

ANNEX 3: INTERVIEWS - Robert Schroeder



Robert Schroeder

Policy Officer at the European Commission, Directorate General for the Environment, Unit C.1 Protection of Water Resources and presents the European Innovation Partnership on Water.

1 – What are the main goals and achievements of the European Innovation Partnership on Water Efficiency (EIP)?

In the first place, please note that the correct name is the EIP on Water, not water efficiency. The word efficiency was dropped during the first consultations in 2011, as it was considered to limit the reach of the initiative.

With regard to the goals, the EIP on Water has three main, overarching objectives: in the first place, the EIP on Water aims to facilitate the development of innovative solutions to deal with the water challenges we are facing. Second, the EIP on Water aims to create market opportunities for such innovative solutions in case there is a market potential, or create demand for those solution that are not suited for the market, but for example focus on governance. Third, the EIP on Water aims to support the implementation of EU water legislation through application of innovative solutions.

In terms of achievements, after having been operational for less than 2 years, no concrete impacts or new innovative solutions can yet be expected. However, as a major achievement we should consider that in this short period of time, a wide variety of stakeholders have come together and have commonly agreed on a joint agenda for the EIP Water, defining 8 priority areas on which the EIP Water activities focus. Furthermore, given the fact that no direct funding is available, it is impressive to see how many stakeholders have been mobilized and have applied to become Action Groups. Currently, after two calls for Action Groups, we have 25 Action Groups active and working on innovative solutions in the framework of the priority areas, out of a total of 102 applications. In addition, an online Market Place, bringing demand and supply of water innovation together and providing visibility for the Action Groups has been developed and is actively used. Also, action plans to remove key barriers to innovation have been developed and action is expected in the coming months. In short, the major achievement at this moment is the fact that within a very short time, stakeholders have embraced the EIP Water as the key platform for water innovation in Europe and are starting action. The next step is to ensure impacts of these actions.

2 – Innovation is vital for economic growth, for job creation and for improving the quality of life in Europe. What kind of tools does EIP uses to boost innovation with regard to water related challenges?

All activities of the EIP Water are developed exactly with those objectives in mind. The requirements for Action Groups ask that in the composition of Action Group partners, the entire innovation value chain is represented (as far as relevant), to ensure that the innovation supply side knows from the demand side what is needed for innovative solutions to be applied in practice, to ensure (market) uptake. In addition, the EIP Water online Market Place connects supply and demand of water innovation, allowing different actors to easily find each other, connect and drive towards impacts. Furthermore, the EIP Water develops action plans to remove key innovation barriers, to make it easier for actors to develop and implement their solutions and deal with the challenges they aim address.

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3 – There is a pressure for applied scientific knowledge to solve present industrial challenges or to have an immediate impact in the lives of European citizens. How do you respond to criticism that focus has shifted from basic research to product research with short-term impacts on the market?

Please comment on the compatibility of the delivery of fast results with the continuous need to focus on fundamental research. It is without doubt that there will always remain a need for fundamental research, to underpin policy development and increase knowledge on societal issues. However, we also have to ensure that the research results will become applied in practice. This is precisely where the cooperation between initiatives like the JPI Water and the EIP Water become relevant. Through coordination of research needs and activities in the JPI Water and connecting it with the wider innovation demand that is considered within the EIP Water, an efficient approach can be guaranteed from fundamental research to application of innovative approached in practice.

4 – Innovation requires articulation between industry-society-academia. In your opinion, what are the largest barriers that hinder innovation and technology/knowledge transfer in Europe?

There are a number of important barriers to innovation and knowledge transfer. The stakeholders in the EIP Water have defined the following key barriers: Regulation (or in some cases, the lack of legislation); Public procurement rules; Opportunities for public-public and public-private partnerships; the lack of targeted financial instruments; and the lack of good showcases and testing facilities. The EIP Water is working on actions to remove these barriers and driving to develop a better innovation enabling framework at the EU and member state level.

5 – It is generally acknowledged that public investment in RDI attracts private investment. In your opinion, is this assumption being met? How do you assess efforts between the public and private sectors in which regards funding of research and development?

Indeed, public investments can be an important driver and means of leveraging private investments. This is certainly happening, as many of the public funding opportunities require co-financing. In addition, initiatives such as the EIP on Water create perspectives for private sector investors, providing a view where policy development and public funding will go in the coming years. At the same time, there still is significant room for working on further incentives to connect private investors and public sector investment.

6 – How can innovation support the implementation of European water policies?

The European Commission's Blueprint to safeguard Europe's waters, published in 2012, clearly stated the importance of innovation as a tool to support water policy implementation. The EIP on Water is a result of this conclusion. The role of the EIP Water is to connect the demand of innovation to support policy implementation to the suppliers of the innovative solutions. The priority areas of the EIP Water reflect the policy needs and we are mapping the key challenges of member states in their water policy implementation. This is being matched with the activities of the EIP Water Action Groups, so we can see how they can concretely contribute to support policy implementation. Furthermore, when relevant, Action Groups are being invited to discuss new policy developments with the European Commission, so we can learn from their expertise and experiences.

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