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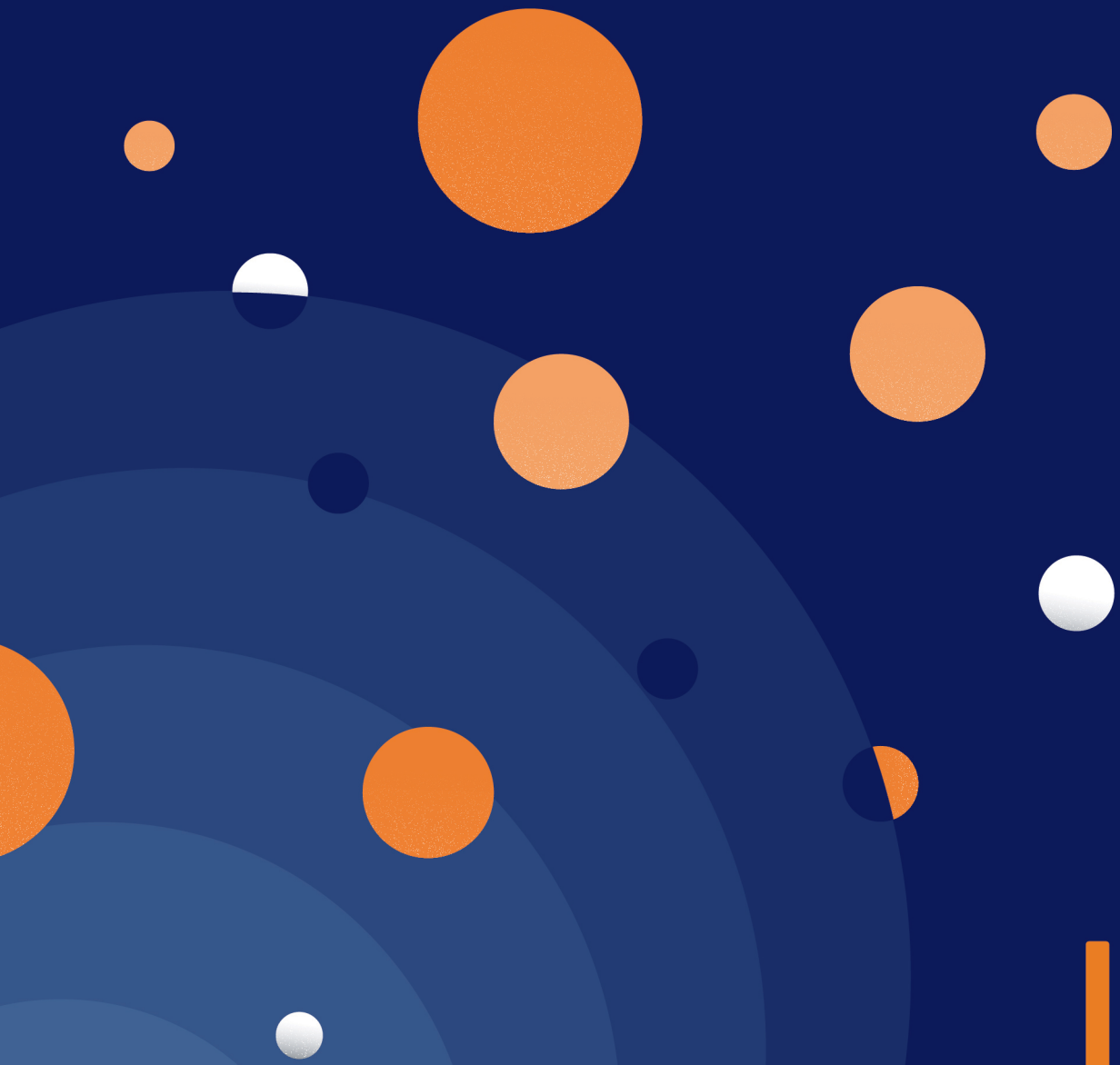
I3 Instrument insights articles

Bridging innovation across borders: the links between the Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs) and Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument projects



I3 Interregional Innovation Investments Instrument

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Contact: Maja Ferlinc

E-mail: maja.ferlinc@ec.europa.eu or EISMEA-I3-INSTRUMENT@ec.europa.eu

European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

Bridging innovation across borders: the links between the Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs) and Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument projects

Authors: *Fabrizio Guzzo & Santiago Donat*

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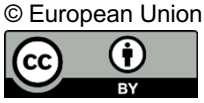

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List of Acronyms

ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EU	European Union
EISMEA	European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency
GVCs	Global Value Chains
I3	Interregional Innovation Investments
R&I	Research and Innovation
S3	Smart Specialisation Strategies
S3CoP	S3 Community of Practice
TSSPs	Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships

1. Introduction

Interregional collaboration is one of the pillars of Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3). These strategies encourage regions to look beyond their own borders, understand where they fit in global value chains and identify opportunities to work with others[1]. This entails identifying complementarities with other regions, assessing regional resources and competitive advantages in relation to other territories and promoting cooperation along value chains. It also involves leveraging synergies between policy initiatives, instruments and infrastructures across regions[2].

To support interregional cooperation in the S3 context, the European Commission launched four Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms in the fields of Industrial Modernisation, Agri-Food, Energy and the Sustainable Blue Economy[3]. These Platforms connect cross-border networks of regions and innovation actors committed to shared thematic priorities derived from their S3. Acting as strategic pre-investment arenas, the Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs) created under the four Platforms enable regional stakeholders to work on common areas of interest, share experiences, align policies and identify investment opportunities. More in detail, they support partner regions in developing joint investment projects, strengthening regional innovation ecosystems and overcoming barriers to market uptake[4]. By bringing together regions with similar Smart Specialisation priorities, TSSPs help identify synergies, build trust and explore investment opportunities across borders.

