

Argument
On the importance of internationalizing the Horizon Europe Partnerships:
why is it necessary and how can it be envisioned?
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Prepared by the Strategic Working Group « European Agricultural Research towards greater impact on global Challenges » of the Standing committee on Agricultural Research » (SCAR-ARCH)

This note is a tentative reflection to identify possible **improvement pathways to foster the internationalisation of the Horizon Europe co-funded partnerships**. This argument primarily targets research and innovation (R&I) policymakers and funders in the European Commission and national ministries but also international organizations with competence for R&I programming and funding.

The European partnerships (EP) implemented in Horizon Europe are powerful instruments that bind the EU, the member states and associated countries to address Europe's key challenges. International cooperation beyond Europe is encouraged for better and faster achievements of the targets, as part of the EU Global approach to R&I cooperation. Horizon Europe partnerships could be regarded to some extent as [Team Europe Initiatives](#) implemented under the EU Global Gateway strategy with the aim to support the green & digital transition in partner countries or regions through coordinated efforts by the EU, Member States, and other stakeholders. A major difference between Horizon Europe partnerships and Team Europe Initiatives is that research organisations from low and middle-income countries in European Partnerships cannot be directly funded by the EU, each members of the partnership having to be funded by their national funding agency. This prevents research performing organizations (RPO) from low and middle-income countries from fully exploiting the partnership possibilities to address common challenges and R&I agendas.

Challenges:

EP are important instruments in support to the European Green Deal, a package of interventions and policies aiming at the EU climate neutrality by 2050. Among the most important EU strategies included in the Green Deal are the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies that address challenges requiring R&I activities. A large part of these activities will be undertaken by various EP developed under the H2020 and now Horizon Europe framework programmes.

Most of the challenges targeted in the EP have also global issues due to interconnected and interdependent systems with global value chains, from production to delivery/trade and consumption. Indeed, the EU uses a significant part of world lands for its own consumption: 40% of the necessary cultivable land for the production of agricultural goods consumed in the EU are outside the EU. In addition, 30 % of agricultural goods consumed in the EU are imported. The EU is also responsible for 16% of the deforestation associated with international trade (2nd world position after China). Soy, palm oil and beef are the commodities with the largest embedded tropical deforestation imported into the EU, followed by wood products, cocoa and coffee. Furthermore, EU directives and regulations aiming at strengthening a sustainable agriculture in the context of climate change, biodiversity loss, environment degradation, although targeting worthy objectives from a European perspective, may have negative side-effects on the agriculture and the development of third countries.

Therefore, the EU has an important responsibility and a global leadership to take in supporting the necessary and urgent transformation to sustainable farm and food systems at local, regional, European and global scales. The EU can also ensure a progressive and fair adjustment of the international trade of agricultural goods, leaving no countries (either net exporting or net importing) behind the expected transformation of the market. The transformation of the farm and food systems and the related global market is also an inherent condition for the achievement of the UN sustainable development goals by 2030. Three SDG are particularly important to consider: SDG2-“Zero Hunger” (achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture), SDG12-“Responsible consumption and

production” (reduced fossil energy use, wastes, production shifts…) and SDG-17-“Partnerships for the goals” (global multi-stakeholder partnership for sustainable development and trade).

In this context, R&I with an international dimension (beyond Europe but with a EU leadership and support) can develop more comprehensive and impactful solutions by pooling knowledge, expertise and resources across the globe and limiting duplications and wastes of time in this pressing period. EP, as powerful EU instruments for R&I, have to engage in more inclusiveness and internationalization, beyond the EU only.

Context:

EP bring the European Commission and public partners together to address some of Europe’s most pressing challenges through concerted research and innovation (R&I) initiatives. In the field of Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment, the EU will be launching 7 new Partnerships for the period 2021 to 2024 (see Fig.1). In the next period (2025-27), another important and related partnership on “Forest and Forestry” will be launched.

Figure 1: List of Horizon Europe partnerships in cluster 6

Co-funded partnership	Work Programme where the topic is introduced
Rescuing biodiversity to safeguard life on Earth	2021-2022
Water Security for the Planet (Water4All)	2021-2022
A climate neutral, sustainable and productive Blue Economy	2021-2022
Accelerating farming systems transition: agroecology living labs and research infrastructures	2023-2024
Animal health: fighting infectious diseases	2023-2024
Agriculture of data	2023-2024
Safe and sustainable food systems for people, planet and climate	2023-2024

It is worth noting that older EU partnerships launched under the 8th Framework Programme H2020 but still active under Horizon Europe share the same characteristics with the aforementioned EP and thus are also targeted by this reflection paper. This the case for the European Joint Project Cofund Soil (2020-2025). The institutionalised partnership for research and innovation in the Mediterranean Area PRIMA, 2018-2027) has also common features with the Horizon Europe EP and could benefit from the analyses and proposals delivered in this paper.

