

The European Union launches its own framework programme for funding research every seven years. The budget is usually large if compared to most of national ones dedicated to research. More important, the funds are assigned on a competitive basis, that is, mostly responding to open calls where participants are selected via criteria of excellence and impact, independently from any geographic provenance. Many instruments of funding have been introduced, and in the recent years we faced an increased attention to support “innovation” to boost growth and create jobs.

The idea that research and innovation can be addressed directly as a source of renewed growth and jobs cannot easily be demonstrated, but it is true that those countries which invested more in research are those who demonstrated to be more resilient to the economic crisis. The EU reinforced this concept facilitating the direct involvement of industry in research projects, also with public stakeholders, and the development of technologies aimed at increasing the industrial competitiveness and providing solutions to the societal challenges, having in mind that investing in research does mean supporting socio-economic growth.

But this is not enough. The support to research and innovation requires other measures to have a real impact positively onto the socio-economic system (such as the rules of the internal market etc., see <https://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/pdf/state-of-the-union/2013/research-and-innovation-as-sources-of-renewed-growth-com-2014-339-final.pdf>). Moreover, the scientific community could not be ready to provide adequately, in time and in some regions, the required solutions.

To date, the present EU framework programme for research, named Horizon 2020, allocates a part of its budget to fund bottom-up curiosity driven projects (for long-term impacting ideas), another part to technologies and another to tackle the societal challenges. Even if deliverables are usually identified, most of the funds are transferred as reimbursement of activities, and not as a payment for a product, which indeed are identified and proposed by the participants as those to be evaluated. So, mainly it is the effort or the process of cooperation to be mainly funded. The other extreme of funding is through a procurement, where it is the product to be defined a priori and tested for the payment.

Definitely, it is difficult to identify a measurable result from a research activity and the risk of unsuccess is intrinsic in any scientific activity too. But the instrument of funding can dramatically influence in the approach which the scientific community will adopt.

This means that, if the next EU framework programme for 2021-2027 would insist to impact onto the socio-economic system, it would be probably adopt instruments of funding more close to the market approach, that is facilitating to provide real solutions, services and products. Procurement will not be the only appropriate instrument, but a clear identification of the results to be provided, a reimbursement proportional to the risk of the activities in providing the product and a bonus for the deliverables could be an option. This implies that the agencies accountable for the management and evaluation of the funds would change accordingly to face this new approach.