Making EU Missions a priority in the regional smart specialisation strategy

Blekinge Region, Sweden

Blekinge in Sweden decided to make the EU Missions a key part of its Research and Innovation Strategy for Smart Specialisation (smart specialisation strategy), by integrating them as one of the specialisations of the region. This came about as the region recognised the importance of incorporating sustainability and climate change within its smart specialisation strategy, which typically prioritises economic development over sustainability. The region believes that future innovations will emerge from sectors and domains where societal challenges are effectively addressed. Additionally, several of the EU Missions link to the other specialisations of the region – tech (digitalisation and smarter societies) and smart industry (marine technology).

The Blekinge Region views the EU Missions as an effective method to apply to the regional work on societal challenges, as it promotes challenge-driven innovation and fosters collaboration among stakeholders from various sectors to develop solutions. The work within the specialisation on EU Missions therefore focuses on refining the method and implementing it thematically through regional 'Mission Pilots'. Concurrently, the region utilises its strengths within the other areas of specialisation (tech and smart industry) and applies these on the prioritised mission areas: climate-neutral and smart cities, adaptation to climate change, and healthy ocean and waters.

While other regions across Europe typically align the work on the EU Missions with their competence, for example within the areas of transport or healthcare services, Blekinge has instead linked its work on the missions to regional innovation development and smart specialisation. This represents a unique approach that, currently, the region is the only one to adopt.

Involving the regional innovation ecosystem

During the development of the regional smart specialisation strategy, the region recognised the importance of involving stakeholders within the regional innovation ecosystem, alongside other interested stakeholders, to ensure alignment with their work. The region worked closely with key stakeholders of the regional innovation ecosystem such as the science park, Blekinge Institute of Technology, and clusters, in shaping the strategy through dialogues and workshops.

A series of local workshops were organised in the municipalities, while growth forums were convened at the regional level to discuss regional development and the future smart specialisation strategy. Both formats engaged a wide range of actors, including companies and municipal practitioners. Finally, innovation forums were organised for politicians and external actors to provide feedback on the smart specialisation strategy. Most regional stakeholders were in favour of including the EU Missions in the smart specialisation strategy, especially as they saw the small size of the region as advantageous for demonstration initiatives addressing societal challenges.

The EU Missions have proven to be an important tool for fostering enhanced collaboration between the region and Blekinge Institute of Technology. While the institute's expertise in digital prototyping has historically facilitated close collaboration with regional industries and businesses, there has been a growing aspiration to broaden this collaboration, as the knowledge can also be applied in other sectors beyond industry. The missions have enabled the institute to apply its research across various sectors and societal domains. One example is the Horizon Europe project RESIST, linked to the EU Mission on Adaptation to Climate Change, which has facilitated collaboration between the region and Blekinge Institute of Technology in visualising and developing new technological solutions for a climate-resilient future. The work of the RESIST project proved to have greater impact than anticipated for the institute, attracting a substantial number of graduate and PhD students eager to contribute their expertise and skills to address real societal challenges.

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The collaboration fostered by the RESIST project has resulted in Blekinge's involvement in the Partnership for Regional Innovation Pilot on Climate Adaptation and Resilience, alongside four other regions. This pilot aims to enhance the alignment between smart specialisation and transformative innovation for climate change adaptation in the five participating regions.

The Blekinge Region has also engaged companies and businesses in its work on the EU Missions. Larger companies are naturally better positioned to implement sustainable practices and proactive initiatives aligned with mission objectives, due to their resources and large-scale activities. In much of their work, they are already leveraging synergies and seeking out environmental and societal co-benefits. However, smaller businesses face challenges due to resource constraints. The regional Mission Pilots have emerged as a solution to also involve smaller businesses in the mission work.

Implementing EU Missions through Mission Pilots

The Blekinge Region emphasises the importance of adopting a regional interpretation of the EU Missions, aiming to foster a common understanding of what the three prioritised mission areas (climate-neutral and smart cities, adaptation to climate change, and healthy ocean and seas) and their objectives mean to the region. Building on this common understanding, the region is developing an action plan to achieve the prioritised objectives.