To complement these efforts, the Cohesion Policy (2021-2027) introduced the Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument, an *ad hoc* funding mechanism aimed at supporting consortia of innovation actors, including SMEs, research institutions, universities, clusters and public authorities, for implementing interregional investments in shared S3 priority areas[5].

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[1] European Commission (2012), Guide to Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3), Brussels.

[2] Brennan, L. and Rakhmatullin, R. (2017), Transnationalizing smart specialization strategy. In S. Radosevic, A. Curaj, R. Gheorghiu, L. Andreescu, & I. Wade (Eds.). Advances in the theory and practice of smart specialization, London: Elsevier, pp. 249 – 268.

Uyarra E., Sörvik, J. and Midtkandal, I. (2014), Inter-regional Collaboration in Research and Innovation Strategies for Smart Specialisation (RIS3), S3 Working Paper Series, n. 6/2014, JRC Research Reports JRC91963, Joint Research Centre.

[3] https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/communities-and-networks/s3-community-of-practice/thematic_platforms_en

[4] Hegyi F. B. and Rakhmatullin R. (2020), Developing an Evaluation Framework Integrating Results of the Thematic Approach to Smart Specialisation, JRC Research Reports JRC120392, Joint Research Centre.

[5] https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/interregional-innovation-investments-i3-instrument_en

The I3 Instrument and TSSPs play mutually reinforcing role within the EU's interregional innovation policy landscape. TSSPs provide the strategic direction, coordination and preparatory groundwork that help regions and relevant stakeholders identify synergies, build trust and shape joint project ideas. The I3 Instrument, in turn, can take these collective action efforts a step further by enabling their translation into concrete interregional investment projects, supporting the scale-up of innovation, the experimentation of innovation services across regions and the development of EU value chains. Once an I3 project ends, TSSPs can enable partners to explore new joint investment opportunities and maintain long-term cooperation.

Together, TSSPs and the I3 Instrument connect regional innovation ecosystems, aligning bottom-up Smart Specialisation priorities with broader EU strategic objectives.

This second issue of the I3 Instrument insights article series explores the links between I3 projects and TSSPs. Specifically, it investigates whether the participation in TSSPs increases the likelihood of consortia obtaining funding under the I3 instrument. To address this, we examine all projects funded under the first eight I3 calls launched since 2021 and analyse their connections to TSSPs[6].

The analysis reveals strong and consistent links between TSSPs and I3-funded initiatives, with nearly 40% of I3 projects resulting from collaborations from one or more Partnership(s). More broadly, the findings indicate that participation in international networks, whether within or outside TSSPs, enhances actors' capacity to identify opportunities, build consortia and access investment instruments such as I3.

Ultimately, to deepen our understanding of how synergies between I3 and TSSPs occur in practice, the article also presents two illustrative experiences. These cases shed light on the ways partnerships shape, and in turn are reshaped by, I3-funded initiatives.

[6] For clarity, participation in TSSPs or other cooperation initiatives is not a requirement for applying to the I3 Instrument and does not provide any advantage in the evaluation, as proposals are assessed solely against the award criteria set out in the I3 calls.

2. Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms and Partnerships

Smart Specialisation Strategies were first introduced as a requirement for countries and regions to access European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) support for research and innovation during 2014–2020. More than 170 strategies guided regional innovation investments across the EU. In the 2021–2027 Cohesion Policy, Smart Specialisation has been retained and strengthened under Policy Objective 1, "A more competitive and smarter Europe". In the current programming cycle, Smart Specialisation functions as an enabling condition for accessing funding linked to research and innovation, as well as skills for industrial transition and entrepreneurship[7].

Smart Specialisation aims to drive innovation and support the economic transformation of regions. It does so by fostering new innovative activities and encouraging stronger connections both within the territories and with partners elsewhere, helping regions accelerate their transformation and build new competitive advantages. By concentrating public support on priority areas with the highest transformative and development potential, Smart Specialisation aims to speed up the uptake of new ideas and strengthen long-term development paths[8].

From the beginning, the European Commission has highlighted interregional collaboration as a core dimension of Smart Specialisation. Regions have been encouraged to adopt an outward-looking perspective, understand their position within global value chains (GVCs) and engage in cross-border projects and networks [9].

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[7] European Union (2021a), Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 on the European Regional Development Fund and the Cohesion Fund, Brussels: European Union.

European Union (2021b), Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions applicable to the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund, the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund, and the financial rules applicable to these funds and to the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund, and Border Management and Visa Instrument, Brussels: European Union.

[8] European Commission (2017), Commission Staff Working Document accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: Strengthening Innovation in Europe's Regions: Towards resilient, inclusive and sustainable growth at territorial level, SWD (2017) 264 final, Brussels: European Union.

Foray D. (2015), Smart Specialisation. Opportunities and Challenges for Regional Innovation Policy, Abingdon, Routledge.

[9] European Commission (2022), Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: A new European Innovation Agenda, COM (2022) 332 final, Brussels: European Union.

European Commission (2012), n. 1.

European Commission (2017), n. 8.

Today, the current EU debate on open strategic autonomy, technological sovereignty and competitiveness makes this dimension even more important. As innovation policy becomes more directional, strengthening European value chains in strategic sectors and technologies requires deeper cooperation between regions. This evolving context poses additional emphasis on the international dimension of Smart Specialisation. Strategies are increasingly expected to build stronger interregional link and promote collaboration with regions that specialise in different but complementary stages of the value chain[10].

National and regional authorities, along with other stakeholders, are showing growing awareness of the benefits this approach offers, from accessing new knowledge and markets to creating stronger pathways for scaling innovations across Europe[11].

