



Implementation of the Smart Specialisation Strategies into the practice with the support of the Synergic Funding

Transferring the lessons learned in the regional context to improve the synergies between structural funds and direct funding instruments

Case European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Horizon Europe (HE)

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Summary

The European Commission (EC) collaborates with national and regional authorities to cultivate a synergistic funding approach, optimising the impact of EU policy instruments. Within the regional framework, Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) play an essential role in fostering these synergies. This report seeks to deepen understanding of the challenges associated with achieving synergies. It reviews recent discussions and guidelines on synergistic funding, incorporating insights from regional case studies and interviews, all enriched by the authors' expertise.

Strengthening synergies, the drive towards greater S3 impact

Synergies can help Member States (MS) and regions address their current limitations in innovation capacity. Significant synergistic potential exists between the HE and ERDF programmes, with the S3 serving as a crucial bridge for their development. Both the EC and various EU institutions have released numerous guides and studies to further this objective. The European Innovation Agenda underscores the importance of these synergies, emphasising the pivotal role of the S3. However, in its evaluation, the European Court of Auditors pointed out that the potential of these synergies has not been fully leveraged. Challenges, such as diverse management structures, language differences, limited capacities, and a lack of an integrated monitoring system, hinder the realisation of full synergic funding. Recommendations have been made for both the EC and MS to enhance the situation.

Experiences in implementing the synergies in practice supporting the S3

While the EC provides valuable guidelines, true understanding often lies in the subtleties and variations from these directives. Practical, on-ground experiences, even when they diverge from theoretical recommendations, furnish invaluable insights. These insights aid in adapting and enhancing synergistic approaches. Key learnings were gleaned from group meetings and interviews. MS and regions require more strategic management and transparent governance to implement synergies effectively. Merely possessing the knowledge and capability to cultivate synergies is not enough. Robust information systems and effective dissemination mechanisms to foster collaboration among innovation ecosystem participants are needed. To some extent, harmonising funding prerequisites is essential to pinpoint and tackle emerging opportunities and challenges proactively. Leveraging "bottom-up" methodologies and diverse practices based on real-world experiences can significantly improve synergy development. Agents like clusters, interregional partnerships, networks, and Interreg Europe projects have played pivotal roles in nurturing regional synergies.

Gleaning insights from the implementation of synergic funding

The main challenges in establishing synergies include

- Diverse program objectives, implementation logics, administrative and governance practices. This is further complicated by distinct legal and financial rules at the MS level and varying performance indicators, making it difficult to identify a common ground for synergy.

- A widespread lack of knowledge, capacity, and resources is a significant hurdle.

However, synergies can be effectively realised when:

- Strategic approaches are employed to align various program objectives during both the programming phase and the S3 implementation.
- Identification of funding profiles can spotlight potential areas for synergy.
- Strong coordination and collaboration are maintained, supported by robust governance mechanisms at all levels.
- Intermediary organisations, research institutions, clusters and interregional partnerships play a crucial role in bridging gaps and fostering collaboration within innovation ecosystems.
- Knowledge exchange, dissemination, and learning from past experiences can serve as a source of inspiration.

Recommendations to make synergies leveraging S3 implementation

Harnessing the power of funding synergies is not akin to rocket science but undeniably demands astute strategic thinking. A critical step in this direction is simplifying our understanding of these synergies. This involves strengthening collaboration and communication among authorities, harmonising the way we implement programs, and uplifting the role of innovation-support organisations.

It's essential to bolster both upstream and downstream synergies. Sharing best practices and augmenting knowledge capacity will be pivotal. Moreover, establishing a robust S3 monitoring framework at the regional level can't be overstated. Such frameworks help us emphasise the importance of synergy-driven development.

Entities like clusters, eDIHs, and TSSP are not just instruments; they are catalysts in leveraging funding synergies. These platforms provide unparalleled avenues for training, capacity-building, and data-driven decision-making. Aligning them with S3 objectives ensures that the power of synergies is utilised to its fullest potential.

The objective isn't just to develop but to continually assess. A comprehensive monitoring system at the regional level, incorporated within the S3 monitoring, is a step towards evaluating the tangible outcomes of these synergies. This will guarantee continuous improvement and instil a sense of accountability.

To truly maximise these synergies, we must raise awareness and nurture a shared vision among stakeholders. After all, the practical implementation of synergies on the ground hinges on our collective ability to combine funding sources innovatively and effectively

1. Introduction

To increase the competitiveness of the EU, the regional research and innovation systems require particular attention. Several regional, national, and EU-level policy instruments are directed to support research and innovation, growth and competitiveness or promote interregional cooperation. EC has stepped up to encourage Member States (MS) to use available EU support to accelerate the transition. To support the process, the EC has simplified regulations and is fostering the development of synergies, particularly with the cohesion policy programmes and other EU smart growth-related instruments¹, such as Horizon Europe (HE), Digital Europe and InvestEU. Specifically, many efforts have been put into creating synergies between the Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and HE. The introduction of the NextGeneration EU (NGEU) also highlighted the importance of these synergies, especially concerning the integration between the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) and current EU programs receiving supplementary funds from the NGEU².

Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) play a crucial role in developing synergies. EC set the S3 as an enabling condition for the Cohesion Policy's Objective 1 Smarter Europe. Such policy objectives, funded predominantly by the ERDF, also advise regions to explore synergistic funding avenues during S3 execution³. The Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP) prioritises investments built on an inclusive and evidence-based process engaging all relevant quadruple helix stakeholders. EDP lays an excellent foundation for mobilising EU funds and programmes to support regional specialisation and sustainable growth.

Despite EC, MSs and regional goodwill, funding synergies are not always working in practice. However, the practical planning and implementation of synergies between the funds is often very complex due to the programmes and funds' different priorities and implementation approaches. Funding synergies are not always working in practice. Therefore, it is essential to continue supporting the national and regional authorities in fostering synergies at the EU level and increasing the demand at the regional level for combining funding sources.

This report aims to enhance the understanding of the challenges in realising synergies. It investigates the underlying reasons and proposes actionable recommendations to optimise synergistic collaborations. It intends to disseminate this knowledge throughout the S3 community of practice (S3 CoP). Its primary audience includes S3 national and regional authorities responsible for defining, implementing, and monitoring S3 strategies.

The report reviews the recent debate and instruction over synergic funding, insights from the three regional cases, and interviews combined with the writers' expertise. It does not attempt to depict the synergic funding in the EU comprehensively. Still, it will present a practical overview of how synergies can best be used in the implementation of the S3, providing:

- Up-to-date knowledge of synergy mechanisms at the regional/national level

¹ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022XC1104%2802%29>

² https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en

³ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/legislation-and-guidance/regulations_en

- Critical assessment of the dimensions across which synergies can and cannot be envisaged and achieved
- Practical examples of the combination of the funds or programmes
- Main enabling and blocking factors and best practices pursuing synergies
- Lessons learned and recommendations for the follow-up actions to enhance synergies contributing to the better implementation of the EU cohesion policy.

2. Strengthening synergies, the drive towards greater S3 impact

The European Commission (EC), Member States (MS), and regional authorities have long pursued enhancing synergic funding's impact on S3. This chapter delves into the collective steps taken thus far by the EC to heighten the policy attention to this objective while encouraging its realisation at the MS and regional levels. It will also present some observations challenging the implementation of the synergies at the EU level. The review draws upon a diverse range of data sources, including a desk review of materials from previously published communications, reports, workshops, and webinars.

2.1. The evolution of S3 and synergic funding

The EC's Communication 2010 on Cohesion (Regional) Policy emphasised its pivotal role in advancing Europe 2020's strategy for smart growth, specifically through the "Innovation Union" flagship initiative. This underscored regions as essential partners for strengthening the Research, Development & Innovation (RDI). Alongside the regions and RDI, SMEs, clusters, and other regional developmental agencies were recognised as critical players, collectively known as the 'quadruple-helix stakeholders'.

The Regional Policy was mandated to harness the EU's growth potential, advocating for innovation across regions while ensuring harmonisation between EU, national, and regional policies⁴. Furthermore, this statement was recognised as a vital conduit for translating the Innovation Union's aspirations into tangible regional actions. The Communication advised MSs and regions to draft Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3) to optimise the Regional Policy's impact. S3 guided regions to channel resources towards specific key areas instead of thinly dispersing them.

A synergic funding model, harmonised with other Union policies, was endorsed. From this directive, various guidelines, policy initiatives, and studies were rolled out to assist MS and regions in refining their S3 strategies and recognise the potential to create synergies. Figure 1 outlines the core policy interventions and supplementary steps related to synergic funding from 2010 to 2023.