The regional Mission Pilots offer a practical approach for the region to work on the Missions by involving multiple stakeholders around clearly defined objectives. The aim is for these pilots to tackle societal challenges and develop concrete solutions, rather than creating plans and other documents. Currently, the region has six Mission Pilots, with four directly aligned with the EU Mission objectives: industrial symbiosis, climate adaptation in cities and municipalities, microplastics, and a knowledge and collaboration forum focusing on innovations in crisis conflict and climate change. The remaining two Mission Pilots, focusing on the topic of mental health, adopt a mission-oriented working method although they are not directly linked to EU Mission objectives.

The Mission Pilot on industrial symbiosis is linked to the mission areas on climate-neutral and smart cities and adaptation to climate change. This pilot aims to develop industrial systems that are both carbon-effective and neutral and that reuse residual and waste streams. Additionally, it is aligned with the region's specialisation in smart industry, which emphasises technological advancements for the industrial green transition.

Currently, the Mission Pilots are in the process of defining the focus of their concrete actions – whether a technological solution, a systems innovation, or another solution is required to address the challenge. Following this, the next phase involved initiating the implementation of the defined actions. Meanwhile, the project Kickstart 2, supported by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), is underway to develop a regional playbook for the missions, aiming to develop a method to support the region in its work on the missions. Two of the Mission Pilots will test the method.

The Blekinge Region has established an informal network comprising regional stakeholders involved in the Mission Pilots, which organises workshops designed to foster collaborative exploration, learning, and reflection. Through the network and its activities, a wide range of stakeholders, including those from the same institutions who may not have previously collaborated, come together. Within these forums, they discover shared interests and identify opportunities for collaboration, crucial for aligning objectives and leveraging potential opportunities.

The work of the Mission Pilots has highlighted a pressing need for both systems innovation and policy innovation, not only at the regional level but also across other governance levels. Implementing a mission-oriented approach is challenging within existing structures and systems, and the current six pilots have struggled to integrate within current organisational and governance structures. Despite these governance challenges, the region advocates for the establishment of additional innovation pilots in the future. Such initiatives are essential for involving stakeholders and stimulating challenge-driven innovations and solutions.

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Utilising regional funds for implementation activities

The Blekinge Region contributed to the formulation of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programme for South Sweden, incorporating both EU Missions and innovations for societal challenges into the programme to align it with the regional smart specialisation strategy. As a result, the region can utilise ERDF funds for regional projects aligned with the mission objectives.

ERDF funds have already been utilised to finance the activities of three Mission Pilots, while the remaining three pilots are financed through other funding sources. Furthermore, ERDF funds have supported the establishment of a new centre for marine technology, which will focus on offshore wind, defence, and resilience, which encompasses energy and sustainable seas.

Blekinge is also involved in the Interreg South Baltic Programme, whose objectives align with those of the EU Missions. Additionally, the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), which supports capacity building, could potentially support mission objectives, although this possibility has yet to be explored and further utilised.

Lessons learnt

The Blekinge Region has acquired valuable insights that may be beneficial for other regions looking to incorporate EU Missions and societal challenges into their smart specialisation strategies, as well as those pursuing an innovation-driven approach to EU Missions.

- Emphasise future-oriented perspectives: Anticipate the societal challenges that the region will face in the future and design the smart specialisation strategy accordingly. Engage regional stakeholders in discussions geared towards fostering a forward-thinking approach.
- Experiment with new initiatives: Whenever feasible, test new initiatives like Mission Pilots alongside the strategy development process. This allows for early demonstration of results and the extraction of valuable lessons. Given the necessity for trial and error when navigating place-based implementation of new initiatives like EU Missions, experimentation is essential.
- Prioritise collaborative innovation: Focus on involving regional stakeholders in the co-creation of innovations, prototypes, and concrete solutions, rather than concentrating on the development of additional strategies and action plans.
- Ensure alignment: Once the smart specialisation strategy has been developed, ensure that related funding programmes are aligned with the priorities of the strategy, that is, EU Mission objectives and mission-oriented approaches.
- Address structural limitations: Existing structures and systems do not support a mission-oriented approach, and regions lack the necessary tools to successfully implement the EU Missions. Engagement of the national level is essential to ensure that policies and governance systems support the missions' implementation.
- Develop synergies: By creating synergies between the prioritised missions, the region can work in a smarter and more resource-efficient and focused way.

This case study has been developed in collaboration with Erika Augustinsson, Innovation Strategist, Region Blekinge and Daniel Sköld, Project Manager, Region Blekinge.

REGION BLEKINGE

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