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## JRC TECHNICAL REPORTS

# Synergies between Interreg Europe and Smart Specialisation

*A methodological proposal  
to enhance policy  
learning*

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2018

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**EU Science Hub**

<https://ec.europa.eu/jrc>

JRC113414

EUR 29390 EN

PDF ISBN 978-92-79-96382-7 ISSN 1831-9424 doi:10.2760/572859

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018

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How to cite this report: Cortijo Arellano M., Esparza Masana R., Fernández Sirera T., Marinelli E., Arregui Pabollet E, Synergies between Interreg Europe and Smart Specialisation  
A methodological proposal to enhance policy learning, EUR 29390 EN, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018, ISBN 978-92-79-96382-7, doi:10.2760/572859, JRC113414

# Contents

- Acknowledgements .....2
- Abstract .....3
- 1 Introduction .....4
- 2 Knowledge-based development and policy learning: Synergies between INTERREG Europe and Smart Specialisation .....5
- 3 Reinforcing Interreg Europe and S3 in Catalonia - a methodology .....6
- 3.1 Preparatory analysis: mapping Interreg-Europe projects and defining the objectives of data collection.....6
- 3.2 Workshop with IE project – Creating a community of practice through an exploratory data collection.....7
- 3.3 Survey – Rigorous data collection .....7
- 4 Results: Exploring synergies between IE Europe and Smart Specialisation in Catalonia8
- 4.1 Preliminary mapping .....8
- 4.2 Synergies between IE and S3 – easier to identify than to implement.....9
- 4.3 Methodological reflections..... 10
- 5 Conclusions and policy implications..... 11
- References ..... 13
- List of abbreviations and definitions ..... 14
- Annex 1. Key characteristics of IE projects with Catalan partners ..... 14

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank all the representatives of IE project that participated to the initiative described in this report. Without their time, effort and commitment, we would know much less about how to enhance shared policy learning through monitoring.

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## **Abstract**

The Interreg Europe (IE) programme supports projects in which interregional consortia develop a set of peer-learning activities, followed by action-plans, aimed at improving given policy interventions. The programme gives priority to projects focussed on instruments in ERDF Operational Programmes that have a direct link to S3. Despite this potential, little attention has so far been paid on exploring systematically the complementarities between Interreg and S3 to maximise policy learning. This paper aims at bridging this gap by framing the relationship between IE and S3 in the broader debate about synergies between different EU funds and stressing the importance of monitoring such complementarities. The present work argues that the Interreg Europe programme can provide a space for experimentation, learning and generation of good practices in S3 that can serve broader purposes. This argument is put forward by describing and analysing an exercise conducted by the Catalan government, which targeted synergies between IE and S3.

# 1 Introduction

Europe 2020, the strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth, sets out the targets that the European Union should meet by 2020 in the fields of research and innovation (R&I), climate change and energy, employment, education and combating poverty. Regarding the European budgetary period 2014-2020, the European Commission established that the Operational Programmes (OP) for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) should support actions in the research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation (S3). S3s support economic and knowledge specialisations that best match the resources and capabilities in a particular territory and, therefore, its potential for innovation.

According to the Joint Research Centre (2012), these strategies are organised through an inclusive and interactive bottom-up process (known as 'entrepreneurial discovery process') in which public administrations, research and innovation stakeholders, companies and civil society co-decide the priorities for the strategy. The idea of shared learning is de facto implicit in the concept of Smart Specialisation.

The European Commission also promotes the coordination and complementarity of programmes co-financed by European funds in order to maximise the impact of these funds towards the Europe 2020 objectives.

In parallel, the European Commission has fostered the territorial cooperation of the EU member states and their regions, developing programmes (commonly known as Interreg) to foster transregional collaboration to design and implement better and more efficient public policies. Several Interreg programmes exist under three main blocks: cross-border (member state border regions), trans-national (tackling main EU macro-regions), and interregional (for all EU regions to participate). Each EU region can participate in a number of them, according to its geographic position. The Interreg Europe (IE) programme, the main interregional programme, supports projects in which interregional consortia develop a set of peer-learning activities, followed by action-plans, aimed at improving given policy interventions. The programme gives priority to projects focussed on instruments in ERDF OPs that have a direct link to S3. The programme is designed to open a space for shared reflection between stakeholders and the public sector.