⁴ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A52010DC0553>

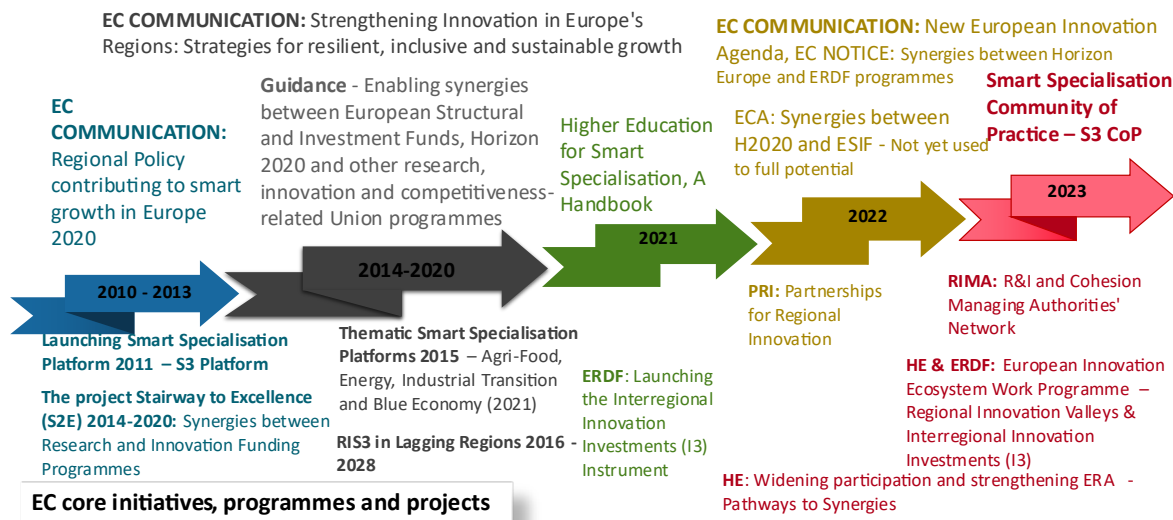


Figure 1: EC policy and support measures for synergic funding

The European Green Deal – the EU growth strategy – sets the ground for allocating EU spending and implementing the current Multiannual financial framework (MMF). The NextGenerationEU, Digital Compass, Green Industrial Plan, and European Growth Model complement and provide more practical tools to reach out to the transition to a green, digital, and resilient economy⁵. The common objectives and priorities crosscut every financing programme and fund. Creating synergies between different actions became increasingly important in implementing the MMF. Various EU funds finance these allocations depending on their unique goals and targets. These funds have separate management structures: directly managed by the European Commission (EC), jointly managed by the EC and member states (MS) authorities, or indirectly managed by partner organisations or other authorities.

About one-third of the European MMF spending is directed to the cohesion policy through shared managed funds⁶. Implementation of the cohesion policy in each MS is based on the Partnership Agreement signed between the EC and MS⁷. The agreement introduces the arrangements for the efficient use of the funds but also indicates the synergies, complementarities or blending with other EU funds and programmes (Art. 8 CPR*). In the agreement, the MS introduces its approach to implementing cohesion policy with the regional and structural policy programs (Operational Programmes, OP). Every programme will have specific objectives in line with EU cohesion policy objectives. MSs have different approaches in designing the programmes: fund-specific, thematic-specific, regional, pluri-regional, member state or combination of different approaches. E.g., the Partnership Agreement with:

- Poland covers 8 national programmes, 16 regional programmes, 8 cross-border cooperation programmes and 4 interregional cooperation programmes
- Finland covers 1 for the mainland, 1 for the whole country, 1 for the Åland region, 5 cohesion policy Interreg programmes and 3 other interregional programmes

⁵ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0083&qid=1655798743597>

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/what/investment-policy_en

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country_en

- Spain covers 45 programmes, out of which 6 at national level 9 cohesion policy Interreg programmes

The New European Innovation Agenda⁸ (July 2022) highlights that “S3 shall continue to play a central role in strengthening regional innovation ecosystems so that they are better equipped to stimulate and sustain economic growth. They provide the framework for ERDF support for research and innovation. Thematic Smart Specialisation Platforms and partnerships have also become key tools for connecting innovators with similar or complementary strengths and priorities in all Member States and regions, including in technology areas that are key for the twin green and digital transition”. The Agenda’s Flagship 3: Accelerating and strengthening innovation in European Innovation Ecosystems across the EU and addressing the innovation divide, will be funded from the European Innovation Ecosystems Work Programme HORIZON-EIE-2023-CONNECT-03-01 - Implementing co-funded action plans for connected regional innovation valley and Interregional Innovation Investments (I3)⁹

2.2. The synergies with ERDF and HE at the heart of S3 implementation

Synergies can facilitate overcoming the existing lack of capacity for innovation in the MSs and regions. To support this goal, EC published the Notice “Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes (2022/C 421/03¹⁰), guiding the MS management authorities, the national HE contact points (NCP) and HE project promoters/proposers. Both programs deliver further benefits in terms of better innovation results, closing the innovation gap in Europe, and promoting regional economic growth. Encouraging an integrated approach and increasing synergies between these key EU funding instruments, respective HE pillars, and Cohesion Policy Funds objectives can offer new win-win situations. After making the S3 an enabling condition for the Cohesion Policy’s Objective 1 Smarter Europe, the developing synergies with ERDF and HE are even more accurate. The picture below describes these connections.



Figure 2: Horizon and Cohesion policy - Working for innovation (See Notice)

⁸ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0332>

⁹ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/198cd4de-dadf-45b0-83b8-c25864a4d44c_en

¹⁰ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022XC1104%2802%29>

Arrangements for synergies between the ERDF and HE shall support activities bridging particularly S3 actions with excellent research and innovation, including joint interregional or transnational programmes and pan-European research infrastructures, with the aim of strengthening the European Research Area (ERA) and contributing to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in the regional context. The ERDF focuses on developing and strengthening regional innovation ecosystems and industrial transformation, including supporting increased RDI capacities. That could include uptakes of the HE results for RDI, digitalisation, environment, transport, energy, etc. In the Notice, the synergies were categorised as follows:

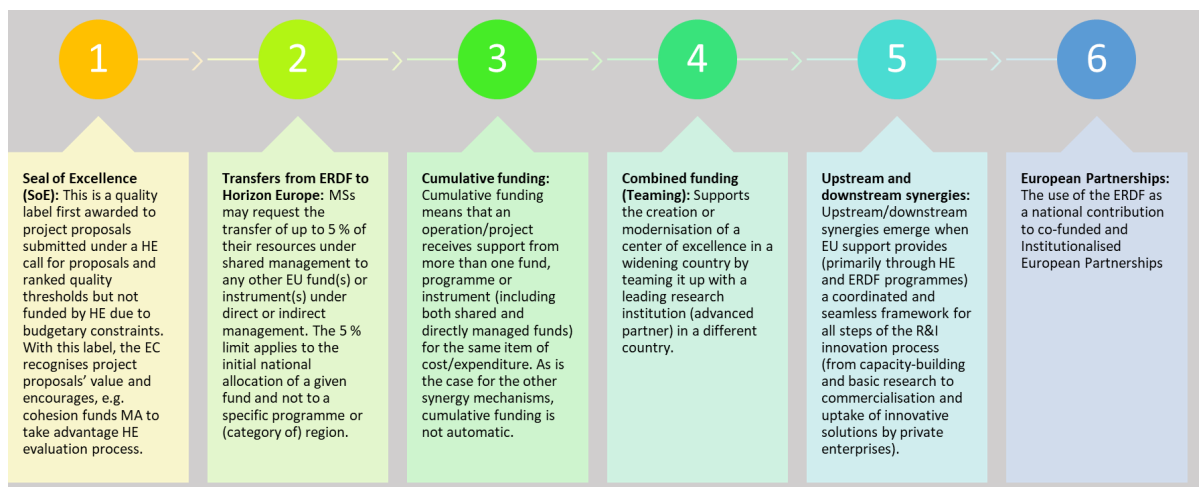


Figure 3: Key types of Synergies

2.3. Overview of the debate and documentation about synergic funding and S3

The report of the European Court of Auditors (ECA) – “Synergies between Horizon 2020 and European Structural and Investment Funds- Not yet used to full potential”, provides comprehensive reflection and lessons learned from the previous programming period (2014-2021)¹¹. It has been widely used as a reference to improve the regulations and guidance supporting funding synergies. ECA assessed whether the EC and relevant MAs made appropriate measures to establish synergies between Horizon 2020 and the European Structural Investment Funds (ESIF). The results show that the full potential of these synergies still needs to be thoroughly exploited. Although DG REGIO and DG RTD cooperated well, the absence of a regular and structured dialogue involving all relevant players responsible for designing and implementing programmes and projects has been holding back the synergies from developing as anticipated. In the report, the synergies were grouped as follows.

¹¹ <https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=62446>

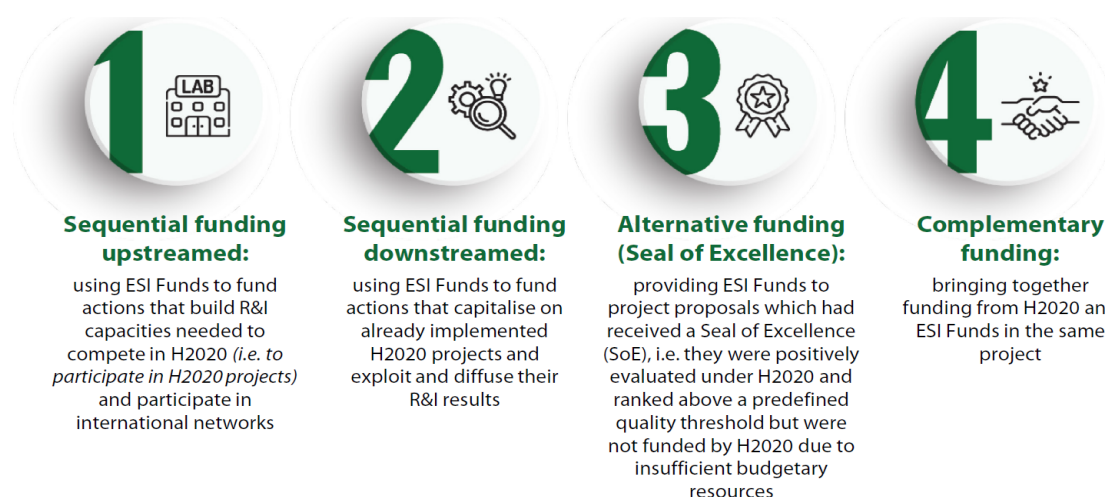


Figure 4: Types of synergies. Source: ECA

To reflect on the ECA report and to support the practical implementation of the notice Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes, the EC launched the RIMA – R&I and Cohesion Managing Authorities’ Network in June 2023. The group aims to act as a platform to enhance dialogue and coordination between the EC and MS, facilitating synergies across all relevant funding sources and boosting scientific and innovation excellence throughout Europe, one of the European Research Area (ERA) priority areas.

