EVALUATING EUROPEAN REGIONAL INNOVATION STRATEGIES

Jon Mikel Zabala-Iturriagagoitia (*), Fernando Jiménez-Sáez, Elena Castro-Martínez
Postal address: INGENIO (CSIC-UPV), Institute of Innovation and Knowledge Management, Ciudad Politécnica de la Innovación, Edificio 8E. Camino de Vera s/n, 46022 Valencia, Spain.
* Corresponding address: jonzait@ingenio.upv.es

Abstract

In this paper we analyse the degree of achievement of the Regional Innovation Strategy goals. This is an EU Commission policy oriented toward the promotion of regional STI policy design through the involvement of regional stakeholders. We analyse two categories of objectives: those dealing with process participation and those dealing with behavioural change. Our results show that the overall achievement of the goals is meaningful: the former have been achieved in a larger extent than the latter ones. However, other aspects such as multidisciplinary, and the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system have not been so fruitful.

1.- Introduction

The view, role and importance of the region as a territory of reference is changing rapidly and still evolving within the EU area. This is resulting in a process of competence devolution to the regions in several EU countries which gives them room for the development of regional policies (Fernández de Lucio et al., 2003). On the other hand the importance of the innovation policy both at national and EU levels is no longer under discussion. Regional governments have also profited from several regional development theories and approaches such as the learning region approach (Morgan, 1997; Landabaso, 2000) or the regional innovation system idea (Autio, 1998; Braczyk et al., 1998) to claim for the design and implementation of regional innovation policies.
as part of their competencies. Therefore, the consideration of the region as a geographical space with specific and different characteristics in terms of institutional, regulatory and legal frameworks from those of the nation (Cooke et al., 2000) has posed problems and raised concerns on the design, implementation and evaluation of regional Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) policies (Díez, 2002).

In order to provide some support to the development of these policies, the EU launched in 1994 the Regional Innovation Strategies (RIS) as the most active exercise in the promotion of R&D and innovation policies at the regional level with the aim of offering regional stakeholders a common platform to promote, design, implement, manage and evaluate the region’s R&D and innovation policy. As Oughton et al. assert “the idea is that by spending a small additional sum of money on innovation policy and networking key players, the RIS policy aims to increase the efficiency of industrial policy by ensuring that the structural funds are spent strategically and targeted at innovation” (2002: 105) in a clear intention to redirect regional policy efforts toward innovation as the regional policy core provoking an additionality effect (Buisseret et al., 1995). In this sense, RIS initiative offers regions the possibility to learn not only from their own experiences but also from the ones of those with similar characteristics, so as to improve their regional programmes and adapt them to their specificities.

Many EU regions have applied the RIS framework to undertake the R&D and innovation policy design process since the initiative was set. We can find in the literature some examples of how the RIS process has been carried out (Morgan and Nauwelaers 2003; Henderson, 2000) or descriptions illustrating RIS obstacles in configuring the regional innovation system (Kyrgiafini and Sefertzi, 2003). Therefore many efforts have been addressed toward the evaluation of partial objectives. Just one work regarding the evaluation of the RIS has been found in the literature, undertaken by ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd. on behalf of the European Commission (Ecotec, 2000). This approach was based on the results of a questionnaire completed by 19 RIS regions and examining relevant documentation and eight case studies in
1998. It represents a descriptive view of the RIS, but does not evaluate the whole programme. However few attempts have been addressed to gauge to what extent RIS exercises have meant an actual change in the way regions and regional stakeholders face and tackle regional STI policy design and whether this EU support scheme has rendered the intended additionality effects. In this respect we want to highlight the behavioural additionality concept (Buisseret, et al, 1995) as the operational tool to gauge to what extent RIS initiatives have meant a behavioural change on regional stakeholders involved in the policy design process.

In this context, the objective of this paper is to set a comparison framework to evaluate the usefulness of the different regions’ RIS exercise in achieving the EU goals for this initiative, regarding the established guidelines and stakeholders involvement in the policy design, identifying therefore reasons for the observed differences across RIS exercises.

To do so, we have structured the paper as follows: first we describe the RIS initiative, its main goals and the methodology defined by the European Commission for its development. Next, we propose the research methodology used to analyse the degree of success of each regional initiative and we define our common comparison framework. Then we perform our analysis on the existing RIS initiatives for the period 1997-2000. The last section of this paper is devoted to draw some conclusions on the previous results and suggest some policy recommendations.

