



# S3 CoP S3 Thematic Platforms

## Guidance on Lessons Learnt

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S3 CoP Secretariat

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## 1. Introduction and context

The **Smart Specialisation Community of Practice (S3 CoP)** is the central node on guidance, networking, support and peer-learning on S3, covering its conceptual development and its implementation. The S3 CoP also facilitates interregional cooperation in shared and complementary smart specialisation areas across Europe. It is DG REGIO's major source of support for S3 implementation, it provides advice and technical assistance to all S3 stakeholders and offers a platform for knowledge exchange that facilitates regional collaboration.

The **S3 Thematic Platforms** are joint initiatives between several Directorates- General of the European Commission under the lead of DG Regional and Urban Policy (REGIO) including Agriculture and Rural Development (AGRI), Energy (ENER), Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (GROW), Maritime Affairs and Fisheries (MARE), and Research and Innovation (RTD). The platforms provide the structure to support the creation of an interregional collaborative network of strategic Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs) and enables these partnerships to work together in shared smart specialisation areas.

**Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs)** bring together regions interested in initiating and exploring new value chains in specific priority areas based on a shared interest in their smart specialisation strategies. TSSPs target specific areas with high potential for technological, societal, and ecological return at regional and European level, underpinned by shared smart specialisation strategy priorities across committed regions, cluster organisations, businesses, and innovation actors as well as civil society. TSSPs are open to participation of regional authorities and/or quadruple helix actors with a mandate from their regional authority and have a smart specialisation strategy that has clear links to the topic.

The following document on **Guidance on Lessons Learnt** presents the insights obtained after the second phase of service delivery to the S3 Thematic Platforms under the S3 Community of Practice.

## 2. Challenges and needs that TSSPs face

TSSPs rely on regional commitment, through the participation of the regional authority, or other stakeholders from the quadruple helix with a mandate from the regional authority. Collaboration builds on a common interest and particular strength in the region with the ambition to look beyond regional borders for complementary expertise, new insights and explore opportunities for further advancement. Interregional collaboration can take the form of exchange of practices and experiences, alignment of policies, design of co-investment projects, among others. Regions involved in the TSSPs aim to strengthen core areas of expertise complementary to and in collaboration with other regions based on shared smart specialisation priorities. Outcomes of the TSSPs include the development of interregional

investment projects, interregional collaboration projects, the alignment of smart specialisation strategies between various regions, among others.

Some of the core challenges that TSSPs face in their interregional collaboration, also identified together with the Interregional Working Group under the S3 CoP include:

- Ensuring smooth, flexible and sustained **regional commitment** including a good onboarding of new partnership members and a long-term engagement.
- Finding the right **scope** for cooperation, outlining **priorities**.
- **Access to funding** for interregional activities.
- Identifying an **appropriate governance structure**
- Culminating interregional collaboration in **co-developed projects**.
- **Capitalising** on collaboration experiences and staying on top of the continuous learning curve.
- **Adapting to changing policy contexts**

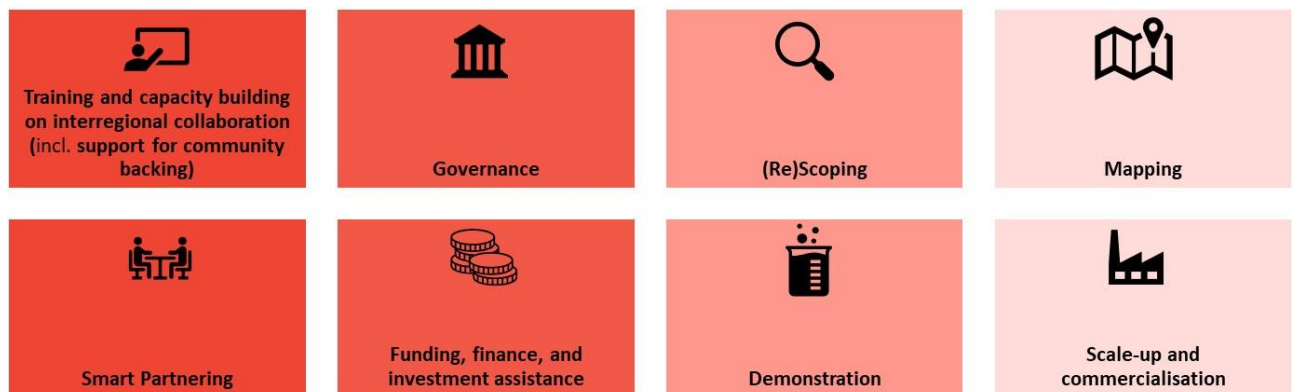
To address these challenges, the S3 Community of Practice has developed a portfolio of eight **services to support partnerships** in their activities and facilitate their development towards their particularly outlined mission and objectives.

