

Concluding remarks by

Johannes HAHN, Commissioner for Regional Policy

At the High Level Conference on Smart Specialisation

Brussels, 8 November 2013

Dear colleagues,

Dear friends,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank our speakers and hosts, and of course our audience for an extremely interesting debate. It shows the potential of smart specialisation to contribute significantly to the European growth strategy.

The discussion we have had confirms to a large extent that we are certainly on the right track with smart specialisation, and that we are getting more and more buy-in and ownership among our stakeholders.

I am therefore extremely enthusiastic, Kris, about this initiative which you have proposed. This is the kind of bottom-up initiative and ownership that we are of course happy to endorse. It combines the strategic with the practical and helps to bring smart specialisation to the next level.

This also shows that smart specialisation strategies can bring together regions not only within one Member State, but also encourage cross-border cooperation.

Yesterday I was in Romania speaking at the Danube Rectors' Conference. In the context of our Danube Macro-region Strategy, we have clearly identified Research and Innovation as one of our priority areas.

But there is no reason why smart specialisation in other parts of Europe cannot bring synergies between regions or even Member States, so I am very happy to see that your initiative will encourage this kind of cooperation.

Your proposal, dear Kris, is well placed to bring together the important players to facilitate and exploit these synergies. It is also an important platform for spreading the word about smart specialisation - about the strategic approach which we and the Member States will be taking over the next 7 years and beyond. This will help to stimulate enthusiasm in the potential of smart specialisation to spur new regional growth initiatives. It will also motivate more Member States and regions to take full ownership of the concept.

I am sure that it will also be a useful forum for pooling resources and identifying joint investment opportunities. So it will be complementing the smart specialisation platform that already

counts 142 regions and 13 Member States and that will continue its support actions for a few more years.

There will certainly be challenges in developing and implementing smart specialisation strategies. Regions will need to share their experiences, pool resources and activities, for instance on monitoring, in order for the strategies to have maximum effect.

But it is worth the trouble. Smart specialisation strategies will be a powerful tool for us to target investment and reap the greatest benefit from innovation and EU funds.

I congratulate you and the other regions that came up with this initiative, and I hope that many more regions will commit themselves at a political level in the way you do.

As you rightly mentioned, alongside the political will, we need more interaction between bottom-up and top-down and more entrepreneurial discovery.

We as policy makers need to be in constant dialogue with the private sector and the innovation community so we can respond to the needs of the real economy and determine where it is most beneficial to intervene with scarce public funds.

This is a unique opportunity. The next 7 years will be crucial not only for Regional Policy, but also for firing up the micro-

economic engine so Europe's regions emerge out of the economic crisis more resilient and competitive than before.

We are quickly moving to the implementation stage of the next programming period, to deliver the growth agenda on the ground. I have said already that I am committed to a strategic approach in spending EU funds over the next 7 years.

I know that many regions and Member States are taking this up with passion, as do you in Flanders. But there is still some work to be done, at least from what we have seen so far in terms of the Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes delivered to us, where we need to see more precise and targeted plans of implementing smart specialisation in practice.

We as the European Commission, as well as the Member States have invested a lot in developing these strategies. But it is also clear that it does not stop with approving the strategies and the related ERDF investment programmes but it is really only a start of a 7-year campaign to stimulate transformative growth in the regions and work towards the Europe 2020 goals.

Goal achievement will of course be closely monitored during implementation so that we support continuous learning and maintain the capacity to finetune the strategic orientations and react to new developments.

The social and intellectual capital that has been invested in the strategy development process needs to live, on so that these multi-level/multi-actor partnerships will fertilize the implementation of these growth strategies and leverage as much private capital and involvement as possible.

The foremost challenges and next steps will therefore be to make good use of smart specialisation to redefine innovation support in the Member States and regions, to rethink governance and to cooperate better across borders.

We are looking forward to stimulating many more strategic cooperation activities across borders. These will help to align and match strategies and actions for more coherence and synergies.

The word 'synergy' by the way comes from the Greek 'synergos' meaning "working together". It is in this sense that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts, when we add smart specialisation and cooperation.

We will support such decentralised cooperation with our 8 billion Euro European Territorial Cooperation Objective, which will become a more strategic tool in the new programming period and has a key role in building the necessary transnational and interregional platforms and clusters.

But we will also need to continue our work towards achieving more synergies between our place-based approach and different vertical policies at the different level. Smart specialisation is the right tool for this. It provides this missing strategic link from the European to the local level.

This is a continuous challenge for all levels of government, but having smart specialisation strategies in place is an important element to achieving more synergies and mobilising all resources for a truly European growth strategy.

Your discussions this afternoon will certainly yield valuable insights and suggestions in how to tackle these future challenges and what can be further done at the different levels of government and in a decentral way through cooperating to improve it.

This will be summarised in a conference report before Christmas, which we will make available to fertilize our thinking on future steps.

So I invite you all to comment to this debate with your ideas and practical examples and wish you a fruitful rest of the conference this afternoon at the Committee of the Regions

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