EU funding legislation and regulation enable and emphasise the synergies¹². Still, the different implementation approaches of the programmes, primarily when synergies are pursued between the shared and directly managed funds, will sometimes make it complicated to bring them into practice. Although the EC emphasises simplifying and aligning rules between different funding instruments, the reality at the MS is different. Many Partnership Agreements and relevant cohesion programmes include references and recommendations to apply synergies. However, these are introduced too broadly and not forwarded at the practice level. The flexibility to use the synergies in the cohesion policy programmes is also impacted by MS legislation and state aid rules. For example, implementing the Seal of Excellence (SoE)¹³ will challenge the business subsidies legislation.

HE is often seen as very distant, and its relevance in regional development is challenging to recognise. That is not only because of the different management structures, objectives, etc. The language used is essential. HE language is English, while cohesion policy language is the respective national or even regional language. The recommendations to develop synergies are often presented “up to down,” missing the practical level point of view and making the synergies look pretty complex.

As mentioned earlier, there is quite a comprehensive amount of guidance and studies supporting or analysing the implementation of synergies. However, the focus in the materials is more on how to use HE, supporting the RDI ecosystem to exploit synergies. The HE Work programmes are sometimes very detailed recommendations to enable synergies while

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022XC1104%2802%29>

¹³ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/seal-excellence/information-funding-bodies_en

designing the projects in the different HE Work programmes. Applicants are asked to consider and actively seek strategic combinations, linking the calls with the regional programming and S3. E.g., The website Horizon Academy - for the HE NCPs contains “Synergies between Horizon Europe and the new cohesion policy programmes: a practical approach” to support HE governance¹⁴. Similar practices or supporting measures are missing from the cohesion policy programming.

The European Commission implemented the Stairway to Excellence (S2E) initiative 2014-2020¹⁵ and directed the Member States and regional authorities to develop and exploit the synergies as part of the Cohesion Policymaking. That was done through supporting governance, developing capacity building, and designing innovation and commercialisation. Today, the HE - Widening Participation and Spreading Excellence - Pathways to Synergies calls provide something similar, where the primary beneficiaries are the less developed regions.

In many comments, the lack of a broad system for monitoring synergies makes it challenging to identify and promote or evaluate examples of good practices on synergies. The absence of an integrated database for ESIF projects interoperable with the HE database makes it difficult for the Commission and national/regional authorities to identify and explore possible synergies. One point often appears: a better synchronisation of planning and implementation of the programmes is required to capitalise on the full potential of RDI investments.

Conclusions

The EC, MSs and regional authorities emphasise the importance of synergic funding in implementing the S3. Originating from the EC's 2010 Communication on Cohesion Policy, the emphasis is on directing regional resources towards specific areas and fostering synergy among various EU funds and policies.

Creating synergies between different actions became increasingly important in implementing the MMF, and EC has published several Communication to support that. The New European Innovation Agenda sets new ground for synergies, highlighting the central role of the S3.

Despite the push for integration and the inception of tools to boost regional innovation, challenges remain in fully harnessing synergies between various EU funding instruments. The European Court of Auditors noted that the potential synergies between weren't maximised and actions in both EC and MS levels should be taken to improve the situation.

Obstacles like differing management structures, language disparities, and the absence of an integrated monitoring system continue to impede the realisation of complete synergic funding potential. Often strategic thinking to approach seems to be missing in the MS and regional level.

¹⁴ <https://horizoneuropencpportal.eu/academy/synergies-between-horizon-europe-and-new-cohesion-policy-programmes-practical-approach>

¹⁵ <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/stairway-to-excellence>

3. Experiences in implementing the synergies in the practice supporting the S3

Chapter 3 investigates the tapestry of real-world applications of synergies in support of S3 through three practical cases. While the EC offers valuable guidelines, the most profound learning often occurs in the nuances and deviations from these recommendations. The on-ground experiences, sometimes contrasting with theoretical guidelines, provide essential insights, helping to adapt and refine synergic approaches. Valuable feedback was obtained during two "Synergic funding talks" conducted in June 2023, involving both regional managing authorities and agents of the S3 innovation ecosystems. More details can be found in Annex A. The review draws upon a diverse range of data sources, including a desk review of materials from previously published communications, reports, workshops, and webinars.

3.1. The practical side of synergies between funding programmes

The practical implementation of synergies between funding programmes has shown considerable promise in supporting S3. When effectively used, these synergies can facilitate knowledge transfer, encourage innovation, and direct investment into areas with the highest growth potential, thereby contributing to regional economic development and supporting the S3 priorities.

As expressed earlier in this report, the EC and related organisations' guidance has highlighted the importance of effective coordination between different levels of government and stakeholders involved in S3 implementation. These have also shed light on the opportunities and challenges of leveraging synergic funding.

This section will spotlight three practical cases to provide a tangible understanding of the synergies in implementing S3. These case studies will illustrate the potential challenges, solutions, and success factors involved in synergic funding leveraging. By studying these scenarios, we can analyse potential pitfalls and opportunities, thus crafting more effective strategies for implementing smart specialisation.

3.1.1. Silesian Voivodeship

The Silesian Voivodeship (NUTS II) is an "Emerging innovator +" region, according to the Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2023,¹⁶ and a less developed region, according to the NUTS classification¹⁷. Silesia has one operational programme (ROP WSL) for implementing the structural funds covering Cohesion Policy objectives funded by the ERDF, ESF+ and JTF¹⁸. The management authority (MA) is the Silesia Regional government. The Regional Development Strategy implements the ROP WSL¹⁹ complemented with their S3²⁰.

¹⁶ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/regional-innovation-scoreboard_en

¹⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/regions/background>

¹⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2014-2020/pl/2014pl16m2op012_en

¹⁹ <https://ris.slaskie.pl/>

²⁰ <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/en/w/the-approach-of-the-silesia-region-to-smart-specialisation-strategy-monitoring>

The region faced the lack of a joint research and innovation infrastructure management strategy and the lack of common rules and criteria between the many entities operating in the region. In the Interreg Europe project “InnoHEIs”, Silesia created an Action Plan²¹ - to support building the regional innovation ecosystem. Key players in the regional innovation ecosystem include research universities, business environment institutions, clusters, technology parks and incubators. These entities are pivotal as integrators of innovative services bolstered by R&D infrastructure. Furthermore, the region has the Network of Regional Specialised Observatories (SO RIS)²², which integrates innovation ecosystem actors, strengthening regional specialisation, building regional research service markets, and linking the R&D sector with enterprises, NGOs, and regional authorities.

Silesia has developed a Regional Innovation Strategy (RIS WSL 2030+) that targets enhancing the capabilities of regional innovation ecosystem players. The RIS 2030+ seeks to develop solutions that increase capacities, notably by creating a research infrastructure information system. This strategy interfaces with the ROP WSL.

A key challenge is the absence of a common mapping of resources. They are now developing a flagship project to cover that need. The region plans to create a dedicated fund to maintain key research infrastructures, supporting the definition and development of projects looking for complementary funding from the HE. The Regional SO RIS could significantly facilitate the implementation of potential synergies, facilitating the engagement of regional actors in their use.

The potential synergies between funding programs implementing the S3 would ensure the structured development of research infrastructures and foster a pro-innovation environment. Silesia has some experience combining funding support from its own budget with the resources provided by national or European programs. They look for potential synergies, requesting specifically their description in some of their calls’ application forms. There are references to synergies created bottom-up, such as the ones created around the Silesia Competence Centre of Industry 4.0 with a strong participation of the Silesia Automotive and Advanced Manufacturing Cluster.

Silesia also plans to participate in the “Innovation Valleys” and related calls and work on the potential synergies between the JTF and other sources, which they estimate could facilitate the support of more complex projects. The actions proposed in RIS WSL 2030+ align with the new ROP WSL. This alignment emphasises strengthening research and innovation and utilises advanced technologies. It also harmonises with the objectives of HE by focusing on building research infrastructures and boosting the commercialisation of research outcomes. The main recommendations from Silesia to achieve true synergies between funds are:

- Facilitate the combination of the JTF with other funding sources.

²¹ https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/tx_tevprojects/library/file_1655125035.pdf

²² <https://www.interregeurope.eu/good-practices/network-of-regional-specialized-observatories-so-ris>

- Establish a Unified Management Strategy, a centralised, cohesive strategy for research and innovation infrastructures that can streamline efforts and provide more precise direction.
- Develop a comprehensive platform for stakeholder engagement, from research entities to enterprises and NGOs, ensuring that regional needs are accurately addressed.
- Expand EU collaborations, bolstering activity within consortia building to bring external expertise and opportunities to the region.
- Strengthen Information Systems, developing robust information systems about research infrastructures, ensuring easier access and collaboration for stakeholders.

