European Commission

SMART SPECIALISATION PROCESS EVALUATION:

MONITORING AND EVALUATION EXPERIENCES ACROSS EUROPE

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This policy insight provides an overview of the 2020 assessment on how and to what extent Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation systems put in place across Europe allow and contribute to a cyclical policy learning process for improved policy design and implementation.

In view of the 2021-2027 programming period, a new cultural change is needed to enable monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and practices to address the shortcomings and challenges observed in the previous period and allow it to fully exert its supporting purpose to Smart Specialisation policy makers and practitioners.

Based on the evidence gathered through a survey and through case studies covering 13 regions and 4 Member States, a number of recommendations have been drawn.

The practice of policy monitoring and evaluation continues to lag behind, which in turn limits learnings and an updated strategy that is based on S3 policy outcomes and impact.

It is necessary to identify a dedicated team responsible for S3 monitoring and evaluation within the public administration in order to have an evaluation of the S3 results and the effectiveness of the policy intervention logic.

To support evaluation activities, it is important to collect data relating to the behaviour of innovation actors, even those not represented in regional calls. While in view of the next programming period, it is necessary to make use of analytical and informative tools (big data, web semantics, etc.) able to provide different kind of data and faster return.

1. What is this policy insight about

Having approached the end of the 2014-2020 European Cohesion policy cycle, we aim to provide an overview of the assessment of Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation practices across Europe. In particular, the following research questions have been assessed:

1. To what extent does Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation systems allow and contribute to a cyclical policy learning process for improved policy design and mechanisms and if they are able to measure the socio-economic-environmental impact of Smart Specialisation related interventions?
2. Do Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation systems collect, organise and convey information about the development of the policy interventions in a way that they provide, manage and use data that contributes to evidence-driven policy?
3. Is the methodological approach adopted in the Smart Specialisation strategy suited for an overall evaluation of the whole S3 strategy?

Two main sources of information have been used: a survey, addressed to national and regional S3 implementing authorities, and case study reports based on secondary data analysis and interviews with public officials and relevant stakeholders involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of Smart Specialisation.

2. The issue at stake

A solid Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation framework is a necessary tool that can help policymakers and practitioners ensure the effectiveness of Smart Specialisation implementation (Hegyi and Rakhmatullin, 2020). Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation systems allow policymakers and practitioners to continuously assess progress and if the strategy has reached (is reaching) its expected objectives. Consequently, the right timing of the Smart Specialisation evaluation is evident: it should occur alongside programme development and implementation. Moreover, the usefulness of single evaluations of individual instruments is highly questionable in multi-rationales, multi-level, multi-actor policy context.

When a monitoring and evaluation systems is an integrated part of the policy making cycle, enhancing the learning capacity of the system, it is working toward reconciling the implications of social complexity with the requirement for effective public policy intervention.

In parallel, complexity theory may provide a useful conceptual framework for evaluation in innovation: a

complexity framework adds to evaluation the understanding of how, why and to what extent policies need to adapt to the environment and stakeholders' perceptions and, therefore, can help in the evaluation of Smart Specialisation policy impact.

Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation processes are required to embrace and meet the needs of broader groups in society, which call for mechanisms capable of mapping relevant stakeholders of specific areas of research and innovation and engaging directly with them. Accordingly, participatory approaches of policy formulation and implementation are supporting the learning capacity of the system.

Successively, the adoption of the Smart Specialisation concept as a guiding principle to implement innovation strategies represent a culture change. The backwardness of Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are calling for a new culture change.

3. Data sources

To assess the monitoring and evaluation practices carried out during the programming period 2014-2020, we used two main sources of information. Both, the survey and the case studies provide a wide geographical coverage and include territories at different levels of development and with different institutional settings. Out of the 120 existing Smart Specialisation strategies, the survey has been filled out by 79 national or regional implementing authorities from nineteen countries while the case studies cover thirteen regional and 4 national strategies and their implementation practices. The survey gathered responses of national and regional Smart Specialisation authorities regarding their experiences and observations of implementation and on the future of Smart Specialisation policy agenda: 89 percent of the respondents represent regional administrations (25 less developed regions; 39 more developed regions; 7 transition regions), while 11 percent national administrations (including the Six-city strategy of Finland). The case study reports are based on secondary data analysis and interviews with public officials and relevant stakeholders involved in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of Smart Specialisation strategies. The case studies cover 13 regions (2 less developed regions; 3 transition regions; 8 more developed regions) and 4 countries (Poland, Hungary, Slovenia and Spain).

