

## The Network is Key

***Smart specialization is all about the smart combination of competencies in the region. But how does one find partner regions with the right profile to match ones own?***

“Everybody has heard the expression *stronger together* and when joining these types of projects everyone hopes that one plus one will equal three. You hope, but you can't be sure as collaboration with new partners from different cultures is not always easy,” says Emily Wise, a researcher at the University of Lund who specializes in the internationalization of innovation processes and implications on policy in the Baltic Sea Region.

“Working with ten countries that are completely different, with different people, languages, and legal systems, can be challenging. All nations have their own agenda, but to work together you have to find common ground. At first, everybody spoke on behalf of their own country. Then we realized we have to speak on behalf of the macro region for people to listen,” says Rima Dijkstra, who used to be head of the innovation policy division at the Lithuanian Ministry of Economy, but who now works as an innovation consultant based in the Netherlands. She has been involved in BSR Stars since the launch of the program in 2010.

“In BSR Stars, building the trust was the main challenge. It took two years. Before you trust the others you will be reluctant to share your knowledge and ideas. But if you manage to build trust then you can create something unique, develop new ideas and share experience, skills and expertise,” says Dijkstra.



Maria Lindbom, international strategist in Region Skåne, Sweden

Region Skåne was the first Swedish region to develop an innovation strategy focusing on smart specialization. It is widely regarded as a role model for other regions. According to Maria Lindbom, international strategist working with innovation and clusters in Region Skåne, part of what makes their strategy unique is that it focuses on societal challenges instead of specific industries. “If you gather around a common challenge the chances of getting it right are higher,” she says.

Her colleague Lennart Svensson, head of innovation at Region Skåne, agrees: “Doctors only cooperate when there is a patient. Let's identify the issues we can cooperate around.”

Region Skåne has identified smart sustainable cities, personal health, and smart materials, as its three areas of priority. It is currently looking for other regions to collaborate with on these issues and the BSR Stars network is proving to be an invaluable asset.

Wise, along with the program management, continuously evaluates the BSR Stars program and adjusts the program design to incorporate lessons learned. She was thrilled when her research found that the participants of BSR Stars now consider themselves better able to face common challenges jointly. “Stronger together are no longer just empty words,” she says.

Once there is a network built on trust, and people become aware of each others' strengths and weaknesses, things can happen fast. Innovation Express, one of the recent activities within BSR Stars, is proof of that.

“We managed to mobilize financing from six different countries and the Nordic Council of Ministers, launch the call, and select 28 new transnational projects to fund with participants from eleven different countries - all in less than a year. It was possible because there are people who know each other and have worked together before. It is all thanks to the network of ministries and innovation agencies,” says Nygård Skalman.



Karin Nygård Skalman, program director of BSR Stars

Written by Kajsa Norman

Photos by Torbjörn Lagerwall