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Rodriguez Clemente R.

*in*

Morini C. (ed.), Rodriguez Clemente R. (ed.), Arvanitis R. (ed.), Chaabouni R. (ed.).  
Moving forward in the Euro-Mediterranean Research and Innovation partnership. The  
experience of the MIRA project

Bari : CIHEAM

Options Méditerranéennes : Série B. Etudes et Recherches; n. 71

2013

pages 197-204

Article available on line / Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<http://om.ciheam.org/article.php?IDPDF=00006795>

To cite this article / Pour citer cet article

Rodriguez Clemente R. **MIRA project self-evaluation**. In : Morini C. (ed.), Rodriguez Clemente R. (ed.), Arvanitis R. (ed.), Chaabouni R. (ed.). *Moving forward in the Euro-Mediterranean Research and Innovation partnership. The experience of the MIRA project*. Bari : CIHEAM, 2013. p. 197-204 (Options Méditerranéennes : Série B. Etudes et Recherches; n. 71)



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# MIRA project self-evaluation

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**Abstract.** This article describes the background, development and lessons learnt of INCO-Net Project MIRA, aimed at supporting the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation in the field of Research and Innovation.

**Keywords.** Euro-Mediterranean cooperation – Research – Innovation – Capacity building.

## **Auto-évaluation du projet Mira**

**Résumé.** Cet article décrit le contexte, le développement et les enseignements tirés du projet INCO-Net MIRA, conçu pour soutenir la coopération euro-méditerranéenne dans les domaines de la recherche et de l'innovation.

**Mots-clés.** Coopération euro-méditerranéenne - Recherche - Innovation – Renforcement des capacités.

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## **I – Introduction**

INCO-Net Projects are instruments designed in FP7 to support the political dialogue on issues related to research and innovation cooperation between the EU and other world regions. They have been addressed to countries, such as China or India, or neighbouring groups of countries, such as the West Balkan Countries, the Eastern European Countries, ACP (Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific) countries, or the Mediterranean Partner Countries (MPCs).

This new instrument, previously tested through the increasing policy exchanges between the Mediterranean countries and the EC, has soon appeared well adapted to the Mediterranean area where an institutionalised policy dialogue had already been established in the Monitoring Committee for Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation in ST (MoCo), created within the context of the Barcelona Process of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (started in 1995). The MIRA project was thus designed as the first INCO-Net, in close connection to the MoCo, with the following specificities:

1. The MoCo was designed as the Steering Committee of MIRA; it was the result of the former experience, where the MoCo proposals had been instrumental in identifying projects that described the state-of-the-art of the EU-MPC cooperation in RI (ESTIME and ASBIMED projects), improving the capacity building to support the EU-MPC cooperation (EUROMEDANET), or identify the common priorities in research (MED7). In this sense MIRA capitalised upon the previous experience and was drafted by persons and institutions previously involved in the above mentioned projects.
2. The consortium of MIRA was designed by gathering the MPC stakeholders responsible for promoting the EU-MPC cooperation in RI, i.e., the Ministries in charge of this policy and some Institutions and, even companies, committed to this objective.
3. The project intended to launch actions going well beyond bilateral initiatives; it defined a work programme that targeted regional and EU common interests, following the recommendations of the Steering Committee, where most of the MPC partners were represented.

## II – The MIRA consortium

The composition of the consortium implied some risks, since the MoCo composition incorporates national interests, whereas the MIRA Project could only address common regional issues. This apparent difficulty, however, did not seem to influence the normal development of the project, and all the partners accepted its regional character. In this sense, MIRA is an interesting example of a specific policy space, where national interests agree to participate together with, but also separately from, the EU entity, by defining a specific agenda including items that are common but also different from national agendas. It is also a very rare case of international relations involving both national authorities and multilateral arrangements and creating shared governance of research and, to a lesser extent, innovation. We can only underline that the unsuccessful cases of common governance were the result of actions that did not share the characteristics assumed by MIRA and that we would like to clearly describe in the following pages. MIRA, and its coupling with the MoCo, was not only a good case study: it is a rare example of effective collaboration between MPCs and the EU. Paradoxically, science (as well as culture and agriculture) had not been contemplated in the initial drafts of the Barcelona process. It is now clearly apparent that any EU-MPC collaboration should rely on the research and innovation experience embodied by the MoCo/MIRA activities.

