

Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions — Partnering in Research and Innovation’

COM(2011) 572 final

(2012/C 229/07)

Rapporteur: **Ms HEINISCH**

On 21 September 2011, the Commission decided to consult the European Economic and Social Committee, under Article 304 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, on the

Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Partnering in Research and Innovation

COM(2011) 572 final.

The Section for the Single Market, Production and Consumption, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 8 May 2012.

At its 481st plenary session, held on 23 and 24 May 2012 (meeting of 23 May), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 191 votes to 2, with 7 abstentions.

1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1 The EESC shares the Commission's view that partnerships offer a range of advantages and still have untapped potential. The EESC therefore welcomes the Commission's initiative to establish and promote European innovation partnerships (EIP) under the Innovation Union flagship initiative, which are geared towards organising the European research and innovation cycle in a more effective way and reducing the timeframe for innovations in the market.

1.2 To ensure that partnerships have a long lifespan and a sustainable impact, conditions must be put in place which are geared towards overcoming challenges relating to management structures, financing and implementation.

1.3 A basic requirement is that partnerships must be simple, flexible, inclusive and open, steering groups should be representative and balanced, and relations between existing initiatives and instruments must be clarified from the beginning.

1.4 The EESC stresses the importance of social innovation as a key instrument for creating an innovation-friendly environment with a view to encouraging businesses, the public sector, the social partners and other civil society organisations to cooperate and thus increase their innovation and production capacity.

1.5 In order to take forward the partnership approach, clarification and ongoing review of the relationship between the EIP and other political initiatives is required (point 2.3.2 of the communication).

1.6 Facilitating coordinated implementation and funding of European and national programmes as a matter of necessity with a view to addressing societal challenges more effectively (points 3.1.3 and 3.3.3 of the communication) should involve an adjustment of Member States' national administrative

procedures, national development guidelines and funding conditions.

1.7 Furthermore, the EESC recommends that existing resources be pooled more closely, that the various (co-)financing possibilities be categorised more clearly and thematically more effectively, that their use be targeted and that information about them be provided centrally and systematically.

1.8 The EESC also proposes that consideration be given to all stakeholders and initiatives at national and European level which can contribute to appropriate regular follow-up and the future sustainability of partnerships and to the implementation of results.

1.9 Including third countries in R&I partnerships should continue to be supported in order to make Europe more attractive to global players.

1.10 On the basis of previous experiences of partnerships, it should be explained what form and what degree of commitment are needed to guarantee flexibility, openness and innovativeness while ensuring long-term, stable partnerships with a sustainable impact.

1.11 In order to conserve human resources and not waste time and money, in future consideration should be given to achieving a higher degree of effectiveness. To this end, measures must be better coordinated, evaluated regularly and implemented consistently.

1.12 There must be close ties with stakeholders at national, regional and local level with a view to taking account of particular national and regional features. At the same time, the importance of the global dimension of current challenges must not be overlooked.

2. Communication from the Commission

2.1 The Commission's communication on partnering in research and innovation (R&I) ⁽¹⁾ deals with the question of how to optimise existing R&I resources so that the European Research Area can be completed by 2014 and the Innovation Union, Digital Agenda and other Europe 2020 flagship initiatives ⁽²⁾ can be implemented, even in view of the current economic and financial crisis.

2.2 In its communication, the Commission falls back on the concept of partnerships, the importance of which as a means of pooling efforts was emphasised in the Commission's communication on the Innovation Union published in October 2010 ⁽³⁾. Partnerships should bring together European and national stakeholders from the public sector in public-public (P2P) and public-private (PPP) partnerships ⁽⁴⁾, in order to meet the major challenges facing society and to strengthen Europe's competitive position.

2.3 In order to reach a common view on how R&I partnerships may contribute to smart and sustainable growth in Europe, partnership models were developed and tested in the seventh framework programme for research (FP7), the competitiveness and innovation programme (CIP), the European Research Area (ERA) and in the political framework of the Innovation Union.

2.4 In its overall assessment, the Commission concludes that partnerships offer a range of advantages and still have untapped potential.

2.5 European innovation partnerships (EIP) may provide an overarching framework for the various partnership models by bringing together all important stakeholders in the R&I cycle, covering both the supply and demand sides, and by fostering political commitment to agreed measures. In addition, partnerships are an efficient way of involving small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) more closely in research and innovation.