These include (see Figure 1):

- **Training and capacity building** is considered a prerequisite to foster successful interregional collaboration that is founded in the smart specialisation strategies.
- Developing a clear **governance** structure lays the foundation for the optimal functioning of a partnership based on the expectations of the involved regions and stakeholders.
- A **scoping** exercise ensures that the collaboration thematic is sufficient granular to identify clear opportunities for collaboration.
- A **mapping** of competences of stakeholders aims to map the competences of the stakeholders active in the partnership and should build on a clearly defined and granular scope.
- **Smart partnering** aims to assist in identifying relevant, targeted potential partners in regions or areas not yet engaged in the specific partnership.
- The scope, capacities and partners are vital for a thematic collaboration, however the search for **funding, finance and investment assistance** is paramount to finance the collaboration.
- **Demonstration** is for partnerships that want to further expand and/or integrate their prototyping, piloting and demonstration activities towards other partners.

- **Scale-up and commercialisation** can be pursued by partnerships that have a need to deploy demonstrated solutions within interregional value chains and support the broader commercialisation/application of innovations.

Figure 1: Services offered by the S3 CoP Secretariat



Source: S3 CoP Secretariat

### 3. Key insights from the service delivery

The following section outlines the **key insights obtained by the S3 CoP Secretariat service delivery experts** related to each service that was delivered. As no partnership requested the scale-up and commercialisation service, there are no insights to share for this service at this time.

#### 3.1 Training and capacity building

The partnerships that received this service share **common challenges** including:

- Partnerships need some guidance to (re)define their mission, vision, and strategic objectives.
- There are several **cross-cutting issues** when discussing the mission, vision, and objectives of the partnership, notably with **governance structures or models** and **funding models** to support a continuity in the activity. It is difficult for the coordinator(s) to find a way to engage all partners in a common reflection process and to discuss the way forward internally. The **engagement and participation** of some of the partners in the partnerships is low or very low due to a lack of time and/or lack of capacity.
- The high number of existing thematic partnerships open the possibility to **explore synergies and join forces**. Opening avenues of collaboration between and among partnerships would be interesting.

## 3.2 Governance

Interregional partnerships face in their operational implementation a series of common, cross-cutting challenges related to the governance structure.

- In many partnerships, the **leading regions play a crucial role** in animating the partnership and keeping all activities ongoing. Having a solid governance structure supports the partnership in clarifying the democratic decision-making structure and distributing responsibilities over the various partners that are active in the partnership. It also allows to keep them accountable for performing several actions as they need to report back on them during regular meetings organised by the respective partnerships. The MoU entails a section on contributions of the partners involved in the partnership.
- In our discussions with the partnerships, we noticed that a financial contribution to fund a network manager is a sensitive issue for many regions. **Network managers** who can devote part of their time to managing the TSSP, without the additional burden of managing or contributing to their partnership along with their full-time job in their specific region, are important for the well-functioning of a partnership. Most TSSPs prefer to initially set up a formal governance structure, with dedicated responsibilities assigned to the various working groups, asking in-kind contributions from the various partners. As the partnership matures, the MoU may be revised to entail a section on financial contribution. Experience from well-established partnerships, like High Performance Production 3D Printing or Smart Sensors for Agri-food, demonstrate that a network manager can be beneficial to grow and expand the partnership.
- **To structure the governance**, a draft template of **an MoU has been developed** by the S3CoP Secretariat. This MoU has been discussed and refined for every partnership that has requested the governance service.

