

SMART REGIONS CONFERENCE 1 June 2016, Brussels
Thematic Smart Specialisation Platform: Agri-food
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Key insights

- Agri-food is a multi-sectoral platform. Packaging and logistics are natural components and related diversification in agri-food clusters. ICT, transportation, aeronautics and bio-pharma are also present.
- At the same time there are sub-segments such as horticulture, which demonstrate high productivity and employ advanced irrigation and fertilisation technologies, and these segments stand isolated so there is no spill-over effect from their advanced technologies – which naturally are applicable to agri-food.
- Robotics and smart pharma are drivers in the agri-food sector.
- Complementarities across regions prevail, as agri-food activities are embedded in a different way in the local economy. These complementarities need to be highlighted and re-defined. This process has to be facilitated by the Commission – so co-alignment with strategic priorities prevail over localised stakeholder interests.
- Regions share a lot of positive practice and experience, but are constrained by the lack of wide-spread information about other potential complementarities – hence there is a need for a more granularity in the shared information about regions.
- The current mapping gives only a generic orientation about capabilities. More fine-grained mapping of stakeholders and capabilities is needed.
- The entrepreneurial discovery process should be taken at a pan-European or cross-regional level.
- The topics and insights vary substantially across the workshops on the 12 May and 1 June – there is almost no overlap – which suggests that there are no dominant emerging topics and very little consistency in terms of leadership – almost everything is ‘up-in-the air’.
- There is a lot of experience sharing during discussions, which is of great relevance to all participants – great insights – perhaps a social interaction forum should be made an essential part of the future platform.
- There is a consensus that the Smart specialisation strategy should be the focus of inter-regional cooperation. It gives regions a focus – what to promote, what kind of links to look for, and what kind of partners to seek.
- There was a comment that once partnerships start to emerge – the regions is changing its one self-perception of its priorities – or its priorities are redefined while engaged in an inter-regional collaboration.
- There is a need for effective triple helix constellations at regional level – to balance interests and stir engagement with the business sector.
- It is still an open question – how regions should focus and concentrate – on specific projects, priorities, relationships... The proliferation of networks and platforms may be useful to find potential partners, but it is really confusing -where to participate, and how to prioritise. There is a need for guidance about the process of engagement and participation.
- There are two sides to inter-regional cooperation – demand and supply – these require different networks and mechanism.
- Sharing experience first-hand – from personal contacts are more insightful – how to do things. Published success stories often turn into self-promotion.
- Focus on traceability and transparency is important.
- Inter-sectoral representations are not clear – at what level
- Financial instruments for innovation are not clear
- The long-term framework for the bio-economy is not encouraging further participation

- Difficulties in investment, in engaging with business, even engaging with consumers. Both sides of up-stream and downstream value added are not known – lack of information on value chains and potential input-output markets
- New business models are necessary – for match-making and forming effective partnerships.
- Innovation aid often does not reach small farmers – they remain isolated producers
- Focus on opportunities is more fruitful
- The issues of transition from ‘contacts to contracts’ emerge at a later stage. Addressing these require specific framework. The stages before, however, take place too much in dark where more information sharing is needed.

Recommendations

- Better connectivity between governments – including links between regional and national governments and links between national government and EC
- Need for political commitment at all levels – including EC, national governments and regional authorities
- Improved data-sharing across regions – platforms – initiatives – both the regulatory conditions for data sharing and the practical aspects
- Better use of existing resources, platforms, networks...
- Standardisation is an important pre-condition for collaboration
- Combining research capacity is still difficult – demonstration projects focus on exclusive partners
- To establish a mechanism – how to continue this workshop-type and ... bottom-up communication
- Some endorsement from S3 on open competitive calls – will create a better collaborative climate
- There is a need for localised innovation-driven research – to bridge the gap with global competitiveness
- There is a need for a wide spread mapping of value chains – within and across platforms and sectors.
- There is a need for mapping sectoral and cross-sectoral complementarities – to assist in the match-making process and to shorten the period of ‘Learning-Connecting-Collaborating...
- The development of Pan-European Agri-food cluster that combines established agri-food clusters in Europe.
- Some form of regional participation in platform governance – to share risks, commitments and obligations, as well as access to decision making.

Additional observations and insights from the key-note presentation

- Distilling principles and advise – on how to select partners
- Provisions for exit strategies
- Considering a structured approach that reflects reality:
 - o Three types of experience in inter-regional collaboration –
 - advanced (Vanguard),
 - intermediate (some collaboration),
 - isolated regions (no collaboration experience)
 - o Three types of participation in Global Value chains –

- Global competitiveness and participation in GVC at the high end – looking for further innovation capabilities and capacity
 - Regular exports and participation in GVCs at low-to medium level – a need for upgrade
 - Local produce – important for safety and local security, but driven by different strategic priorities – carrying some potential for capturing creativity, but feeding into localised value chains
- Three types of embedded agri-food activities
- Global businesses
 - Localised cluster agglomerations
 - Isolated capabilities