2.6 However, partnerships are not a 'sure-fire success'. To ensure that they have a long lifespan and a sustainable impact, conditions must be put in place which are geared towards overcoming the management, financing and implementation challenges linked to partnerships.

2.7 On the basis of the results of various partnerships, important conclusions have already been drawn for the design of partnerships and potential solutions have been developed to meet the challenges highlighted ⁽⁵⁾.

3. General comments

3.1 Demographic change, climate change as well as changes in industry, the economy and in the labour market as a result of globalisation are the biggest challenges for the future development of the European Union's Member States. In order to overcome these challenges, joint efforts and the participation of all potential stakeholders are required and relevant measures must be coordinated centrally. They must be dealt with urgently through a combination of research, science and technology-based innovation as well as social innovation.

3.2 Pooling resources, the creation of an appropriate budget and distribution of resources also requires central coordination so that the opportunities also associated with demographic change and global challenges can be used effectively for research and innovation.

3.3 The EESC therefore welcomes the Commission's initiative to establish and promote European innovation partnerships (EIP) under the Innovation Union flagship initiative ⁽⁶⁾, which are geared towards organising the European research and innovation cycle in a more effective way and reducing the timeframe for innovations in the market ⁽⁷⁾.

3.4 On the basis of an analysis of the partnership models tested under the seventh research framework programme (FP7) ⁽⁸⁾, the competitiveness and innovation programme (CIP) ⁽⁹⁾, the European Research Area (ERA) ⁽¹⁰⁾, within the political framework of the Innovation Union ⁽¹¹⁾ and the European pilot partnership on active and healthy ageing (AHA), it has already been possible to draw initial conclusions for the design of partnerships ⁽¹²⁾.

3.5 According to the conclusions, partnerships should be simple, flexible, inclusive and open, steering groups should be representative and balanced, and relations between existing initiatives and instruments must be clarified from the beginning. Furthermore, partnerships require clear frameworks for how they are structured, financed and operate in order to ensure their stable development over the longer term.

⁽¹⁾ COM(2011) 572 final, 21.9.2011.

⁽²⁾ COM (2010) 546 See also IP/10/225. The 10-year follow-up programme to the Lisbon Strategy was adopted by the European Council in June 2010. The objective is smart, sustainable and inclusive growth with better coordination of national and European economies.

⁽³⁾ COM(2010) 546; see also EESC-opinion OJ C 132, 3.5.2011, p. 39.

⁽⁴⁾ Examples of P2P partnerships include ERA-NET and ERA-NET Plus, Article 185 initiatives and Joint Programming – JP. R&I PPP include for example Joint technology initiatives (JTI) and Future Internet.

⁽⁵⁾ See Commission Staff Working Paper SEC(2011) 1028 final of 1.9.2011.

⁽⁶⁾ COM(2010) 546 final, 6.10.2010.

⁽⁷⁾ COM(2011) 572 final, 21.9.2011.

⁽⁸⁾ OJ L 412, 30.12.2006, p. 1 and OJ C 65, 17.3.2006, p. 9.

⁽⁹⁾ OJ L 310, 9.11.2006, p. 15, and OJ C 65, 17.3.2006, p. 22.

⁽¹⁰⁾ COM(2000) 6 final and OJ C 204, 18.7.2000, p. 70.

⁽¹¹⁾ See footnote 6.

⁽¹²⁾ See Commission Staff Working Paper SEC(2011) 1028 final of 1.9.2011.

3.6 The EESC welcomes and supports the Commission's efforts to develop these conclusions into concrete proposals and guidelines and to incorporate relevant aspects into the Horizon 2020 programme. The proposals described in the communication are necessary but, in the EESC's view, still need to be amended.

4. Specific comments on the Commission's proposals

4.1 Objectives of the European Innovation Partnerships (EIPs)

4.1.1 The EESC welcomes and supports the objective of the Commission communication to use the EIP to link tried and tested supply-side tools (research and technology) with demand-side tools (users, regulatory, standardisation, etc.) (2.3.1). It agrees with the Commission that EIP can bring together key stakeholders at national and regional level from the public sector and civil society and boost dialogue among them, thus optimising instruments, increasing synergies and pooling resources as well as promoting innovation – especially social innovation such as new business models⁽¹³⁾ – and strengthening political commitment.