2.- Describing the European Regional Innovation Strategies (RIS) innovative action

RIS initiative was introduced in 1994 as an instrument to promote STI policy implementation at the regional level aiming at “stimulating the development of clusters … that combine industrial, technological and geographical advantages … [which] requires the active involvement of all the actors concerned … [and in which] the main emphasis should be on a horizontal, transsectoral and multidisciplinary approach”
These pilot projects were launched to help regions focus on performance and create the participative dynamics necessary to design their own STI policies (Oughton et al., 2002). As Morgan et al. (2003: 12) state, they were “a ‘social engineering’ action at the regional level whose aim is to stimulate and manage co-operation links among firms and the regional RTDI actors (Research, Technological Development and Innovation), which may contribute to their competitive position through innovation”. The main aim of this RIS initiative was the design of an innovation oriented strategy for the regions (Oughton et al., 2002). Other goals included (European Commission, 1998, 1999a):

- Promote more open and consensus based processes for developing regional policies;
- Create an innovation culture;
- Identify regional firms’ needs in terms of innovation support services;
- Target and strengthen identified small and medium sized enterprise (SME) growth sectors and clusters;
- Co-ordinate the actions of existing innovation support structures;
- Increase inter-firm and public-private co-operation and networking;
- Develop a horizontal, transectoral and multidisciplinary approach;
- Identify new pilot innovation projects in firms and/or new innovation policy schemes;
- Exploit the European dimension through engaging in inter-regional co-operation and benchmarking of policies and methods.

From the previous targets two main types of goals can be distinguished: methodological and behavioural. By methodological (process goals) we understand those which encourage regions to develop the RIS process according to some previously (in this case by the Commission) procedures or guidelines (i.e. involving the main stakeholders, promoting consensus, carrying out self-diagnosis and benchmarking exercises); that is, encouraging regions to act in a particular way.
Equally, the behavioural goals aim at inspiring regions to behave in a certain way in their future policy making processes (i.e. promoting an innovation culture, inter-regional networking, monitoring and evaluating their policies). We will come back to this later on.

On average, each RIS initiative involves around 0.5M€, co-financed equally by the European Commission and the region, provided over a period of two years. This funding has enabled more than 30 regions to develop strategies including audits of more than 5,000 SMEs, and several hundred RTDI organizations becoming active players in the definition and assembly of action plans arising out of these strategies (Henderson, 2000; Morgan et al., 2003).

In practice, each RIS comprises three main phases (European Commission, 1999a; Landabaso et al., 2003; Landabaso and Mouton, 2005):

1. Consensus building and awareness phase:
   - discussion and negotiation among key regional actors

2. Analysis phase:
   - Self-diagnosis
     - Identification of firms’ innovation needs
     - Analysis of the region’s innovative capital
   - Benchmarking
     - Study of international trends in key sectors
     - Interregional benchmarking analysis

3. Elaboration of a RIS
   - Identifying pilot projects
   - Designing and implementing a monitoring and evaluation system.

Since 1996, many European regions have participated in these RIS pilot projects (Table 1). They include regions in decentralized countries which are involved in regional decision making, such as Weser-Ems and Almark-Harz-Magdeburg in
Germany, and the Basque Country and Aragón in Spain, and regions in centralized countries, such as Auvergne in France and Dytiki Makedonia in Greece. Thus, it can be seen that these pilot projects have fostered the design of regional policies regardless of the level of national-regional government centralization.

[Table 1 here]

In moving from general to regional specificities, Figure 1 depicts the main processes involved (in different ways and from different viewpoints) in the implementation of a specific RIS. The steering group, including firm representatives, local authorities and key innovation stakeholders, is responsible for the overall development of the pilot project. Its tasks include defining objectives, monitoring the project, selecting the management team personnel and offering support to policy makers. The management team, as well as being in charge of correct implementation of the project, is responsible for liaising with the European Commission and support organizations, by reporting on the tasks being carried out, and acting as the main hub in the regional network, to facilitate achievement of a regional consensus and cooperation with other regions. Impartial consultants and experts have responsibility for specific tasks, whilst the working groups focus on sector specific issues.

