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Regional Foresight Exercise for the Greek Region of Epirus

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Purpose

The regional foresight exercise for the Epirus region was carried out as one of the project 'Entrepreneurship through Innovation in Epirus – ENTI' actions (Action 5), funded by the Innovative Actions of European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The purpose of the regional technology foresight was to go a step further than short- and medium-term analysis and to provide the EPIRUS region with a clearer view on future technological opportunities as the basis for future innovation.

Opting for Entrepreneurship in the Epirus Region

The regional foresight exercise for the Epirus region was one of the main actions of the "Entrepreneurship through Innovation in Epirus – ENTI" project. The ENTI project aimed to develop innovative measures to support entrepreneurship through innovation in the Greek Epirus region. It was based on the results of the Community Support Framework programme for the Epirus region (1994-1999) and on the strategic analysis of the region which took place during the Regional Innovation Strategy Programme.

The analysis revealed several opportunities for improving Epirus's competitive position in the next years. The infrastructures being developed (like the Igoumenitsa harbour, the Egnatia highway, the new local transport networks, the expansion of the Ioannina University infrastructures, the new tech-

nology park, etc.), create a totally new environment for the region.

Within this framework, Epirus must better comprehend emerging entrepreneurial and investment opportunities, especially in the service sector, and redirect activities to exploit them.

At the same time, obstacles must be overcome and the factors enhancing innovation need to be nurtured. The firms of the region lack innovation culture. Training in innovation development is essential. The local entrepreneurial potential is weak, characterized mainly by small and non-ambitious enterprises, operating in the local environment.

Private capital, either in the form of individual investors or venture capital, must be ensured. Two factors are crucial in this respect: firstly, identifying interesting and well-justified business opportunities, and, secondly, making potential investors aware of those opportunities.

Furthermore, innovative entrepreneurship does not only rely on current opportunities. It also depends on shaping a local economy and technological needs and opportunities that will



occur in the future. Today's innovation policy is not shaped in a vacuum, but needs to consider future needs, challenges and trends. Coordination with other national or regional schemes promoting innovation is also essential. Activities promoting innovation in Greece cover most of the economic sectors. Actions like mobilizing private capital and innovative training should be aware of the current development of new entrepreneurs. Opportunities resulting from parallel actions must be identified and exploited.

Mobilization of Actors

Last but not least, innovation promotion and support cannot be developed without a broader awareness and greater mobilization of companies, entrepreneurs, private capital, local actors, and policy makers. In addition, innovation language should not be "difficult", but needs to be comprehensible for all actors called upon to bring in their ideas and other input.

Following the preceding context analysis and the consequent results and conclusions, the ENTI project adopted an integrated strategy for regional development, based on innovation along the following axes:

- Recognizing and promoting new investment opportunities as a result of infrastructure development in the Epirus region, and by creating new enterprises, especially in the service sector.
- Pilot implementation of innovative training methods targeting innovation development and support.
- Promotion and diffusion of private capital in the Epirus region.
- Pilot promotion of e-commerce and information management in local enterprises.
- Implementation of a regional foresight exercise.
- Creation of an Interface Committee for Innovation.
- Conducting an awareness campaign promoting innovation.

In the future, the region should act not only as a "passage" to Greece, but be developed as a "gateway" to growth via endogenous development and application of innovative ideas.

From Simple 'Passage' to 'Growth Gate'

The ENTI project reflects the new priorities of the Community Support Framework for the Epirus region (2000-2006), aspiring to develop policy orientations and measures to accelerate innovative thinking and innovation in the region. The 2000-2006 Community Support Framework for the Epirus region includes a well-structured approach toward supporting regional development:

- The development of the region as the new Greek Western

Gate to Northern Greece and Europe, and the use of the competitive advantages created by the new transport infrastructures.

- The further development of urban infrastructures and services.
- The development of tourism – the protection and development of the natural and cultural regional resources.
- The sustainable development of non-urban areas.
- The qualitative development of human potential.

Foresight Serving the Local Community: Targeting Transport, Tourism, ICT

In light of the necessity of taking future needs, challenges and trends into consideration in developing innovation policy for the region, ENTI included the implementation of a regional foresight exercise.