## III – The project life

We can state that the development of the project allowed the partners to envision the common problems and identify the need to harmonize and cluster efforts. This coordination was not only understood on the grounds of efficiency (tackling issues in a coordinated way to save money and effort), but also as a process aimed at creating a common identity. In the course of the project, there has been a clear evolution from an initial attitude of a “Europe-driven action” (as stated in the Project Technical Annex) to a series of initiatives demanded and supported by MPC partners, whose involvement and expectations have notably increased over time. This positive evolution has, however, pointed out the enormous difficulties of the MPC partners to properly handle the funds received from the European projects and the urgent need to adapt their financial and administrative systems to the international cooperation procedures in the fields of research and innovation. Needless to say, this increased activity and mobility of the MPC partners was continuously hampered by the Visa policy of the EU MS. This chief problem needs to be solved in the shortest period if we really want to advance toward a Euro-Mediterranean Research and Innovation Area.

Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the most important impact of MIRA is, perhaps, the functioning of an “ad-hoc” forum of MPCs animated by the common interest in drafting national research and innovation systems aimed to promote and enhance research for the benefit of national development, and support the link, even the integration, of these systems in a possible Euro-Mediterranean Research Area. In that sense, MIRA acted not only as an EU-driven forum, but also as a regional tool of high relevance. However, this makes the process very fragile mainly because at all times, the legitimacy of the forum can be challenged by any member of the consortium. This is also true for the EU Commission, since there is a continuous interaction with Brussels. Increasingly, MIRA has been understood not as an independent European-funded project, but as the policy instrument of the MoCo.

The relation between MIRA and the MoCo has been very fluid and the work programme of MIRA has evolved according to the suggestions or new demands agreed in the MoCo Meetings. MIRA has confirmed and reinforced its role as arm of the MoCo and instrument executing the policy demands of the MoCo. The latter, acting as Steering Committee of the project, has always

endorsed the yearly activity report of the project. It also transformed the membership in the consortium of MIRA as a political statement.

The relations between MIRA and the European Commission have been an interesting exercise of assessment of the INCO-Net instrument, and of the relevance of this type of project in supporting international cooperation, specifically the INCO policy of the Framework Programme. The management of the FP7 Projects by the Commission has suffered the inconveniences of a dispersed responsibility. By opening practically all calls and programmes to third countries, international cooperation dissolved into a collection of projects whose impact is difficult to be evaluated as a whole. Moreover, the responsibility has been dispersed also on administrative grounds: scientific officers are no more the single entry point for project coordinators in all aspects related to the management of projects; financial and legal officers have an increasing share of control on the development of the projects. This fact, added to the unstable computer-based services provided by the Commission in the name of simplicity-in-management, have made the relations with the Commission a cumbersome issue, softened only by the good individual attitude of these officers. Better coordination inside the Commission services and improvements in the ICT facilities might simplify the Consortium in the execution of the work programme and orient most human contacts to interesting policy issues instead of spending enormous amounts of time and energy in administrative and financial issues. Finally, the frequent changes of the Commission officers (scientific and others) in charge of the project, and the overload of work due to the lack of trained personnel, increase the difficulties of managing projects.

Having said that, the attitude of the Officers in charge of INCO towards promoting the acknowledgment and coordination of different types of projects (notably BILAT, ERA-Wide, and INCO-Net), has created an enormous momentum for a process of integration of activities across the region and between the two shores of the Mediterranean. This period covered by MIRA, and we dare to say also because of MIRA, has created the framework for a real Euro-Mediterranean Research and Innovation Space that is a concrete engagement of the national systems of research. We support this claim by noting that MIRA has promoted the discussion on policy initiatives and has been the adequate forum to test new ideas: EMIS, the thematic clustering of projects, the measurement of collaborative effort, and the like, have been discussed and examined in MIRA. The ERA-Wide Programmes aimed to support centres of high quality in the MPCs for their promotion in the ERA arena and focused on the regional research priority areas, have been another initiative favouring the link between research and the innovation system, providing the ground for Mediterranean-wide networks of high competence in key areas.