[Figure 1 here]

The figure provides a general picture, but it should be remembered that each region develops its RIS process in a specific way and based on different perspectives. In some regions local institutions, usually those responsible for innovation policy making, play a major role in the implementation process (i.e. Weser-Ems, Basque Country); in others this responsibility is taken on by the universities (i.e. Norte) or by firms and technology centres (i.e. Western Scotland). However, as will be seen, since
the instrument is mainly focused on SMEs, in almost every region the involvement of firms in the definition, consensus building and implementation processes has been substantial.

The RIS initiative is thus seen as the additionality mechanism which provides a modest amount of funds to involve regional stakeholders in the design of the regional policy and provoking a change in their behaviour with respect to their involvement in future policy design processes. In this respect, the RIS Initiative is aimed at motivating regions to define, implement and evaluate their STI policies, based on the methodology set by the initiative, therefore providing policy tools specifically designed by the European Commission, to enable regions to learn from their own (and the others) experience. This in the end results in the promotion of the knowledge society and learning share as an effective vehicle to induce the desired behavioural change on stakeholders with respect to their implication on the regional policy design feeding back the knowledge society building process.

In addition, RIS initiative counts on a very significant support structure from the European Commission. As a matter of fact, the IRE (Innovating Regions in Europe) Network constitutes nowadays one of the most relevant sources for carrying out benchmarking exercises on innovation policies in European regions, with more than 235 regions currently gathering the network. Its main target is to ease the exchange of experiences and good practices among those European regions enhancing their capacity to support innovation and competitiveness through the development and implementation of regional innovation strategies and schemes (IRE Network). Hence, as we mentioned before, the European Commission aimed at defining a policy oriented to foster the learning and knowledge society in Europe. In this sense it has to be added that in December 2006, the Directorate General of Enterprise and Industry launched a new platform called PRO INNO⁵, complementing the IRE Network, aiming at contributing to the development of better innovation policies in Europe, learning from best-practices and transregional cooperation.
These types of policies are mainly oriented to influencing policy making bodies directly and reaching all the agents involved through a chain reaction, to achieve a systemic image of the region. It is a matter of “teaching regions [how] to fish” instead of “giving them the fish”; the former promotes learning processes, which the latter does not. Thus, encouragement and support of these types of policies is crucial in order to develop methodologies that promote social and political learning in the region (Landabaso and Mouton, 2005).

3.- Methodology

We find in the literature many approaches to policy evaluation but also agreements in the sense that no single evaluation methodology will be applicable to every type of policy (Díez, 2001). In other words, there is no ideal methodological design, and each situation, policy or instrument requires a unique and specific evaluation plan. Nevertheless, it is also generally accepted that there is a need to integrate both quantitative and qualitative methods (Lawrence, 2004) in order to achieve a better understanding of the economic and social impact of the policies being evaluated. In our case, we investigate the degree of achievement of a policy design considering EU pre-established guidelines and stakeholders’ involvement in the policy design process. Hence the approach to this research rests on qualitative observations of whether each region’s policy design has been accomplished according to the EU guidance. We only can quantify the number of regions which are behaving in such way and consider design aspects such as consensus building, networking and institutional learning (European Commission, 1999a).

The information used for this evaluation is the documentation provided by the regions in their memories once their RIS process had been finished (IRE Network). Hence, we will focus on those regions that participated in the two RIS periods where the initiative was carried out (Table 1), 1997-1999 and 1998-2000. It has to be acknowledged that the information available in these public sources might offer a
biased view of the RIS as a policy instrument, since these memories cannot offer in depth information. However, it has to be added that these memories constitute the only source of information available regarding these innovative actions.

We will carry out a qualitative ex-post evaluation so as to determine if the objectives in each of the RIS phases have been achieved. Related to this, Bachtler and Michie (1997) and Batterbury (2006) show how ex-ante, interim and ex-post evaluations have been applied in some European policies.

RIS have been applied in many different EU regions with varying degrees of success. As pointed out in the introduction above, the literature provides some examples of RIS processes in several regions. Henderson (2000) focuses on the Welsh Regional Technology Programme (RTP) showing its contribution to the development of learning processes among stakeholders in the region. Kyrgiafini and Sefertzi (2003) identify some of the main obstacles to the formation of regional innovation systems in Kentriki Makedonia, Dytiki Makedonia and Thessalia (Greece), and show that the initiatives in these regions have been effective in creating a supporting institutional framework which has fostered regional innovation efforts. And Morgan and Nauwelaers (2003) illustrate how the RIS processes have been developed in Limburg, Lorraine, Wales, Kentriki Makedonia and Castilla y Leon among other regions.