4. Evidence

In this policy insight, we focus on selected aspects of

Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation systems in order to assess how and to what extent the monitoring and evaluation practices across Europe contribute to a cyclical policy learning process for improved policy design. Furthermore, we provide an overview how data gathered on the development of policy interventions is managed in a way that it contributes to evidence-driven policy. Therefore, in this report we present the results of our analyses as regards the (1) distinctive features of the Smart

The policy context of this research

This report is part of a research project developed within the Territorial Development Unit of the JRC and co-financed by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy (DG REGIO) in the context of the Smart Specialisation Platform activities. The research project explored four main themes: Smart Specialisation governance, the entrepreneurial discovery process, monitoring and evaluation systems, and policy implementation measures. Further references can be found in the "Read more" section.

Specialisation monitoring system; (2) contribution of evaluation to the policy learning process; (3) challenges for monitoring and evaluating of Smart Specialization Strategies.

1- Distinctive features of the Smart Specialisation monitoring system

Analysing the links between the Smart Specialisation strategy objectives and result indicators, a correlation can be detected between objectives and indicators in the analysed national and regional settings: if the former is unique for each priority, so are the latter. Similarly, regions and countries having had defined common objectives for several priorities, usually employ common indicators for several priorities. Assessing the relations between systematic data collection and Smart Specialisation specific evaluation exercises, our analysis has shown that regions and countries, which collect systematic information on strategy implementation, are the same that have carried out or have planned evaluation exercises of their Smart Specialisation strategies. Based on the percentage of respondent who declare that they have carried out or are planning evaluation exercises of their Smart Specialisation strategies, there seems to be awareness of the importance of evaluation.

2 - Contribution of evaluation to the policy

learning process

Evaluation plays a key role in policy development allowing policymakers to react to new information and emerging results. From the evidence on the degree of integrating results of current monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of Smart Specialisation into the planning of the next programming period, it can be distinguished that policy learning is underway, in particular in the case of more developed and transition regions and at national level. While it is less pronounced in less developed regions. Slightly more than half of the regions and countries in our sample have put in place a system to ensure that monitoring and evaluation results reach policy makers.

3 – Challenges for monitoring and evaluating Smart Specialization Strategies

The main challenges related to the monitoring system concern the lack of adequate and timely data requiring the elaboration of sound indicators that go beyond a mere accountability-based approach. Another challenge is the absence of clear connections between objectives and indicators. The availability of reliable and timely data on the implementation of a Smart Specialisation strategy is a fundamental prerequisite for the evaluation of the strategy.

Considering the vision behind Smart Specialisation, the monitoring and evaluation system should take into account the impact of the overall strategy on the regional/national territory. About 64 percent of respondents to the survey states that they have carried out or have planned an impact evaluation for the overall Smart Specialisation strategy.

5. Policy recommendations

The adoption of the Smart Specialisation concept as a guiding principle to implement innovation strategies represent a culture change for most regions, whether developed and already well acquainted with regional innovation policy practices or less developed with lower innovation performance (Foray et al, 2011; Foray, 2015). In the view of the next programming period, a new cultural change as regards to Smart Specialisation policy monitoring and evaluation mechanisms would enable to forge ahead in the backwardness of monitoring and evaluation practices. Therefore, it is essential, that:

- the indicators of the monitoring system are to be adequately linked to the Smart Specialisation priorities, which is requiring an explicit theory of change, as survey results show;

- there is a dedicated team responsible for Smart Specialisation monitoring and evaluation (equipped with adequate human and financial resources) to enable the Smart Specialisation strategy to reach its objectives, as presented in our case studies;

- behavioural insights – as explicitly addressed in the Tuscany case - are used as a tool to understand the implementation of processes of change enabling possible revisions of the strategy and related interventions, for the reason that collecting data related to the behaviour of innovation actors increase the effectiveness of policy interventions (Kuehnhanss, 2019);

- making use of analytical and informative tools, including big data, web semantics, etc. to enable providing different kinds of data and faster return;

- as highlighted in the literature review, assisting countries and regions adopting evaluation approaches drawing on ideas of complexity, given that evaluation practices adopting simple models of impact assessment and accountability are not suitable for judging the effectiveness of Smart Specialisation (Walton, 2014, Prota 2019), while

- improving the use of monitoring and evaluation in the policy cycle by putting in place efficient processes for feedback from evaluators to policy makers, throughout the programme implementation, as well as around its conclusion. Good examples are presented in the Ostrobothnia and Valencian Community case study reports.

The policy insight is based on the report:

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Read more:

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Kuehnhanss, C.R. (2019). The challenges of behavioural insights for effective policy design. Policy and Society, 38(1), 14-40.

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