

The problems of EU-SouthMed cooperation in Research and Innovation and some suggested solutions

The political framework

Cooperation between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean countries (SouthMED) has a long tradition, in infrastructure support, development aid and Research and Development. The political basis for this cooperation and support is the Barcelona Declaration, launched in November 1995 by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the (then) 15 EU Member States and the 12 Mediterranean partners. The Declaration was seen as the framework to manage both bilateral and regional relations. This Euro-Mediterranean Partnership focused on Political and Security Dialogue, Economic and Financial Partnership, and Social, Cultural and Human Partnership. At that time it was an innovative alliance based on the principles of joint ownership, dialogue and co-operation, seeking to create a Mediterranean region of peace, security and shared prosperity and later evolved into the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM). The Barcelona Process was also a mandate for the Framework Programmes for Research and Development and Innovation to foster closer cooperation between Europe and the countries of the SouthMED.

Implementing the policy and its impact

The EC went on to spend well over a billion Euro for R&D programmes and projects targeting the SouthMED for research, development and innovation, either in support of projects for capacity building or in research projects addressing specific scientific research areas.

Participation of organisations from the SouthMED increased steadily and peaked towards the end of FP6 and the beginning of FP7 in 2007. From then on the number decreased, and with the beginning of H2020 substantially declined, see Figure 1. One of the reasons for this decline is certainly the higher complexity and competition under H2020, another reason is that the number of international cooperation calls directly addressing the SouthMED has been significantly reduced in H2020.

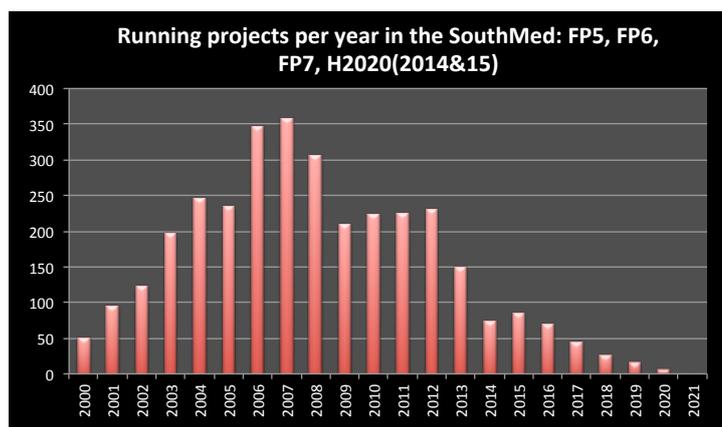


Figure 1: Projects with SouthMed participation
Source: CORDIS open data, 8/2016

Although no official reason is given for this reduction, it seems obvious that the interest of the EU in the SouthMED region is fading, which raises the question what results the EC had expected from the funding programmes over the past 20 years. Was it just to fulfil political obligations postulated in the Barcelona Agreement or does the EU have a long-term strategy for its cooperation in R&D with that region? Fostering collaboration between SouthMED and European researchers is certainly a laudable aim, but where should such collaboration lead to and what are the intended mutual benefits? The neighbouring SouthMED region with more than 200 million inhabitants could potentially be a huge market for the EU, not just to supply produce but also for jointly developing innovative technological solutions to address common challenges. To realize this will require improving the economic situation of the SouthMED, which despite the prevalent well-educated human capital is economically weak with diminishing prospects. This is where the funding programmes have so far failed. There is no clear EU strategy for the region, neither with respect to the target countries nor on how to coordinate action across the DGs involved. Each DG has its own, mostly short-term strategy. In FP7 DG Connect funded several support actions for the SouthMED, but then gave up in H2020 because there was no impact in terms of increased participation in the Framework Programmes; after focusing for a while on capacity building and on innovation "pilots" in the region, DG Research became fond of 'science diplomacy'. Only DG Near, through CBCMED, is putting some emphasis on economic and social development and common challenges in the environment.

