



Smart Regional Growth Experience and Rural-Urban Relations

Expert Workshop – Brussels – February 1st 2018

The first ROBUST expert workshop was hosted in Brussels by DG-Agri. The workshop brought together 20 participants from the ROBUST consortium and organisations including DG-Agri, DG-Regio, OECD, European Network for Rural Development and RWI-Leibniz Institute for Economic Research.

The workshop was opened with an update on progress to-date in ROBUST by Han Wiskerke. The day was then organised into three sessions. In each, an invited speaker reported on existing research or interventions in smart development and rural-urban relations. Each presentation prompted discussions, chaired by Michael Woods.

Summary of key points

Four areas of focal questions for ROBUST research emerged from the workshop:

1. **Terminology.** There are many similar ‘smart’ and rural development concepts. What do they mean? How to be clear in communications?
2. **Development aims.** What are the characteristics of a smart approach to rural development? What are the aims and targets?
3. **Smart opportunities.** What does smart specialisation mean across particular domains? What opportunities does it open up?
4. **Engagement.** Who is involved in making decisions about what is ‘smart’? How can different stakeholders engage in the process?

These questions will help inform further development of the ROBUST conceptual framework. Looking ahead, they also have implications for deliverable outcomes, both at policy level and in what practice partners can do on the ground.

Invited speakers

Pia Nilsson (Jönköping University) recapped the 2014-17 TASTE – Towards a Smart Rural Europe – project. Three key concepts for smart rural growth were identified: **connectivity**, or networks; **embeddedness**, or place-based development, and **relatedness**, referring to local forms of diversification.

Javier Gómez (Joint Research Centre) explained JRC's smart specialisation platform, which aims to concentrate resources on regional priorities for innovation. The platform assists regions through a priority **discovery process** and **practitioner community** resources. **Inter-regional partnerships** are a current main activity.

Mark Shucksmith (Newcastle University) advocated a hybrid conceptual approach combining **territorial** and **relational** thinking. **'Soft space'** is an example of cross-boundary collaboration observed in planning practice. Yet while pragmatic and creative, soft space has potential problems of legitimacy and accountability.

Themes arising from discussion

Workshop participants shared an understanding that rural and urban places have differing dynamics, but also interdependencies. While rural-urban relations are often approached from an urban perspective, discussions brought rural issues to the fore. Throughout the sessions, discussions asked: **how can rural-urban relations and smart development intersect practically and positively?**

From presentations on 'smart development' and 'smart specialisation' to the EC's new action plan for 'smart villages', **terminology** abounded. What's new about 'smart'? In academic research, different rural development theories have looked at different scales, like individuals and firms (smart development) or communities (networked rural development). Many existing European initiatives also work at different scales to engage stakeholders around development issues. Examples include: LEADER, Integrated Territorial Investments (ITIs), Community Led Local Development (CLLD) and Interreg. As policymaker participants emphasised, a key question is: **How can existing architectures be integrated or built upon?**

Along with asking what is new, participants debated what 'smart' could and should mean. Knowledge, resource use, social innovation, and methods and strategies for

development, all came to mind. But it was also observed that there can be frictions between what is ‘smart’ for a firm or region’s **aims** and what a community might need. Some place-based development schemes, for example, have had economic success by attracting incomers, leaving the existing community excluded. This points to a critical question: **what are the aims of development and the measures of success?**

Thinking about aims also prompted discussion around **enabling opportunities**. In rural localities, education is vital for the development of human capital. Place-based development research recognises that rural localities offer crucial contributions to broader societal issues. Specialisation can enable contributions. But a too narrow concentration on one sector increases vulnerability. **How can smart approaches both focus priorities and create resilience?** Policy participants explained that smart specialisation developed as a practical way to distribute limited funding. Funding ‘carrots’ enable some opportunities, but may constrain others. Similarly, discussion noted that local collaboration enables synergies and access to knowledge and infrastructures – but competition can be good for innovation, too.

Who gets to decide what is smart? Participants queried top-down policy and region-level implementations. Rural localities, especially, may miss out on **engagement** in decisions about regional priorities. In the academic literature, ‘soft space’ also privileges government. Productive partnerships should extend beyond government. Adding other actors, however, may not solve accountability issues. People need to be able to both identify and identify with the form of governance they want to hold to account. Equally, local knowledge should not be romanticised: rootedness in traditional employment or political resistance, for example, may be far from ‘smart’.

Further reading

Allmendinger, P., Haughton, G., Knieling, J., & Othengrafen, F. Eds. (2015). *Soft Spaces in Europe: Re-negotiating Governance, Boundaries and Borders*. London: Routledge.

Brown, D.L., & Shucksmith, M. (2017). Reconsidering Territorial Governance to Account for Enhanced Rural-Urban Interdependence in America. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 672(1):282-301. <http://bit.ly/2oIDCnH>

Naldi, L., Nilsson, P., Westlund, H., & Wixe, S. (2015) What is smart rural development? *Journal of Rural Studies*, 40:90-101. <http://bit.ly/2FigKwS>

TASTE project website <http://taste-smarteurope.eu>