As a reminder, EP are basically built as “Team Europe Initiatives” pooling resources and expertise for more effectiveness and greater impact. EP are funded by the member-states with a EU top-up. To achieve their goals, EP typically organise internal activities and competitive external open project calls for specific R&I needs. EU beneficiaries of granted proposals are funded by their national research funding organisation (NFO). The NFOs financial support is a mix of a national budget contribution and the EU top-up. The proposals have to be evaluated and approved by all NFOs to which depend the applicants.

The participation of RPO and other stakeholders, including the private sector, from non-EU or associated countries is allowed in the EP and international cooperation is encouraged. In EP open calls, like in any other Horizon Europe calls, stakeholders from low- or middle-income countries (LMIC) are by principle eligible to funding. However, the bulk of funding for the research activity under EP comes from the EU

members states (MS) or associated countries, and the EU top-up subvention to EP is rather limited (generally 30% of the total). In this context, the budget that can be allocated to institutions from LMIC is left to the goodwill of MS, in reduction of their own EU subsidies and thus is often limited. This actually strongly limits the participation of LMIC stakeholders, particularly from Africa, a priority partner of the EU of research and innovation cooperation in the field of food and nutrition security and sustainable agriculture (FNSSA).

The way forward:

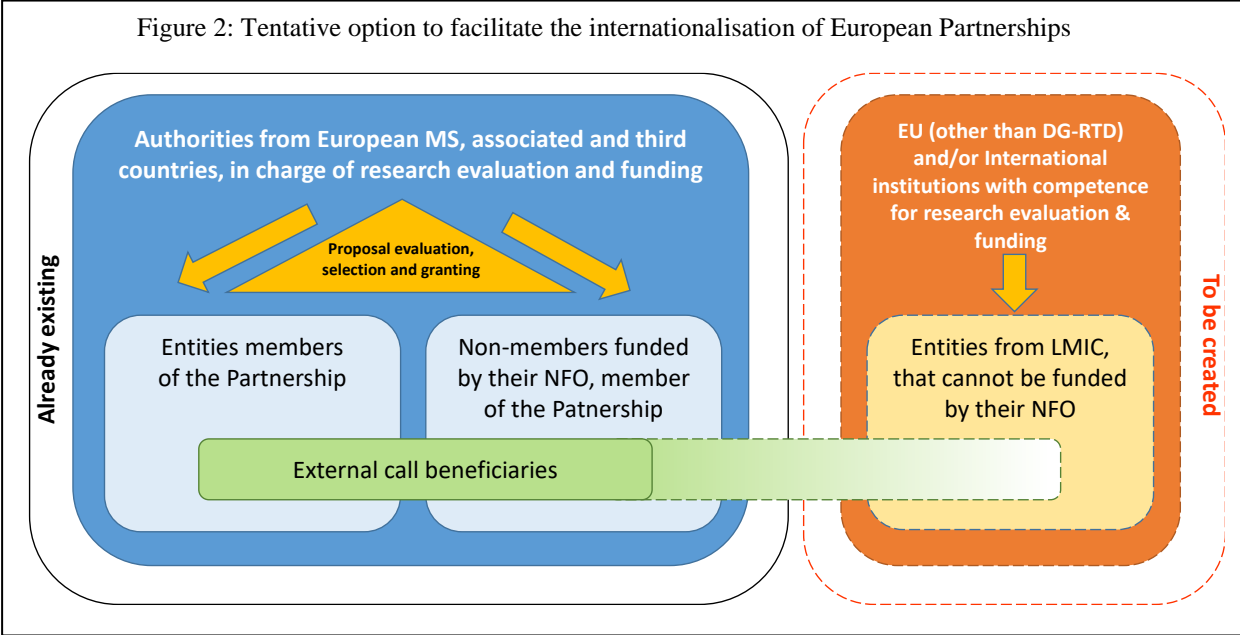
Here after, we propose possible improvements by which the participation of RPO and other stakeholders from LMIC could be better supported for mutual benefit.

The easiest way to solve the situation would be to stimulate the commitment of more national funding authorities contributing to EP, to safeguard a significant budget to support the activities of RPO from LMIC. This would also have the advantage to avoid complex procedural modifications in the management of EP. The main drawback of this option is that 1) it can rely only on the willingness of EP members for increased international cooperation with third countries and 2) not all national funding rules will allow the use of national fund for support of RPOs in other countries.