Despite a clear potential, little attention has so far been paid on the complementarities between Interreg and S3. This paper aims at bridging this gap by framing the relationship between IE and S3 in the broader debates about synergies between EU funds and about monitoring. The present work argues that the Interreg Europe programme can provide a space for experimentation, learning and generation of good practices in S3 that can serve broader purposes. To exploit this potential a systematic approach is required: a methodologically rigorous exchange has to be opened between S3 and IE projects, as part of the broader S3 monitoring process. Such exchange needs to enable policy learning by providing stakeholders and the public sector with (a) the opportunity to build a common understanding of the issues at stake, (b) a clear picture of the policy situation and (c) opportunities to generate feedback for future policy decisions. At the same time, this very policy learning process is instrumental to building capacities to exploit synergies between S3 and other EU funds, including Horizon 2020, the EU research and innovation framework programme. This argument is put forward through an exercise aimed at identifying and exploiting synergies between IE and S3, recently conducted by the Catalan government. Reflecting on this experience is particularly timely, as now regions and member states are evaluating the first few years of S3 and preparing for the forthcoming programming period 2021-2027, in which S3 is confirmed to be an important element of cohesion policy.

## **2 Knowledge-based development and policy learning: Synergies between INTERREG Europe and Smart Specialisation**

As pointed out by McCann and Ortega Argilés (2012), the smart specialisation concept is essentially a way of thinking about systems for local knowledge and learning enhancement. A key element of S3 is stakeholders' interaction and collaboration both to identify areas for investment in research, development and innovation (RDI) and to implement projects in such areas (the so called entrepreneurial discovery process). According to the OECD (2014), stakeholders' participation, combined with early stage monitoring and clear opportunities for feedback into decision making is essential to develop an iterative process of policy-learning.

The aforementioned Interreg Europe (IE) programme supports interregional consortia providing opportunities for peer exchange and learning. One of the requirements of the Interreg Europe programme is that projects should focus on improving regional public interventions, preferably co-financed by the ERDF and related to S3, in the following thematic fields: research and innovation; SME competitiveness; low-carbon economy; environment and energy efficiency. The IE projects must have partners in at least three different member states that work together on specific regional public interventions (mostly policy instruments or strategic tools). The projects are developed in two phases:

- the first (with a duration of up to three years) focuses on interregional learning and the preparation of regional action plans that include the lessons learned during the peer-exchange activities;
- the second (two years in the calls for proposals in 2015, 2016, 2017, and one year in the 2018 one) is devoted to implementing and monitoring the action plan which specifies what will be done in each partner-region to ensure that the lessons learnt from the IE cooperation have a local impact.

Looking at the links between IE and S3 provides some insights into policy learning processes as well as mechanisms to support synergies between different EU policies. The latter is a topic of high interest to policy makers and policy beneficiaries, hence different initiatives have been developed to address it.<sup>1</sup> These have identified the main obstacles in exploiting synergies in:

- difficulties to access/form international networks,
- weak collaboration with other EU countries,
- lack of experience in EU project consortiums management, as well as
- lack of long-term strategic planning of R&I policies (Ozbolat and Harrap, 2018).

In particular, the "Horizon for RIS3"<sup>2</sup> working group (promoted by the JRC) has underlined the importance of promoting more informal learning platforms and networks for regions to exchange and discuss about synergies experiences. We argue in this paper,

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission has been working on building capacities for synergies in regions to increase the impact of R&I funding, especially between ESIF and those centrally managed. The efforts have been particularly focused on synergies between S3 and Horizon 2020, as the latter is the largest RDTI funding programme at European (see <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/stairway-to-excellence>). In addition the Interact programme, that supports Interreg programmes activities, has promoted the identification of EU regions and countries that have identified under their ERDF operational programmes the use of the current Article 96.3 of the Common provision regulations for interregional collaborations to enable further synergies.

<http://www.interact-eu.net/library>

<sup>2</sup> The "H2020 for RIS3" working group has been set up by the JRC Stairway to Excellence project with the aim of to co-designing activities that better adapt to the needs of public authorities to build capacities and be a test-bed for implementing capacity building activities to improve excellence of their local R&I systems.