4.1.2 In this connection the EESC underlines the importance of the Commission's proposals which are based on the conclusions of the Commission Staff Working Papers on AHA pilot EIP and other partnerships⁽¹⁴⁾. They point out that clear conditions are needed for management structures as well as for implementation and funding so that R&I partnerships can develop efficiently and over the long term.

4.2 Taking forward the partnering approach

4.2.1 The EESC considers the following points to be especially important for taking forward the partnership approach and proposes that the following aspects be added:

4.2.2 Clarification of the relationship between EIP and other political initiatives (point 2.3.2 of the communication); this relationship should be continually reviewed and clarified especially in the case of new EIPs.

4.2.3 Involvement of all stakeholders who can ensure appropriate regular follow-up (2.3.2); to this end, the respective roles and needs of the various stakeholders in the innovation process must be identified and taken into consideration. It is just as important to be able to abandon a measure as well, either when it has met its objective successfully or if, over time, a measure turns out to be unsuitable.

4.2.4 Facilitating coordinated implementation and funding of European and national programmes with a view to addressing societal challenges more effectively (3.1.3). In the EESC's view, this would involve a comprehensive overhaul of national development guidelines and funding conditions. The need to

synchronise national administrative procedures of Member States is already mentioned in the Commission communication (3.3.3).

4.3 Current research and innovation partnerships

4.3.1 Partnership models have been developed and tested in the FP7, the CIP, the ERA and within the political framework of the Innovation Union⁽¹⁵⁾.

4.3.2 Current joint initiatives include the European innovation partnership for active and healthy ageing (EIP AHA)⁽¹⁶⁾, the Digital Agenda for Europe⁽¹⁷⁾, the JPI 'More years, better lives - the potential and challenges of demographic change' (MYBL)⁽¹⁸⁾, as well as the planned Horizon 2020 programme⁽¹⁹⁾.

4.3.3 If fragmentation of the market and duplication of work is to be avoided, then other key stakeholders and initiatives at national and European level must be involved. Initiatives such as the 2012 European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations⁽²⁰⁾, the WHO Age-friendly Environments Programme⁽²¹⁾ and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities lend themselves to R&I partnerships or, at the very least, synergies⁽²²⁾.

4.3.4 Greater consideration should also be given to the relevant preparatory work of other stakeholders at national and European level. This includes, for example, the various programmes and initiatives of DG SANCO, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT)⁽²³⁾ and the Institute for Prospective Technology Studies (IPTS)⁽²⁴⁾.

4.3.5 Furthermore, the EESC emphasises the importance of partnering in increasing Europe's attractiveness as a global partner in research and innovation. By helping to build scale and scope, partnering increases the efficiency and effectiveness of research investment in Europe for global players⁽²⁵⁾. The EESC encourages the further development of partnering in this direction.

⁽¹⁵⁾ See footnote 4. A relevant example of a P2P partnership is the AAL JP with a volume of over EUR 600 m. A specific example of a PPP is the joint technology initiative ARTEMIS (Embedded Computing Systems).

⁽¹⁶⁾ See IP/10/1288.

⁽¹⁷⁾ See IP/10/581, MEMO/10/199 and MEMO/10/200.

⁽¹⁸⁾ See <http://www.jp-demographic.eu>.

⁽¹⁹⁾ Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020); MEMO-11-435. See also preliminary draft opinion INT/614-615-616-631 on Horizon 2020, rapporteur: Gerd Wolf.

⁽²⁰⁾ See <http://europa.eu/ey2012/>.

⁽²¹⁾ See http://www.who.int/ageing/age_friendly_cities/.

⁽²²⁾ See <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150>.

⁽²³⁾ See <http://eit.europa.eu>.

⁽²⁴⁾ See <http://ipts.jrc.ec.europa.eu>.

⁽²⁵⁾ To mention just two examples, as result of the Joint Programming Initiative on Neurodegenerative Diseases, Canada has reoriented its research agenda in this field towards coordination with Europe and is now a partner in a pilot action on centres of excellence; and India is actively interested in participating in the Joint Programming Initiative on 'Water'.

⁽¹³⁾ OJ C 132, 3.5.2011, p. 22-25.

⁽¹⁴⁾ SEC(2011) 1028 final.

4.3.6 In addition to structural conditions, a workable common vision which points the way ahead is also crucial for the future sustainability of research and innovation partnerships. The EESC therefore believes that, alongside all potential stakeholders and representatives of civil society and older people, the social partners as well as young people or their representatives must also become involved in partnerships in order to secure their active support for sustainable future development and implementation.