## 3.3. (Re)Scoping

Scoping allows to have a more granular definition of priorities, leading to better identification of meaningful synergies and the recognition of complementary expertise within the same value chain that can be combined to compensate for missing assets / expertise / technology in the regions.

- **Matching insights on interest with underlying expertise.** In the second phase service delivery, several partnerships chose to pursue an analysis that was based not only on the interests of the partner regions in certain topics, but also on their underlying expertise. This matching allowed the partnership to have a picture of the match between interest and expertise, with so-called 'hot topics' often resulting in a high interest but not necessarily the expertise to back it up to form the basis for concrete collaboration opportunities. This provides valuable insight when choosing partnership priorities based on strengths and common interests.

- **Brainstorming sessions as a data collection tool.** The aim of the brainstorming activity was to 'scan' all possibilities of innovation activities (niches) that could potentially interest stakeholders. A list of topics was presented by the lead region to the partners to select the ones to be considered. This approach was particularly beneficial for partnerships that did not yet feel ready for a survey. The final objective of the exercise was to obtain a limited list of topics, following the matrix approach, across technologies and application sectors (markets).
- **Surveys as a key data collection method.** The survey has proven to remain a key tool for the collection of priorities as it captures insights on all respondents equally and allows to trace back suggestions to specific actors. In terms of level of granularity, it remains that consolidated replies at the level of the region and the actors therein allow to, on the one hand, confront the regional actors in creating joint priorities before coming to the partnership, and on the other hand, provide information on regional position towards the partnership where the region is the main unit of collaboration.
- **(Re)scoping at the level of working groups.** One partnership has also requested (re)scoping support at the level of the working groups to expand the scope of the underlying working group, enhance its activities and better define its priorities. This can serve as a foundation for further support through the demonstration or mapping service. However, more resources are required to offer this kind of support compared to a partnership level prioritisation exercise, as it involves more in-depth analysis of underlying surveys and data collection.
- **Using (Re)scoping as a basis for onboarding new regions in the partnership.** The (re)scoping service has been tested to take decisions on the potential onboarding of new regions in some partnerships. This approach allows to capture insights on the priorities of potential new partners prior to accepting their participation, providing insights on their interests, expertise and expected role at the onset. This practice can be encouraged for further partnerships wishing to pursue this approach.

### 3.4 Mapping

The mapping service was designed and implemented to support Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs) in better understanding the distribution of competences across participating regions and identifying the organisations holding those competences.

- There is a **general lack of clarity regarding a partnership's identity, objectives and strategy**. This uncertainty slows down the service delivery process as the evolving internal structures and priorities required continuous alignment and adaptation. In some cases, partnerships redefined their goals or shifted focus during the process, which delayed the development and finalisation of the surveys.
- **Slow coordination** among partnership's members and delayed internal administrative procedures also hinder the timely execution of the service.

- **The service is seen as a useful tool by partnerships** due to the participatory approach taken during the design phase and the effort made to adapt the surveys to the specific needs and expectations of the respective partnerships. The structure of the survey and the attention given to capturing the thematic and operational realities of each partnership were particularly appreciated. The Mapping service supports a more structured and informed collaboration moving forward, once the internal dynamics of the partnerships are more settled.

### 3.5 Smart partnering

The smart partnering service is proposed for partnerships where the proposed project has existing partners but identifies gaps in their competences, and where complementary expertise might be beneficial. It supports the identification of relevant potential partners in regions or areas not yet engaged in the specific partnership.

- **The needs and expectations of partnerships vary significantly**, with each having distinct goals and priorities. Delivering the smart partnering service therefore requires a precise and tailored approach, considering specific requirements and ensuring continuous engagement through back-and-forth communication. This iterative process is essential to refining the service and aligning it with the partnership's objectives.
- **Personal connections, targeted event networking, and structured discussions** help to communicate the added value of interregional collaboration more effectively compared to cold outreach. Additionally, as joining a partnership does not always present immediate funding opportunities, some organisations may be hesitant to engage without a clear strategic incentive. Ensuring that potential partners see long-term benefits remains a critical factor in successful matchmaking.
- Having established **direct connections** with relevant organisations proved to be a significant advantage when identifying potential partners for the partnerships.
- **Dedicated workshops.** Interactive workshops can play a crucial role in shaping the strategic direction of the partnership. Beyond simply providing a list of potential partners, the collaborative discussions allow stakeholders to align on common objectives and identify actionable next steps.