The internal functioning of MIRA project has been highly influenced by the internal restructuring of partners' organizations. However, a progressive involvement of most partners has resulted in a sense of "appropriation" of the project. It has been finally identified as an effective Euro-Mediterranean project, with a consolidated team of partners, sharing a sense of mutual trust and acting as an engine to move forward in the topics of mutual interest. Another important factor is that the public administration, represented by the Ministries, suffered the internal logics and dynamics of the political scenario. Even though the personal involvement of partners in the project has been deep and intense, their capacity to interact within the road map of the project has been limited by their own political agenda. Nonetheless, their presence in the project is the guarantee that actions will be motivated by a real national demand, and outputs will be useful for the scientific and innovation communities. That said, the political actors need to rely on institutions less involved in the political dynamics, if we want to implement activities in favour of the above mentioned communities. The MIRA project has shown that a balance of political and implementing actors inside the consortium could be an effective means to cope with this inherent contradiction in supporting a common EU-MPC research agenda. Maybe the actual evolution of MIRA towards a more politically sound forum has been a way of solving this contradiction. At a time where more transparency and accountability is demanded, a political response really could be to mingle more closely the policy personnel and the more technically-oriented personnel. The

way to create this interconnection is to accept each other and claim no “absolute truth”; in this sense, MIRA has been a great lesson in trimming pretensions of expertise and fitting science and policy in a common future.

The activities of MIRA have been quite diverse, ranging from training on participation in the FP (awareness on calls, writing of proposals, etc.) to quantitative and qualitative analyses of the EU-MPC cooperation in RI, as well as the identification of thematic priorities, opportunities and obstacles to such cooperation. As a tool to support cooperation, an Observatory on such activity was envisaged as a key activity of the project. Just after launching the project, some difficulties related to this objective emerged. No one contested the need and the opportunities of such an initiative; however, there was a certain mismatch between this regional initiative and the projects to create National Observatories on cooperation in RI. In fact, in some countries there was a competition between institutions to host the Observatory, while in other countries the established Observatories were disbanded after a change of government. The actual experience of setting-up an observatory has been difficult both politically and technically. Moreover, there was no accepted set of indicators that could provide a regional vision. This issue was addressed by MIRA, and a consensus was reached about a minimum number of common indicators to describe the evolution of cooperation between the EU and MPCs in the RI domain. However, other problems are still pending, such as the establishment of data repositories at national level, the quality control of data and the swiftness in sharing these data. The only sources that have provided till now significant insights on cooperation are statistics linked to publications and patents, making it possible to measure the domains of specialisation and assessing the number of publications and affiliations of authors in international refereed co-publications. The limits of this exercise have also been examined in the MIRA project and alternatives have been proposed, all of them being included in a “White Paper” (in the pages of this issue).

On the other hand, the good quality of engagement and participation of the MPC partners in capacity building activities in favour of the research community in their countries must be emphasised. Some activities, such as the training in writing of proposals and management of projects, have been successful, with training seminars being repeated on demand from the MPC partners. Similarly, other un-programmed activities, such as the training of MPC legal and auditing experts, were very successful, and the material is now being used by other projects.

## **IV – The Euro-Mediterranean Innovation Space**

The support to the Euro-Mediterranean Innovation Space (EMIS), a long-term engagement, marked as a key activity of MIRA, has been one of the most important focuses of activities providing significant results. The initial ambition was to go beyond the definition of “innovation”. Instead, the activities have been defined in a pragmatic way, by addressing the issues as viewed by multiple stakeholders. Positive interactions have been established with DG Enterprise and its programme on the “Euro-Mediterranean Charter for Enterprise”, the European Investment Bank (EIB), the Network ANIMA and other stakeholders in this domain. The most important deficit found in the evaluation of the impact of innovation in research within the productive system was the lack of proper instruments of Technological Transfer (TT) from the knowledge creation system to the productive system. MIRA focused its activity in this important domain, by organizing Workshops on TT and training of experts, and promoting Thematic Forums to provide a platform of interaction between the MPC productive and academic worlds. The two following domains were chosen: water and waste water management (Casablanca, December 2011), and renewable energies (Tunis, June 2012).

Other activities such as the promotion of Research-Driven Clusters at regional level or the promotion of a Thematic Network of Metrology Laboratories and Medical Technologies Laboratories complete the fruitful results of this activity of MIRA and provide a “portfolio” of

experience to support the deployment of a Mediterranean-wide Innovation strategy. In this regard, as in other domains of activity, the involvement of the MPC MIRA partners has been very intense and, in some aspects, it has been a driver to launch or support a national debate on how to couple research and innovation activities. However, this effort is still at an early stage, and the effective outcomes will depend on multiple decisions, legislative activities, accumulated experience and profound changes needed in the productive systems. Nevertheless, an interesting output has been the perception of common problems from all the countries of the region and the need to cooperate and share experiences in a process of mutual learning. This particular area of activity of MIRA, where research meets innovation and production, where research and the economic system need to complement each other, has interested other INCO-Net projects, and some joint activities on Innovation issues were devised with neighbouring regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and the Western Balkans.