Interregional cooperation allows regions to access complementary knowledge, expertise and resources, strengthening their innovation ecosystems and competitive position. Working together across borders allows regions to combine research and innovation strengths, build on each other's capabilities, acquire new skills and address common challenges such as fragmented innovation efforts. These collaborations encourage shared learning, the development of communities of practice, and the mobilisation of diverse funding sources. By exchanging experiences and building new competences, regions can increase their capacity to design effective research and innovation policies[12].

For less developed regions, collaboration with more advanced territories can be particularly valuable. It supports knowledge transfer, technological upgrading and access to specialised services. However, weak institutional capacity and underdeveloped innovation systems can limit the ability of these

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[10] Hernández-Rodríguez, E., Boschma, R., Morrison, A., and Ye, X. (2025), The role of complementary interregional linkages for functional upgrading and downgrading of global value chains in EU regions, *Industry and Innovation*, 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/13662716.2025.2480624.

[11] Elena-Pérez, S., Nauwelaers, C., Tuffs, R. Bley, F., Duchêne, V., Stanislovaityte, I. and Goñi Navarro L. (2025), *Final reflections and lessons learnt from the S3CoP WGs on innovation diffusion, industrial transition and innovation diffusion*, Smart Specialisation Community of Practice (S3 CoP).

Hunter, A., Taskinen, P., Nauwelaers, C., Elena-Perez, S., Borbon, Y., Duchêne, V., Donat, S., Goñi, L., Tuffs, R. and Bley F. (2024), *How to enhance the fulfilment of the S3 enabling condition in European regions. Lessons learnt from the WGs on innovation diffusion, industrial transition, and interregional cooperation*, Policy Brief, Smart Specialisation Community of Practice (S3 CoP).

Uyarra et al. (2014), n. 2.

[12] Rakhmatullin R., Hegyi F. B., Ciampi Stancova K., Gomez J. and Mieszkowski K. (2020), Methodological Manual. Developing Thematic Interregional Partnerships for Smart Specialisation. A Practical Guide to Building and Managing Interregional Smart Specialisation Partnerships. EUR 30172 EN, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, ISBN 978-92-76-17907-8, doi:10.2760/564759, JRC116630.

Uyarra et al. (2014), n. 2.

regions to join international networks[13]. This creates barriers to entering well-established partnerships. There are also concerns that interregional cooperation may, at times, evolve into closed "clubs" dominated by highly advanced regions, leaving fewer opportunities for newcomers to participate[14].

To address these concerns and support cooperation between less developed, transition and more developed regions, the European Commission launched three Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms in 2015 on Agri-Food, Energy and Industrial Modernisation.

The Smart Specialisation Platforms provide the structure to support the creation of an interregional collaborative network of strategic Thematic Smart Specialisation Partnerships (TSSPs) and enables these partnerships to work together in shared smart specialisation areas. TSSPs target specific areas with high potential for technological, societal, and ecological return at regional and European level, underpinned by shared S3 priorities across committed regions, cluster organisations, businesses and innovation actors as well as civil society. TSSPs rely on regional commitment, through the participation of the regional authority, or other stakeholders from the quadruple helix with a mandate from the regional authority[15].

Building on the Vanguard Initiative (2013), which pioneered strategic interregional cooperation among regions with similar Smart Specialisation priority areas, TSSPs have been designed as collaborative policy spaces that connect regional actors in international networks for testing, policy learning and joint value chain development. Through a bottom-up approach involving quadruple helix actors, TSSPs enable regions to identify complementarities, share expertise, and co-develop pipelines of investment projects [16]. Interregional collaboration can take the form of exchange of experiences, alignment of policies and design of co-investment projects. TSSPs' outcomes include the development of joint investment projects and other interregional collaboration initiatives to be supported by various EU programmes and funds[17].

To guide partner regions, the European Commission developed a set of principles, recognising that regional cooperation initiatives must be tailored to diverse thematic priorities, contexts and capacities. To support partnerships in advancing their collaboration, the process framework illustrated in Figure 1 was

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[13] Woolford, J., Amanatidou, E., Gerussi, E. and Boden, J.M. (2021), Interregional Cooperation and Smart Specialisation: a Lagging Regions Perspective, EUR 30691 EN, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, ISBN 978-92-76-37539-5, doi:10.2760/25586, JRC124118.

[14] Elena-Pérez et al. (2025), n. 11.

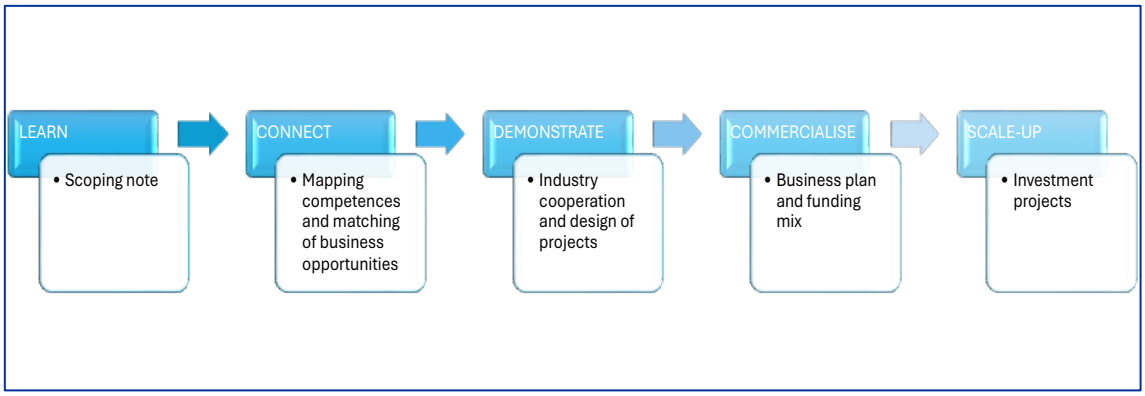
[15] S3CoP Secretariat (2025), *S3 Thematic Platforms. Guidance on lessons learnt*, 1 July. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/policy/communities-and-networks/s3-community-of-practice/S3_CoP_Guidance_on_Lessons_Learnt.pdf

[16] S3CoP Secretariat (2025), *S3 Thematic Platforms. Guidance on lessons learnt*, 1 July.

