TP Organics comments to the first Horizon 2020 Research Framework proposals of the European Commission (from November 2011)


TP Organics – the Technology Platform for Organic Food and Farming – who we are?

TP Organics brings together stakeholders throughout the organic sector and from the wider public to discuss strategic research priorities that will enhance the sectors’ ability to produce high quality foods consistently, reliably and in sufficient quantity while at the same time also serving the interests of European societies at large. Profound challenges and the need to improve the sustainability of agriculture and to increase food production are widely acknowledged, but different views exist on how to respond. TP Organics is not only supported by the organic sector but also by many civil society organisations and Small and Medium Companies, as well as by some national governments. It is the only European Technology Platform focusing on agriculture and food systems and can provide insights into how science can advance the sustainability and public benefits of European agriculture. Major research institutions dealing with research in organic agriculture have contributed to the priority setting process.

TP Organics takes the opportunity to comment to the first draft proposals of EU Framework Programme Horizon 2020, as outlined in the first Commission documents from Nov 2011 (EU-COM 808-212). The main focus of the comments is on the sections relating to agriculture and food in the two documents EU-Com 2011/809 for the Parliament and the more detailed document EU-Com 2011/811. TP Organics is referring in the comments our Research Vision 2007, Strategic Research Agenda 2009 and in particular to the Implementation Action Plan published in 2010, in which concrete proposals on how to address food agricultural challenges in the next EU Research Framework Programme were made (P 69-78). All documents are available at (www.tporganics.eu).

The new Framework Programme Horizon 2020 – what is it about?

Horizon 2020, the new framework programme for research and innovation will be shaping the European Research Area from 2014 to 2020. After broad stakeholder consultations, including one on the future Knowledge Based Bio-Economy (KBBE), the European Commission has published first legislative proposals for Horizon 2020 in November 2011. These are now going through the ordinary legislative procedure with exchange of views, public hearings and collection of amendments in the first half of 2012. The adoption of the legal texts is expected for the middle of 2013; first research calls will be launched in beginning of 2014.

Horizon 2020 is not just a new name for the next Framework Programme, but represents a new, integrated instrument that bring together existing funding streams for research and innovation, such the Framework Programme for Research and Technical Development (FP), the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP) and the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT). With €80 billion budget (an
important increase compared to the FP7), Horizon 2020 will be significant, having a stronger focus on Europe’s priority objectives and being part of the drive to create new growth and jobs in Europe.

Horizon 2020 will therefore be the major European source of research and innovation funding and will be very important in shaping for agricultural research. This could mean that there might be more opportunities to develop organic food and farming research projects building on the principles of agro-ecology. However, at presents the proposals do not make it clear what research areas will be given priority and how the money will be allocated and different paradigms appear to be at work in different sectors. The discussion and decision process of the legislative proposals in 2012 will be very important for priority setting.

Positive points of the first draft framework proposals of Horizon 2020 – view of TP Organcis

The positive aspects of the Horizon 2020 proposal are evident: a single framework, full integration of innovation, a focus on the major societal challenges, a more inclusive approach, more emphasis on public-private partnership (e.g. new sustainable business models) and remedies for market deficiencies in accessing risk finance for research and innovation. TP Organics also welcomes that overarching framework proposals provide room for more agro-ecological research.

TP Organics suggestions for change

However, the document still has some major gaps that should be bridged in order to meet its important ambitions.

1) Emphasise resource use conservation/sufficiency in addition to resource efficiency with eco-functional intensification

The Horizon 2020 legislative proposals place much emphasis on resource efficiency but ignore the need for the conversation and protection of the remaining scarce natural resources (capital) such as land, water, phosphorous and bio-diversity and their relations with climate change which are all crucial for food production as documented in the recent SCAR 3rd foresight update. Instead of only looking for technical solutions to increase efficiency, the proposals should focus on high output/low input production systems that are more economical in the use of scarce natural resources and may create synergy between food production and preservation of natural capital. Considering resource conservation/sufficiency will guard against the ‘rebound effect’ where in the end due to efficiency gains even more resources are used.

The term ecological (or eco-functional) intensification needs to be defined in terms of harness beneficial activities of the ecosystem to increase the productivity of agricultural systems.

2) Preserve the diversity of food production from farm to plate needs as well as bio-diversity

The proposals focus on the need to protect bio-diversity, but we believe it is important to also protect the genetic diversity of food crops and animals and the diversity of foods. An average of 7,000 plant species used to be cultivated, today only 120 of them are still important for agriculture, and just 30 species deliver 95 percent of all foods on the planet. High diversity in food production preserves and enhances the diversity of food on the plates and improves the health and well-being of citizens. Reconnecting the consumers and producers in a whole chain approach of authentic and natural food will benefit public health and lead to more sustainable consumption behaviour.
3) Recognize important connection between food production and public health and animal health

In the proposals’ focus on two societal challenges (health and wellbeing and sustainable agriculture) both human and animal health is primarily considered in the context of disease challenges and disease control and not health promotion. There is need to recognize food production as one of the important determinants of health. The proposals should include cross cutting actions between the production and quality of food and public health. Encouraging consumers to adopt a diet based on fresh and whole foods, using processing technology with only minimal alterations to the intrinsic qualities, such as organic food, will have major benefits for public health. Moreover, there should be a recognition of the links between veterinary and human health strategies where the development of livestock systems with low use of antimicrobials has long term positive benefits for human disease treatment as reflected in the One-Health initiatives.

4) Base all three strategic actions on an inclusive concept of innovation and knowledge partnerships

The Horizon 2020 proposals make reference to social innovations, but this mainly in the context of societal challenges. We believe the proposals need to recognize a variety of research and dissemination approaches based on a broad and inclusive understanding of innovation. This should focus on empowering of human and social capital in agriculture and food systems, which will result in low dependency of farmers from financial capital and external inputs, and will instead utilize natural capital to increase productivity through eco-functional intensification, diversification, supporting local adaptation («local resilience») and best agricultural practice. There is a need for paradigm change from ‘Productivity’ over ‘Efficiency’ to ‘Sufficiency’ including the smart use of technologies and to create centers for innovation within Europe’s farming communities. There is a need to recognize and support the adaptive capacities of production systems in relation to environmental and climatic challenges as well as economic and social changes.

5) Not just technological but also social leadership for a fair economy

Major parts of the Horizon 2020 proposal aim for industrial rather than social leadership. In this second decade of the 21st century, on the backdrop of a changing world order, Europe faces a series of crucial challenges: low growth, insufficient innovation, and a diverse set of environmental and social challenges. The solutions to all of these problems are linked and are not just technical. It is precisely by addressing its environmental and social challenges together and not sector-wise that Europe will be able to boost productivity, generate long-term growth and secure its place in the “new world order”. Science and innovation are key factors but need to be developed with Europe’s citizens to tackle its pressing societal challenges. Europe should take leadership for a fair economy.