## **V – The interaction of MIRA with other Euro-Mediterranean policies**

The connection with other EU policies has been a main objective of MIRA, as mandated by the MoCo. Among its activities we draw attention to innovation issues and to the high interaction with the Programme Horizon 2020 of De-Contamination of the Mediterranean, where the activity of MIRA has produced a recommendation of a Joint Research Agenda on the matter, to support the implementation of the programme.

The Euro-Mediterranean Conference on Research and Innovation, held in Barcelona last April 2012, represents an interesting turning point in the European Policy of research cooperation with the MPCs. The stated objective was to intensify the relations between the EU and the MPCs following the wave of the “Arab spring”. New principles of co-design, co-funding and co-ownership in this collaboration were announced. To some extent most of these concepts emerged in the continuous policy dialogue between MPC members and EU officials both within the MoCo and MIRA. Some of these concepts can be easily traced back to intense policy discussion in setting-up specific funding, shared funding programmes, with results more or less satisfactory that, however, contributed to keep links between both shores. This opened the discussion on instruments and funding from the EU to support this EU-MPC cooperation or partnership, as it was labelled in Barcelona in 2012.

The year 2012 will be known for the opening of a discussion and negotiation process aimed at creating a common instrument to handle this co-responsibility and partnership on an equal footing. MIRA organized a Working Group to extract from the conclusions of the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean Conference on Research and Innovation, the MIRA Thematic Workshops recommendations and other relevant policy and technical documents agreed in a multinational EU-MPC partnership, a Common Research and Innovation Agenda to be discussed in the coming Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference on Research and Innovation.

## **VI – Communication and delivering issues**

Another important element observed along the project is the increased use and impact of the website ([www.miraproject.eu](http://www.miraproject.eu)). The original expectations of this website were the design of an INTERNET management tool and of a discussion platform; unfortunately they have not been fulfilled. The interaction has been less virtual and more related to face-to-face meetings. In fact, the project has offered several meeting opportunities; the Management Boards or all Workshops, Seminars or Conferences organized, were lively discussion forums. On the other hand, the functioning of the website as a portal for Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation in SI where

all partners posted their information, has not been as fruitful as expected. The site acted more as a management tool for the Coordination of the Project rather than as a point to collect and post information, since most of the uploaded material was gathered by the coordination team.

The lesson learnt is that the debates in the Mediterranean cultural environment need the physical presence of the actors, and the management of information requires a centralized structure well connected with the sources; perhaps a greater use of social networks would be more efficient in improving the information exchange. Moreover, the virtual tools in the management of projects have still not been sufficiently tailored to meet the actual needs and capacities of partners.

Formally, MIRA has achieved most of the expected Deliverables and Milestones. It is worth mentioning, among others, some key Deliverables and Milestones scheduled in the MIRA Technical Annex or resulting from non-scheduled specific demands of the MoCo, Steering Committee of the project, such as:

- Screening Conference of the State of the Art in the EU-MPC cooperation in SI.
- Recommendations of the Thematic MIRA Workshops on identifying common EU-MPC research priorities that were used as key elements in the setting of Specific International Cooperation Actions (SICA) of the Thematic Priorities of FP7.
- The results of the Training Seminars on writing and management of FP Projects, organised for scientists and administrators of the MPCs, which are being used now as reference material in the BILAT Projects. In this line it is also important to mention the evaluation of the MPC NCPs and the Training Seminar for Auditors.
- The agreed list of Indicators of International Scientific Cooperation to be used in the description of the EU-MPC scientific cooperation.
- The “portfolio” of the Euro-Mediterranean Innovation Space (EMIS-MIRA WP8) activities promoting research-driven innovation and capacity building in the MPCs, such as Technological Transfer training, setting Networks of Laboratories (Metrology and Biological testing), promoting Research-Driven Clusters, organizing Thematic Forums (Water and Waste Water, Renewable Energies) with the participation of Industry, Administration and Academia.
- The Documents of the “Horizon 2020 Programme of De-Contamination of the Mediterranean Research Agenda” and the “Common Euro-Mediterranean Research and Innovation Agenda (CRIA)” created by EU and MPC Groups of Experts, at the request of the MoCo.
- The promotion of a Mediterranean ERA.Net proposal.