[17] Hegyi and Rakhmatullin (2020), n. 4.

introduced. This model helps regions to build on complementarities, exploit network synergies and co-create emerging markets, reducing investment risks through coordinated demonstration, market testing, and deployment[18].

Figure 1: Steps of the Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms approach



Source: Rakhmatullin et al. (2020, p. 9).

Over time, many Partnerships have been established under the three original S3 Thematic Platforms and, in 2022, a new Platform on Sustainable Blue Economy was launched.

Since 2020, the management of the Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms and Partnerships has been transferred from the European Commission's Joint Research Centre to DG Regional and Urban Policy, which now coordinates and supports them through the Smart Specialisation Community of Practice (S3CoP)[19]. Partnerships remain open to new members and allow regions to participate in more than one Partnership. Regions may also propose and establish new partnerships in new areas.

According to the S3 CoP website, 43 TSSPs are currently operating across the four Platforms, with 182 NUTS2 regions involved, more than 580 regional participations (including regions participating in multiple partnerships) and around 1,200 actors such as universities, technology centres, cluster organisations and companies. Although less developed regions are represented in most partnerships and their number has been rising over time, their participation remain limited: only about half of all less developed regions are active in TSSPs, with particularly low engagement in Romania, Bulgaria and Slovakia[20].

[18] Rakhmatullin et al. (2020), n. 12.

[19] The S3CoP provides the following eight services to the various partnerships: Training and capacity building on interregional collaboration, Governance, (Re)Scoping, Mapping, Smart partnering, Funding, finance and investment assistance, Demonstration, Scale-up and commercialisation.

[20] Szávics, P. (2025), 10 years of cooperation on the Thematic Smart Specialisation Platforms. Could macro-regional strategies foster S3-related interregional cooperation?, *Eastern Journal of European Studies,* January, vol. 16, n. 1, 258-280, DOI: 10.47743/ejes-2025-0112.

The Thematic Platform on Industrial Modernisation hosts by far the largest number of Partnerships: 27 in total, accounting for 63% of all TSSPs. This concentration is partly explained by the integration of the Vanguard Initiative pilot projects into the Platform in 2016 (Rakhmatullin et al., 2020), which significantly expanded its portfolio. It is followed by the Agri-food Platform, which includes eight Partnerships, the Sustainable blue economy (five) and the Energy Platform (three) (Table 1).

Table 1: Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms and partnerships and funding sources of related projects

Industrial modernisation	
Partnership	**EU Funds/Programmes supporting projects related to the TSSPs**
1. Artificial Intelligence and Human Machine Interface	Horizon Europe; Interreg
2. Advanced Materials for Batteries for Electro-mobility and Stationary Energy Storage	I3 instrument (ERDF)
3. BERRY+	Interreg
4. Bioeconomy	Horizon Europe; Interreg; ERDF; LIFE
5. Chemicals	Technical Assistance Facility
6. Circular buildings	_
7. Cultural and Creative Regional Ecosystems	Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe; Erasmus+
8. Cybersecurity Smart Regions	Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO)
9. Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing	Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe; I3 instrument (ERDF); Interreg
10. GO4COSMETICS	Horizon Europe
11. Health Resilience	_
12. High Performance Production 3D Printing	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon Europe
13. Hydrogen Valleys S3 Partnership	I3 instrument (ERDF); Erasmus+; Horizon Europe
14. Medical Technologies	Interreg
15. Mining	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe
16. New Nano Enabled Products	Vanguard
17. Photonics	Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe
18. Safe and sustainable mobility	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon 2020
19. Smart health	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon Europe
20. Smart Regional Investments in Textile Innovation	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon 2020; Interreg
21. SME integration for Industry 4.0	Interreg
22. Space	_
23. Social Economy	Interreg; Horizon Europe; Single Market Programme

24. Sport and Vitality	I3 instrument (ERDF); Erasmus+; Horizon Europe; Interreg
25. Virtual and Smart Cultural Tourism	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon Europe; Digital Europe Programme
26. Water Smart Territories	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon Europe
27. Wireless ICT	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon Europe

Agri food	
Partnership	**EU Funds/Programmes supporting projects related to the TSSPs**
1. Biosolutions for sustainable agriculture	_
2. Food for positive health impact	_
3. Food packaging	I3 instrument (ERDF)
4. High Tech Farming	Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe; Erasmus+
5. Ingredients for a Circular Economy (I4CE)	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon Europe
6. Plant-based food innovation	_
7. Smart Solutions for Agri-food	I3 instrument (ERDF); Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe; COSME
8. Traceability and Big Data in the agri-food value chain	Horizon Europe; Interreg; Erasmus+

Energy	
Partnership	**EU Funds/Programmes supporting projects related to the TSSPs**
1. Sustainable buildings	Interreg; Horizon Europe
2. Bioenergy	Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe; Interreg
3. Solar Industry Regions Europe (SIRE)	Interreg

Sustainable blue economy	
Partnership	**EU Funds/Programmes supporting projects related to the TSSPs**
1. ADMA Energy	Vanguard
2. BlueXChange	_
3. Circular Smart aquaculture	Horizon 2020; Horizon Europe; Interreg
4. Maritime Sustainable Blue Bioeconomy	Interreg; EMFAF (European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund)
5. Shipbuilding Alternative Fuels Propulsion Systems Alliance	Horizon Europe; LIFE; Interreg; Interreg NEXT-MED; EMFAF

Source: authors' elaboration based on information from the S3 CoP website

TSSPs vary in their maturity, depending on when they were launched and whether they build on previous collaborations developed through Interreg, Horizon 2020 and other initiatives. Many have generated joint project proposals (more than 300 to date) supported by a mix of EU funding sources, most prominently Horizon Europe, the I3 instrument and Interreg, as well as other

instruments such Erasmus+, Life and The European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund. The Bioeconomy partnerships, for instance, have secured funding for ten projects across four programmes, including one of the few interregional initiatives financed under the ERDF outside the I3 instrument (the Bright Coating project).

