THE CSIC’S PRESIDENT INTERVENTION
R&I DAYS SESSION

“Horizon Europe toolbox: simplify the life of researchers”

Brussels, 25 October 2019 (10 – 11 h)
The CSIC participates in the European Union Research and Innovation Framework Programmes even before being part of it, since 1984, thus we recognise what is at stake on the ground. These were times where you learnt along the way, notably because of the lack of suitable IT tools, legal and financial advice, and appropriate communication systems. There can be no doubt that this lack of technical support represented a genuine problem for participant organisations without the needed expertise.

In the positive side, however, lessons learned have led the CSIC to create a dedicated structure to support our scientists in their relationship within the Research Framework Programmes, from the birth of the idea to its full implementation in an RTD project, including legal and financial issues. At the end, every CSIC scientist approaching the Framework Programme for the first time is a newcomer. But they have the advantage of being part of an organisation that has invested in this dedicated structure to guide them and make the participation in H2020 and, I am
sure in Horizon Europe, less, let’s say, intimidating and accessible.

I am honestly proud of being pioneers in this field and, today, the CSIC has a highly trained professional team specialised in the different administrative, legal and financial matters enclosed in the implementation of Framework Programmes.

In this sense, and applied to all participants, the **Common Support Centre** (CSC) – created in 2014 to solve the multiple fragmentation existed under FP7 – has done an excellent job so far. As the European Court of Auditors report shows, some uncertainties persist as regards of the consistent application and interpretation of the European Union rules and that affects the quality of the advice received by participants and beneficiaries. This is **particularly important** in the case of proposals submitted by entities which operational scale is small, or newcomers without experience in the preparation or implementation of proposals under EU Framework Programmes.

With that in mind, and the significant improvement in the centralised administrative management obtained by the Common Support Centre, in my
view, the communication process has to be rationalised and, for instance, the Research Enquiry Services (RES) should be incorporated into the Common Support Centre structure. I believe it is very difficult to be consistent in the legal or financial advice if the Research Enquire Service is supported by 36 helpdesks, as the European Court of Auditors report states, even with the verification of quality carried out by the Research Executive Agency.

In addition, the quality of the advice and the general communication is crucial. But it is also essential that those receiving the information trust in the source. In other words, there are multiple channels of information for people interested in participate in the Frameworks Programmes, but there should be an EU centralised legal channel where the information and help provided can be considered reliable.

The Participant Portal, now the Funding and Tender Opportunities, is an essential management tool and the one-stop-shop to everything related to the Framework Programme. As such, must be in permanent evolution introducing as many improvements as possible.
The **National Contact Points (NCPs)** are the first line of support, funded by organisations and Member States, facilitating the participation in the Framework Programmes and the practical application of their legal rules. They are essential contributors to the successful implementation and communication of the Framework Programmes.

I can say that in Spain we have an excellent network of NCPs of which all Spanish participants are very proud of. But, as excellent as they are, they cannot perform their duties appropriately if, for instance, they don’t get the information on updates or crucial decisions taken by the EC that could affect to hundreds of their clients with sufficient notice. The EC should not lose the added value of NCPs in their search of simplification. As included in the ECA recommendations, the EC must work with Member States to improve the methodological and technical guidance provided to NCPs. I would add that NCP networks must be maintained and reinforced, given the added value they have for national actors.

Horizon 2020 Outreach events, Info Days in Brussels, the Coordinators’ Days and National Info Days also excellent ways to communicate with stakeholders,
explain the rules and procedures of the Programme and facilitate networking. The dynamics of these events has been adapted to the availability of new IT tools that allow to reach for a wider audience.

To sum up, the improvements implemented by the European Commission are in the right direction. A completely centralised Helpdesk, reinforced NCP networks, the continuous update of the Funding and Tender opportunities portal and the improvement in legal certainty provided by the legal documents will facilitate the communication and participation in the upcoming Framework Programme to all actors.

**FINAL REMARKS**

As mentioned earlier, aspects such as the support of existing tools including NCPs networks, or the relevance of legal certainty about applicable rules are critical if we want to *simplify the life of researchers*.

For that purpose, I would like to remark the importance of the *synergy among the different funding instruments* available in the R&I environment.
Within a couple of days, the Competiveness Council will hold a policy debate on *Horizon Europe and synergies with other programmes*. Many of the points included in the document prepared by the Council Presidency are addressed in the 2018 ECA report and discussed among us today.

Therefore, taking account of the existence of this political will and the excellent work already accomplished by the European institutions and by the organisations participating in the Framework Programme, I am convinced that Horizon Europe will significantly rationalise procedures and make life easier for everyone involved.