In summary:

- The entire set of funding programmes fell short of supporting the creation of a functioning "Research System" in the MED. This of course would have required commitment and investment by the SouthMED countries, possibly with pressure from the EC. It would also have required the support of ENPI and its predecessors.

- The programmes failed to involve the private sector in developing business cases from the research and development projects. Economic development and in particular innovation is not possible without involving the private sector. For DG Research this may not be the direct aim of R&I projects in water, energy or food in the SouthMED, but sustainability of the project results certainly is a top priority and this would be a good route to achieve success. Long-term sustainability can only be achieved through successful business cases; in this respect the majority of the projects have failed over the past 20 years.
- The programmes failed in helping to create a supportive policy and regulatory framework for R&I and SMEs in the countries of the region.

What needs to be done in future?

- Define an overall European strategy across the relevant DGs, to be coordinated and monitored by a cross-DG committee. The strategy should state clearly what Europe wants to achieve – scientifically, politically, economically, etc. Based on the agreed strategy each DG defines their specific action plan, in line with the overall aims. EuropeAid has to play a leading role in this process. Through their national action plans with each of the SouthMED countries they could have a significant impact on formulating the research and innovation strategies that should then be supported by targeted actions from H2020.
 - The main emphasis of all action plans must be on socio-economic development and the involvement of SMEs and the development of business cases must become obligatory¹ – following the same philosophy as H2020. Fostering cooperation between the academic and the private sector is essential as this in particular is weak point in most of the SouthMED countries – see Figure 2.
 - The 'Digital Economy' has become a driver for economic growth in Europe, and it should be Europe's interest to extend it to our neighbouring countries. Changing the economy towards a Digital Economy in the SouthMED must become one of the priority areas, on the same level as water, energy and food. DG Connect should be strongly involved, ensuring a close link to cyber-security or trusted services.
 - ICT as an enabling technology needs to play an important part in the International Cooperation with the SouthMED: *"ICTs have an economic, social, political, and environmental impact. They are the base of modernization of private and public life, as well as a force of growth and job creation, and a fertile ground for innovation and creativity."* (EMERG Meeting 9/2014). Therefore the launch of RIA calls addressing one or two common priorities in the form of 'Pilots' could offer an effective way of establishing economically viable solutions in the SouthMED².
- In addition there should also be short-term actions such as "Top-up measures", to extend running projects with additional partners from the SouthMED, in a sense as a quick-start for the 'pilots'. The demonstrable added value of such extensions must be the valorisation of the projects' results in their respective SouthMED countries.
- Support improving the 'Research System' in the SouthMED. The vast majority of the universities in the region are higher education institutes undertaking little or no research. EuropeAid must address this issue in the national action plans with each country and in close cooperation with H2020. PhD programmes in the region need to be developed further and be better funded. H2020 should support this through specific MSCA, designed for the SouthMED. These could take the form of fellowships programmes with shorter duration and without the reintegration phase. In particular the training aspects in MSCA are essential for building up a functioning research system in the region.
- Finally a monitoring action within the EC must be launched, which will report regularly to the cross-DG committee and representatives of the South Med countries thus providing input for corrective actions.

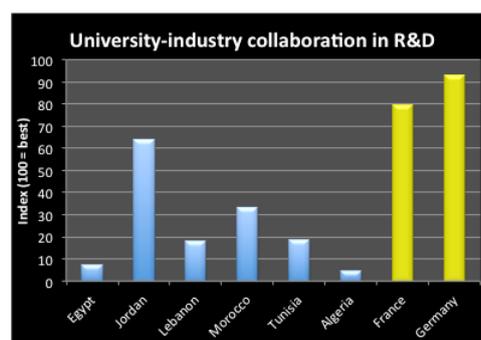


Figure 2: Source: Global Competitive Index, World Economic Forum, 2015

¹ In the entire FP7 only 18 SMEs from the SouthMED region were involved.

² A similar call for pilot application is currently open for Sub-Saharan Africa: ICT-39-2016-2017