3. The links between TSSPs and I3 projects

The I3 Instrument, launched in 2021 under the ERDF regulation, is designed to help regions collaborate on interregional innovation and bring solutions closer to market. It supports cooperation and investments in shared smart specialisation areas and strengthens European value chains by funding projects at high technology readiness levels (TRL 6–9). A particular focus is placed on helping less developed regions connect to value chains and work with partners in transition and more developed regions, contributing to more balanced growth across the EU.

The I3 instrument targets themes linked to the digital and green transitions and smart manufacturing and is aligned with burning challenges identified in the New European Innovation Agenda[21] and the critical technologies outlined in the Strategic Technology for Europe Platform strategic technologies[22].

The box below presents the articulation of the I3 Instrument, which is organised around two main strands.

Box 1: Structure of the I3 Instrument

Strand 1 targets consortia of innovation actors aimed at increasing the competitiveness and resilience of EU value chains by taking new and innovative solutions towards market maturity, leading to new or significantly improved products, services, or production processes.

Strand 2a focuses on supporting the creation of new value chains in less developed regions and the better integration of actors in less developed regions in existing pan-European value chains, by supporting the creation or diffusion of innovative solutions.

Projects under Strand 1 and Strand 2a support innovation actors with investment ideas that are ready to be developed into mature business cases, through a portfolio of complementary and interlinked investments across participating regions.

Projects under Strand 2b shall help innovation actors from the quadruple helix in less developed regions to reinforce their regional innovation ecosystems. They should also develop their institutional capacities to mobilise companies to move from good investment ideas to mature business plans for (interregional) innovation investments. Projects should identify and address specific bottlenecks in the implementation of the joint investments and increase the business cases readiness to attract private and public financing, including from Strands 1 and 2a of the I3 Instrument.

Source: European Commission (2025), Work programme for the years 2025, 2026 and 2027 for the Interregional Innovation Investments Instrument, Annex, p.2 https://eismea.ec.europa.eu/programmes/interregional-innovation-investments-i3-instrument_en

[21] The New Europan Innovation Agenda: https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/strategy/support-policy-making/shaping-eu-research-and-innovation-policy/new-european-innovation-agenda_en

[22] Regulation (EU) 2024/795 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 February 2024 establishing the Strategic Technologies for Europe Platform (STEP).

The analysis of the linkages between I3 projects and TSSPs provides some interesting insights. As of November 2025, a total of 70 I3 projects have been selected for funding, with a committed budget of EUR 301 million across the six calls managed by EISMEA since 2021. Of these, **27 initiatives (39% of the total) are connected to TSSPs**, meaning that the projects originated from and involve TSSPs' representatives (Table 2).

The largest number of I3 projects linked to TSSPs (10) comes from the first call launched in 2021 under Strand 1. Another six projects with TSSP connections were funded under the 2021 call for Strand 2a, while nine projects derived from the two for Strand 2b launched in 2022 and 2023. In the most recent calls, covering Strand 1 (2023) and Strand 2a (2024), only one project per call shows a direct link to TSSPs.

As expected, most of these projects, **21 out of 27, are connected to partnerships under the S3 Thematic Platform on Industrial Modernisation**, reflecting the extensive networks of collaborations within this platform. Five projects are linked to partnerships within the S3 Thematic Platform on Agri-food and one project to the S3 Thematic Platform on Energy.

Among the TSSPs, the most frequently represented are **"Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing" and "Hydrogen Valleys" which appear in five and four projects respectively**. In three cases, projects are connected to more than one TSSPs. For example, BATMASS and IRMHUB are both associated to the "Advanced Materials for Batteries for Electro-mobility and Stationary Energy Storage" and "Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing" partnerships (Table 2).

Table 2: I3 funded projects related to TSSPs

	Project Call Id	Project Acronym	S3 Thematic Platform	Partnership (TSSP)
1	I3-2021-INV1	3DoP	Industrial Modernisation	High Performance through 3D Printing
2	I3-2021-INV1	AMBITIOUS	Industrial Modernisation	Wireless ICT
3	I3-2021-INV1	BATMASS	Industrial Modernisation	Advanced Materials for Batteries for Electro-mobility and Stationary Energy Storage; Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing
4	I3-2021-INV1	DeremCo	Industrial Modernisation	Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing
5	I3-2021-INV1	DIGIT-PRE	Industrial Modernisation	Sport and Vitality
6	I3-2021-INV1	HIGHFIVE	Agri Food	Smart Sensors 4 Agri–Food
7	I3-2021-INV1	Hy2Market	Industrial Modernisation	Hydrogen Valleys S3 Partnership