In addition to it, in 2005 Socintec carried out an ex-post evaluation of the 1994-1999 European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funded innovative actions (Socintec, 2005). It focuses mainly on the relevance of the strategy, its effectiveness, impact and community added value. Nevertheless, it is agreed that in order to assess the actual impact of the programme, it is necessary to show some more continuity in this innovative activities.

The criteria we use in the paper are determined by the goals of the RIS initiative. This way, within the consensus building phase, we evaluate the involvement of the main actors in the process, the promotion of consensus based decisions and the
promotion of an innovation environment (culture). In the second analysis phase, we study on the one hand if the self-diagnosis and benchmarking processes have been developed or not, and the development of networking, the coordination of the existing innovation support infrastructures and multidisciplinary approaches on the other. Finally, and within the RIS elaboration/implementation phase we mainly focus on the extent to which RIS regions consider monitoring and evaluation related activities in their strategies and consequently in their future innovation policy making processes. Besides, we also devote attention to the identification of innovative regional pilot projects within the new strategies and the participation (or absence of it) in the future RIS+ initiatives, what reflects the continuity given to innovation related issues in the regions. It has to be added that the EU Commission, with the RIS initiative, aimed not only at determining regions to define a regional innovation strategy but also to provide them with a concrete methodology. Hence, its goals, and consequently the criteria employed to their evaluation (both methodological and those more oriented to obtaining behavioural changes or concrete outputs) have been classified into these sets.

4.- Results

Table 2 presents the main results of our RIS evaluation in the three stages of the RIS projects (consensus building, analysis and RIS elaboration-implementation), and includes the criteria referred to above to evaluate the particular issues to be developed in each stage.

[Table 2 here]

In the first RIS (consensus building) phase, all the regions involved the main actors in the process, e.g. universities, firms, technology centres, public institutions, ministries, cluster representatives, etc. Thus, there is a critical correspondence across regions in terms of this social participation and the characterization of the RIS as a
consensus based practice. In fact, almost all regions (83%) had a consensus based procedure from the beginning. A smaller percentage (63%) considered the promotion of an innovation based culture or environment within their societies as a major goal.

The previous phase was followed by a period of analysis when the main actors were chosen and the process was widely discussed. In the self-diagnosis step, two key activities can be distinguished: identification of the innovation needs of firms; and analysis of the region’s innovative capital. One of the central aspects in defining a RIS is that it should accord with regional specificities. All the regions completed these two stages in the period under study. For example, in Wallonie an interesting study was accomplished to make the main strengths of the region emerge in those regional key technological domains. This study revealed a whole set of 40 key technologies according to the social trends, the (at that time) current technological developments and the analysis of the growth potential of the sectors in which these technologies were to be applied.

The development of an interregional benchmarking analysis was achieved by 58% of the regions. The success of a RIS is strongly related to the increased cooperation and networking among regional actors. Having identified these agents who were brought together to work towards a common regional goal, 88% of the regions participating in the RIS process consider the increased interactivity among regional actors to be an essential aspect, which should continue to be fostered. This relates to the need to coordinate the existing innovation related support infrastructures which was accomplished by 67% of the RIS regions.

On the other hand, the development of multidisciplinary approaches to the definition of the new regional strategy was undertaken by only 16%. This lack of multidisciplinarity can be considered as a surprising result nowadays, when most technologies and products incorporate different sources of technologies and the diversification of the industrial structure is at its core (Corley, 2007). However, one has to bear in mind that despite the Commission already wanted to promote this
multidisciplinary approaches to innovation, most regions were not still capable enough to face these processes in the end of the 90s. This reflects the learning processes taken place in the reorientation of innovation policies in the last years (Schwerin and Werker, 2003).

Most regions had focused on establishing sectoral strategies for key sectors; few showed an interest in creating new business orientations based on combinations of the strengths of their core sectors. Those that did include Yorkshire & the Humber, Altmark-Harz-Magdeburg, Wallonie and West Midlands.

