

Introduction

Annalisa Caloffi

Sandrine Labory

Christian Longhi

Sylvie Rochhia

The European 2020 Strategy has put innovation at the heart of European efforts to strengthen the competitiveness of the European economy. For this purpose, the creation and support of clusters at regional level has been stressed as one of the key actions to be implemented. As shown by the initiatives of the European Commission including the creation of a European Cluster Observatory, clusters are a key concern at European level. However, clusters have been an essential focus of national and region policies too.

In 2008 the European Commission published a Communication on an innovation strategy for the Union based on the development of world-class clusters, a “policy framework for better complementarities and synergies between the different policy levels with a view to supporting the development of more world-class clusters in the EU” (COM(2008)652 Final/2, p.2). The Community Strategic Guidelines on Cohesion (CSGs) adopted by the Council on 6 October 2006 for the period 2007-2013 explicitly encourage Member States and regions to promote strong clusters as part of their economic reform strategies. The European Commission recommended improving trans-national cluster cooperation, promoting the excellence of cluster organization and ensuring inclusion of SMEs in cluster programme as essential elements of policies aimed at building world-class clusters.

Many policy initiatives have been adopted in the European countries since then, both at national and at regional level, and this special issue intends to provide a well-documented source of information on this variety. The issue gathers together different articles covering a wide range of countries and cases, providing evidence that under the same label of cluster strategy, policies have taken various forms and focuses, and have had different effects.

The first contribution is an illustration of the diversity of the cluster policies; it is dedicated to the variety of regional cluster policies in a federal state, Germany, and to policy learning from other experiences. The purpose of this special issue on cluster policies is indeed to learn from multiple experiences.

A number of contributions show the changes occurred in the cluster policies over time. This is the case of Korea, France, Italy, Germany, Basque Country, and somehow UK, where the cluster policies begin to spread in the 90's. In all these countries the cluster strategies change their labels over time, and in many cases they also modify their content. Policy objectives and general policy settings also change, and in some cases, such as in France or in Italy, the “old” cluster policies seem to be at odds with the new strategies. In some cases, such as in the UK, the reforms of regional development agencies that were in charge of cluster strategies introduce further complexity.

Other contributions relate to some countries and regions in which cluster policies have been implemented in recent times. This is the case of, China, Russia, Serbia, Tunisia and Turkey where cluster strategies emerge during the 2000s. Although the experiences of these countries are still young, some contribution tries to provide some evidence of the results achieved so far, as well as some analysis of the more general context into which these policies insert. In all these cases, cluster policies are instruments to promote the development and the innovative potential of a region. In the case of China these objectives combine with the aim of achieving a more balanced development.

Last but not least, the *i-topic* associated to this issue draw lessons from a personal experience related to the implementation of the so-called third mission of universities in the Italian industrial district.