

SD-WISHEES

Policy Brief

Strengthening Inclusive Participation in Horizon Europe Partnerships through Thematic Action Programmes

Consideration of practical solutions to improve collaboration across Europe to be more aligned, accessible and equitable.



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Strengthening Inclusive Participation in Horizon Europe Partnerships through Thematic Action Programmes

Consideration of practical solutions to improve collaboration across Europe to be more aligned, accessible and equitable.

The ambition of Horizon Europe Partnerships is to foster impactful and transnational cooperation around key societal challenges, including the one addressed by SD-WISHEES: the protection and sustainable management of cultural heritage threatened by increasing hydroclimatic extremes. However, many countries, particularly those in widening regions, continue to face significant barriers to full participation. These include misalignment between national and EU priorities, financial constraints related to co-funding, limited institutional capacity, difficulty in building sustainable and equitable partnerships, and procedural complexity. This policy brief draws upon experience in coordinating cross-national networks to encourage inclusive participation plus recent exchanges among European Commission officials, national funding agencies, and project coordinators to highlight these challenges and propose actionable solutions.

The Thematic Annual Programming (TAP) actions form part of a system piloted by both Water 4 All and SD-WISHEES for bringing together researchers from several different countries that are working in the same field. They are funded as part of the project grant, providing a low-cost approach to exchange of knowledge, enabling researchers to build a network of like-minded researchers to collaborate on future projects. They also help countries to align national research with European priorities and open the door to more inclusive joint funding applications (see section on 'What are TAPS'). This paper aims to consider the hurdles for widening countries to participate in European funding, and makes recommendations for practical solutions, including the TAP as one mechanism.

Challenges for participation of widening countries

Improved strategic alignment between Horizon Europe and national research priorities is a central issue. While such alignment is a formal requirement under the EU treaties, mechanisms for ensuring this coherence are often weak. National funding agencies sometimes lack the structured pathways, such as Mirror Groups^[1] or dedicated inter-ministerial coordination, to feed national priorities into EU-level programming. This is particularly relevant for widening countries. In addition, certain thematic areas, such as cultural heritage, remain underrepresented in both EU and national research strategies, or are not addressed jointly with other related topics, such as hydroclimatic extreme events or climate change. Strengthening feedback loops and

A TAP is a network of up to ten nationally funded research and innovation projects. All projects included in a TAP relate to the same scientific domain and aim to strengthen collaboration among them. Such collaboration may take the form of knowledge exchange, the organisation of thematic conferences or seminars, or the creation of a consortium in response to a call for proposals. TAP actions last for several years during the period of the funded project.

[1] A Mirror Group is a national or stakeholder coordination body that reflects ("mirrors") a European research and innovation partnership or programme at national level. It facilitates two-way alignment by conveying national priorities, expertise and stakeholder perspectives to the European initiative, while disseminating European strategies, calls and agendas back to national actors. Mirror Groups have an advisory and coordination role and do not hold funding or formal decision-making authority.

building dedicated national programmes in key thematic gaps would help countries better align and engage with EU instruments.

Financial constraints remain a fundamental obstacle to broader participation. Co-funded partnerships often require significant national contributions, which may be unfeasible in countries with limited public research and innovation (R&I) budgets. National planning cycles may also be misaligned with EU calls, creating timing and flexibility issues. Although the European Commission co-finances up to 30% of the total budget in these partnerships, many countries are still unable to mobilise their share. Greater flexibility in financial instruments, including targeted allocations or increased co-funding rates for widening countries, could significantly enhance access and equity.

A third major barrier is the lack of institutional capacity and support structures to guide and sustain participation. Many widening countries lack well-resourced National Contact Points (NCPs) or specialised agencies to assist researchers through the Horizon Europe process. Training, peer learning, and dedicated awareness-raising activities—both at national and European levels—are essential to equip new entrants with the tools to navigate complex partnerships. While some efforts are in place, such as the Partnership Forum and mutual learning exercises, more structured and tailored capacity-building measures are needed to ensure long-term institutional strengthening.