8	I3-2021-INV1	HYMANTOVALLEY	Industrial Modernisation	Hydrogen Valleys S3 Partnership
9	I3-2021-INV1	INSHAPE	Industrial Modernisation	Sport and Vitality
10	I3-2021-INV1	REGIOGREENTEX	Industrial Modernisation	Smart Regional Investments in Textile Innovation
11	I3-2021-INV2a	Biotech4Food	Agri Food	Ingredients for a Circular Economy
12	I3-2021-INV2a	CESAM	Agri Food	Agri Food (TSSP)
13	I3-2021-INV2a	DigiLung	Industrial Modernisation	Medical Technologies
14	I3-2021-INV2a	HealthChain	Industrial Modernisation	Smart Health
15	I3-2021-INV2a	I4-GREEN	Industrial Modernisation	Mining
16	I3-2021-INV2a	INCIRCULAR	Industrial Modernisation	Bioeconomy
17	I3-2022-CAP2b	RISE	Industrial Modernisation	Mining/ SME integration for Industry 4.0
18	I3-2022-CAP2b	Value4Pack	Agri Food	Food packaging
19	I3-2023-Cap2b	ELEVATECEE	Industrial Modernisation	Hydrogen Valleys S3 Partnership
20	I3-2023-Cap2b	EPIC	Agri Food	Food packaging
21	I3-2023- CAP2b	GreenStep	Industrial Modernisation	Water Smart Territories
22	I3-2023- CAP2b	Greet GEO	Energy	Sustainable Buildings
23	I3-2023- CAP2b	InnoMedCatalyst	Industrial Modernisation	Medical Technologies; Wireless ICT; Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing
24	I3-2023- CAP2b	IRMHUB	Industrial Modernisation	Advanced Materials for Batteries for Electro-mobility and Stationary Energy Storage; Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing
25	I3-2023- CAP2b	MetaHeritage	Industrial Modernisation	Virtual and Smart Cultural Tourism
26	I3-2023-INV1	CLOSER	Industrial Modernisation	Efficient and Sustainable Manufacturing
27	I3-2024-INV2a	NASCHA	Industrial Modernisation	Hydrogen Valleys S3 Partnership

Source: I3 Support facility based on the survey to I3 project coordinators for the Annual I3 Support Facility Observatory Report and I3 project data provided by EISMEA

The breakdown of data per call shows some interesting insights. TSSP-related initiatives represent a substantial share of I3-funded projects, particularly in the early stages of the I3 instrument programme. **Overall, 39% of all funded**

projects are linked to TSSPs, capturing 43% of the total EU contribution (Table 3).

A clear pattern emerges in the first calls launched in 2021. Under I3-2021-INV1, TSSP-related initiatives represent 77% of funded projects and nearly 80% of the allocated EU budget. **The strong presence of TSSPs in the projects selected in the first calls reflects the maturity of several interregional partnerships active within the Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms, particularly those under Industrial Modernisation, and their rapid answer to the first I3 calls with competitive proposals.** These TSSPs seems to have benefitted from preparatory activities aiming at developing joint roadmaps, mapped complementarities and identified potential investment areas, giving them a strategic advantage in respond quickly and effectively to the first Strand 1 call, which targets mature partnerships ready to accelerate market uptake, scale-up innovative solutions and develop a portfolio of investment projects at high technology readiness levels (TRL 6-9).

The relevance of TSSPs is also evident in I3-2021-INV2a, where TSSP-related initiatives represent half of the funded projects and nearly 60% of the allocated budget. **This confirms that TSSPs provided early applicants with structured collaboration environments, which translated into higher project readiness and more mature investment pipelines.**

By contrast, **the number of TSSP-related initiatives is lower in the Strand 2b calls**: 22% of projects in I3 2022-CAP2b and 44% in I3-2023-CAP2b. This pattern appears to reflect both the **more limited engagement of less developed regions in existing TSSPs** and the specific purpose of Strand 2b, which focuses on capacity-building and thus opens the door to actors with weaker prior integration in TSSPs. At the same time, projects funded under CAP2b can act as important catalysts for strengthening and maturing TSSPs, helping regions deepen their collaboration, develop shared methodologies and ultimately position themselves for more investment-oriented calls, as exemplified by the Value4pack project that will be discussed in more detail later.

On a more general level, from 2022 onwards the relative share of TSSP-related projects declines. This hints to the broadening of the applicant base as new consortia, often building on previous experience gained through other EU initiatives, participate and successfully compete for funding. Evidence from a recent survey of I3 beneficiaries corroborates this interpretation: all 37 respondents indicated that at least some consortium members had collaborated in the past and 13 reported that their project directly stemmed from earlier initiatives funded by Horizon 2020, Interreg and other programmes. This confirms that **participation in international networks, whether within or outside TSSPs, enhance the capacity to identify opportunities, form consortia and access investment instruments such as I3.**

Interestingly, some recent calls show limited or no TSSP participation (e.g., I3-2023-INV2a and I3-2024-INV1), suggesting a need for continued support to ensure that TSSPs, namely newer or less mature ones, can effectively translate their collaborative activities into investment-ready project proposals.

Table 3: Number of projects and funding allocation of TSSP-related projects per I3 Calls

Call	Funded projects (n.)	TSSPs-related projects (n.)	Share of TSSPs related projects (%)	Total EU Contribution (€)	EU Contribution to TSSPs-related projects (€)	Share of EU contribution to TSSPs-related projects (%)
I3-2021-INV1	13	10	77%	€ 97.520.918	€ 77.155.544	79%
I3-2021-INV2a	12	6	50%	€ 35.487.960	€ 20.842.303	59%
I3-2022-CAP2b	9	2	22%	€ 12.905.052	€ 2.716.948	21%
I3-2023-CAP2b	16	7	44%	€ 22.989.500	€ 9.744.262	42%
I3-2023-INV1	4	1	25%	€ 30.382.961	€ 9.851.025	32%
I3-2023-INV2a	6		0%	€ 31.877.285		0%
I3-2024-INV1	4		0%	€ 26.265.560		0%
I3-2024-INV2a	6	1	17%	€ 43.524.543	€ 7.904.306	18%
Total	**70**	**27**	**39%**	**€ 300.953.780**	**€ 128.214.388**	**43%**

Source: I3 Support facility based on the survey to I3 project coordinators for the Annual I3 Support Facility Observatory Report and I3 project data provided by EISMEA

Overall, **the data reveal that TSSPs play an important enabling role in the early identification, coordination and maturation of interregional investment ideas**. Projects connected to TSSPs are not only frequent but also financially significant under Strand 1 and 2a calls. This suggests that **involvement in TSSPs can increase project readiness, strengthen consortia formation and improve the capacity to mobilise investment under the I3 instrument.** However, as awareness of the I3 Instrument has increased, the relative influence of TSSPs on awarded projects has decreased, with other consortia formed through different networks or previous EU-funded initiatives now playing a growing role.