<http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/-/working-group-h2020-for-ris3-on-optimising-the-use-of-h2020-in-implementing-smart-specialisation?inheritRedirect=true>

that the process of integration of IE project in S3 – as implemented in Catalonia- is an example of such platforms and provides opportunities to address the challenges that hinder the exploitation of synergies at a more general level.<sup>3</sup>

### **3 Reinforcing Interreg Europe and S3 in Catalonia - a methodology**

The exploration of synergies between IE and RIS3CAT (the Catalan S3) is part of the broader S3 monitoring system of Catalonia, one which embeds policy learning by engaging stakeholders and providing avenues for feedback and discussion. The exercise, as we will argue, provides a blueprint to understand how to make the most of experiences occurred within the region or elsewhere. It must be stressed that the current exercise focusses on IE projects that are already approved and ongoing (i.e. not on project proposals).<sup>4</sup>

The exercise methodology is based around 3 steps:

- 1) A preparatory analysis mapping of the Interreg Europe projects with Catalan partners
- 2) A workshop with local stakeholders involved in IE Projects in the region.
- 3) A qualitative survey on such projects, exploring synergies with S3 and opportunities for policy learning at three moments of the project life-cycle:
  - i. The design of the project;
  - ii. The current phase of action-plan definition/implementation
  - iii. The future of the project

Each of the three elements is described below.

#### **3.1 Preparatory analysis: mapping Interreg-Europe projects and defining the objectives of data collection**

The preparatory analysis included an overview of the Interregional Cooperation programmes in Europe and a mapping exercise of each IE project and its links to the Catalan S3. In other words, the exercise was framed against the regional and EU policy landscape. With the aim of understanding and exploiting synergies between IE and S3, the preliminary mapping distinguished between:

- IE projects relevant to specific **RIS3CAT instruments** versus IE projects relevant to **RIS3CAT Priorities**.
- IE projects with a direct relationship with regional or local public interventions and IE projects without such relationship.
- IE projects related to public interventions **co-funded by ERDF** or **not**.

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<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, one of the challenges in exploiting synergies between S3 and other EU programmes, such as H2020, lies in the different regulatory framework. Whilst such problem does not arise in the case of Interreg Europe, the pursuit of synergies across EU policies and funding streams poses other common challenges.

<sup>4</sup> In a previous stage, when the project were being submitted to the IE secretariat, the managing authority for the ERDF Regional Operational programme and the body responsible for RIS3CAT have ensured that projects were framed within S3 priorities. Meetings were held between regional government representatives and potential stakeholders with IE proposals with the aim of understanding the scope of their projects and the overlap with S3 priority areas. A letter of intent between the public administration and the IE project-responsible was signed when a good match was identified.



### **3.2 Workshop with IE project – Creating a community of practice through an exploratory data collection**

A meeting with Catalan partners of IE projects (projects granted under the first and second calls for proposals of the 2014-2020 periods, which were the ongoing projects at the date) was organised on the 11<sup>th</sup> of January 2018, in the premises of the Catalan government. The meeting revolved around three focus groups which aimed, on the one hand, at getting participants to know each other and, on the other, at starting a discussion on the synergies/complementarities between each IE project and RIS3CAT. The debate was articulated following the tripartite survey described in the session below, covering the synergies between IE projects and S3 at the time of the design of the project, the definition/implementation of the action plan and the future. The focus groups provided the opportunity for project representatives to exchange their views and to understand the objectives of the public administration for S3 and the exercise itself. The meeting was framed against the broader process of S3 monitoring and highlighted the need to understand the RIS3CAT as a strategy encompassing multiple instruments and not limited to the ERDF Operational Programme.

### **3.3 Survey – Rigorous data collection**

The data collection exercise revolved around a questionnaire exploring synergies and complementarities between Interreg-Europe and RIS3CAT at different points of the IE project life, namely the design, the implementation and the future of the project. The **first** part of the questionnaire identifies the links between IE and S3 –both in terms of instruments and priorities- as envisaged in the design phase of each project. The **second** part of the survey covers the implementation phase, as defined in the Action Plans of the IE projects, and explores specific mechanisms/obstacles that may favour/hinder synergies between those and the RIS3CAT. The **third** and final part looks at the opportunities to embed monitoring results into policy actions, by exploring avenues to improve synergies between IE projects and RIS3CAT in the future. The three questionnaires are reported in the table below.

