

## Creating Synergies among EU Programmes to Enhance their Impact on Regional Development

Two major and coexisting policies in the EU both deal -wholly or partly- with regional development. [Cohesion Policy](#) -hereafter referred to as CP- and [Horizon 2020](#) -hereafter referred as H2020- work with research and innovation activities, which in the European context are recognised as tools for the balanced and sustainable development of regions. Yet there is a lacking debate on the coordination across them, in terms of their design and especially in terms of their implementation. It is argued here that there are potential synergies to grasp through increasing coordination and alignment between the two policies, that is, generating a combined impact greater than the sum of their separate impacts<sup>1</sup>. The key issue is avoiding redundancy and enhancing complementarity between them, as synergies shouldn't become missed opportunities while tensions become obstacles. This blog post is based on my personal reflections with respect to a debate which seems to have received little importance in the past, but that is determinant in the current discussions about budgetary priorities and plans post-2020.

CP is the core of EU's strategy for territorial development of regions, especially less favoured regions (*European Commission, 2014*). Projects funded through this policy aim to reduce the gaps among European regions in economic, social and territorial terms (*Molle, 2008*). CP supports projects on research and innovation, as well as on SMEs, environment and public administration, among others. H2020 is the EU's framework programme aimed at enhancing research and innovation, which are considered means to economic growth (*European Commission, 2017*). With more than 300 calls for proposals, projects in this programme are dedicated to areas such as science excellence, industrial leadership and societal challenges through different actions like [Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions](#)<sup>2</sup>, [European Research Council](#) and [Euratom](#), among others.

Both CP and H2020 coexist in the budgetary period 2014-2020. More than €350 billion –a third of EU budget- were set aside for CP. In the case of H2020, the funding available over this 7 years period is nearly €80 billion. Despite H2020 is the flagship initiative for research and innovation in Europe, many CP projects have a considerable importance in the same scope. Beyond that, these two policies are -albeit to varying extents- tools to promote regional development. However, CP and H2020 are rarely found together for discussion and debate, and from my personal experience at conferences and academic events, there is a lot more to be said about the alignment and coordination of these policies in practical terms. To improve the total impact of these two policies, it is important to ask: *What are the -potential- synergies between CP and H2020 that must be treated in order to enhance regional development?* This question is discussed below.

To understand the potential synergies that could arise from greater coordination between the two policies, we must first understand how the policies are alike, and how they are different. On one hand, both policies coexist in the budgetary period 2014-2020, have economic growth and regional development as common final goals, involve research and innovation projects, and their funds come from EU member contributions, that is, taxes paid by EU citizens. On the other hand, CP and H2020 discrepancies come mainly from their different geographical approaches. In terms of budget and eligibility criteria, CP is controlled by national and local

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<sup>1</sup> [Synergy](#) is understood as “the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects” (*Oxford University Press, 2018*).

<sup>2</sup> The [RUNIN project](#) is an [Innovative Training Network](#) that makes part of MSCA, being a beneficiary of funding from H2020.

authorities, while H2020's is led by the European Commission or designated bodies. Additionally, while CP covers EU member states with focus on less developed regions, H2020 funds projects with non-European partners and apart from research mobility, geography isn't a determinant factor of eligibility. These differences and similarities generate a framework in which tensions must be mitigated and synergies must be promoted, as discussed next.

Beyond the similarities between CP and H2020, there are already some common meeting points between them. Firstly, projects from the two policies might coincide in taking place in the same location or territory and in involving the same or similar stakeholders (e.g., authorities, universities, SMEs). Secondly, these projects might also work on similar topics or problematics (e.g., societal challenges, technology). However, differences between CP and H2020 trigger some tensions that need to be overcome for allowing the greater impact of these policies when put together. At the outset, these policies are carried out by people, so power issues and discretion among officeholders and authorities in the European and national/local levels can be an obstacle for coordination. This might be related with potential discrepancies in the priorities and scopes for what European funds are used for (e.g. local vs national/European, urban vs rural) and with the differences in language, work/life style and beliefs among regions. Last but not least, involvement and good will from authorities, universities, firms and citizens can vary depending on the region. These seem to be enough relevant reasons to look for coordination and coherence between CP and H2020.

Redundancy must be avoided -fighting tensions- and complementarity must be sought out -enhancing synergies-, how? The objective of this post is to open a debate on this issue, but the author takes the initiative on recommending some general guidelines based on the previous text. To avoid people and power related tensions, a chain of command and a responsibilities hierarchy for research and innovation governance have to be well defined within and between CP and H2020 when they coincide. Another key measure is encouraging the engrossment and awareness of involved actors in research and innovation projects through structured and formal efforts. Synergies between programmes are achieved in the implementation phase of projects, despite some aspects could be better defined at their design and planning. To finish, let's state that flexibility and complementarity should be the main values for enhancing research and innovation and allowing an impact on regional development from CP and H2020 when considered together.

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