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EMILIA-ROMAGNA ECOSYSTEM OF INNOVATION: THE THEMATIC CLUSTERS/ASSOCIATION CASE AS A TOOL TO ENHANCE INNOVATION OPPORTUNITIES

Practical case

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Abstract text:

Innovation – that can be defined as the process that, starting from an idea with a commercial aim, develops, commercializes and successfully delivers it in the marketplace (1) – is becoming the centerpiece of a socio-economic development model for regions (2-5). As scholars show, innovation has a “systemic” nature and a strong link exists between the regional level of social and economic welfare and the regional ability to innovate (6-7). In the knowledge society, the capability of a region to facilitate the development of its innovation ecosystems - “environment” with complex relationships between actors or entities whose functional goal is to enable technology development and innovation (8) - increases the regional attractiveness and competitiveness. According to the European Commission (EC), Emilia-Romagna (ER) represents an outstanding case of regional innovation governance and is generally considered to offer a favourable environment for business and innovation (9). This is due to thousands of innovative small and medium enterprises (SMEs), a number of industrial districts hosting numerous world-leader enterprises (10, 11) and a high number of highly ranked research centres and universities providing one of the highest numbers of STEM graduates and R&D personnel in Italy. In 2002 ER was the first region in Italy to approve a regional law reorganizing its new competencies in terms of industrial policies being the role of policy in affecting companies’ innovative behaviours particularly important at the regional level (12). Such law (no. 7/2002) set the guidelines for its local innovation policy (13) and laid the basis to create the ER High technology Network (HTN). Initially HTN was an informal network representing the Regional Ecosystem of Innovation (REI), but as ER innovation-related policies further developed, HTN began to be coordinated by ASTER - now ART-ER - the Joint Stock Consortium owned by the ER Region and other R&I and public bodies also acting as the Regional Innovation Agency. Since then, to join HTN the different actors of the REI must be formally accredited as industrial research laboratories or innovation centres by the ER Regional Authority. The HTN Network currently includes 96 facilities, comprising 82 public and private industrial research laboratories and 14 innovation centres, organized in 6 thematic platforms that share joint projects and strategic programs to foster research-business collaboration in the following fields: agrifood, construction, energy and environment, ICT and design, mechanics and materials and life sciences. After that EC decided that each European region had to develop its own Regional Smart Specialization Strategies (RIS3), the ER government decided to establish a program to give birth to regional cluster organizations, an Intermediary of Knowledge (IoK) organization that is of apparent interest in the development and implementation process of S3 (14, 15). More in details, in 2015, the ER government launched a triple helix cluster initiative (16) to top-down set-up a group of clusters organisations (17-19), the so called Clust-ER associations. Clust-ER operates on the seven innovation priority tracks which were identified within ER RIS3, namely: Mechanics and Mechatronics, Building industry, Agrofood sector, Health sector, Creative industries, Service Innovation and Green technologies. Besides, in 2019 ER decided to set up another thematic IoK on the topic Big Data setting up the Big Data Association.

This paper will describe the ER thematic IoKs (7 Clust-ERs and the Big Data Association) organizational structure, how they work to facilitate the process of innovation within the ER REI, how they are differently impacting on their sectors, how they collaborate and will present a best practice from each IoK.

Adopting the triple helix model (20) as a general framework, this research explores how interactions between regional cluster organizations and their local innovation ecosystems, from which they are generated, actually operate providing a contribution on the role of top-down cluster initiatives as IoK. The explorative nature of this study that aims to unveil the interactive dimension of cluster organizations through their evolutionary development required the collection of rich empirical data around that cluster and, therefore, the use of a qualitative methodology. Notably, this paper applies a single case study methodology (21) of a top-down cluster initiative developed by the ER Region.

The Clust-ERs and the Big Data association are not for profit associations with partners such as companies, research and technological organizations (RTOs), universities and professional training institutions that stimulate the innovation process through a multi-cross-cultural approach aimed at increasing relationships and innovation opportunities within the Triple Helix actors - RTOs/universities, government and companies. ER IoKs operate through an open-innovation approach (22) also stimulating/training the innovation and entrepreneurial potential of young students or managers (23). In conclusion, the paper describes practical cases that can be transferred to another REI. In fact, the example of ER thematic IoKs can trigger the development of similar policies therefore promoting the development of sound innovation projects though innovation-related policies cannot be easily replicated between different regions due to many factors (i.e. economic and social framework). Besides, being the ER RIS3 thematic priorities common to other EU regions, the thematic IoK approach could support in building specific policies combining research results exploitation and regional growth.

Owner:

Clust-ERs/Associations are thematic intermediaries of knowledge (IoKs) within the Emilia Romagna ecosystem of innovation. They are partly funded by the Emilia Romagna Ministry of Economic Development that decided to give birth to such IoKs in 2015 as a triple helix initiative managed by Art-ER, the Regional Innovation Agency. They are aimed at a more efficient development and implementation of the Regional Smart Specialization strategies (RIS3). They operate on the seven innovation priority tracks which were identified within ER RIS3, namely: Mechanics and Mechatronics, Building industry, Agrofood sector, Health sector, Creative industries, Service Innovation and Green technologies. Besides, in 2019 ER decided to set up another thematic IoK on the topic Big Data setting up the Big Data Association.

Geographical origin:

Italy / Emilia Romagna / Bologna

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