4. I3 projects and the role of TSSPs: illustration of two experiences

This section provides a more detailed account of how TSSPs interact with I3 projects, by presenting two illustrative cases. The evidence draws on insights shared directly by project coordinators during the online event, “From Thematic Platforms to I3 Projects", organised as part of the activities of the I3 Support Facility. The event was specifically designed to explore how TSSPs and I3 projects jointly contribute to the development interregional innovation ecosystems and value chains[23].

How the TSSP for Sport and Vitality has helped shape and successfully incubate two I3 initiatives

The first case focuses on the TSSP Sport and Vitality, which operates under the S3 Thematic Platform on Industrial Modernisation. It explores the interconnections between this partnership with two I3 projects and other initiatives, illustrating how collaborative activities started within TSSPs can evolve into mature investment projects supported by the I3 instrument. The case shows how TSSPs serve as a strategic enabler for market-oriented innovation, SME support and interregional value-chain development.

Investment idea development: the TSSP incubation stage

Established in 2017 and jointly led by South Netherlands (NL) and Lapland (FI), the partnership has always been characterised by a strong bottom-up, cluster-driven approach. Its Quadruple Helix structure, involving companies, research organisations, public authorities and societal actors, enabled the creation of a strong interregional partnership that could articulate shared priorities, identify complementarities across regions and translate these into coordinated innovation activities. This collaborative environment provided a stable foundation for developing a long-term mission centred on enhancing sports and healthy active lifestyles and supporting the transition from “healthcare” to “care for health”.

Years before the I3 instrument was launched, the partnership had already developed a common vision, expressed through its ambition to guide SMEs along the full innovation trajectory, from identifying user needs to market validation, acceleration and impact generation. Through successive bottom-up initiatives and projects, including an Interreg project (Inno4Sport) and other EU-funded activities, the partnership progressively built its interregional value chains and accumulated practical experience in cross-border collaboration. These early

[23] For the presentations and recording of the event held on March 31, 2025, see: https://interregional-innovation-investments.ec.europa.eu/events/3-thematic-platforms-i3-instrument-projects.

initiatives played a central role in aligning regional priorities and building trust, while also generating a portfolio of early demonstrators and pilot actions that would later serve as stepping stones for I3 project readiness.

The support received through the Smart Specialisation Community of Practice (S3CoP), particularly during the recent re-scoping exercise, further strengthened the strategic direction of the partnership by refining its mission and focus areas. This periodic reflection helped ensure that the partnership remained aligned with evolving regional ambitions and emerging opportunities, while maintaining continuity in its long-term objectives.

The I3 projects: INSHAPE and DIGIT-PRE

Against this backdrop, the transition from the TSSP activity to I3-funded investment projects occurred naturally. The two I3 projects presented, INSHAPE and DIGIT-PRE[24], both mirror the collaborative principles, thematic priorities and operational approaches cultivated within the partnership.

INSHAPE, led by the Cluster Sports & Technology from the Netherlands, is a 9.5 EUR million project to strengthen value chains in sports and wellness and gathers 24 partners across seven regions, from five different countries. It supports more than 40 SMEs in progressing from TRL 6 to 9 in an interregional collaboration setting. DIGIT-PRE, led by the regional innovation agency Innovation Skåne in Sweden, follows a similar structure, demonstrating continuity in the partnership's approach. With an EU contribution of EUR 4.6 million, the project operates across more developed, transition and less developed regions in eight countries, strengthening collaboration and accelerating investments in digital health. It leverages complementarities whereby advanced regions provide infrastructure and expertise, while transition and less developed regions gain capacity building, access to innovation and new economic opportunities.

Key takeaways

These projects illustrate how TSSPs support I3 applications in several ways:

- TSSPs provide a strategic framework, promote trust and the identification of shared priorities.
- They also help generate early project concepts and pilot activities, enabling actors to mobilise international consortia quickly and effectively when funding opportunities arise.
- In many cases, TSSPs also play an important role in helping actors navigate and combine different EU instruments (Horizon, Erasmus+, Interreg, etc.) to progressively mature investment ideas into proposals.

[24] INSHAPE and DIGITPRE are both projects from the (I302021-INV1) call

Importantly, the relationship between the TSSPs and the I3 projects is mutually reinforcing:

- The I3 instrument provides the financial means to scale up services, strengthen interregional value chains and support SMEs.
- TSSPs, in turn, offer the long-term strategic and reflexive space necessary to sustain collaboration beyond the lifespan of individual projects, explore new opportunities and themes, potentially in synergies with other TSPPs, and promote projects in other regions.
- Together, they establish a coherent pathway from strategic coordination to concrete investment, exemplifying the complementary roles of the TSSPs and the I3 instrument in supporting interregional innovation and value-chain development.

How the Value4Pack has strengthened the TSSP for Food Packaging

The second experience illustrates how an I3-funded initiative can emerge from the preparatory work, coordination efforts and early collaborations of a TSSP, while simultaneously acting as a catalyst that strengthens the methodological, knowledge and organisational foundations of the partnership itself.

From informal cooperation to the establishment of the TSSP

Launched in 2023, the I3 Value4Pack[25] project grew out of an already active, though still embryonic, network of clusters and regions committed to food-packaging innovation. The project's impact proved transformative: it provided the organisational, analytical and methodological backbone that now underpins the fully structured TSSP Food Packaging, jointly led by Pack4Food, with its leading partner the Flanders' FOOD cluster (Flanders, BE), and Natureef association (PL, Zachodniopomorskie).