**Table 1** Work session questionnaire

1. Project previous or design stage
1.1. Did you consider complementarity with RIS3CAT or the ERDF OP at the initial stage of designing your project? 1.2. Did you consider complementarity any particular RIS3CAT instrument? And any particular sector? 1.3. Was it easy to find this complementarity? (Specify in terms of both conceptual level and actual articulation). 1.4. Did you consider complementarity as a bureaucratic issue (as a condition of the call for proposals) or as a strategic matter (of interest to the project)?
2. Current or action plan design and implementation stage
2.1. Does the action plan include learning generated by exchanges of experiences with other partners? 2.2. Is the action plan designed to influence RIS3CAT instruments or specific public policies? Through what mechanisms? 2.3. During the implementation of the action plan, did the way that complementarity was considered evolve (for example, from bureaucratic to strategic, or vice versa)? 2.4. Are there any experiences from other project regions worth highlighting (cases of good practices regarding complementarities and synergies with RIS3)? 2.5. What value-added can your action plan bring to RIS3CAT or public policies? 2.6. What obstacles do you expect when it comes to influencing RIS3CAT instruments or specific public policies?
3. Stage after 2020 (future considerations)
3.1. From your experience, can you think of possible ideas (mechanisms, design of calls for proposals, etc.) to enhance the complementarities and synergies between Interreg projects and regional public policies, that is, to increase the impact of Interreg Europe projects on regional policies? 3.2. From the point of view of the Interreg Europe programme or call for proposals (project design, requirements, objectives, etc.). 3.3. From the point of view of RIS3. Based on your experience, how could greater or stronger complementarity have been achieved from the beginning?

Source: Generalitat de Catalunya Directorate-General for Economic Promotion, Competition and Regulation.