3.1.2. Andalusia

Andalusia autonomous community is a “Moderate innovator -” Spanish region according to the Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2023²³ and a less developed region according to the NUTS classification²⁴. Spain implements a multi-level governance model, having several national level OPs, between them the “Pluri-regional operational programme” (PROP)²⁵ and a specific operational program for Andalusia, the “Programme Andalusia ERDF 2021-2027”²⁶, implementing the structural funds covering Cohesion Policy objectives funded by the ERDF. The MA is the Ministry of Finance and Public Function (NUTS I). In Andalusia, the implementation of the OP is done at the regional level (NUTS II), having the regional development strategy complemented with the S3 (NUTS II)²⁷, called by the Andalusian government S4Andalusia (“Sustainable Smart Specialisation Strategy of Andalusia 2021-2027”).

Historically rich and culturally diverse, Andalusia has evolved to embrace a vibrant regional innovation ecosystem. S4Andalusia identifies clusters as a “Key agent”²⁸. The region has shown a solid commitment to participating in alliances, networks, and European-level projects, nurturing a complete ecosystem composed of universities, clusters, technological centres, technological parks and companies.

S4Andalusia supports synergies at a conceptual and strategic definition level, serving as a bedrock for advancing the region's research and innovation pursuits. Mining resources, water cycle and energy transition are high priorities at the regional level. The strategy gives attention and support to actions that might not be within its budgetary scope, regarding its role as a favourable condition of Specific Objectives 1.1 and 1.4 of PO 1 funded by ERDF and could be financed through other sources. Actions within the HE framework, Interreg

²³ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/regional-innovation-scoreboard_en

²⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/regions/background>

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2021-2027/es/2021es16rfpr001_en

²⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2021-2027/es/2021es16rfpr002_en

²⁷ https://www.redpoliticasi.es/es/system/files?file=repositorio-archivos/S4Andalusia_enero-2023_0.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/organismos/universidadinvestigacioneinnovacion/areas/empresas-emprendedores/especializacion-inteligente.html>

Programs, ESR+, and Erasmus+ are considered, highlighting the cohesion between regional, national and EU programs.

Andalusia's experience with synergies is mainly related to their use of the SoE. The financing of individual projects through synergies is limited, indicating a gap between strategic intent and practical implementation due to the complexities of the practical administrative procedures. The "Seal of Excellence" has been evaluated by the region as a very positive instrument. They are taking advantage of the evaluation process carried out at a European level and simplifying their processing.

Regulatory frameworks pose significant challenges, making it difficult for projects to meet the requirements of different funding programs simultaneously. The lack of standardisation of the conditions and requirements between funding programs adds complexity to finding complementarity between actions and ensuring procedural compatibilities.

Andalusia recognises the importance of European and international cooperation, with its S3 emphasising addressing territorial challenges and aligning with European cooperation dimensions. Their active participation and support of networks and platforms have been identified as a powerful synergy enabler. Clusters such as SmartCity Málaga or OnGranada Tech City have developed a bottom-up approach, taking advantage of funding opportunities and using them to create strategic projects aligned with S4Andalucia. Andalusia is strongly involved in European projects, leading four Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSP) and participating in eight more. The main recommendations from Andalusia to achieve true synergies between funds are:

- Advance in the standardisation of funding requirements.
- Implement a predictive monitoring system to identify and address arising opportunities and barriers proactively.
- Establish a catalogue of good practices to guide regional administrations and stakeholders.

3.1.3. East and North Finland (ENF)

ENF is a Strong Innovator according to the Regional Innovation Scoreboard 2023²⁹ and a transition region according to the NUTS classification³⁰. Finland mainland has one regional and structural policy programme for 2021-2027 (OP) covering all Cohesion PO and ERDF, ESF+ and JTF. The management authority (MA) is the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (MEAE). OP is implemented at NUTS III regions where MEAE has mandated that regional authorities act as intermediaries.

Finland has no NUTS II-level authorities, but regions have developed common working groups to steer NUTS II-level collaboration. 7 NUTS III level regions form ENF NUTS II, each having its own S3 strategies built on the strengths and opportunities of that region. ENF has Northern

²⁹ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/regional-innovation-scoreboard_en

³⁰ <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/regions/background>

Sparsely Populated Regions (NSPA) status in cohesion funds³¹. However, regions of ENF are working together to build an attractive operating environment where companies can work and grow and have developed joint S3 to strengthen common priorities and complementarities³². The identified common growth sectors in the ENF are bioeconomy and new products, sustainable mining, chemical industry, manufacturing industry, sustainable tourism and appeal and new emerging industries. Joint S3 priorities on “Clean technologies and low-carbon solutions”, “Industrial circular economy & digitalisation”, and “Innovative technologies & production processes” support the development. The ENF S3 was developed as part of the Regions in Industrial Transition pilot by DG Regio³³. The ENF S3 highlights the importance of the cluster and the innovation environments as core enablers to make RDI and enterprises work better together to find the true EDP.

Finland’s Partnership Agreement and OP acknowledge the need for synergies and complementary development between the cohesion policy funds, other EU policies and programmes. However, there has not been further communication between MA and intermediary bodies on making it happen in practice. The initiatives to develop the synergies are up to regions and regional stakeholders’ activeness. Partly because of that, there are significant differences between the regions in how the synergies have been applied in practice in ENF. For example, in the case of the mining and related industries, RDI organisations operating in the regions are using the ERDF and HE in a complementary manner.

The intermediary bodies need more knowledge and resources to utilise the potential of the synergies. They are not receiving the full amount of Technical Assistance (TA), which could also be used to develop strategic support in synergies. It is highly up to active regional stakeholders to take the role to acknowledge the synergies. Some of the regions have been active in Interreg Europe. Through these projects, the regions have greatly benefitted (for example, REMIX, BRIDGES, EUREGA, etc.) from exchanging experiences on developing synergies. In addition, shared S3 priorities in ENF have created some solid internal collaboration between ENF regions and other EU regions. The ENF regions are active on the TSSP by leading six and involved in nine other TSSPs. One practical case is the mining sector, where ENF regions and quadruple actors have built a well-defined synergic approach that regions support but are up to the activeness of the key RDI institutions to develop in practice³⁴. The main recommendations from ENF to achieve true synergies between funds are:

- To implement better overall governance of the process and targeted capacity-building
- To provide the evidence passed added value about the synergies

³¹ https://commission.europa.eu/publications/partnership-agreement-finland-2021-2027_en

³² <https://elmoenf.eu/smart-east-and-north-finland/>

³³ <https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regions-in-industrial-transition-c76ec2a1-en.htm>

³⁴ <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/054469> Case 3: Complementary financing with Cohesion policy at the project level

- To acknowledge the “bottom-up” approaches and different practices to develop synergies based on real-life experiences and the needs of the regions
- To develop a transparent dialogue between EC and the different agents involved, including the regions

3.2. Common findings and experiences implementing synergies

Based on the information gathered during the Synergic Funding Talks, interviews organised for this report involving policymakers, managing authorities and regional innovation ecosystem actors like universities, research centres, clusters and business representatives, some key experiences in implementing synergies between funding programs can be identified. Those are summaries shortly below.

3.2.1. The discrepancy between HE and ERDF programmes' logic

The rationale behind programs like HE often doesn't match the practical implementation of the cohesion policy programs at the regional level. Their approaches, scales, and focuses can differ.

Where HE focuses on boosting the EU's innovation and research capabilities globally, cohesion programs are more inclined towards addressing economic disparities, creating jobs, and supporting regional development. They prioritise regional and local stakeholders, including SMEs, local government, and community groups, helping smaller groups emphasising capacity building at the regions. They often have shorter project cycles and are more adaptable to changing regional needs. However, the role of S3 is to develop a regional agenda for the systematic use of RDI to benefit sustainable regional growth. The S3 only at the MS level will rarely contribute to the regional development and specialisation as hoped compared to those in the regional S3s.

RDI organisations in the regions with a targeted research and development policy often rely on HE calls for funding, although they are more challenging to receive. The ERDF projects, like the HE funding, are not appreciated in the academic world. RDI organisations often create projects that align more with their interests and, if possible, try to fund similar projects through different sources, primarily to secure financing. All three regions referred to in this study have experienced this issue, with Andalusia referring to it as the main perceived barrier to designing synergic funding approaches in practice.

3.2.2. Complexity of the Process

Implementing synergies between funding programs is a complex process that requires a significant understanding of the structure and requirements of the respective programs and an updated view of the funding needs and opportunities provided by the different funding instruments.

The mapping of those needs and opportunities can be supported in some cases by tools like the Catalonian [RIS3-MCAT platform](#), allowing a clear visualisation by topic, project or entities

involved. Finland is clearly a reference in this point due to their multi-level structure and division of responsibilities.

3.2.3. Coordinated funding strategies

Some regions and organisations have developed coordinated funding strategies that aim to align and combine resources from different funding programs. This involves identifying common priorities, finding compatible ways to support projects, and integrating funding streams to maximise the impact of investments. Such strategies help streamline the application process for researchers and innovators and facilitate the pooling of resources. An example of this approach is **Silesia** and its planned dedicated fund to maintain key research infrastructures, supporting projects looking for complementary funding from the HE.

Seal of Excellence (SoE) present specific challenges in coordinating strategies. Some interviewees expressed a critical view of the SoE program as implemented in practice. They highlighted two key issues:

- **Different priorities and evaluation systems:** The SoE program could be inadequate for regional policy logic, following different priorities than the HE Work programmes, which are basically oriented to Excellence.
- **Potential bias for innovation leader regions in R&D:** If SoE projects are prioritised at the MS level, as has been done, for example, in Portugal Centro35, then the funding might mostly end up supporting projects from innovation leader regions, with stronger R&D agents and ecosystems, leaving emerging regions at a disadvantage. The SoE program risks favouring already prosperous regions and leaving behind those with more limited resources.