In Yorkshire & the Humber the collaborative work between the Electronics Industries and the Engineering Marine Training Association should be highlighted. Altmark-Harz-Magdeburg stands out due to its focus on intelligent mechanical engineering, innovative environmental technologies for recycling systems, medical technologies with a special focus on non-operative therapies, and the development of ready-to-market, need orientated tourism offers/health tourism, and tourist information systems. Wallonie has set up five pilot “grappes” (telecommunications, environment, energy, transport, construction and public works) that has allows the development of 15 projects in which 95 partners are involved, being 64 of them firms, and the rest public research organizations (IRE Network). Finally, in West Midlands a dual approach favoured both highly innovative and high value added sectors, and was instrumental in encouraging the application of new technologies to more traditional sectors with a significant presence in the region. The emerging strategy is placing considerable stress on manufacturing design, information technologies for manufacturing and new materials. Some examples of this strategy in the West Midlands can be found in the application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the medical and pharmaceutical sectors and the application of computer aided design (CAD) for the development of new materials, processes and dyes in sectors such as ceramics and textiles.
The next step for all RIS regions was the definition of their *regional innovation strategy* and the action plan for its implementation. Besides, most regions (83%) identified concrete *pilot projects* to be developed and implemented in their respective territories as a future outcome of the new regional innovation strategy. This involves that 63% of the regions decided to participate in the foregoing *RIS+ initiative* in order to become those strategic pilot projects identified during the RIS visible and that way give continuity to the innovation policy in their territories.

The foregoing description may give the impression that to a great extent, the main goals of the RIS initiative initial phases have been achieved. According to the results of our evaluation, the main regional actors have been involved in building consensus based processes, the needs of regional firms and the regions’ the innovative capital have been identified, and new strategies have been put in place including key aspects such as networking and the creation of new firms. One of the main rationales for the RIS was that it would enable regions to learn about innovation policy formulation (European Commission, 1999a, 1999b). Learning is an implicit goal within the evaluation targets (Batterbury, 2006). Hence our aim is to provide some evidence of a relationship (or absence of it) between the two within the RIS framework.

The last two columns in the RIS Elaboration-Implementation Phase in Table 2 show that very few regions conceive evaluation in their RIS memories (i.e. Niederösterreich, Galicia, Basque Country, Northern EU, Weser-Ems, Shannon and Yorkshire & the Humber). Only 25% of RIS regions showed an awareness of its importance for regional policies and there are wide disparities in regions’ (RIS) evaluation procedures. It is somehow striking this lack of evaluation mechanisms if RIS initiatives aim at inducing benchmarking exercises in order to identify best practices.

In order to demonstrate these differences in regional approaches to evaluation, we highlight show some of their particularities. In Niederösterreich, among the identified needs for external innovation support, the evaluation of the feasibility of the pilot projects is included (IRE Network). RIS Galicia has contemplated the use of
indicators to monitor the regional strategy, and guarantee the progress of the project and accomplishment of the defined targets. In the Basque Country, the RIS process has resulted in the implementation of a monitoring and evaluation system that was developed to assess the impacts of the current Basque Science and Technology Plan (BSTP) 1997-2000 through a preliminary analysis of the programmes launched. The results of this monitoring exercise contributed to modifying the organization, definition and implementation of programmes within the BSTP. This process also was applied to the 2001-2004 BSTP. The RIS Northern EU project plan includes a proposal for an Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum to monitor the implementation phase of the strategy and to measure the increase in cross-border cooperation in innovation. In Shannon, the view is that implementation of the strategy must include the establishment of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This involves the use of accurate and specialized indicators (Morgan, 2004) to enable the benchmarking of future achievements against the existing regional baseline. In Yorkshire & the Humber a wide set of measures, which fall into three categories (High Performing Companies, Access to Knowledge/Expertise and Support for Companies), has been proposed to evaluate the performance of the RIS, despite no explicit mention is made to the evaluation of future regional policies. Finally, in Weser-Ems the regional working plans and projects are constantly being evaluated, by representatives of chambers of commerce and businessmen on the Steering Committee, to assess their positive effects on SMEs, in spite of the fact that as in the previous case of Yorkshire & the Humber, it is not clarified whether this evaluation processes are going to be extended to future policy making procedures (IRE Network).

In order to explain these differences, a possible hypothesis is that those regions more experienced in the definition and implementation of innovation policies in their respective territories are more disposed to their evaluation. Despite we cannot assert this for all the European RIS regions, in the Spanish case it can clearly be observed how those regions (participating in the initiative) that count on with a longer experience
in the innovation policy making procedures (both previously and subsequent to the RIS initiative), are also the ones that a higher degree of fulfilment show in this sense (Calderón Patier et al., 2005).