Another common barrier for stakeholders in participating in transnational programs also concerns the difficulty to build sustainable and equitable partnerships or find the right consortia. This requires incentivising collaboration and the inclusion of stakeholders with complementary expertise, while preventing discrimination within partnerships, to effectively address key societal challenges. R&I programmes should emphasise the importance of engaging local communities, as well as decision-makers, in partnerships to make the results achieved fully applicable up to the local scale.

Finally, administrative and procedural burdens continue to limit the ability of newer or smaller organizations to engage effectively with EU partnerships. Competitive calls and complex reporting requirements often favour experienced institutions. Simplifying procedures, offering dedicated coaching and guidance, and incentivising partnerships to include underrepresented actors can go a long way in reducing these access barriers.



Key Recommendations for Policymakers

To support the meaningful participation of widening countries in Horizon Europe Partnerships, the following actions are strongly recommended:

1. Improve alignment of national research priorities:

- Establish Mirror Group or inter-agency coordination platforms to align national research priorities with EU strategic planning processes.
- Invest in capacity-building initiatives
- Promote peer learning through mutual learning exercises, cross-country exchanges, and forums for sharing good practice in partnership governance.

2. Reduce financial and institutional barriers:

- Creating flexible funding instruments, including EU allocations specifically earmarked for widening countries or reduced co-financing thresholds.
- Simplifying administrative procedures whilst providing tailored support and guidance for new applicants and less experienced institutions.
- Create calls that specifically target widening countries, either by a requirement that they take a leading role, or constitute more than 50% of the consortia. Support leadership roles with a capacity building programme to encourage coordination actions.

3. Support the building of inclusive consortia:

- National and youth programmes in underrepresented fields e.g. cultural heritage to create a foundation for alignment with EU partnerships.
- Dedicated widening activities into all Partnership work plans e.g. mentoring schemes, particularly with youth, mobility grants, or training workshops.
- Invest in capacity building and knowledge transfer initiatives through NCPs and other intermediaries, including communication campaigns, training activities and technical assistance.
- Promote peer learning through TAP actions and cross-country exchanges as a way to increase collaboration across borders, and learning between researchers in the same field.

By adopting these measures, the EU and its Member States can ensure that Partnerships are truly inclusive, efficient, and impactful—fully leveraging the diversity and innovation potential across all regions of Europe.



Thematic Annual Programming (TAP) actions as enablers of participation

TAP actions represent a powerful instrument to foster inclusiveness in Horizon Europe Partnerships, particularly by enhancing the participation of widening countries in transnational R&I activities. By design, TAPs provide a structured, low-barrier entry point for countries with limited resources or experience in EU-level collaborations. They focus on specific thematic areas, enabling participating agencies and research communities to gradually build expertise, strengthen networks, and increase their visibility in European partnerships. This incremental approach helps reduce the structural disadvantages faced by widening countries positioning them more effectively for engagement in larger and more competitive calls.

In addition to lowering entry barriers, TAP actions directly address the institutional and strategic challenges that often limit widening participation. They encourage dialogue and knowledge sharing between national funding agencies, support the alignment of research priorities with EU agendas, and provide opportunities for mutual learning and capacity building. By involving widening countries in joint programming and co-funded projects, TAPs create a safe environment to test collaborative mechanisms, develop trust, and establish lasting transnational partnerships. Over time, these experiences contribute to greater institutional maturity and readiness, empowering widening countries to take on more prominent roles in shaping and implementing European R&I priorities. In this way, TAPs function not only as stepping stones towards deeper integration but also as catalysts for systemic change, ensuring that the potential of all Member States is fully harnessed in addressing Europe's grand societal challenges.



Conclusions

To maximise their impact, TAP actions should be more systematically integrated into European Partnership planning and resourcing. Policymakers and funders should ensure dedicated support for TAPs as instruments that enable widening countries to strengthen their scientific capacities and transnational networks. Embedding TAPs into the design of partnerships would provide a sustainable mechanism to balance excellence with inclusiveness, while reinforcing European cohesion in research and innovation. Furthermore, the lessons and best practices derived from TAPs should be systematically captured and scaled up, helping to inform the design of larger joint calls and EU-level initiatives. In this way, TAP actions can directly complement the broader objectives of Horizon Europe and the European Research Area by ensuring that widening participation is translated into tangible, long-term impacts.

Extra information

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