However, some of the targeted objectives have not been attained for different reasons; we hereby mention some of the most important ones:

- Setting of a Euro-Mediterranean Observatory of Scientific Cooperation. MIRA found enormous difficulties due to internal reasons in promoting single national Observatories in the MPCs, to be federated into a regional one.
- The creation of the MIRA Internet Forum and the Political Dialogue Platforms through the MIRA Website was not enhanced by most of the MIRA partners, and the communication within the project that was done, unfortunately, via e-mail messages, rather than using the Web facilities, produced a considerable exchange of multiple messages and replies, making it difficult to evaluate the real engagement of partners in the development of the project as measure of their contribution through the Web.
- The dialogue with other EC DGs was limited to the issue of the “Horizon 2020 De-Contamination of the Mediterranean” and DG Enterprise. The expected Workshop of

the MoCo with different DGs to be organized by MIRA has, unfortunately, not yet been organised.

## VII –Lessons learnt and future expectations

The experience of MIRA provides some Lessons Learnt and insights on the future of the EU-MPC scientific collaboration expectations that we can list as a conclusion of the self-evaluation exercise:

- A fluid cooperation dynamics has produced a demand for shifting from a somehow unidirectional setting of the scenario and decision-making process to a partnership with co-ownership of programmes on all aspects of collaboration.
- This new scenario is being assumed by most of the MPCs, but it is highly dependent on political difficulties, on both sides of the Mediterranean. Networking of thematic actors from the EU and MPCs, including Technology Platforms, must be promoted and maintained for the mutual interest. A structure providing a minimum management of these networks should be created and co-owned.
- The political debate structured by the MoCo and the Ministerial Conferences should build a shared instrument to implement the actions needed to boost and improve the quality and focus of the cooperation. This instrument must be co-owned by all parties.
- The identification of demands should be the result of analysis, debate and, if possible, consensus. No common shared agenda will ever be the result of a purely national dynamics. Also, no agenda can ever be built uniquely on political discourse: experts from all sides of the Mediterranean need to be involved in actual projects that assess the cooperation potential, the issues open to research and development and the instruments to be mobilised. The shared partnership cannot be made at the expense of a documented analysis.
- The debates in the Mediterranean cultural environment need the physical presence of the actors, and the management of information necessitates a centralised structure well connected with the sources.
- The political actors need to rely on institutions that are less involved in the political dynamics to guarantee the long-term sustainability of scientific cooperation.
- MPC partners have had enormous difficulties in handling the funding received from the European projects. There are urgent needs to adapt their financial and administrative systems to the context of scientific cooperation. May be the use of “third parties” and/or an independent co-owned structure to cope with the handling of the EU-MPC cooperation in RI could be a solution.
- The MPC scientific community is claiming for a better research environment: less bureaucracy and more linkage to the societal challenges of their countries. The actions will seek greater involvement of the industrial sector/SMEs. Duplicating actions from other regions is not a solution.
- The participation in research and innovation activities must be better rewarded. The EU-MPC cooperation must address this as a common challenge, research needs to be given a strong footing inside the EU-MPC relationships and innovation should be on the political agenda rather than relegated to some subaltern activity. Innovation activities must be associated to most of the actions launched by international cooperation in research.
- Finding success stories and best practices in South – South cooperation and transforming them into initiatives will help mutual learning between actors sharing similar challenges.



Look at neighbours before asking to the supposed advanced countries.

- Innovation push needs a joint action plan for the creation of an international platform to cooperate on the technology transfer area. MoCo should support the establishment of this platform/network on technology transfer and innovation as a priority for achieving a Euro-Mediterranean Research and Innovation Space.
- Big investment supported by political decision should follow, not precede, an innovation and research strategy centred on improving human capacities, building or improving the innovation and research environment adapted to the national circumstances, and guaranteeing the sustainability of investments and the job security of the actors. Research needs a long term strategy, a continuous effort, with priorities linked to national and regional challenges on social, economic and environmental demands.
- The building of trust between cooperating parties results from the involvement in well-drafted actions that engage all parties. Prejudices do not resist the proof of cooperation in topics of mutual interest.

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