This diversity of approaches in the regional innovation evaluation practices involves great difficulties when searching for common patterns among regions, what would allow them to have some minimum of coincidence and hence ease their inter-regional learning and benchmarking.

Based on these results, and as regards the awareness and effort devoted by RIS regions towards evaluating their regional policies it is possible to categorize them within the following groups:

1.- Regions that do not consider evaluation as central to their innovation policies (e.g. Limburg, Extremadura, Dytiki Makedonia, Thessalia, Abruzzo, Calabria, Norte),

2.- Regions that see evaluation practices as relevant, but will consider, and hence develop, them in the future (e.g. Aragon, Castilla la Mancha, Altmark-Harz-Magdeburg, Epirus, Sterea Ellada, Puglia),

3.- Regions that evaluate their innovation strategies (policies) (e.g. Niederösterreich, Galicia, West Midlands, Western Scotland, Northern EU),

4.- Regions that have implemented mechanisms to monitor and evaluate their regional innovation policies (e.g. Basque Country, Weser-Ems, Shannon, Yorkshire & the Humber).

These findings are in line with Batterbury’s (2006) in the sense that regions (countries in her case) can be categorized according to their experience in evaluation. In the same fashion, Socintec (2005: 10) classifies the ERDF regions within five groups depending on their degree of maturity when dealing with innovation and information society issues.

5.- Conclusions and discussion
RIS initiatives have been mainly addressed toward the promotion of collaboration dynamics among stakeholders to stimulate their involvement in the design of regional STI policies. In addition, the Commission has provided the regions with the IRE Network and its platform to exchange knowledge and experiences.

The RIS initiatives pose some objectives that we can group into two categories: those dealing with process participation and those dealing with behavioural change of stakeholders. In this paper we analyse to what extent these two categories have been fulfilled in each RIS initiative. The average achievement of the goals in the RIS initiative rises to a 72% (Table2). Hence, we can state that in global terms the initiative has been fruitful. This success is mainly produced due to the RIS own guidelines: methodology, support from the IRE Network, exchange of experiences and documents among regions to foster the inter-regional co-operation and networking. In this sense, those goals related to the management of the initiative itself, or process goals, have been achieved to a higher extent than the output and behavioural ones\(^{10}\). This shows that both the methodology provided by the EU Commission and the included guidelines have been useful for the participating regions.

As a result of using RIS methodology, all regions have defined a regional innovation strategy and an action plan for its future implementation. These strategies include key activities identified by the Commission: involvement of the main regional actors in consensus based processes, identification of the needs of the regional firms, analyse the innovative capital within the region, definition and identification of new priorities, coordination of the existing innovation support structures, etc. That way, among the output and behavioural targets, those that have not been achieved to a greater extent are the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach (16% of regions) and the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation system (less than 30%).

Why do some regions develop evaluation practices while others do not? There are some possible explanations. It is beyond of the scope of this paper to review the multi-faceted literature analysing the factors that may foster (hinder) the innovative
capacity of the territories that has emerged in recent years. Here, we point to some possible reasons for the absence of these evaluation processes:

- The methodology provided by the EU to the regions to develop the RIS initiative suggests the inclusion of the evaluation as part of the political procedure but does not make an explicit statement in this sense.
- Policy makers are often reluctant to undertake independent evaluations of their activities, which makes it even more difficult to develop these evaluations.
- There is a significant need to improve the indicators and measures that would enable innovation activities and policies to be evaluated. Currently there is a lack of robust innovation-related indicators in the regional arena. In addition, outcomes of this sort of policy are not expected to be achieved in the short run.

As the Commission itself concurs “one of the main problems associated with the monitoring of the impact of innovation is the identification and definition of suitable indicators” (European Commission, 1997: 62). In this sense, the Commission made an effort suggesting a list of possible evaluation indicators for regions to develop continuous monitoring and evaluation activities. However, as the results obtained by Socintec (2005: xiii) show, “the use of indicators as an instrument for handling project progress is limited. Indicators signalling whether the projects are on the right track in relation to its objectives, or impact indicators, have seldom been developed and used in a systemised manner”. From here, we can conclude that the implementation of evaluation processes is quite vague, and that monitoring and evaluation activities do not appear to be formal or even systematic processes.