4.3.7 Innovations do not necessarily come about as a result of a linear process, but by linking up and integrating sectors, systems and concepts. The most common factors contributing to service-related innovations for example include social structural changes, new customer needs and the reaction of businesses to such changes. Such factors must be taken into consideration especially in connection with social innovations.

4.4 Other proposed changes

4.4.1 Funding and implementation – Article 3.2 of the Commission communication

4.4.1.1 In order for partnerships to have a long lifespan, they need to have a reliable financial framework. The Commission's proposals to simplify and coordinate existing financial instruments at European and national level are therefore very useful and should definitely be pursued.

4.4.1.2 In addition, it would be a good idea for the various (co-)financing possibilities to be categorised more clearly and thematically more effectively in order to put planning and implementation of initiatives on a more solid footing. The EESC therefore recommends that resources be pooled more closely, that their use be targeted and that information about them be provided centrally and systematically.

4.4.2 Clarification of the level of commitment required in future partnerships

In terms of the level of commitment required, current partnerships range from loose cooperation on particular issues, through binding undertakings by individual partners, which are, however, limited in terms of time and money, to a long-term commitment by all stakeholders in a partnership. With an eye to the Horizon 2020 programme and on the basis of previous experiences of partnerships, it should be explained what form and what degree of commitment are needed to guarantee flexibility, openness and innovativeness while ensuring long-term, stable partnerships with a sustainable impact.

4.4.3 Implementation

R&I partnerships should be geared towards swift and consistent implementation of measures which are deemed suitable. Therefore interaction between science and practice as well as an approach which is geared towards and includes users must

be strengthened in innovation partnerships. In order to avoid using valuable time and human and financial resources unnecessarily, in future consideration should be given to achieving a higher degree of effectiveness and measures should be better coordinated, evaluated continually on the basis of agreed criteria and implemented consistently.

4.4.4 Intellectual property

When several stakeholders are involved in a project or partnership, the question of intellectual property rights to joint initiatives becomes an important issue. Fair solutions to this issue must be guaranteed from the very beginning for the future innovation partnerships as well, so that all stakeholders – including relevant end-users – receive an appropriate share of the funding and any subsequent profits.

4.4.5 Regional identification

Partnerships must always be implemented and prove their worth in concrete contexts. Close ties with stakeholders at national, regional and local level and consideration of particular national and regional features is therefore to be recommended as a matter of priority, since requirements both within Member States and between them vary significantly. However, such a context-based approach must not lose sight of the importance of the global dimension of current challenges.

4.4.6 Examples of good practice

4.4.6.1 Examples of successful existing partnerships should be gathered and publicised. The EESC proposes that current ways of disseminating information, such as the CORDIS website, be supplemented with a separate web portal for example or annual events to award the most successful partnerships.

4.4.6.2 However, it may be just as useful to find out the reasons why certain partnerships have failed and to learn from this. The EESC therefore recommends collecting examples of best practice and failed initiatives and finding out the circumstances which gave rise to both, and actively disseminating information about them.

4.4.7 Clarification of concepts

4.4.7.1 The concepts of innovation, research and partnership have not been explained. Although important conditions for partnerships are already defined⁽²⁶⁾ in the Commission communication and the term 'innovation' is clarified in various communications and opinions⁽²⁷⁾, it remains largely unclear what future research should focus on, with only examples being given. However, in view of demographic change and global social challenges excellent basic research is indispensable.

⁽²⁶⁾ See IP/11/1059 and MEMO/11/623 of 21 September 2011.

⁽²⁷⁾ COM(2010) 546 final. See also OJ C 132, 3.5.2011, p. 39.

4.4.7.2 Any explanations on this matter would be beyond the scope of this opinion. The EESC is drawing up an own-initiative opinion for this purpose entitled, 'Eighth Research and Development Framework Programme: Road maps for ageing' ⁽²⁸⁾.

4.4.8 Tapping potential more effectively

The ageing population is an example of successful interaction between medical and technical research and development on the one hand, and social progress on the other. Pooling all available intellectual, financial and practical resources can continue to produce a tremendous force aimed at overcoming the current challenges.

Brussels, 23 May 2012.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Staffan NILSSON

⁽²⁸⁾ 'Horizon 2020: Road maps for ageing', (own-initiative opinion), See page 13 of this Official Journal (CESE 1290/2012.)