### 3.6 Funding, finance and investment assistance

This service aims at offering partnerships the possibility to improve their general ability to identify and secure relevant funding and financing opportunities.

- **Funding needs are diverse in nature. They can relate to the actual generation of projects by partnerships or related to supporting transversal activities of partnerships.** Funding needs differ according to the stages in the 'access to funding' cycle, from establishing clear funding needs (including a proper identification of types of activities/projects a partnership is willing to fund) towards succeeding in embracing a targeted opportunity.



- Partnerships with a certain degree of maturity tend to have solid knowledge of the interregional funding landscape in their fields, including ‘recent’ initiatives like I3, RIV, EIE, etc. They have already (to a various extent) processes/tools to inform members about relevant funding opportunities, and have knowledgeable experts that can be activated, when needed. Hence, the service was less about informing them about relevant funding opportunities, but more about **how to establish processes and structural changes to address the specific needs expressed**.
- The biggest ‘funding-related’ challenge for partnerships in general is to **fund the management of the partnership itself**. The organisation of the partnerships’ activities is heavily dependent on voluntary contribution of stakeholders involved, having different impacts on the functioning of the partnership. Other challenges – and associated solutions – faced by the partnerships are of diverse nature and relate to funding transversal activities (such as coordination), and funding of projects generated by a partnership.

### 3.7 Demonstration

The demonstration service is designed for advanced partnership, i.e. partnerships that have clearly defined their mission, vision and objectives. The main interest of partnerships in this service, was to demonstrate and expand the benefits of their partnership and their realisations to a larger number of actors in various regions.

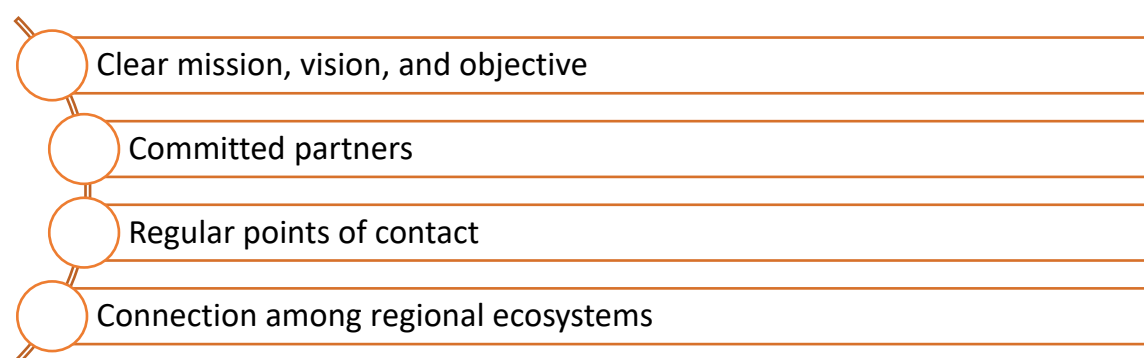
- Even highly active and mature partnerships that run various Horizon Europe and I3 projects, face **challenges in identifying the correct intermediaries, clusters, and stakeholders to effectively disseminate their demonstration cases** in various regions.
- Partnerships are looking for **support in mobilising and involving specific actors**, and they also need help in being more attractive to diverse regional stakeholders. In addition, they all need support in demonstrating their added value to the different ecosystems including regional authorities and regional stakeholders.
- **It is important to discuss and discover the main interests of the partnership**, beyond the “standard” demonstration activities. Creating a consistent and coherent demonstration project where objectives and activities are aligned and measured is sometimes challenging, but questions on this matter were addressed in the various meetings that were organised.

