Note to the European Commission, DG REGIO G5 - GREECE & CYPRUS

Review of the on-going RIS3 processes in the Region of Ionian Islands

Author: Alasdair Reid, expert appointed by DG REGIO to monitor the Greek smart specialisation process

Date: 30 August 2013

This short note summarises the principal observations and conclusions to be drawn from the Technical meeting, held in Athens on 17 July, between the Greek national and regional authorities and the Commission with a view to the preparation of the partnership agreement 2014-2020, and specifically the research innovation strategy for smart specialisation in the Region of Ionian Islands.

i) RIS3 processes adopted by the region. Weaknesses and structures to be modified

Following the organisation of the regional conference and the RIS3 workshop for the new programming period on 11 and 12 April, the DG REGIO expert noted that the process of designing a RIS3 was a challenging experience for all involved partners. The region submitted an update note for the 17 July meeting which tended to suggest that while some further progress has been made there remains a lot to do and organisation of the RIS3 process is made more difficult by the need to cover the various islands (the consultation "cannot be done in one or two meetings and each meeting has to be repeated 3-4 times").

In her verbal report, the regional representative noted that the RIS3 network, established after the April meeting (in which GSRT participates) had held a couple of meetings using teleconferencing. This had allowed the identification of the needs of main production companies and checked how the university could respond. However, the main problem in terms of the process is getting production companies to participate. So the region organised meetings with production companies in four big islands and identified companies that "wanted to change something". Other meetings have been held with the Chambers, Centre of Maritime Research, etc. A first conclusion is that there is a strong interest in partnerships, on how to link primary production to tourism, and how to bring the two universities closer to business, etc.

The region was still aiming to have a detailed action plan drawn up by end September but this appears illusory as an objective given the state of play mid-July (and the holiday season).

ii) Promoting RIS3 in opposition to sectoral approach defended by some important stakeholders

The current expected focus of a RIS3 strategy for the Ionian Islands is on the synergy of the "agro-food + gastronomy + hospitality + tourism + cultural heritage (e.g. music)" and the identification and application of technologies that will increase the comparative advantage of the Ionian Islands. Draft proposals from the private sector and academics include new business opportunities in organic farming, production of food with ant-oxidant qualities, maintenance of food items with herbs, new technologies and contemporary know-how in wine production and anti-oxidant olive oil.

The broad orientation is in line with the recommendations of the DG REGIO expert report which argued there was a need to better inter-connect the tourism sector is the bio-economy, both on terrestrial natural resources and biodiversity (with a potential for reinvigorating the agricultural sector through the production of new crops and a focus on designated origin, etc. products) as well as aquatic resources (blue-biotech). However, other opportunities, such as a nascent marine energy potential do not seem to be considered. Indeed, there is a need to investigate how specific technologies can reduce the costs and disadvantages of the insular nature of the region (e.g. energy, transport, digital technologies, etc.).

iii) RIS3 and the GSRT role and synergies

As in other island regions, there is a need for the GSRT (or any other future management structures for national OPs in research and innovation field) to adopt a much more small business tailored approach. The various island regions face common challenges and the national authorities should ensure that national level measures are tailored to complementing locally embedded strategies. For instance, expertise in energy systems, bio-economy, food technologies or aquaculture are not necessarily located in the region but need to be made available. At the regional level, a business and innovation advisory search (e.g. an advisory service with access possibly to vouchers to hire in expertise for companies) should seek to identify opportunities or problems and prepare a pipeline of projects for funding. A collaborative approach to specific technological issues should be encouraged – involvement in national cluster programmes, regionally based 'competence centres', etc.

iv) Conclusions of the seminar

In general, it appears that while the 'innovation network" has started actively working, there is only a limited basis so far for defining a robust RIS3. A telephone interview, end August, with the consultant working for the region on the RIS3 tends to confirm that the region is still at the stage of developing initial ideas for possible priorities and actions. The region will almost certainly need to request an extension or develop a RIS3 process that allows the further elaboration of innovation platforms bringing together regional partners with national and international expertise.

v) Milestones and deliverables

In short term, three deliverables (D) at two milestones (M) would accelerate the work of RIS3:
(**D1**) Analysis of the regional innovation system, innovation gaps, SWOT, and balance scorecard based objectives to be prepared by the consultant, by mid-October 2013 **(M1).**
(**D2**) Creating a number of thematic working groups to develop innovation platforms in each of the potential priority areas **(M2).**
(**D3**) A first discussion about RIS3 in the Elected Regional Council, delivery mechanisms, and innovation support, and draft strategic orientations, by mid-December **(M2).**