3.2.4. Networking and knowledge exchange

Synergies can be fostered through networking and knowledge exchange activities. Platforms, events, and initiatives that bring together stakeholders from different funding programs facilitate sharing best practices, experiences, and lessons learned.

Clusters were stressed in all pilots and were also seen as one of the drivers in success cases. They are crucial in connecting agents, identifying opportunities, and linking the appropriate resources at regional and international levels. This can lead to the identification of new collaboration opportunities, the transfer of knowledge and technologies, and the establishment of partnerships for joint projects.

The **EU networks and initiatives** were also critical enablers for finding collaborators in the EU. The interregional collaboration grounds include, e.g., Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships, Smart Cities and Communities initiatives (several complimentary) EIT communities. Also, the Interreg Europe projects' role was seen as essential to generate good practices in developing action plans.

³⁵ <https://errin.eu/events/dut-errin-policy-wg-workshop-funding-synergies-theory-practice>

However, more support is needed to engage the MS and regions for knowledge exchange at the EU level and within the MS and regions.

Conclusions

1. Silesian Voivodeship focuses on strengthening its regional innovation ecosystem. They've adopted a Regional Innovation Strategy (RIS WSL 2030+) and are keen on developing funding synergies, despite facing challenges like the absence of a unified resource mapping.
2. Andalusia boasts a vibrant regional innovation environment with S4Andalucia as its bedrock. Though they've faced administrative complexities, their efforts are directed towards embracing European collaborations and funding synergies.
3. East and North Finland (ENF) emphasises collaboration through their joint S3 to fortify common growth sectors. They've recognised the importance of clusters and EU partnerships, but the implementation of synergies remains inconsistent across regions.

Key Findings on Synergy Implementation include:

- Program Logic Discrepancies: programs like HE focus on boosting the EU's global innovation and research, while cohesion programs target economic disparities, job creation, and regional development, often with different project cycles and adaptability.
- Process Complexity: implementing synergies is intricate and demands an understanding of program structures and funding needs, plus a team properly capacitated.
- Coordinated Funding: some regions and organisations develop strategies to align resources from different funding programs, enhancing the funding impact. Silesia, for example, plans a fund for research infrastructures to gain complementary funding from HE.
- Networking and Exchange: synergies benefit from networking and knowledge sharing. Clusters and other EU networks play a significant role in driving success, linking resources, and establishing partnerships. More support is needed for broader knowledge exchange.

4. Gleaning insights from the implementation of synergic funding

In this journey towards optimising synergic financing, it's crucial to understand both the challenges faced and the successful strategies employed. Chapter 4 delves deep into these aspects, distilling the lessons learned from real-world experiences.

Section 4.1 sheds light upon the primary hurdles in building synergies, while 4.2 focuses on the success stories, exploring what drives synergies in practice.

4.1. What are the main challenges in establishing synergies?

Alignment of policy aims and scopes

Each program has its specific objectives and priorities. These don't always align perfectly, creating a challenge to identify common ground and areas for collaboration. Successful implementation of synergies requires alignment between the different funding programmes. This involves identifying common goals and priorities to ensure a coherent approach.

However, in the case of ERDF and HE, the reality will make this difficult. According to the Partnership Agreement programs, ERDF is implemented mainly at the MS or regional level. More than 200 structural and regional programs and more than 180 S3s are in the EU to implement cohesion policy into practice (estimation based on the figures 2014-2020 from the S3 Platform³⁶). HE calls are opened according to 14 Work programmes, each with specific calls and topics.

Although the systematic approaches applied by the EC to bring the synergies in the cohesion policy funds and HE implementation, the situation at the MS or regional level is different. Developing a comprehensive approach for synergies supporting the S3 implementation often depends more on the individuals' enthusiasm in the regions and innovation ecosystems than applying a strategic governance approach in applying the synergies to the practical level.

Complexity and silos between programs – lack of dialogue

Both ERDF and HE have specific logic in the implementation. But when there is a need for synergies, these programme-specific implementation logics will become complex as they differ from each other. The EC notice “Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes” provides a good outline and instructions to develop the synergies. However, it forgets the difference in administrative practices of the cohesion policy funds and S3 in the MSs, applying synergies in practice challenging. That is, in the case of having different decision-making levels of the funds, different governance practices of the S3. If different ministries or regional bodies are responsible for the ERDF and S3 management, it will challenge the development synergies at the programming level.

Another point is that management authorities and intermediary bodies are often unfamiliar with HE objectives and Work programmes. That could be the case another way, and NCPs don't always know how the cohesion programs are implemented in practice. The silos in

³⁶ <https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/map/-/eye3/y/2014-2020>

which these two programmes operate in the MS and regions pose significant challenges for implementing synergies. One of those is at the MS level, the lack of alignment between regulatory provisions governing.

Finally, the real-life language barriers will make it more challenging to understand the potential of the HE to support the implementation of the cohesion programmes and S3: HE language is English and cohesion policy programmes language is always the MS's national language. Most of the regional innovation ecosystem actors don't speak English.

Disparate rules and procedures

As set, different programs come with their own sets of complex legal and financial rules. That will also include the performance indicators and reporting requirements. The lack of harmonisation across these factors increases complexity and can hinder synergies. It is necessary to understand that the different implementation practises of these two programmes will set the barriers to harmonisation at the practical level, which are not acknowledged. Although the MSs have developed different practices to support dialogue between cohesion programmes management authorities and HE National Contact Points, the regional level is often missing from that dialogue.

A regular exchange of views on synergies between MS cohesion programmes' MA, including the regional level and the implementation of HE, would help raise awareness of the possibilities offered by synergies in MS. The absence of common performance indicators and evaluation frameworks makes it difficult to assess the added value of synergies. Developing harmonised frameworks can help measure the effectiveness and impact of synergies. It is also recognised that ERDF and HE have different implementation approaches, and having common performance indicators and evaluation frameworks could be challenging. However, the S3 priorities could be used to define indicators to measure the successful synergies at the regional level.

Lack of knowledge and understanding of the different funding programmes

There's a need for a clear mapping and understanding of the different funding instruments, their objectives, and the specific areas they support to enhance synergies effectively. This lack of knowledge can be a significant barrier. This also requires a general understanding of the entire approach and interlinkages between different EU policies. Capacity-building efforts can include training programs, workshops, and knowledge-sharing platforms that enhance understanding of the funding landscape and promote stakeholder collaboration. Main reasons behind this lack of knowledge:

- MS and Regional Disparities - Different regions' specific conditions and constraints, particularly less developed regions, must be considered when implementing synergies.
- Lack of Capacity Building and Training - Regular training and capacity building among entities involved in these programs, including policymakers, researchers, businesses, and implementing bodies, is necessary to facilitate synergy implementation.

Funding and resource constraints

Implementing synergies often requires additional resources and funding to combine different programs' efforts and interventions effectively. Limited resources and budget constraints can pose challenges in realising the full potential of synergies. Synergies are foreseen in Partnership Agreements and Regional and Structural programmes. However, the resources needed to facilitate the practice are not necessarily anticipated.

4.2 What makes the synergies work in practice?

Strategic approaches

Taking a comprehensive approach that considers the different objectives and functioning of various programs and policies is necessary. It requires assessing the dimensions across which synergies can be envisaged and achieved. Understanding the funding concentration profiles of different programs, such as the HE and ERDF, in specific technology and policy areas helps identify areas of potential synergy.

Some interviewees call for a more bottom-up approach to overall regional development. Regions should identify their development strategies first and seek directly managed European funds to support them. This way, the different funds and initiatives can be used in most synergic manners.

On this point, it's worth mentioning the classification of funding synergies proposed by the Catalanian Government³⁷:

Project synergies, in which different project elements receive support from various sources. Current evidence, however, suggests that project-level synergies are limited and occasional rather than the outcome of a systematic process. The different intervention logics, funding rates, state aid and eligibility rules hamper the full development of synergies.

Policy-level synergies are pursued by aligning agendas between initiatives funded at the regional, national and EU levels whilst building research and innovation capacity among local actors. This is seen as a more viable strategy as well as a precondition for reaping the benefits of project-based synergies, should adequate instruments arise in the future.

Within the context defined by the referred paper, synergies emerge as a natural outcome of the S3 policy cycle. In the HE Work programmes under Pillar II and so-called "widening," it is possible to find recommendations to develop a project with a synergic and complementary approach supporting the implementation of S3 and to find complementary with ERDF, ESF+ and JTF.

Coordination and Collaboration

A common theme is the need for improved coordination and collaboration at the regional, national and European levels. Coordination and guidance from the European Commission are essential. But this is also particularly crucial at national or regional levels, between ministries

³⁷ "RIS3CAT Shared Agendas as platforms for synergies", Catalanian Government, 2023

that oversee these programs, between entities working within these programs, and the relationship with the NCPs.

Establishing dedicated coordination mechanisms, such as inter-agency working groups or joint task forces, can facilitate collaboration and information sharing between funding programs. These mechanisms provide a platform for regular communication, coordination of activities, and collaborative decision-making. They help ensure that synergies are actively pursued, and barriers to collaboration are addressed.

Role of regional intermediary organisations and EU networks

Intermediary organisations like clusters, associations, European Digital Innovation Hubs (eDIH) or international partnerships were emphasised in all meetings. These entities play a crucial role in facilitating synergies between funding programmes in practice. They help bridge the gap between research institutions, industry, and policymakers, facilitating collaboration and effectively leveraging resources, thanks to their understanding, experiences, and close relationship with a complex economic and innovative ecosystem.