The main target was drawing up a framework of directions suited to support regional authorities in designing innovation policy and to help enterprises improve future planning. According to the needs and opportunities identified, the sectors targeted were transport, tourism and ICT. The issues studied referred to Epirus's role as the new gateway to Western Europe, the role of transport and services industry, and the impact of EU enlargement on the availability of Structural and Cohesion Funds, which constitute a major development source for the region.

Challenge Scenarios and Investment Arenas

The main methodology was based on "scenario development". The scenarios referred to possible actions and investment for each thematic area, generally aiming to support regional innovation development policy. The scenario development was the main task of the three expert working groups that were set up (one for each of the three areas targeted). The expert groups worked via internal as well as external consultation workshops. Each of them was asked to organise a consultation workshop for discussing scenarios and another one for disseminating them.

A questionnaire survey was also carried out for each of the study areas, investigating the views of representatives from the local public and the private sectors, as well as other individuals. The aim of the questionnaire survey was to gain feedback on the factors characterizing the scenarios developed as well as on their importance for the region of Epirus, the expected time and feasibility of realization, and their influence on the strategic regional targets. The results of the questionnaire surveys were fed into the working groups.

The increased awareness awakened by the results and their dissemination was the basis of a greater dialogue aiming to raise citizens' and businesspersons' sensitivity towards innovation

and technology. Apart from the dissemination workshops organised by each working group, a final conference also took place making the results of the whole exercise generally known.

Three Sustainable Regional Development Options

Three scenarios were developed for each of the thematic areas studied. Each of them was discussed with the relevant public and private stakeholders via the questionnaire survey and consultation workshops. One of the three was selected as the most desirable for the Epirus region. In collaboration with the stakeholders involved, the policy implications and consequent actions to achieve the desired scenario were then defined.

Transport: Towards ‘Sustainable Mobility’

The most desirable scenario for the development of transport is based on the existence of an integrated plan and a transportation system development policy, geared toward reduced environmental pollution, increased safety in transport, increased quality of life – especially in the urban areas – and involving citizens in decision-making.

It is important to adapt to EU policies for regional development and transport development. An institutional framework defining areas of public-private partnerships and cooperation is also crucial. Furthermore, the specific scenario calls for extensive initiatives and actions by the regional as well as local authorities to improve services, protect the environment and citizens’ quality of life. In this respect, the role of entrepreneurship, research and innovation is relevant. In turn, the upgrading of firms involved in transport is a crucial factor, as is the collaboration between the academic world, research bodies and the business world.

Tourism: From ‘Mass’ to ‘Mild’ and ‘Innovative’ Tourism

The most desirable route chosen for the tourism sector was away from the current ‘mass’ tourism development model towards a ‘mild’ and then an ‘innovative’ tourism model. The ‘mild tourism’ scenario supports the development of sustainable tourism with cautious interference and respect for the environment, building up a more widespread sustainable development culture. This scenario is based on the distribution of demand throughout the year, the promotion of the economic and cultural wealth of the region, and the integration of tourism within the regional economy such that the entire region may participate in the benefits.

The ‘innovative’ tourism scenario highlights the development of significant innovations in tourist activities and services. The production and support of new ideas is facilitated by exploiting the demand for new features and trends, as well as forming new demands by launching new products and services. In this respect, Epirus is defined as a new destination for high-quality, specialized tourism (winter tourism, spiritual tourism, adventure tourism, etc.).

ICT: Towards an ‘Intelligent Community’

In relation to the development of the ICT sector, the most desirable scenario was chosen to be the ‘Intelligent Community’. This is characterised by broad ICT usage in everyday operations in the private and the public sectors, as well as individual households. ICT applications are user-friendly, and citizens use them in a wide range of activities. Transactions with public organizations are easy and fast, aiming to maximise citizen satisfaction.

The ‘Intelligent Community’ scenario envisaged by the Epirus community reflects the ICT’s potentially important role in regional development, enhancing social cohesion, participation and competitiveness.

Social Modification alongside Technological and Institutional Change

In consultation with stakeholders, each working group went further and identified the challenges and issues to be tackled in order to create the required conditions for realising the most desirable scenario. Additionally, consequent policy implications and priorities were defined and concrete actions were suggested.

Transport: Need for Cultural Change

The major factors considered important for realising the ‘sustainable mobility’ scenario referred to the creation and management of large infrastructure works, ensuring the availability of necessary investment capital, exploiting the positive developments in the Balkans, and accepting the basic principles of the scenario directing consumer preferences.

