

European Partnerships under Horizon Europe & Biotechnology as a European mission

*2nd Biotech Hub Meeting,
10th/11th of November, 2020*

Short summary

On the 10th and 11th of November, 2020, the 2nd Biotech Hub Meeting was organised by the Saxon State Ministry of Science, Culture & Tourism (SMWK). The Hub Meetings bring together representatives from the European Commission and from European initiatives supported by Member States and regions in order to foster strategic alignment and integration in biotechnology.

The specific goal of this second Biotech Hub Meeting was to use the participants' experience of partnerships in biotechnologies and bioeconomy in Europe to contribute to their future shape under Horizon Europe.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the meeting was held in virtual format, with 79 participants from 14 European countries joining the presentations, workshops and panel discussions. Participants mostly represented national or regional ministries and funding agencies, as well as two members of the European Commission/DG Research and Innovation. The majority of participants also had strong experience with initiatives contributing to the European Research Area, e.g. ERA-Nets, ETPs, KICs or JTIs, under H2020, FP7 or even FP6. Thematically, the meeting covered white, green and red biotechnology, adjoining health topics and more production-focussed parts of the bioeconomy.

Speakers represented the European Commission, ERA CoBioTech, JTI BBI, SCAR, KetBio, ERA-Net ERA-GAS, ERA-Net PerMed, cPPP SPIRE, JPI AMR, KIC EIT Health, ERA-Net E-Rare 3, ERA-MIN 2, M-ERA.Net and ForestValue.

“Partnerships under Horizon Europe”

The first workshop and following panel discussion focussed on *Partnerships under Horizon Europe*. Compared to Horizon 2020, there will be fewer partnerships (currently 49 candidates altogether in Pillars II, III and cross-pillar) and the form they take has been rationalised to three – co-programmed, co-funded, and institutionalised. Participants discussed experiences of European partnerships to date, opportunities and challenges of Horizon Europe partnerships, and ideal future partnerships in the area of the bioeconomy/life sciences.

Outcomes

Opportunities the participants saw with regard to the new structure of fewer, but larger partnerships included a greater potential for synergies and less danger of overlap between initiatives. Stakeholders may also find it easier to get an overview of funding options in a given field. Finally, Member States will be able to cover a broader thematic area with engagement in the same number of partnerships. However, a number of *challenges* and concerns was also voiced.

Valuable elements developed in Horizon 2020 ERA-Nets, such as knowledge, infrastructure, networks, trust, and best practice, risk being “lost in transition”, since responsibility for the new partnerships might often shift at national/regional level. Horizon Europe partnerships would benefit from building on this tacit knowledge established over the years, so a mechanism should be developed to ensure its transfer.

Larger, more top-down networks might also see topics with the greatest lobby win, while others lose out

without a specific initiative to support them. Focus may thus shift or funding gaps arise. Regional funders were concerned that barriers into new partnerships are too high, and that regional priorities are not necessarily the same as national priorities and the nuances may be lost. For instance, some regional and smaller funders specifically use partnerships to internationalise early- and mid-career researchers, but it was not clear how this would be possible in the new structures. Some participants also mentioned an absence of structures for consulting regions: co-funded partnerships are the only clear option for regions to take an active role; thus, there is a lack of options now in the area of biotechnology. Against this background, the higher barriers to entry, especially for regions, were of course also among the concerns voiced in connection with the BBI. The regional aspect of the bioeconomy is one of the major focuses in the Bioeconomy Strategy, but how this will be implemented in the new initiative, Circular Bio-based Economy (CBE), did not quite become clear – possibly because the exact structure and mandate of the planned Deployment Group of the CBE are not fixed yet. It was, however, established and emphasised that the main challenge will be to construct this Deployment Group in such a way as to encourage real, regular two-way communication and thus a meaningful alignment with MS / regional programmes in the area of the bioeconomy.

“Bioeconomy as a European mission”

In the second workshop and following panel discussion, which focussed on *Bioeconomy as a European mission*, the strategic biotechnology stakeholders exchanged their views on the expected impact of biotechnology R&D in the transition from a fossil-based to a bio-based economy. The groups also discussed their understanding of the bio-based economy, capacities for a transition, and the role of responsible research and innovation.

Outcomes

It was established that terms such as “bioeconomy”, “sustainability” or “circularity” have distinct and established definitions only in some areas, most prominently the production-focussed ones. In the area of health, these terms do not currently have the same relevance. The drivers and challenges of “red” biotechnology often differ from those of other biotechnology areas.

Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI) were deemed well acknowledged in the respective networks, but there is capacity for learning. RRI is being included in strategic documents as well as in calls – as requirements to applicants and integration into the scoring system which evaluators use. Some participants ensure that evaluation panels are a site of capacity-building, as new evaluators learn from established ones. ERA CoBioTech is one of the initiatives that have such a comprehensive approach for integrated RRI.

From the strategic biotechnology stakeholders' experience and view, important approaches for future partnerships, in addition to organising joint calls and funding joint research include strengthening or establishing (depending on the biotech area) a circularity approach in biotechnology, continue funding a broad TRL spectrum and aim for good data stewardship. Discussions in the more health-focussed group also made clear concerns that Personalised Medicine currently lacks implementation in the health sector, and that, generally, health is often more basic research. There was some concern that future partnerships were not ideally placed to accommodate this.

Discussions in another group focussed on the topic of digitalisation, which was acknowledged as an important tool for a number of fields and sectors, but which was also seen as hyped a lot. Care should be taken to see digitalisation not as a goal of its own, but as a means to a very specific end in each case.

Finally, based on past experience with the BBI JU and the plans presented for the new CBE, participants identified specific limits on current inclusion of topics in CBE. Biotechnology topics spanning across several TRLs were mentioned here, as was “eco-design”, an approach that has easy re-use at the heart of the design process of a product (whether bio-based or not), green energy for industrial processes, and forestry.