In many cases, those agents are at the basis of the practical implementation of synergies, monitoring opportunities and, in a bottom-up approach.

Knowledge exchange and dissemination

Sharing knowledge, best practices and lessons learned among stakeholders involved in implementing synergies is critical. Dissemination of information about funding opportunities, requirements, and outcomes helps stakeholders gain a clear overview and encourages policymakers to consider and develop funding synergies. This can be facilitated through platforms, networks, and targeted communication strategies.

Conclusions

What are the main challenges in establishing synergies?

- 1. Alignment of policy aims:** Different programs have unique objectives that might not always align, making finding common grounds for collaboration challenging.
- 2. Complexity and silos:** Programs like ERDF and HE have differing implementation logics, administrative practices, and governance practices, causing a disconnect between Mas and intermediaries.
- 3. Disparate rules and procedures:** Different programs have distinct legal and financial rules and performance indicators. A lack of common indicators makes synergy assessment difficult.
- 4. Lack of knowledge and understanding of the different funding programmes:** There's a need for clear mapping and understanding. Capacity-building efforts, including training programs and knowledge-sharing platforms, are required.
- 5. Funding and Resource constraints:** Implementing synergies often needs additional resources, and budget constraints can hinder realising their full potential.

What makes synergies work in practice?

- 1. Strategic approaches:** A comprehensive approach is essential that considers objectives of various programs. Identifying funding concentration profiles helps highlight potential synergy areas.
- 2. Coordination and collaboration:** Improved regional, national, and European coordination is crucial. Dedicated mechanisms, like working groups or task forces, facilitate collaboration.
- 3. Role of intermediary organisations:** Entities like clusters, eDIHs, or international partnerships are pivotal in bridging gaps and facilitating collaboration between multiple stakeholders.
- 4. Knowledge exchange and dissemination:** Sharing information about funding opportunities, requirements, and outcomes provides clarity and encourages the development of synergies.

5. Recommendations to make synergies leveraging S3 implementation

As discussed in the previous chapters, the complex dynamics between different funding programs, regulatory frameworks, and collaborative efforts present both challenges and opportunities for all the stakeholders involved. The broader context is an essential factor, playing an instrumental role in shaping the nuances of effectively implementing synergic funding. To build a comprehensive picture, it is necessary to consider the overall framework provided by the EC and pragmatic approaches, each contributing to unique insights and experiences that are key to understanding this complex ecosystem. After exploring part of the diverse tapestry of studies, guidance, and recommendations designed to optimise the synergic funding leveraging in implementing smart specialisation, it's crucial to understand that the landscape isn't merely black and white or one solution will suit every MS or region.

This chapter aims to provide practical recommendations for refining and optimising the synergic funding policies to bolster the implementation of S3. The focus is on delivering simplified, straightforward advice, intending to strip away any potential confusion. With an emphasis on fostering a collaborative mindset, promoting best practices, and equipping stakeholders with the necessary knowledge, the recommendations are grounded in the cumulative experiences and insights from the actual cases previously presented, discussions, comprehensive desk studies and the writers' expertise. The goal is clear: to build a framework that optimises funding synergies, ultimately driving the success of S3s across the EU MSs and regions.

5.1. To strengthen coordination and collaboration

Fostering better collaboration and communication among authorities at different levels responsible for the programmes, funds, and S3 management is essential. The ECA report recommended improving coordination between programmes and implementing a regular and structured dialogue process involving relevant EC DGs and national players responsible for designing and implementing the cohesion policy and HE programmes. Launching the RIMA Network aims to support that. MS-level managing authorities are the prominent representatives of the cohesion policy in the RIMA. However, it will not be enough to improve governance practices only between EC and national-level MA in the MSs. It is essential to involve the regional authorities responsible for implementing ERDF and S3 and with key agents in the regional innovative ecosystems. It could benefit from the expert directly involved in creating and using synergies.

The cases and discussions showed the need to ensure that better information flows all the way into the regional innovation ecosystem and is adequately communicated. It should also be essential to ensure the practical experiences go all the way up. That should particularly develop between the national MA and regional MA or regional intermediary body.

EC harmonisation actions of programmes' implementation, including legal and financial rules supporting the practical implementation of synergies, must be better explained at the level

of implementing the programmes, S3 and projects. The legal setting at the EU programming level enables and encourages the synergies, but it is quite some jungle to navigate alone. At the MS level, the most suitable governance practices should be implemented to ensure coordination and collaboration.

An essential part of harmonisation is evaluation criteria and how they are conducted in practice. Is there a possibility of adopting some standard evaluation criteria or checking points used in programming and practical project level? This could reduce administrative burdens and allow for smoother collaboration between different stakeholders.

5.2. To increase knowledge and capacity to exploit the synergies

Increasing the impact of HE deliverables requires active support for cohesion policy funds/programmes authorities and engagement of the innovation ecosystem actors. There is a need for more practical guidance on applying the different synergic approaches while designing the programme and policy objective implementation. Furthermore, it is essential to understand the central role of the S3s to develop the synergies. Capacity-building measures will increase knowledge that will help to match the specific needs of particular regions and target groups.

To fully leverage funding synergies, it is essential to equip the individuals and organisations involved with the appropriate knowledge and skills. We recommend implementing a robust, comprehensive, and ongoing training program that should address the following elements:

- **Understanding Synergies:** Fundamentals of synergies, how they work, and why they are essential in funding. This includes the different forms of synergies and how they contribute to the effective use of resources.
- **Identifying Opportunities for Synergy:** Training on how to spot potential areas where synergies can be leveraged. This includes understanding how different funding programs can be aligned and identifying projects or initiatives that could benefit from synergistic funding.
- **Navigating Regulatory Frameworks:** Detailed training on the rules and regulations around different funding streams, including any changes in the regulatory landscape. This would equip the relevant stakeholders with the knowledge to navigate any legal and administrative challenges that could arise when establishing synergies.
- **Practical Application:** Hands-on training that enables participants to apply their knowledge in real-world scenarios. This can be facilitated through workshops, case studies, and simulations. This component should also include lessons learned from past successful and unsuccessful attempts to create synergies.
- **Continuous Learning:** As the landscape of funding and synergies is dynamic and evolves, the training program should be flexible and adaptive, offering regular updates and refreshers.

- **Fostering Collaborative Mindset:** Training should also focus on cultivating a mindset of collaboration and interdepartmental understanding. This will facilitate a more fluid interaction between different stakeholders and entities, allowing for a more seamless creation of synergies.

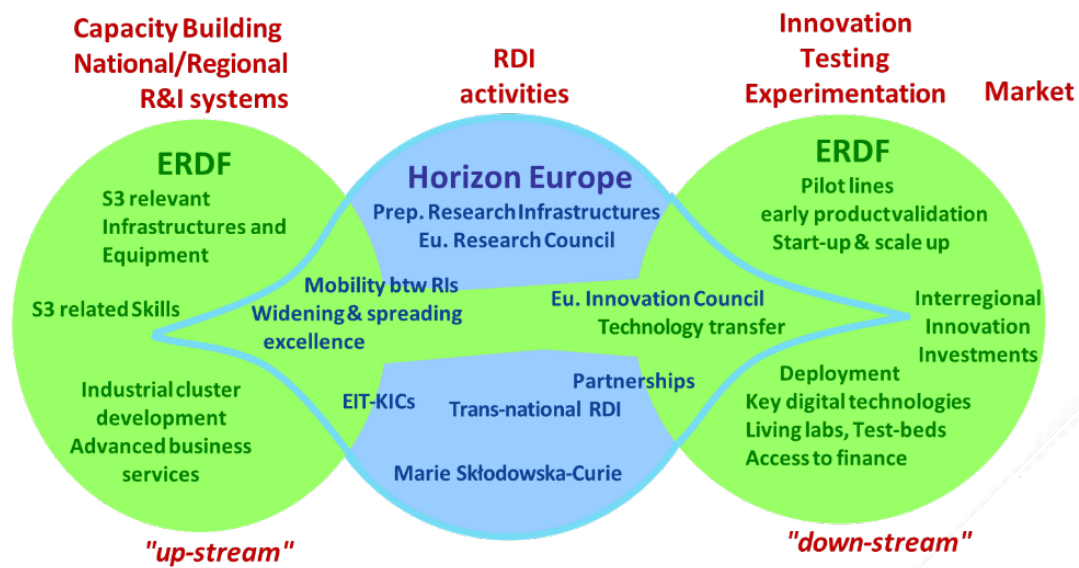
Training to increase knowledge and capacity to build on synergies is needed. It should be implemented commonly at the EU level and each MS. This should be supported **by sharing good practices**. Learning from others is an excellent source of inspiration to develop synergies at the practical level. It could be a new chapter in the so-called Smart stories collected in the earlier years by the DG Regio to have it on the agenda of EU Week of Cities and Regions, S3 Forum, and other EU events. The Interreg Europe program's role could be more significant, and better use of the policy learning platform could support increasing knowledge sharing.

5.3. To reinforce the upstream and downstream synergies

In general, synergies involve two or more programmes working together to produce a more significant impact than one initiative can do alone. In the EC guidance, several types of synergies are introduced. Some of those require a longer time to be systematically applied due to the constraints between the regulations of EC and MSs. Meanwhile, supporting the synergies that can be used bottom-up in the regional context and between individual projects is essential.