## 4. Lessons learnt in interregional collaboration

The following lessons learnt are a result of the culmination of the activities of the TSSPs under the S3 Thematic Platforms and S3 CoP to date. The lessons learnt should service as guidance to (prospective) partnerships to give insights into what works well, what a partnership should ideally have in place globally, and in relation to the specific services provided under the S3 CoP.

The four pillars of the lessons learnt identified are depicted in Figure 2 include: (i) a clear mission, vision and objective, (ii) committed partners, (iii) regular points of contact, and (iv) connection among regional ecosystems. In fact, these four elements stand out as being a vital starting point for a partnership to engage in the service delivery offered as a part of the S3 CoP as it allows for a more fluid service delivery overall.

*Figure 2: Key ingredients for a Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnership*



*Source: S3 CoP Secretariat*

- It is important that a partnership is structured with a **clear mission, vision and objective**: Each partnership should ideally be structured with a clear mission, vision and objective, answering the questions ‘why are we here?’, ‘what do we want to achieve’ and ‘how are we going to do that?’. Doing so at the onset of a partnership is essential to ensure that all partners are aligned about the goals of the partnership, and that the partnership can clearly communicate its added value in the overall landscape related to the thematic activities of the partnership itself.
  - ➔ **Service guide: If a partnership does not have a clear mission, vision, and objective, it should target the (re)scoping service as a priority.**
- The partnership needs to build upon the involvement of **committed partners**: one of the key challenges of successful interregional collaboration is to ensure regional commitment. This means ensuring that the regions and their quadruple helix stakeholders are not only subscribed to the topic of the partnership, but also actively engage in outlining the scope, prioritising activities, develop projects, jointly search for funding solutions for the activities as well as projects, and provide information to support mapping, while serving as the central node in animating the regional participation to the partnership activities on the long term. By design, the central node is the regional authority, to ensure the links

with the underlying Smart Specialisation Strategy, however organisations with a mandate from the regional authority can act on their behalf in the partnership, to steer the activities. Having a central animator is key to ensure that the oversight and engagement in the partnership is kept, and forms part of the success of ensuring committed partners to be active in the partnership. Another key element is the availability of resources to dedicate to the partnership activities. Committed partners are those that take the time to actively contribute to the activities, likely capturing resources from projects or activities once these have been successfully acquired.

- ➔ If the partnership does not have a clear understanding of the aims of interregional collaboration, needs support for connecting to stakeholders within their own partnership or region, or European networks, it should target the training and capacity building service as a priority.
- ➔ If a partnership has committed partners but lacks awareness of the specific competencies around a clearly defined scope, it should target the mapping service.
- There should be **regular points of contact** to maintain activities and trust. Trust is a core foundation upon which interregional collaboration is built. Forming trust is best built through meeting, ideally face-to-face as this allows partners to engage with one another, and truly explore in discussions and related exchanges, the true underlying expertise and complementarity of each organisation involved, which paves the way for a successful collaboration. In the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, partnerships were challenged in their inability to meet, and several partnerships struggled in their activities as a result, hence the S3 CoP support was very welcome. Regular points of contact serve as an indicator for a well-structured partnership, with often a clear lead region or working group members taking the initiative to organise meetings because of a well organised structure and distribution of roles.
  - ➔ If the partnership does not have a clear structure, with working groups and regular meetings, it should target the governance service.
- Partnerships should ideally build upon and lead towards the development and strengthening of **regional innovative industrial ecosystems** and connections among them. Partnerships facilitate the shift from stand-alone activities to collaboration based on the engagement of the quadruple helix across the European landscape. By connecting regional actors that have complementary expertise along shared interregional value chains, partnerships effectively pool resources and capabilities to support the implementation of Smart Specialisation Strategies and foster a place-based innovation culture. In doing so, not only the exchange of best practices can be fostered, but concrete projects and opportunities can be demonstrated building upon regional excellence and improving interregional collaboration and learning.
  - ➔ If the partnership wants to strengthen and deepen connections with other regional ecosystems, to explore concrete opportunities in an interregional setting, it should target the demonstration service.