## **4 Results: Exploring synergies between IE Europe and Smart Specialisation in Catalonia**

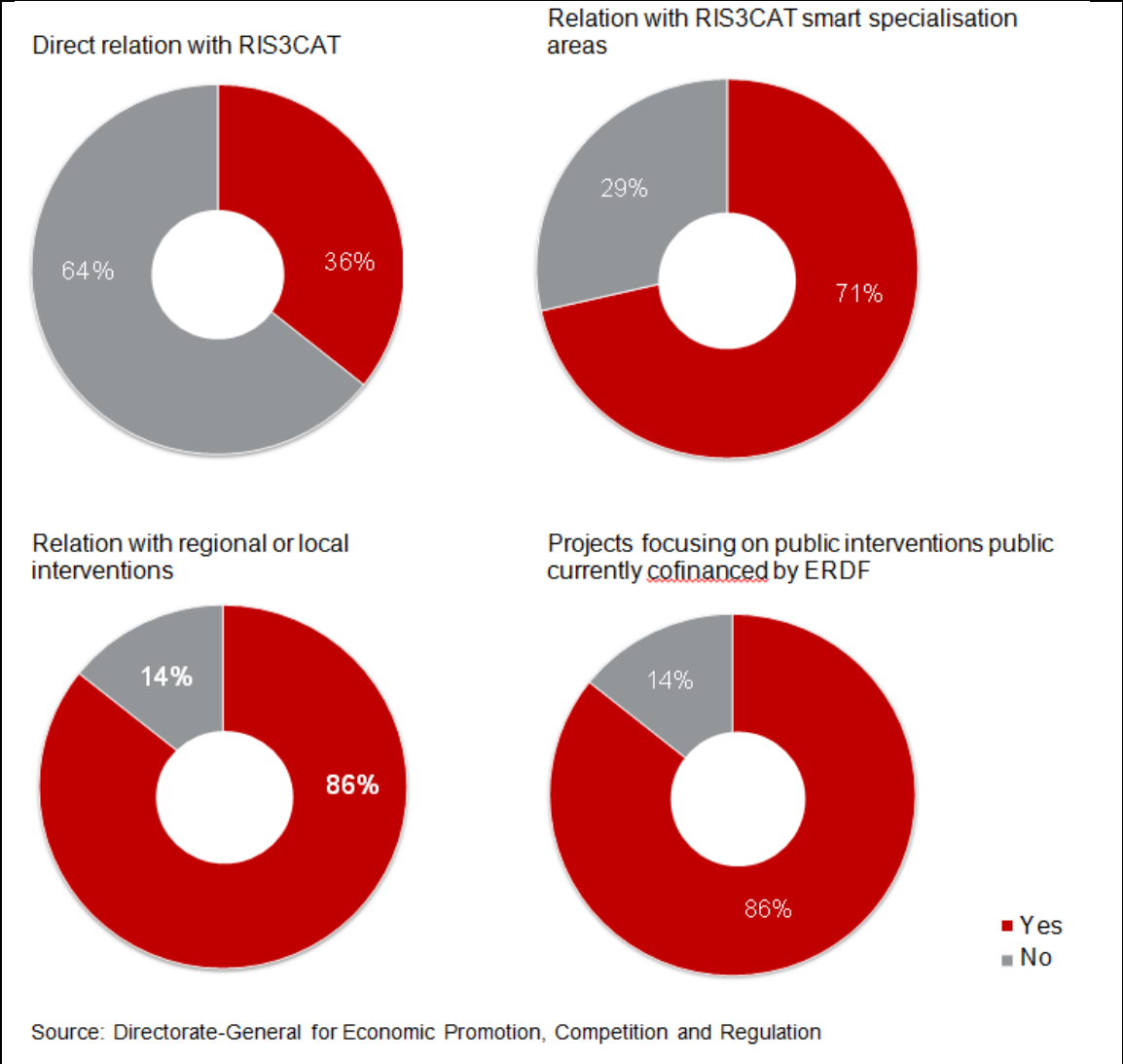
### **4.1 Preliminary mapping**

Out of the 20 IE projects with partners in Catalonia (emerged from the first and second calls for proposals only), fourteen (described in Annex 1) participated to the second and third steps of the exercise under examination. The IE projects in which Catalan stakeholders participate have an average duration of 4-5 years, an average budget of 1.2 million euros and an average of 7 partner regions.

As indicated in the graph below, of the 14 projects, 5 are directly related to RIS3CAT instruments, 10 are related to areas of smart specialisation established in RIS3CAT, 2 have no direct relation with regional or local public interventions, and 12 focus on public interventions currently not co-financed by the ERDF OP. Projects related to a particular

sector do not usually focus on any one specific public intervention; rather, they take into account the various instruments and policies that may affect the sector.

**Figure 1. Results of the questionnaire on the relation between the Interreg Europe 14 projects and RIS3CAT**



**4.2 Synergies between IE and S3 – easier to identify than to implement**

The fieldwork in Catalonia highlighted that it was relatively easy to identify complementarities and synergies between IE and S3 at the project-design stage. In most cases the identification of synergies, which was an administrative requirement for IE project-proposals, responded to true strategic needs. However, in a minority of projects this was not the case: the identification of complementarities and synergies had been considered more a bureaucratic issue, performed to comply with the requirements of the call for proposals.

If at the theoretical level it has been relatively easy to identify synergies and complementarities, it proved a lot more difficult to work on them throughout the subsequent phases of the projects, i.e. the exchange of good practice, the definition of the action plan and its implementation.

The exchange of good practices with peer regions and with stakeholders is one of the key features of Interreg Europe. Whilst it is perceived as useful by virtually all projects examined, it appears difficult for IE project-representatives to translate its outcomes in policy lessons relevant for S3. The value of the good-practice exchange appears largely dependent on the components and design of the project consortia. The most successful exchanges emerged where project partners could identify from the start, a common challenge/opportunity/need for which they wanted to develop and implement an innovative response and for which they had the capability or competence to exercise influence. In these cases the exchanges of good practice produced a higher level of satisfaction as the learning generated could be directly applied to public policies.

Whilst the direct outputs of the IE exchange of good-practice projects are difficult to translate into policy learning for the S3, there are other project outcomes, for which synergies are more obvious. In particular, IE projects often require the mobilisation of the quadruple helix stakeholders. Several of the Catalan projects explicitly promote the articulation and enhancement of cooperation networks among these stakeholders in order to formulate innovative responses to societal challenges and to generate evidence that can serve as the basis for improving the effectiveness of public policies. It follows that Interreg Europe projects could make a major contribution to articulating stakeholder participation and entrepreneurial discovery processes driven by S3 (an aspect emerged crucial to exploit synergies also with other EU programmes).

At the time the exercise was carried out, IE projects were still defining the action plan. Hence, whilst it was not possible to assess whether and how IE-S3 synergies and complementarities had been implemented, it was feasible to discuss how to prepare to enhance them. In particular, it is essential that, from the onset, a true strategic objective aligning the IE project and RIS3CAT is identified. The importance of such first step cannot be overstated. Secondly, partner organisations in IE projects must also have the capacity (and will) to actually apply the outcomes of the IE learning process, identifying and implementing the emerged good-practice. This may be difficult for those partners which do not directly manage the instrument they tackle in the project. In such cases they must collaborate as early as possible with the relevant institution to ensure the implementation of the initiatives defined in the action plans. In those same cases, it could be useful to support with dedicated resources the design and implementation of small pilot projects that adapt and test the local effectiveness of good-practices emerged in other contexts. However, at this stage, the IE regulations do not foresee support for such actions. Thirdly, good communication is essential between the IE project managers and the relevant government units throughout the project life-cycle. Last but not least, to maximise the impact of Interreg Europe projects on public policies and the territory, a communication strategy is necessary at regional scale to inform about projects' progress and learning outcomes.