It is fair to say that ERDF contributes to capacity building for RDI and industry at the regional level. That could leverage the chances of successively receiving the more competitive HE funding - **upstream synergies**. ERDF funding could also exploit or advance the HE projects' deliverables in the regional innovation ecosystem - **downstream synergies**. All three cases demonstrated such examples, and it was also possible to find them from the different studies and workshops' presentations.

Measures could be implemented to increase the use of up – and downstream synergies. This involves further exploiting HE projects' results through ERDF and other cohesion funds. It could be done by design, as a condition introduced and strongly evaluated on the HE calls. In the creation of the S3, this should be acknowledged already. Furthermore, in the S3 implementation plan, these synergies should be foreseen in collaboration with the regional core actors in the innovation ecosystem. The figure below demonstrates how synergies could be thought of in the practice.



"Smart specialisation strategies" shall include:
 (a) "Up-stream actions" to prepare regional R&I players to participate in Horizon Europe
 (b) "Down-stream actions" to provide the means to exploit and diffuse R&I results, stemming from Horizon Europe"

Figure 5 5: Complementarities ERDF & Horizon Europe³⁸

5.4. To support EU innovation ecosystem to work together - Clusters, EDIHs and TSSPs

Since launching the EU Innovation Union, the EC has highlighted the increasing collaboration between the actors in the innovation ecosystem regionally, nationally and at the EU level. Clusters are seen as bridges towards a modern industrial policy in the regions, could facilitate the growth of regional competitiveness and act as glue for interregional and transnational collaboration. Since then, the modern cluster policy of the EC has been applied, which is also in line with the objective of the S3³⁹. The regional clusters include science/tech parks, development agencies, incubators and accelerators, tech platforms or technology centres, etc., often forming the ground for the clusters' industry partners to develop and grow. **EuroClusters**⁴⁰ provide critical value by connecting the regional clusters and being a natural collaboration arena to establish synergies.

The first **European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH)** were approved in 2022 to support the digital transition. The aim is to build a vital community of hubs and other stakeholders fostering networking, cooperation, and knowledge transfer activities between EDIH, SME and mid-caps, the public sector and the other relevant stakeholders and initiatives⁴¹. EDIHs are funded through synergies between the Digital programme and ERDF involving other programmes. In many MSs, the EDIHs are based on the clusters or clusters that are partners in EDIH.

³⁸ Mikel Landabaso Director Growth and Innovation, JRC – Joint Research Centre EXPLORING SYNERGIES BETWEEN HORIZON EUROPE AND REGIONAL POLICY STOA WORKSHOP PANEL FOR THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY. 02.02.2021

³⁹ <https://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/16903/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native> and best practises <https://clustercollaboration.eu/in-focus/policy-acceleration/cluster-solutions-library>

⁴⁰ <https://clustercollaboration.eu/euroclusters>

⁴¹ <https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/home>

S3 Thematic Platforms and Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSP) have operated since 2015. S3 Thematic Platforms are joint initiatives between several EC's Directorates-Generals in the leadership of DG REGIO⁴². TSSPs are interregional partnerships built on shared S3 priorities identified by the participating regions. Partners should ideally leverage collaboration by combining their cluster organisations, businesses, and innovation actors with those of other regions. The involvement of the quadruple helix is vital to the activities underpinning the regional priorities and the interregional partnership. TPPs are natural collaborations that enhance the synergies in the practice.

The dynamic nature of clusters and networks brings a wealth of opportunities for improving the utilisation of funding synergies. These well-connected entities, with the net of quadruple helix stakeholders, resources, and expertise, are inherently primed for collaborative innovation and synergic efforts. Enhancing their role in the context of S3 is, therefore, crucial.

- **Foster collaboration and sharing:** Encourage clusters and networks to actively participate in the S3 discovery process, specifically identifying and operationalising funding synergies. This fosters an environment that accelerates discovery processes, leading to quicker identification of potential synergies and more effective smart specialisation strategies.
- **Networks for training and capacity-building:** Leverage clusters and networks as platforms for training and capacity-building. Equipping members with the necessary knowledge and skills related to the optimal use of funding synergies significantly improves the chances of successful implementation of funding synergies over smart specialisation strategies.
- **Use data-driven insights:** Encourage clusters and networks to utilise data-driven insights for decision-making. This can lead to more precise and effective identification of funding synergies, thereby optimising the allocation of resources towards areas of smart specialisation.
- **Align objectives:** Ensure that the purposes of the clusters and networks align with the overarching S3s. This way, the activities of these entities will naturally feed into the larger goal of optimising the use of funding synergies.

By enhancing the role of clusters and networks, we can significantly improve the discovery process and the application of smart specialisation strategies, ultimately leading to a more effective and efficient use of synergies. Many other collaboration and EU initiatives, such as New European Bauhaus, Build4People, and Covenant of Mayors – Europe, could make a significant difference in developing the synergies. These should also be better integrated with the daily implementation of the structural and regional programmes and S3

5.5. To develop S3 robust monitoring frameworks at the regional level

Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes and impacts of synergies at the regional level is essential. S3 can be used to establish the ground for that monitoring. It helps ensure the intended objectives are achieved, aligning with the S3 priorities and allowing adjustments and improvements as needed. Clear responsibility for

⁴² https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/communities-and-networks/s3-community-of-practice/thematic_platforms_en

monitoring and evaluation should be assigned to relevant stakeholders to ensure accountability and continuous improvement.

Regular and systematic monitoring of synergies is critical to their success. A robust monitoring framework helps assess the effectiveness of synergic funding, provides insights for improvement, and ensures accountability.

Monitoring should be comprehensive, covering all aspects of synergies, from their establishment to their impacts.

Key proposals include simplifying the understanding of synergies, strengthening collaboration and communication among various authorities, harmonising program implementations, and fostering the role of innovation-support organisations.

The importance of reinforcing both upstream and downstream synergies, promoting the sharing of best practices, increasing knowledge capacity, and establishing robust S3 monitoring frameworks at the regional level is also emphasised.

Specifically, the chapter underscores the significance of clusters, eDIHs, and Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSP) as key instruments in leveraging funding synergies. They offer platforms for training, capacity-building, and data-driven decision-making, and their alignment with S3 objectives can facilitate more effective utilisation of synergies.

The chapter also advocates for a comprehensive monitoring system that evaluates the outcomes and impacts of these synergies at the regional level as part of the S3 monitoring, ensuring continuous improvement and accountability.____

Fostering synergies is not rocket science yet it requires strategic thinking.

Such strategic thinking requires to raise awareness and build a common understanding among stakeholders.

Finally, for synergies to be implemented in practice on the field, it requires building capacity to practice the different ways of combining fundings.

Annex A: Sources and Contributors for the Report

This annex provides a comprehensive overview of the various data sources, events, and entities contributing to the report's findings and recommendations.

Key Events:

Valuable insights and feedback were garnered from two events:

- "Synergic Funding Talks with managing authorities" (26 June 2023)
- "Synergic Funding Talks with agents of the S3 ecosystems" (27 June 2023)

Participating regions from the Synergic Funding Talks:

Case Studies:

- Andalusia, Spain
- North and East Finland
- Silesian Voivodeship

Special Guest:

- Centro region, Portugal

Entities engaged during the Talks:

- Agri-Food cluster North Savo, Finland
- Business Joensuu, Finland
- Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment, Finland
- Geological Survey of Finland, Finland
- Kokkola Industrial Park, BioValley Finland
- Norrum, Finland
- Savonlinna's Technology Park Noheva, Finland
- Silesia Automotive & Advanced Manufacturing cluster, Poland
- Silesian Science and Technology Centre of Aviation Industry, Poland
- SILO company, Spain
- SmartCity cluster, Spain
- University of Lapland, Finland
- University of Oulu, Finland
- University of Malaga, Spain
- University of Granada, Spain

Individual Interviews:

Discussions were held with representatives from:

- Catalanian Government, Spain
- S3 Expert Group
- European Commission's Directorates-General:
 - DG GROW
 - DG REGIO
 - DG RTD

Desk Review:

The report drew upon a diverse range of materials, most referred to in footnotes, including previously published communications, reports, workshops, and webinars. Between them, we can highlight the following:

- Cohesion Policy legislation 2021-2027
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/information-sources/legislation-and-guidance/regulations_en and
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/what/investment-policy_en
- Combination of financial instruments and grants under shared management funds in the 2021-2027 programming period
<https://www.fi-compass.eu/publication/factsheets/combination-financial-instruments-and-grants-under-shared-management-funds>
- COMMISSION NOTICE Synergies between Horizon Europe and ERDF programmes (2022/C 421/03) <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022XC1104%2802%29>
- COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS
Regional Policy contributing to smart growth in Europe 2020, * COM/2010/0553 final *
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=celex%3A52010DC0553>
- COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Towards a green, digital and resilient economy: our European Growth Model Brussels, 2.3.2022 COM(2022) 83 final
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0083&qid=1655798743597>
- COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A New European Innovation Agenda {SWD(2022) 187 final}
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0332>
- COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Towards a green, digital and resilient economy: our European Growth Model COM(2022) 83 final
<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0083&qid=1655798743597>
- Cortijo Arellano, M., Esparza Masana, R., Fernández Sirera, T., Marinelli, E. and Arregui Pabollet, E., Synergies between Interreg Europe and Smart Specialisation, EUR 29390 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2018, ISBN 978-92-79-96382-7,

doi:10.2760/572859, JRC113414.

