

Establishing a Northern Sparsely Populated Areas Network common Smart Specialisation platform in line with OECD recommendations

The concept of smart specialisation in the light of NSPA

Regional smart specialisation strategies aim to coordinate the investments and allocation of resources in a region to some areas pointed out as delivering future competitive advantages for the region concerned. This to deliver more concentrated actions with more effects to make a difference in those pin-pointed specific areas and sectors that do deliver future potentials of jobs and growth.

In many way, S3 can be put as making a SWOT-analysis on the region, looking at the strengths and weaknesses and what opportunities and threats that delivers, to establish a strategy that supports needed investments in the most competitive areas relative other regions and economic entities.

The OECD puts in its Territorial Review on the NSPA, the concept of Smart Specialisation as especially relevant for sparsely populated regions as NSPA. OECD also implies the potentials to take this further by a collaborative approach within the NSPA, giving critical mass and common revenue as there are several areas of potentials for competitive advantages, using the shared specificities the NSPA regions possess.

This is also in line with EU support for regional development, as smart specialisation strategies, S3, or Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation, RIS3, is a corner stone for EU support for regional innovation and growth. The EU is also increasingly encouraging to develop common S3 actions between regions to deliver added common European value and more efficient use of the EU funds. The on-going Arctic Stakeholder Forum process is an example of EU engaging in future investment priorities for sustainable growth, in cooperation with the NSPA network, very much interlinking to the idea of regional smart specialisation over the borders in a specific area.

For the network of NSPA it is therefore of interest to explore the concept of Smart Specialisation and how it can be taken further, not only for the regional development efforts in each region, but for the common work in the NSPA as a whole. This PM is a first condensed draft concept for that discussion.

Aspects to take into account for a common NSPA S3

Each region should and do work on their S3. It is also important to see that the NSPA with its 14 regions do differ. This is also very evident in the OECD report. To this comes that even if cooperation within the NSPA network is of benefit for all parties, the regions do not to only work together within the NSPA, but also other neighbouring and European regions. The NSPA is furthermore a network and not a formal organisation, a partnership for common gains built on the regions own wish of level of cooperation. Those factors imply that one common S3 fully incorporating all 14 regions is not feasible or even to aim for.

However, the potentials, gains and possibilities if deepening the work on each region's smart specialisation strategy also in a common NSPA S3 context, should not be underestimated. The aim should therefore be to find areas and sectors and working methods and not least platforms for knowledge sharing and possible coordination within some fields of common interests, delivering added value to each region own regional development efforts. For this can the OECD findings on relevant investment priorities for the NSPA as a whole be a good starting point.

It need though to be done in a smart and flexible way, built on trust for the common gain. By so also making it possible for regions to take part out of the level of relevance, interest and ambitions, and finding the way as things evolve, in cooperation with also national level, the Nordic context and the EU. It has to take its time, step by step, and be driven by the regions engaged, however now not losing the momentum of really starting off the next common NSPA steps building on the still newly published OECD study.

Possible first steps and process facilitators for a NSPA S3 platform

The process can be put in three initial steps:

1. The first thing could be to gather the regional development officials for the 14 regions for a first "brain-storming" work-shop to elaborate possible ways forward.
2. These regional representatives should then make a first mapping of possible common priorities, bringing each region's development planning and thinking ahead in to the discussion, together with the OECD report's conclusions and recommendations, as a ground for what could be the true NSPA added value for the regions, to deepen the future collaboration on.
3. To this comes also to see to how the process could be taken ahead by for example establishing working groups and engaging experts in possible areas of action, with a very open mind-set to how regions, actors and areas of actions can interact in different ways and levels over time.

For this the NSPA network do have a self-evident role as facilitator for the over-arching process and via the Brussels office keep the close connection to the EU. However, it is in the end the officials and their political responsible in the regions that must take the lead to be able to develop the work and deliver the mandate for the regions engagement in the common work. In the first place, it is about to at all initiate the process.

The possibilities to get external financial and other support to facilitate the process should also be investigated. It can be a very interesting pilot for EU to support within for example the Baltic Sea Programme or other EU funding schemes. Beside funding for future potential common projects and actions, possible support for a coordinator for the initial phase could maybe be looked at. Nordregio is for example an actor that could be engaged out of their work on smart specialisation in the Nordics and Arctic, as a partner or maybe even enrolled as a more active coordinator for the S3 platform building and overall implementation of the OECD study recommendations. This should be further elaborated as it can also deliver more visibility in the Nordic context, something that the OECD proposes for NSPA in the report.

All this to be discussed and further elaborated.