### **4.3 Methodological reflections**

The afore-mentioned exercise is relevant also for its methodological implications. The exercise is part of the broader monitoring process of the RIS3CAT and represents an interesting example of qualitative data collection.

There are four methodological strengths that are worth noticing:

- 1) The preparatory work conducted to specify the remit of the exercise
- 2) The homogeneous selection of stakeholders
- 3) The targeted questionnaire used to elicit qualitative data
- 4) The appropriate timing of the exercise

The preparatory technical analysis allowed a clear mapping of the IE presence in the region, with a first assessment of their relevance for the RIS3CAT. It also enabled to define more clearly the scope of the fieldwork.

The workshop with stakeholders, combined with the qualitative survey, allowed exploring critically the synergies and complementarities between S3 and IE.

The survey is a good example of qualitative data collection for S3 monitoring. Such method is appropriate when the number of stakeholders targeted is limited, and when the focus is more on process than on results or output of policies, such as in the case at stake. Furthermore, the survey (and the preparatory analysis) well reflects the S3 logic of intervention, linking IE projects to S3 instruments and priority areas, allowing a clear and pertinent use of the information gathered.

A critical aspects of monitoring and policy learning exercises, is timing. The survey on IE and RIS3CAT synergies was indeed strategically launched in January 2018, at a time when most IE projects were involved in the design or early implementation of their Action Plan. The data highlighted that better communication channels needed to be open between the government and IE stakeholders, and that a much deeper understanding of RIS3CAT was needed if IE were to have an impact. Given the appropriate timing of the exercise it was possible to act upon these findings, to the benefit of both RIS3CAT and IE projects

## **5 Conclusions and policy implications**

The paper reports what is, to the best of our knowledge, the first exercise aimed at mapping and exploiting synergies between Interreg Europe projects and Smart Specialisation Strategies. The results of the paper, based on a case study conducted by the Catalan government, are three-fold:

- 1) At the practical level, the paper provides a methodology for authorities to map and monitor the synergies and complementarities between S3 and IE, engaging stakeholders in the policy process.
- 2) At the conceptual level, the exercise allows reflecting on the policy-learning opportunities provided by such process and highlights how the latter can be enhanced.
- 3) At the policy level, the exercise is rich in implications for the future programming period (2021-2027) in which Smart Specialisation, inter-regional cooperation and the pursuit of synergies have a prominent role (European Commission, 2018).

As for the first point, the paper articulates the importance of establishing a methodology of data collection that combines a deep understanding of the region and the policy framework, whilst opening opportunities collective learning. It stresses the importance of engaging a homogenous set of stakeholders and highlights the relevance of developing the exercise at the appropriate time, allowing the lessons emerged to feed back into the policy process. In so doing, the paper provides regions involved in S3, and stakeholders involved in IE projects with a tool to get closer to each other and enhance the coherence, impact and sustainability of Interreg Europe projects.

As for the second point, we have shown that for IE projects to achieve their aim, that is to improve regional policy making through international participatory process and the generation of good practices, it is important that IE partners and the regional administration identify and discuss common challenges as early as possible. Incidentally, such a process can support the networking and collaboration capacities needed to exploit synergies with other EU programs and indeed similar exercise could be conceived for other EU initiatives (H2020, Erasmus+, etc.).

As for the third point, we show that the current requirements for IE projects do not, per se, guarantee synergies: formally requiring proof of alignment of an IE project-proposal with S3 is necessary but not sufficient. Indeed, it is also essential, on the one hand, to ensure a structured communication and cooperation between the regional government

and the (potential) IE beneficiaries, throughout each project cycle. On the other, the engagement of IE local partners in S3 needs to be reflected in the participatory governance and monitoring systems of the region. Last but not least, the renewed attention that the EC proposal (2018) places on inter-regional collaboration indicate that understanding transregional networks is becoming increasingly important for S3. Opening spaces for shared learning by building on current IE consortia and engaging with regional stakeholders that have an outward looking attitude, appears as crucial to build capacities for S3 implementation.