<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC113414>

- Doussineau, M. and Bachtrogler, J., Exploring Synergies between EU Cohesion Policy and Horizon 2020 Funding across European Regions: An analysis of regional funding concentration on key enabling technologies and societal grand challenges, EUR 30678 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2021, ISBN 978-92-76-36247-0, doi:10.2760/218779.
<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC123485>
- DUT & ERRIN POLICY WG WORKSHOP: FUNDING SYNERGIES – FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE
<https://errin.eu/events/dut-errin-policy-wg-workshop-funding-synergies-theory-practice>
- EuroClusters at the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
<https://clustercollaboration.eu/euroclusters>
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Evaluation study on the external coherence and synergies of Horizon 2020 within the European research and innovation support system – Case study report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/054469>
<https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/054469>
Case 3: Complementary financing with Cohesion policy at the project level
- Eurostat
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/regions/background>
- Eye@RIS3: Innovation Priorities in Europe
<https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/map/-/eye3/y/2014-2020>
- Horizon Europe Work Programme 2023-2024 10. European Innovation Ecosystems (EIE)
https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/document/download/198cd4de-dadf-45b0-83b8-c25864a4d44c_en
- How to support SME Policy from Structural Funds
<https://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/16903/attachments/1/translations/en/renditions/native>
and best practises
<https://clustercollaboration.eu/in-focus/policy-acceleration/cluster-solutions-library>
- In your country
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country_en
- InnoHEIs ACTION PLAN SILESIA - Regional Innovation Strategy of the Silesian Voivodeship for 2030
https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/tx_tevprojects/library/file_1655125035.pdf

- Kelchtermans, S., Kardas, M. and Klincewicz, K., Implementing Smart Specialisation Strategies, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2021, ISBN 978-92-76-40318-0, doi:10.2760/711198, JRC125959
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<https://www.eca.europa.eu/en/publications?did=61346>
- Mikel Landabaso, Director Growth and Innovation, JRC – Joint Research Centre EXPLORING SYNERGIES BETWEEN HORIZON EUROPE AND REGIONAL POLICY STOA WORKSHOP PANEL FOR THE FUTURE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY. 02.02.2021
<https://eit.europa.eu/news-events/events/stoa-workshop-exploring-synergies-between-horizon-europe-and-regional-policy>
- Network of Regional Specialized Observatories (SO RIS)
<https://www.interregeurope.eu/good-practices/network-of-regional-specialized-observatories-so-ris>
- NextGenerationEU
https://next-generation-eu.europa.eu/index_en
- Partnership Agreement with Finland – 2021-2027
https://commission.europa.eu/publications/partnership-agreement-finland-2021-2027_en
- Pluri-regional programme Spain ERDF 2021-2027
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2021-2027/es/2021es16rfpr001_en
- Prague Declaration on Synergies in the Research and Innovation Funding in Europe SYNERGIES IN THE RESEARCH AND INNOVATION FUNDING IN EUROPE
<https://synergies2022.eu/>
- Programme Andalusia ERDF 2021-2027
https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2021-2027/es/2021es16rfpr002_en
- Regional innovation scoreboard
https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/statistics/performance-indicators/regional-innovation-scoreboard_en
- Regions in Industrial Transition
<https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regions-in-industrial-transition-c76ec2a1-en.htm>
- RIS3CAT Shared Agendas as platforms for synergies RIS3CAT 2030 in Knowledge Pills, no. 1 Catalanian Government, 2023
[RIS3CAT Shared Agendas as platforms for synergies.”](#)

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https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2014-2020/pl/2014pl16m2op012_en
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https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/in-your-country/programmes/2021-2027/pl/2021pl16ffpr012_en <https://ris.slaskie.pl/>
- S3 Community of Practice
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<https://horizoneuropencpportal.eu/academy/synergies-between-horizon-europe-and-new-cohesion-policy-programmes-practical-approach>
- Synergies between regional and European research and innovation support in the thematic areas of “Healthy Living and Sustainable Energy” Nordrhein-Westfalen Germany
<https://www.synergien-nrw.de/en/index.html>
- The Approach of the Silesia Region to Smart Specialisation Strategy Monitoring
<https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/en/w/the-approach-of-the-silesia-region-to-smart-specialisation-strategy-monitoring>
- The East and North Finland in Industrial Transition – Smart Specialisation Strategy 2019-2023
<https://elmoenf.eu/smart-east-and-north-finland/>
- The Network of European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH)
<https://european-digital-innovation-hubs.ec.europa.eu/home>
- Workshop - Multi-level governance: Synergies between Cohesion Policy and Horizon Europe Interreg Europe The Policy Learning Platform workshop

<https://www.interregeurope.eu/policy-learning-platform/news/multi-level-governance-synergies-between-cohesion-policy-and-horizon-europe>

- Workshop Synergies in Practice: Perspectives on Collaboration in the Upcoming Funding Period 2021-2027

<https://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/en/w/synergies-in-practice-perspectives-on-collaboration-in-the-upcoming-funding-period-2021-2027>

Glossary

Action Plan in Interreg Europe projects: A document providing details on how the lessons learnt and exchange of experience from the interregional cooperation will be exploited to improve the regional policy instruments.

Allocation of funding based on excellence: Allocation based on competitive calls for proposals and through independent and merit-based peer review, selecting only the best projects without any consideration of geographical distribution.

Cohesion (regional) Policy: The main long-term investment instrument in the EU. It contributes to strengthening the EU's economic, social and territorial cohesion, correcting imbalances between countries and regions, and delivering on the Union's political priorities. Several funds implement Cohesion Policy: European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), Cohesion Fund (CF), European Social Fund Plus ESF+ and Just Transition Fund (JTF). In addition, it sets the common Provisions Regulation for European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF) and the financial rules for other shared managed funds (L 231/159).

Commitment: Amount earmarked in the budget to finance a specific item of expenditure, such as a contract or grant agreement.

Complementary funding: bringing together HE and ESI Funds financing in the same project.

Clusters: A network of interconnected businesses, research centers and associated institutions, often geographically concentrated and producing similar or related products/services, that collaboratively foster innovation and growth, creating an integrated innovation ecosystem.

Direct management: Management of an EU fund or programme by the Commission alone, as opposed to shared management or indirect management.

Downstream synergies: Also known as “Sequential funding down streamed”. Using ESI Funds to fund actions that capitalise on already implemented H2020 or HE projects and exploit and diffuse their R&I results.

Entrepreneurial Discovery Process (EDP): The Entrepreneurial Discovery Process prioritises investments based on an inclusive and evidence-based process driven by stakeholders' engagement and attention to market dynamics.

Europe 2020 strategy: The EU's ten-year strategy, launched in 2010, to boost growth and create jobs.

European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIH): The one-stop shops supporting companies and public sector organisations to respond to digital challenges and become more competitive. It is a bridge between public sector organisations and innovators; they are well placed to catalyse innovation procurement in their area. Many EDIHs include organisations that are part of the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN) or European Industrial Clusters (EIC).

European Partnerships: Initiative through which the European Commission works with private and/or institutional partners from the Member States to provide concerted support for research and innovation activities.

European Regional Development Fund (ERDF): EU fund that strengthens economic and social cohesion in the EU by financing investments that reduce imbalances between regions.

European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) 2014-2020: The five main EU funds that together support economic development across the EU: the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund, the Cohesion Fund, the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development, and the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

Horizon Europe (HE): HE is the EU's key funding programme for research and innovation. It is the successor to Horizon 2020 and the previous Framework Programmes.

Innovation Ecosystem: Regional and interregional innovation ecosystems bring together people or organisations whose goal is innovation and include the links between resources (such as funds, equipment, and facilities), organisations (such as higher education institutions, research and technology organisations, companies, venture capitalists and financial intermediaries), investors and policymakers.

Interreg programmes: Framework for interregional, cross-border and transnational cooperation guiding policy exchanges and implementing joint action.

Managing authority: The national or regional authority designated by a Member State to manage the cohesion policy funds.

National contact point (NCP): Entity established and financed by the government of an EU Member State or other participating country to provide in-country support and guidance for applicants and beneficiaries under Horizon Europe.

Operational programme (OP)/ Structural and Regional Programme/Cohesion policy programme: Framework for implementing EU cohesion policy funds, reflecting the priorities and objectives laid down in partnership agreements between the European Commission and Member State.

Seal of Excellence (SoE): A quality label enabling ESI Funds to project proposals that were positively evaluated under H2020 and ranked above a predefined quality threshold but were not funded by H2020 due to insufficient budgetary resources. A type of synergy is also known as "Alternative funding".

Smart specialisation Strategy (S3): National or regional strategy setting priorities for building competitive advantage by developing and matching research and innovation strengths to business needs and bringing convergence in innovation performance.

S3 Community of Practice (S3 CoP): Central node on guidance, networking, support and peer-learning on S3, covering its conceptual development and implementation.

S3 Thematic Platforms: Starting in 2015, the European Commission has launched four dedicated S3 Thematic Platforms related to Agri-Food, Energy, Industrial Modernisation and,

since March 2022, a new platform on the Sustainable Blue Economy. 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)).

Teaming: Widening measure connecting leading scientific institutions with Member States and regions performing less well in research and innovation by creating or upgrading centres of excellence in host regions.

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 levels, underpinned by shared smart specialisation strategy priorities across committed regions, cluster organisations, businesses, innovation actors, and civil society.

Upstream synergies: Also known as “Sequential funding up streamed”. Using ESI Funds to fund actions that build R&I capacities needed to compete in HE and participate in international networks.

Widening measure: Specific measure to help with capacity-building, create links between leading research institutions and EU regions performing less well in research and innovation, and provide expert policy support.

