

Dear colleagues,

In a time where uncertainty becomes normality, a suitable innovation policy has the potential to be supportive to the entire society.

If well implemented, a coherent innovation strategy trickles down and turns challenges into opportunities.

To achieve its goals, an innovation policy needs specific conditions, adequate infrastructures as well as receptive policymakers.

I will elaborate on these in what follows and share with you my thoughts, based on examples from the Swiss context.

I will start with four conditions that, in my opinion, should be at the basis of any reflection on innovation policy, in order to make it successful.

Firstly, an innovation policy should aim at bridging gaps between research and market.

It allows companies to directly benefit from the research infrastructure, knowledge, and competences of academic institutions.

In the case of Switzerland, this happens through good framework conditions and through a bottom-up innovation promotion approach: Innosuisse funds joint R&D-projects between Swiss research institutes and Swiss companies or other innovative organizations.

These can be SMEs, Start-ups or globally known companies such as ON Shoes which is developing, for example, new types of shoe materials from recycled waste from the aviation industry together with a Swiss University of Applied Sciences.

Secondly, an innovation policy should aim at constantly connecting innovation actors and enabling networking activities.

Knowledge gap, finding the right partners, mutual understanding and ideation are typical barriers between research and companies.

In Switzerland, we have good experiences with open innovation boosters (Innovation Booster) or networking events and platforms (e.g. Entrepriise Europe Network).

Thirdly, an innovation policy should aim at supporting a vibrant start-up ecosystem. Start-ups, in particular those based on scientific research, are key drivers of disruptive innovation. They are best placed to incorporate and test new business ideas unencumbered by existing business constraints.

The innovation policy should hence encourage and accompany the foundation and development of start-ups and helping them also to access funds.

Switzerland is a research-intensive economy, in which start-ups play a very important role.

With a small domestic market, Swiss tech and science-based start-ups need to go abroad in order to scale up and to develop international collaboration.

Hence, it is important to accompany the internationalization of start-ups by helping them to establish networks and contacts to facilitate their access to promising large markets worldwide, while better understanding how these markets work.

Innosuisse offers start-up internationalization camps, while also trying to bring visibility and networking opportunities, notably at leading international trade fair at the Swiss Pavillion (CES Las Vegas, VivaTech Paris, MWC Barcelona etc.)

Fourthly, an innovation policy should provide the necessary leverage in difficult moments.

This leverage can be implemented by supporting directly project funding for start-ups to bridge difficult periods prior to market entry.

This also can mean to adopt targeted impulse measures to maintain the innovation power in particular of SMEs and start-ups despite a deep crisis as it was the case during the Corona pandemic.

These four conditions are not an exhaustive list. I have only tried to put emphasis on the most important ones in my opinion.

In addition to these conditions, the whole innovation strategy has to be supported or “imbodied” by structures or institutions.

The effective implementation of an innovation strategy only occurs through the creation of need-oriented research and innovation agencies to co-fund bottom-up joint R&D activities.

In the case of Switzerland, Innosuisse as public funding agency can set some thematic priorities in specific thematic areas through the flagship initiative, complementing the bottom-up approach that is prevalent in Switzerland’s innovation policy.

After focusing on conditions and infrastructures, I will now elaborate on the attitude of policymakers towards innovation policy.

Policymakers must be aware of what makes a supportive environment for innovation.

Firstly, policymakers should avoid “stop-and-go budget inflow” but make decisions to ensure financial stability and planning security.

Switzerland approves 4-year credits for research and innovation funding; however both have to be confirmed in the yearly budget debate in parliament. It gives security, but only to some extent.

Secondly, part of the general budget dedicated to innovation has to flow into high-risk projects.

It is the role of an Innovation Agency to create the political and public support so that high-risk projects can be funded, because the higher the risks, the higher the potential impact if successful.

Throughout my speech, I have tried to exemplify as much as possible my abstract reflections, by giving you some insights into the Swiss context.

Before concluding, I want to put emphasis on one last point: at country-level, Switzerland does not have a directive industrial or innovation policy in the sense that it wants to transform from top-down whole economic sectors.

Switzerland rather follows a bottom-up approach to support projects coming from the economy.

Research relies on the fact that companies know best the market conditions and identify themselves the transformative risky projects, and then eventually benefit from the co-funding from Innosuisse to mitigate those risks.

I thank you very much for your attention and look forwards to further discussing this interesting topic.