A second possibility could be to establish a mechanism by which the EU DG-RTD would automatically and directly fund research performing organisations from LMIC that are members of consortiums selected by the EP.

Finally, a third option could be to call for budget support from other actors (others than national NFO and the EU DG-RTD, including but not limited to other EU-DG, private foundations, philanthropic organizations, national development agencies...) with a mandate for and experience in funding RPO and other stakeholders from LMIC to be part of EP. These actors could operate just like the NFO which are members of EP: e.g. they would contribute to the evaluation of any proposal from research consortiums including at least one RPO or stakeholder from LMIC. Once granted, they would provide funding to support the participation of LMIC beneficiaries.

The figure 2 represents one possible evolution of EP. In this scenario, actors from the orange box will be associated to actors from the blue box to evaluate and approve proposals including beneficiaries from LMIC. Once approved by all stakeholders, beneficiaries from LMIC are granted by actors from the orange box. In this hypothesis, the inner organisation and structure of EP would not be dramatically changed and in contrast, their internationalisation would be facilitated.



The benefits for external actors would be various, including but not limited to:

1. Enable RPO and stakeholders from LMIC to enter R&I consortia with high R&I management standards
2. Support R&I capacities and maximise impacts on major global challenges
3. Become a key-player facilitating international cooperation and the development of synergies

Other solutions could be designed based on the co-construction of innovative ways of cooperation.

Whatever the final option selected, one important condition for success will be to avoid adding complexity in the existing management of EP. With the addition of new actors, the risk of multiplying administrative layers must be addressed and solutions be considered. Interestingly, any innovative measure of simplification in this context could also benefit to other European multi-actor funding initiatives.

A recent self-assessment of the ERA-net Long European-African partnership in agriculture research & innovation ([Leap-AGRI](#)) provided interesting key messages (KM) in order to improve future long-term international cooperation to address global challenges, while aiming at keeping simplified procedures and reduced transaction (administrative & financial) costs. These KM are summarised below and could provide a general framework under which innovative funding models could be created to improve the participation of stakeholders from LMIC:

1. Inclusion of underrepresented EU and third countries in the partnerships with full acknowledgment of their potential difficulties in self-funding
2. Limitation of the funding partitioning in the partnership. Each partner being funded by its own national funding organisation according to national rules: this has led in Leap-AGRI project to management and administrative bottlenecks, unwanted fragmentation of collaborations within consortiums, unbalanced access to resources, major difficulties in case of failure of a particular funding organisation and disjointed progresses between partners owing to delays in fund release
3. Adoption of inspiring approaches and frameworks to foster long-term international partnerships: Theories of changes and Impact (TCIP) enabling funders to make more effective and needs-based decisions, Research fairness initiative (RFI)¹ certification, [Programme and innovation management cycle](#) (PIMC) for continuous progress, capacity building and learning, monitoring systems with SMART key performance indicators
4. Conference/workshop for the co-creation with interested parties (national, European and international funding organisations, investment banks, foundations, NGO, business actors...) and future beneficiaries, of innovative funding models (e.g. Funder-Alliance, blend mixing funding/investment models...), having harmonised transparent rules and shared aims aligned to a joint definition of priorities build on a TCIP and PIMC exercises
5. Creation of a well-established governance structure (secretariat) and common legal rules in the partnerships to ensure equity and stability
6. Flexibility on project duration, funding extension possibility, harmonized payment strategy

¹ Botti, Lauranne (et al.) 2018 Equality in Health Research Cooperation Between Africa and Europe: The Potential of the Research Fairness Initiative. in *Africa-Europe Research and Innovation Cooperation, Global Challenges, Biregional Responses*. Editors: Andrew Cherry, James Haselip, Gerard Ralphs, Isabella E. Wagner. Copyright: 2018. Publisher. Palgrave Macmillan. Basingstoke. pp 99-119.

Next steps from now:

The 2023-24 mandate of SCAR-ARCH is to support the internationalization of the EP, focusing on the partnership FutureFood (“Sustainable Food Systems”).

This document was developed under this context and will serve as a support for further discussion with the partnership members and possibly other interested non-member stakeholders. The objective will be to find actors willing to develop innovative solutions to foster international cooperation under long-term R&I partnerships (basically over the 7-10 years of EP duration).

If the conditions are in place, SCAR-ARCH with others, could support the organization of an international event with R&I actors (including policy makers and funding organisations) to build the future of global R&I partnerships.