The origins of the Food Packaging partnership lie in informal cooperation activities dating back to 2020, based on early networking through B2Match and joint activities between food-packaging clusters. These preliminary exchanges revealed both a clear motivation to collaborate and a lack of the tools, structures and shared knowledge required to build a robust interregional partnership. When the Food Packaging partnership was formally accepted under the S3 Thematic Platform in Agri-Food in 2022, its members still faced substantial challenges: mapping regional ecosystems, identifying complementary strengths, structuring joint work and defining potential investment priorities, all without operational funding for partnership activities.

[25] Value4Pack was selected under the I3-2022-CAP2b call

The role of the I3 projects in further supporting the development of the TSSP

In this context, the I3 Value4Pack project became crucial. Conceived as an interregional initiative to help companies respond to new EU regulations on packaging and packaging waste, especially in less developed regions, it brought together 15 partners from 11 countries, largely overlapping with the TSSP membership. The project supplied the resources, methodologies and coordination capacity needed to address the partnership's foundational gaps. Through extensive analytical work, it mapped and assessed food-packaging value chains in 13 European regions, identified competencies and complementarities and gathered more than 60 innovation ideas related to recyclability, reuse and regulatory compliance. Through matchmaking and pitching activities, 30 project ideas were further developed, leading to 16 concrete interregional business cases.

The project also introduced methods and tools that have since been integrated into the Food Packaging TSSP: a model for regional value-chain analysis, structured processes for idea development, thematic working groups, a funding radar and collaborative platforms such as B2Match and SharePoint. These tools proved essential for building a shared context, aligning strategies and developing investment ideas.

Finally, Value4Pack supported leadership development and capacity building among partners in less developed regions (Poland, Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia and Latvia). Organisations that initially felt inexperienced in coordinating interregional initiatives were supported by more experienced clusters, allowing new leaders to emerge and assume responsibility. This distributed leadership approach has since become a defining feature of the partnership's governance model. In addition, the project has brought significant benefits in terms of capacity building for less developed regions, connecting them with partners in more developed regions and their more advanced practices. Through the development of transition roadmaps and broad stakeholder involvement, less developed regions have strengthened their understanding of regional bottlenecks, innovation needs and investment priorities in the sustainable packaging sector. Peer validation of policy recommendations by more developed regions has further improved the quality, feasibility and alignment with EU policies of the policy actions of less developed regions, accelerating learning and reducing implementation risks.

By 2025, the links between the I3 project and the TSSP are fully evident.

- The S3 Food Packaging Partnership now operates with a signed Memorandum of Understanding, a clearly structured work plan, a pipeline of ready-for-investment project ideas and a durable culture of collaboration, much of which can be traced directly to the methods, tools and experiences developed within Value4Pack.

- The project thus not only advanced its regulatory and innovation objectives but also laid the practical foundations of a robust, functional and strategically coherent S3 partnership.

Key takeaways

Overall, the relationship between TSSP and I3 in this case has been indisputably bidirectional: while the TSSP offered the thematic framework and long-term vision, the I3 project provided the analytical depth, organisational capacities and operational instruments necessary to make the partnership effective and sustainable. Together, they demonstrate how TSSPs and I3 projects can mutually reinforce each other in developing interregional innovation ecosystems.

5. Conclusions

This I3 insights article has examined the link between TSSPs and I3-funded projects. It assessed whether participation in TSSPs improves the chances of successfully access funding under the I3 instrument.

The findings show **the existence of a strong connection between TSSPs and I3**: nearly 40% of approved I3 projects originated from collaborations linked to one or more TSSPs. This indicates that TSSPs act as important enablers for interregional investments. They provide a structured arena for collective action, where partners can identify share priorities, exchange knowledge, build trust and develop joint investment endeavours.

The strong presence of TSSP-related initiatives in the early I3 calls reflects the maturity of several partnerships and their preparatory work in mapping complementarities, identifying shared investment areas, strengthening partnerships and developing joint investment roadmaps. This strategic groundwork allowed many TSSP partners to respond quickly and effectively to the calls (Strand 1 and 2a) launched in 2021, in which TSSP-related projects accounted for a substantial share of both selected proposals and allocated budgets.

In later calls, the share of TSSP-related projects declined. Importantly, the analysis shows that **previous cooperation and networking proved essential in all approved I3 projects, whether rooted in TSSPs or stemming from other international initiatives funded by other EU Programmes**. This confirms that participation in cross-border networks, regardless of their origin, consistently enhances the capacity to identify opportunities, form strong consortia and access investment instruments such as I3. International networks, provide participants with exposure, credibility and a platform for joint action.

The presence of TSSPs in successful projects is lower in Strand 2b calls, which target less developed regions and focus on capacity building. This reflects both the more limited engagement of these regions in existing TSSPs and the aim of Strand 2b to support actors with weaker prior integration in interregional networks. Yet, capacity-building projects can help newer or less mature partnerships evolve, strengthen their methodological foundations and, finally, position themselves for more investment-oriented calls, as demonstrated by the I3 Value4Pack project.

To conclude, the findings highlight that **TSSPs play a significant enabling role in shaping and maturing interregional investment ideas**. Participation in these Platforms supports consortium formation, project readiness and facilitate access to the I3 instrument and other EU initiatives. **The relationship, however, is circular and mutually reinforcing**. TSSPs provide strategic direction and collaboration frameworks, while the I3 instrument provide the means to translate

these efforts into concrete investments. In turn, the capabilities built through I3 projects can flow back into TSSPs, enriching their work and supporting their further evolution. This cycle illustrates how interregional platforms and investment instruments can co-produce EU added value, potentially supporting the emergence of European value chains and more integrated innovation ecosystems across Europe.

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