Human resources were considered crucial in terms of acquiring the necessary skills, knowledge and know-how, as well as increasing citizens’ and businesses’ awareness and strengthening culture in favour of environmental protection. Life-long learning and information for transport sector employees and its users on issues of new technologies, institutional and transport regulations, e-services, etc. were considered a major factor in making the ‘sustainable mobility’ scenario possible. General factors, such as creating suitable conditions for market development and competition, improving economic conditions, and setting up and respecting rules protecting the environment, were also noted.

Supporting the development and application of research, technology, know how and innovation in the necessary fields was also considered crucial. In addition, the importance of the development and application of ICTs was also noted, because of their contribution to improving services, increasing the competitiveness of transport businesses, protecting the environment and improving the quality of life, especially in urban areas. In this respect, the important role of the academic and research community of the region was observed, as well as that of the central and regional administration in supporting these developments.

Certain institutional interventions in relation to safety issues were also highlighted, as well as new transport activities and services not burdening the environment. The regional and local authorities were to be strengthened in their role as main actors next to central administration.

Tourism: Towards Developing a Unique ‘Product’

The route to be taken by the region is the development of its own tourist ‘product’, presenting and exploiting distinctive local features, attractions and advantageous sides of the region. Products and services should be specialized and targeted to a specific market segment. However, this must be preceded by a long period of combining several forms of alternative tourism. In this way, the desired form and particularities can be identified that distinguish the new tourism development model from the current one.

First, a ‘mild’ tourism development model should be established, which respects the environment while maximizing the value of public and private investments within integrated land-planning. This model should evolve by identifying and developing an ‘innovative’ tourism model as orientation, characterized by the constant development and application of new ideas.

The mobilization of the region’s entire human capital has to be achieved through a common set of objectives which should include at least:

- extending the tourist season;
- attracting high-income tourists;
- increasing demand, especially from Europe, USA, Canada and Australia as well as South-east Asia;
- developing new forms of alternative tourism and enhanced tourist packages; and
- offering services to passing tourists.

The collaboration of all relevant actors is important (administration, businesses, academia and the research community). The same is true for the public and the private sectors (for example, via public-private partnerships). Similarly, given that the tourism sector is quite extensive, the whole community in

fact contributes to the development of the final tourist ‘product’. Thus, it is important to mobilize all the regional and local authorities in order to sensitize citizens and involve them in defining the joint vision.

ICTs – Still a Long Way to Go

The consultation concluded that the ICT development policy of the region should emphasize the following issues:

- Extension and upgrading of existing communication networks and creation of new infrastructures.
- Promotion of education and training in ICTs.
- Support of research and innovation, and linking them with the market and production.
- Support of local academic and research institutions in terms of both infrastructure and human resources.
- Promotion of the use of ICT in the transport and tourism sectors.
- Supporting the application and use of Geographical Information Systems.

The regional foresight exercise was considered as an important activity towards the creation of human networks, exploration of new knowledge fields and formation of participatory governance.

The results of the exercise were communicated to relevant policy-makers and stakeholders both during the exercise (through the organised workshops and final conference) as well as afterwards. The results were available in time to contribute to the formation of the Region’s Development Strategy within the 4th Community Support Framework (2007-2013). Hence, they were disseminated during the consultation phase dealing with formation of the region’s development for the next programming period. Round tables were organised at the prefecture level (in all of the four prefectures of the Epirus region). Even though the design of the subsequent actions cannot be attributed solely to the results of this exercise, the view is that the foresight exercise was quite helpful in conceiving the region’s future.

Sources and References

<http://www.bicepirus.gr/enti/en/program/actions.htm> (Action 5)

About the EFMN: Policy Professionals dealing with RTD, Innovation and Economic Development increasingly recognize a need to base decisions on broadly based participative processes of deliberation and consultation with stakeholders. One of the most important tools they apply is FORESIGHT. The EFMN or European Foresight Monitoring Network supports policy professionals by monitoring and analyzing Foresight activities in the European Union, its neighbours and the world. The EFMN helps those involved in policy development to stay up to date on current practice in Foresight. It helps them to tap into a network of know-how and experience on issues related to the day to day design, management and execution of Foresight and Foresight related processes.