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## List of abbreviations and definitions

ERDF European Regional Development Funds

H2020 Horizon2020

IE Interreg Europe

R&I Research and Innovation

RIS3CAT Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation in Catalonia

S3 Smart Specialisation Strategy

### Annex 1. Key characteristics of IE projects with Catalan partners

IE Theme	Acronym	Project objective	N. Partners	Budget	Start/End date
1. Research and innovation	HIGHER	To improve innovation through smart specialisation and to promote public-private R&D&I projects in order to generate innovation policies that encourage cooperation between research centres and industry.	7	Total: 1.871.000€ ERDF: 1.572.350€	2016-04-01 2020-09-30
	RELOS3	To design and implement innovation strategies in the local economy.	6	Total: 1.317.216€ ERDF: 1.119.633,60€	2017-01-01 2021-12-31
	S34Growth	To enhance public policies in order to enhance innovation and R&D&I in advanced manufacturing through exchanges of good practice.	7	Total: EUR 2.227.000€ ERDF: 1.871.735€	2016-04-01 2020-03-31
	S3Chem	To enhance public policies in order to enhance innovation and R&D&I in the chemicals industry through exchanges of good practice between regions.	7	Total: 2.205.010€ ERDF: 1.847.603,50€	2016-04-01 2021-03-31
2. SME competitive-ness	Design 4 Innovation	To provide support for governments in integrating design into policy instruments in the ERDF framework, and promoting SME competitiveness through European territorial cooperation tools.	8	Total: 1.717.517€ ERDF: 1.441.209,45€	2017-01-01 2021-12-31
	RCIA	To improve ERDF policy instruments related to the competitiveness of creative SMEs, and to position the creative instruments as drivers of innovation between sectors.	9	Total: 1.877.340€ ERDF: 1.579.364€	2017-01-01 2021-12-31



	TRINNO	To study how business support ecosystems work in order to promote them through policies aimed at integrating digital innovation into traditional sectors of the local economy and to design measures and action plans necessary to implement or develop them.	5	Total: 1.187.523,00 ERDF: 1.009.394,55	2016-04-01 2021-03-31
3. Low-carbon economy	BIO4ECO	To improve regional and national policies aimed at the transition towards a low-carbon economy, which includes the use of renewable energy, energy efficiency in buildings and forest and agricultural biomass.	8	Total: 1.495.290,00 ERDF: 1.261.636,50	2016-04-01 2020-09-30
	EV Energy	Analysis, initiation and implementation of policies to promote the use of electric vehicles in urban areas in order to pave the way towards the future decarbonisation of energy and mobility systems.	6	Total: 1.049.797,00 ERDF: 892.327,45	2017-01-01 2021-06-30
	School Chance	To incorporate children's independent mobility into regional policies and to develop a safe, accessible and sustainable programme for school mobility for all members of the education community and at all educational stages.	7	Total: 1.716.361,00 ERDF: 1.433.974,45	2017-01-01 2021-12-31
	BID-REX	To include information on natural heritage in Catalonia in decision-making processes in order to promote the conservation of this heritage by improving public policies.	7	Total: 1.609.294,00 ERDF: 1.367.899,90	2016-04-01 2021-03-31
4. Environment and energy efficiency	CIRCE	To detect opportunities and barriers to the implementation of green and circular economy tools and policies.	8	Total: 1.892.771,00 ERDF: 1.608.855,35	2017-01-01 2021-06-30
	Ecowaste4Food	To design an integrated territorial strategy that includes local and regional policies to guarantee food safety and help all players in the food chain to find coordinated and efficient ways of managing and reducing food waste.	7	Total: 1.465.703,00 ERDF: 1.245.847,55	2017-01-01 2020-12-31
	ENHANCE	To improve the implementation of regional policy instruments aimed at increasing efficiency in the use of resources through EMAS (EU Eco-Management and Audit Scheme) in order to promote it as a tool for innovation and an opportunity to develop the circular economy, especially for SMEs.	6	Total: 1.099.386,00 ERDF: 934.478,10	2017-01-01 2020-12-31

Source: Generalitat de Catalunya - Directorate-General for Economic Promotion, Competition and Regulation and KEEP database (<https://www.keep.eu/>)

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Publications Office

doi:10.2760/572859

ISBN 978-92-79-96382-7