But why is this lack of indicators so crucial for regions? It is not just because policies need to be evaluated, but also because these innovative actions require the development of benchmarking and inter-regional learning activities, which do require the use of concrete indicators, defined and collected in all regions. Without them, not only the evaluation, but also many other networking activities cannot be achieved.
In order to overcome these weaknesses in the future regional innovative actions we consider that in the same way as the Commission offers some methodological procedures in their (in this case) RIS methodology, some indicators could also be offered in order to help regions monitor the RIS process and in the longer run evaluate their regional innovation policy. From here on regions could incorporate new indicators, both from a quantitative and qualitative perspective, according to their specificities, strategies or policies defined. In this sense, we agree that the inclusion of process or monitoring oriented indicators could be overcome with few efforts, but the identification of output and outcome-oriented indicators becomes an extremely difficult task.

Taking into account that one of the main features of the RIS initiative is its consensus based procedure in which the Steering Group and the Management Team play an extensive role, these stakeholders may face the responsibility of developing the necessary evaluation processes in their respective regions. This trend is also pointed out by the EU Commission. That way, and since the stakeholders above are conscious of the dynamics generated within their own regions, they can promote a ‘participatory evaluation’ process, in which the rest of the regional stakeholders play a more comprehensive role. These participatory processes are all aimed at changes and improvements to evaluation procedures to make them more interactive, contextualized and directed towards knowledge building. These techniques do not impose a design from outside, but develop as a result of collaboration among stakeholders and their active participation in the evaluation process. Such participatory approach should benefit the evaluation of regional policies, since it enables evaluation to become an exercise that contributes to achievement of the goals of new regional policies. Besides, the EU Commission should provide support for the development of quantitative and qualitative evaluation methodologies within each region and keep on supporting the IRE Network and its platform as well as those network activities addressed toward the professional development of its members.
References


http://europa.eu.int/en/record/white/c93700/contents.html


IRE NETWORK. Innovating Regions in Europe: http://www.innovating-regions.org/


Notes

1 This paper draws on the knowledge base of the ERA-Spaces research group within the PRIME Network of Excellence. We would like to show our appreciation to Mikel Landabaso and his colleagues at the European Commission for their input into previous drafts of this paper. We would also like to acknowledge the advice and help received from Jordi Molas Gallart, Mikel Gómez Uranga, Elvira Uyarra, Manuel Laranja and the contributions made by two anonymous referees on the first draft of this article. Jon Mikel Zabala-Iturriagagoitia acknowledges the support of the Department of Education, Universities and Research of the Basque Country, and funding from its Programme for the Researchers Formation. We are indebted to Cynthia Little for her help with the language-editing of the text.

2 Many projects financed by the PRIME network of excellence deal with this issue. ERA-Spaces is one of them.

3 Aragón, Calabria, Western Makedonia, Northern EU, Auverge, Niederösterreich, West Midlands, Western Scotland, Yorkshire & the Humber and West Midlands.

4 Although development of RIS began in 1991, the political impulse for the initiative by the European Commission did not materialize until 1994, so that the initiative could start working from 1996 onwards.

5 http://www.proinno-europe.eu

6 The report contains the results of such innovative actions as the Regional Innovation Strategies (RIS), RIS+, Regional Innovation and Technology Transfer Strategies (RITTS), Regional Technology Plans (RTP), Regional Information Society Initiatives (RISI) -RISI1, RISI2 and RISI+, Inter-Regional Information Society Initiative (IRISI), and the Regional Technology Transfer (RTT).

7 As said above, in this paper we focus on evaluating the RIS initiative, not the rest of innovative actions within the ERDFs as already done by Socintec (2005). In this sense, we will only study the participation of regions within the RIS+ initiative, in order to analyse whether the already defined regional innovation strategies have been applied and hence given continuity. The main goals of the RIS+ initiative include: (i) To begin the implementation of RIS recommendations and set up pilot projects and pilot networks; (ii) To continue the study of sectoral needs and trends and economic/innovation analysis in the region; (iii) To share and exchange ideas and good practice with comparable RIS/RITTS regions elsewhere.

8 In their RIS memory, Wallonie defines “Grappe” as a group of agents (such as firms of different sizes, high education institutions or research organizations) with common interests, needs, limitations, complementarities or interdependencies that develop joint activities.

9 Some other regions such as Altmark-Harz-Magdeburg, Epirus, Sterea Ellada and Puglia provide evidence that evaluation practices will be used in the future.

10 The goal achieved to a lesser extent is that of benchmarking studies, with a 58% of success.