

## Projects – what else?

*Since its very beginning some 20 years ago, “projects” are the main way to implement European Research Programmes. This seems such an obvious “fact of life”, that there is hardly any debate on the pros and cons of this approach – and on possible other options. This text is intended to provide some first reflections – but unfortunately no definite replies yet ...*

Who thinks of European Research Programmes, thinks of research projects. The annual calls and subsequent proposal evaluations are a central part of the young tradition of European Research Funding over the last two decades or so. The number of projects supported is impressive – in 2013, some xxx were up and running under FP7. A closer look at these reveals that behind the uniform legal denomination hides a wide variety of real activities. For FP7 one might actually broadly distinguish funding for people (like in Marie Curie Actions, ERC Grants) and funding for “real” projects in the sense of supporting (mostly cooperative) temporary research efforts.

What is to some extent amazing is the fact that project funding dominates European Research Policy from its very beginning until today. In light of the manifold changes which occurred in this policy domain, it is puzzling that the central implementation tool stayed basically the same. There seem to be two possible explanations for this:

- Projects are simply the ideal tool for European Research Policy, or
- Projects are not that fantastic, but there are simply no other tools one could think of ...

There is a rather universal consensus that indeed projects are an excellent tool for research funding, and there are many arguments for this, notably:

- Project funding allows to organize a competitive process for the selection of the most qualified team(s);
- Regular calls provide the research community with a steady flow of support money;
- Funding agencies keep a high degree of flexibility, as support is temporary and could be re-oriented to other topics or teams after a short period of time.
- Last but not least, project funding is the established procedure at the European level since decades and has gained a remarkable level of trust among all actors involved.

These are without any doubt very strong arguments which explain why there is no real debate on this issue.

Yet, the nature and ambition of European Research Policy has been changing over time, and some new features might add some question marks:

- With the emergence of the European Research Area, emphasis has been put on the need for lasting transformations of the European Research system. However, Research Projects are temporary by their very nature – and attempts to overcome this through so-called “integrated Projects” in FP6 have not been really successful (and therefore abandoned since);
- Probably the most visible issue here are the great inequalities as regards the performance levels of national research systems among the 28 EU Member States. As projects do essentially mirror the current status of these systems, they are a good benchmark system to identify strengths and weaknesses per country – but they are not a tool to promote change and to support a better exploitation of all intellectual resources across Europe. FP7 participation figures for most countries from Eastern and Southern Europe are low, and, even worse, do not show any convincing signs for a steady catching up process.
- Compared with previous Framework Programmes, Horizon 2020 introduces a radical change by adding “innovation” as a key objective. To a large extent, this substantive modification does not have any major impact on the implementation approach – so most of the innovation support in Horizon 2020 will be carried out through ... projects. Questions remain whether the complexity and uncertainty of innovation processes can be adequately covered by a project during its lifetime – keeping in mind that the time range for bringing ideas to the market is in most technology fields surprisingly long (as our perception is biased through the quick moving IT industry, whereas there is evidence from the health sector that the full innovation cycle there might take up to 18 years).

Research Projects do an excellent job and are irreplaceable as backbone of the European Framework Programme. There are, however, arguments to reflect more than in the past on complementary tools to address notably some of the limitations mentioned above. The fact that over the past decades not many of such alternative ideas have come to fruition might be an indicator that this is not an easy task. In this sense the following ideas should be seen as possible orientations for further reflections – and not as ready-made suggestions or solutions:

- Institutional funding is a kind of “no go” area for European Research Policy, with the genesis of the EIT as a good illustration. There have been very good reasons not to go along this avenue in the past, but may-be it is worth to reconsider whether the same balance still holds today.
- People are key – and it is remarkable that a recent evaluation on the long term impact of FP projects revealed that the most tangible effects could be found in terms of human resources and constituency building. Against this finding, more emphasis on funding people directly (avoiding the kind of “detour” via the projects) might be an option.
- Currently there is an increased emphasis on the expected results, outputs, impacts and efficiency indicators for research projects. While this is of crucial importance, it might just be insufficient: A policy creating more favourable conditions for carrying out research in Europe should start with improving the framework conditions – and since the scientific connectivity across Europe is still an issue, there might be good reasons to re-introduce some kind of simple, open and small scale support to networking activities across countries and communities.

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