25th Meeting of the Euro-Mediterranean Group of Senior Officials in Research and Innovation

8 June 2020
On 8 June 2020, the 25th Meeting of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) Regional Platform in Research and Innovation was held online with the participation of UfM Member States to discuss the region’s future priorities for research and innovation, especially the needs in a post-pandemic world and a new updated research agenda.

Nasser Kamel, UfM Secretary General opened the meeting with introductory remarks followed by opening statements by meeting co-chairs Maria Cristina Russo, Director for International Cooperation of the European Commission’s DG on Research and Innovation and Arafah Dia-Eddin, Secretary-General of the Higher Council for Science & Technology of the Kingdom of Jordan.

Opening remarks:

- Nasser Kamel stressed the relevance of enhancing cooperation in the field of R&I not only during the health crisis but also during the recovery phase, and through a special focus on recovery plans with a regional approach. He also referred to the platform’s support of the current initiative on the Innovation-Employability nexus, supported by the German development agency, GIZ.
- Arafah Dia-Eddin stressed the strategic importance of the meeting for establishing future lines for cooperation at regional level and emphasised that the current challenges can be converted into opportunities.
- Nienke Buisman, Head of Unit of the European Commission’s DG for Research and Innovation made reference to the Commission’s actions since 6 April 2020: Coronavirus Global Response Pledging Conference (4 May), the matchmaking event for COVID-19 related projects (10 June), the European Innovation Council (EIC) calls on projects targeting small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups, and the European and Developing Countries Clinical Trials Partnership (EDCTP) calls. Buisman added the importance of liaising with the EU-Africa High-Level Policy Dialogue scheduled to meet on 18 June 2020.

Main discussion points

1. Agenda and revised guidelines for the UfM Regional Platform in R&I
   - The meeting agenda was adopted. The revised guidelines on the functioning of the UfM Regional Platform in R&I were adopted, including the official denomination of “Union for the Mediterranean Regional Platform in Research and Innovation”. The guidelines will be amended stating that the Bureau should include a minimum of two EU Member States and two Member States from the “Southern and Eastern Mediterranean” (Article 5).

2. Future thematic priorities for R&I cooperation between the EU and Mediterranean
   - A questionnaire on regional priorities was sent to the National Focus Points, but not all received it. As such, a new summary table was sent to participants, including the choices of those who had not received the questionnaire. The results were presented assigning points to the priorities, according to how each country’s ranking. Consensus was reached on the main strategic priorities: health, climate change and renewable energy.
   - It was agreed that these priorities should be presented on a broader level, such as crisis management or natural disasters management. Other crosscutting topics
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included smart specialisation, artificial intelligence, social sciences or eco-innovation along with cross-cutting domains addressed in the strategic paper (which were open science, human capital development and technology transfer and innovation) and higher education.

- It was discussed to establish a new research programme in health, similar to the Partnership for Research and Innovation in the Mediterranean Area initiative (PRIMA), and to fund collaborative research projects on this thematic.

3. Next steps

- Meeting participants reached consensus on setting up a technical Expert Working Group aimed at making proposals regarding the practical implementation of the regional strategic priorities, to be presented at the next Regional Platform meeting. The timeline of the Expert Working Group, profile of the experts and the selection procedure will be discussed in the framework of the Bureau. As per the next Ministerial Meeting, the Bureau will follow up and present its relevance at the next Regional Platform meeting. With the joint priorities identified, next steps are to define effective modes of implementation.

4. UfM Regional Platform in R&I Bureau role presented, and members elected

- The role of the Bureau was presented as per the new revised guidelines: assisting the co-chairs in the planning, preparation and continuity of work between the plenary meetings of the Platform.
- The Bureau will comprise a minimum of seven members: two Co-Chairs, the Secretariat of the UfM, two Member States from the EU and two Member States from the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean Countries.
- The Bureau meetings will be open to all other countries interested to join on a voluntary basis. Each Bureau will serve for two years, which may be renewed upon agreement by the Platform’s members.
- The UfM Secretariat will play a supporting role in the Bureau, backing up the preparation of meetings and drafting working documents.
- The Bureau members will be chosen through a written procedure. The interest of Egypt, France, Jordan, Portugal, Spain and Tunisia has already been confirmed. It has been agreed to extend the possibility of sending candidatures by one week (15 June).

Closing remarks

- Arafah Dia-Eddin congratulated the participants for a focused discussion on the strategic priorities and its related crosscutting topics.
- Cristina Russo stressed the clear political will for moving forward on R&I and that new policy instruments will soon be available through Horizon Europe, as well as the Recovery Fund and the Multiannual Financial Framework.
- International cooperation in R&I must be further enhanced and, for the European Union, Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries are key partners to move in that direction. The Platform will be able to count on a technical Expert Working Group
which will bring additional skills to the common goal of promoting cooperation in the Euro-Mediterranean region.

- Itaf Ben Abdallah, Senior UfM Advisor stressed that the UfM Secretariat strongly supports the decisions taken during the meeting and that having a clearer vision of the strategic priorities will enable the Platform to respond to many common challenges.