Interview with Iryna Kristensen

Interview by Joan Fitzgerald, Editor-in-Chief, Regions and Cities Book Series Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts, USA.

Joan Fitzgerald (JF): Your subtitle of the book Strategic Approaches to Regional Development is Smart Experimentation in Less-Favoured Regions (Edited by Iryna Kristensen, Alexandre Dubois, Jukka Teräs). You didn't say "declining" regions—it seems to suggest that policy has deliberately left out some places. Is that what you mean?

Iryna Kristensen (IK): The term declining has negative connotations to me. It focuses on handicaps rather than opportunities. Of course, the places we discuss in the book have challenges, but we wanted to examine at what could be done to turn their economies around.

JF: Is the distinction between favoured and less-favoured mostly a rural-urban divide?

IK: We use less-favoured as an umbrella term. It can mean areas with geographic specificities such as mountain or sparsely populated areas,

institutionally/economically weak areas, areas facing complex industrial transitions, or areas with demographic handicaps.

JF: How do you define "smart" specialization?

IK: First of all appropriate. The pursuit of regional transition or transformation necessitates "smart" adjustments which should be properly tailored to local conditions such as the quality of existing governance structures, function and composition of regional innovation system, vitality of entrepreneurial ecosystems and industrial structures. Second, Smart is often associated with technology, but that leaves social concerns unaddressed. Digitalization and more efficient application of technology in various sectors is of course important. However, the complexity of less-favoured territorial settings combined with the increasing demand for healthy environments and stronger emphasis on sustainability and resilience in regional development, calls for more thorough differentiation between policy goals and societal relevance based on unique characteristics of each area.

JF: What are example of smart specialization in less-favoured regions?

IK: We wanted to demonstrate the complexity of place-based development, so each chapter addresses different angles of development trajectories through the lens of smart specialization—including governance, regional development, and industrial composition. All these perspectives combined add to the ongoing debate on a more comprehensive set of methods and approaches to regional innovation policy. One chapter presents a case study of a bio refinery as part of a circular economy. It is an example of building on a traditional industry and transforming it into a new realm. Another example is digital Innovation Hubs as mobilising actors in designing and implementing activities in smart specialisation domains; but also as an actor implementing general innovation policies, part of smart specialization. And in another chapter, smart specialization terminology is applied as a retrospective "yardstick" to evaluate past regional intervention approaches—so called institutional learning processes.

JF: How does experimentation come to play?

IK: A lot of the smart specialization literature investigates practical cases of the implementation. We saw this as being too narrow as the scope of territorial innovation activities taking place in these less-favoured territorial settings is

much wider than just implementation of smart specialization strategy. Therefore, the term experimentation reflects the diversity of methods and approaches to promoting regional transformation in a better way. The idea of smart specialization, and certainly not the theory behind it, is not new. And the elements of this approach existed long before the S3 concept was first introduced. They only expressed themselves through different forms. In the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, for instance, they have expressed themselves in different governance and strategic structures, emerging as "common sense responses to regional change and development issues, rather than from explicit paradigm or ideology" (Andrew Copus, ch. 6). It shows a bit of a mixed record of both "dumb diversification" practices and "masked" smart initiatives that were properly tailored to local needs.

JF: What is the theoretical lens of the book?

IK: We attempt to reconcile spatial planning and regional development debates. We emphasize the importance of communication among sectors and actors. Place is not just physical space that engulfs social and economic activities, but a geographical entity that is constructed by and shapes inter-dependencies among actors. Boundaries can move as the interactions between the actors evolve over time due to both internal changes and adaptation to external processes of change.

JF: How many less-favoured regions can really succeed at smart specialization? What are the key factors that determine that?

IK: Although we talk about place-based development and how every region is unique, I still think that we must illustrate strategies with good examples. Replicability is expected. But that's not the right way to think—we can inspire regions—not just empirical cases of what works in different places. Not every region can be a Silicon Valley. Nor should they try to be. All regions are different and they have to find their own assets—something very unique. Every region has to find its own way of "smart" development, which cannot be imparted from somewhere. It should evolve from within. If you look at different regions—even urban regions struggle with this issue. They may have entrepreneurial spirit—but lack leadership and clear mandates to push the S3 agenda forward, for instance. So, the key factors that determine success are: far-sighted leadership; open minded communication; and partnerships that ensure an involvement of relevant stakeholders that can and are willing to contribute to local development. It also

includes supporting intermediaries that can connect actors regionally, SMEs to larger companies, across sectorial borders and outside of the region. Intermediaries help to strengthen extra-regional links between diverse actors and resources and thereby fill gaps in knowledge infrastructure.

JF: Who is the audience for this book?

IK: Anybody (i.e. academics and practitioners) who is interested in a broader field of regional development. Our intentions is to give voice to regional development challenges to a broader audience. It also provides a good platform for engaging with policy makers.