-class partner should be introduced to provide incentive for institutions from non-widening countries to participate. The fact that there is sometimes more interest in working with relevant partners on specific thematic areas under Pillar 2 than under the Twinning call should also be noted and addressed.

Teaming and **ERA Chairs** are tools with good potential to enable organisations to upgrade their governance, management, institutional culture and internal R&I support to create conditions in which excellent R&I could thrive.

Furthermore, leveraging national investments through widening instruments to a greater extent, like in Teaming, can be considered. At the same time, adding funding synergies requirements to the calls can increase the complexity for applicants who would need to secure additional sources of financing. Instead, beneficiaries could be encouraged to apply for other funding for complementary actions, e.g. capacity building within widening and related R&I activities or investments in infrastructure from another source. This way, it would not be a limiting factor for beneficiaries but an opportunity to do more. At the same time, the Seal of Excellence should be promoted and made as easy as possible.

Actions beyond calls for proposals

As **COST Actions** have an inbuilt requirement to include widening countries, they are considered a very good way to help them establish networks across Europe and should be continued. These networks can then serve as a foundation for developing proposals for the open calls under the widening sub-programme and FP more broadly.

The **Week of Innovative Regions in Europe (WIRE) Conference** should be further strengthened as a European policy forum for regional and local R&I ecosystems, encouraging participation of actors from widening territories. It should serve as a meeting place for in-depth dialogue on R&I practices and challenges across European regions and link with the New European Innovation Agenda objectives under Flagship 3. In this way, WIRE should allow policy makers, public authorities, academia and businesses to meet, exchange, further develop and strengthen regional innovation ecosystems and create connections between them, making the EU R&I ecosystem more coherent as a whole.

Examples of COST and WIRE show how actions beyond calls for proposals can work towards strengthening widening objectives. The implementation of such actions should continue, while monitoring their impact.

Other instruments

Comments can also be made on **other widening instruments** that have existed under Horizon Europe; in case it is decided that they should continue.

Regarding the **Hop on Facility**, it is an interesting concept as it offers access to already ongoing projects under Pillar 2 or the EIC pathfinder. However, it is regrettable that participation is limited to only one widening partner per project. This is very limiting, considering that in the Hop on Facility calls so far, the indicative number of grants was always higher than the number of funded projects, and with respect to the potential impact. Projects that already have a partner from a widening country are practically excluded from using the instrument, while otherwise widening applicants would have a wider pool of projects to reach out to, resulting in a potentially higher take-up of the measure as well as projects benefitting from additional widening actors' engagement. This limitation can also have a discouraging effect for consortia to include partners from the widening countries in projects from the very beginning.

Furthermore, the practical arrangements linked to the Hop on Facility are quite burdensome as finding contact details to the consortium coordinators is not always straight-forward without Commission's assistance, the published lists of projects are sometimes not up to date or include projects not interested in taking on new partners, and coordinators are not always aware their projects are on the list. The matchmaking process would therefore need to be improved, potentially with the engagement and support of NCPs. Lastly, it could be considered to enable the hopping on process before the approved projects begin, which could encourage earlier involvement of additional partners from the widening territories.

Pathways to synergies seems to have a good potential as widening countries have a limited share of the Horizon Europe programme but are important beneficiaries of the cohesion funds. However, the take up is limited and more examples are certainly needed. Smart specialisation could be an important facilitator here.

Regarding **ERA Fellowships**, the number of these fellowships offered should be higher if the scheme continues. The brain drain phenomenon in the widening countries, with the researchers often leaving to complete their fellowships in Western Europe or leave to Western Europe to increase their chances of receiving an ERA Fellowship remains an issue to address. Greater targeting of ERA Fellowships researchers in the widening countries should be considered. This could increase the number of projects from the widening countries and encourage researchers from Western Europe to move to the widening countries.

In general terms, **building capacity among potential future widening project leaders** could use greater support. For example, a dedicated facility could be created that would enable shadowing of project leaders through a rotating or shared leadership model ("Hop on Project Leader"). Most of the figures show that even when participation from the widening countries in Horizon projects is increasing, project leadership is not improving when non-widening and widening countries are

compared, making it an important issue to address when setting out to bridge the innovation gap in a sustainable way.

The research community in widening countries would also appreciate having **more research and innovation actions (RIA) and innovation actions (IA)** to complement the recurrently used coordination and support actions (CSA). RIAs and IAs would allow the pursuing of concrete R&I activities in collaboration with partners from the widening countries, as well as across EU and beyond.

Key recommendations

- Simplify and increase the overall accessibility of the FP.
- Include widening measures in the Framework Programme, while considering adding a distinct widening component integrated in each of the FP pillars instead of a horizontal sub-programme.
- Consider introducing tailored positive discrimination criteria in selected calls for proposals across the FP to increase engagement of stakeholders that are usually less involved in the programme.
- Introduce improved measures to evaluate and monitor the outcomes, value and impact of the widening sub-programme as a whole and its separate instruments to provide evidence if the actions are delivering as well as identify and address any needs for changes.
- Strengthen the co-design of widening measures by involving R&I community from widening territories, considering the broader context of FP as a whole.
- Separate the “widening participation” and “strengthening the ERA” pillars into two work programmes with individual programming committees involving all relevant stakeholders.
- Systematically phase out territories from the widening territories group as they reach a certain threshold defined in relation to the established objective eligibility criteria.
- Enhance coordination between the widening sub-programme and other policies sharing similar areas of impact, especially cohesion policy.
- Consider the S3 dimension in widening and increase R&I dimension of cohesion policy beyond its current focus.
- Facilitate a structured long-term dialogue around the widening and cohesion policy coherence by strategically rethinking and strengthening the ERA Forum RIMA sub-group when it comes to its place and composition.
- Limit the current portfolio of widening actions subject to calls for proposals to 4-5 instruments.
- Enhance support for building capacity among potential future widening project leaders.
- Introduce more research and innovation actions (RIA) and innovation actions (IA) in widening programme to complement the recurrently used coordination and support actions (CSA).

[ERRIN](#) (European Regions Research and Innovation Network) is a Brussels-based platform that gathers around 120 regional organisations in more than 20 European countries. ERRIN aims to strengthen the regional and local dimension in EU Research and Innovation policy and programmes. ERRIN supports members to enhance their regional and local research and innovation capacities and further develop their research and innovation ecosystems.

The ERRIN members primarily collaborate through 13 Working Groups (WGs) and two Task Forces (TFs), covering both thematic areas and overarching policy issues. The WGs and TFs are based on members' priorities and current funding opportunities. The WG and TF meetings are at the heart of ERRIN's activities, as this is where our members meet regularly to exchange information, present regional examples, build new partnerships, develop joint projects, network and much more.

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