The competitiveness clusters policy, performance versus diversity? Thoughts on the study of the 2004-2014 period

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The competitiveness clusters policy (CCP) is a national policy launched in 2004 that aims to stimulate cooperative dynamics and collaborative innovation between economic actors within the same territory and in the same field. Its goal is to strengthen their competitiveness – and simultaneously France's competitiveness – on the international scene.

After over ten years of existence, how does the CCP solve the tensions between land use policies and industrial policies, between promoting diversity and promoting performance, between spreading thin and concentration? We propose here to make an assessment from the point-of-view of its relationship to territories.

A COMPETITIVENESS POLICY JOINTLY MANAGED BY THE DATAR[1] AND THE DGCIS[2]

The CCP is one of France's contributions to the Lisbon Strategy (March 2000), through which the European Council sets itself the goal of becoming "the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy[3] in the world". At national level, it lies at the confluence of industrial policies, spatial planning and research and innovation policies and has therefore been brought to the forefront by an Interministerial Working Group (IWG) initially co-managed by the Directorate General for Enterprise (DGE, Ministry of Economy and Finance) and the Interministerial Delegation for Spatial Planning and Regional Action (DATAR, whose missions have now been taken over by the CGET).

1. Interministerial Delegation for Spatial Planning and Regional Action. Today, the General Commission for Territorial Equality (CGET).
2. General Directorate for Competitiveness, Industry and Services. Today, the Directorate-General for Enterprise (DGE).
3. Innovation and the knowledge-based economy have been considered for the last twenty years as the conditions required to maintain competitiveness, both for enterprises and for territories, in a context in which many reports speak of Europe's disengagement vis-à-vis the United States (Debonneuil and Fontagné, 2003) (Cohen and Lorenzi, 2000).

As regards industrial policies, it is considered as a participant in the "[renewal of] the French industrial policy" (Beffa, 2005; Thibault, 2008), following years of state-controlled, and even Colbertist, industrial policies. As regards innovation and research policies, it marks the continuation of several years of proactive policies favouring reconciliation between science/industry and technological transfer, making competitiveness clusters successors to technopoles (1980-1990) and incubators (1990-2000).

Lastly, as regards spatial planning, some consider that it embodies the shift, observed over the last few decades, from a spatial planning rationale based on an "equal, and even egalitarian approach to the territory" to a territorial development rationale based on a "more differentiated approach to the territories" (Crespy, 2007, p. 29). Gilles Duranton considers that "from a declared aim of fairness, we have shifted towards an aim of efficiency" (Duranton et al., 2008). Hence, the CCP is caught in the tension between a spatial planning rationale and an industrial policy rationale.

Furthermore, many public action specialists use the CCP as an example to illustrate the evolutions of public territorial action increasingly taking the form of calls for projects and "explicitly establishing competition between territorial projects for allocation of State funds" (Aust and Cret, 2012). The CCP was followed by several calls for projects aiming to stimulate systems of excellence: Thematic advanced research networks (2006), Research and higher education centres (2007), Operation Campus (2008) and all calls for projects planned as part of the Investment for the Future programme as from 2010 (Idex, Equipex, SATT, IRT, etc.).

THE CERTIFICATION OF A WIDE RANGE OF CLUSTERS: FROM TECHNOLOGICAL SHOWPIECES TO "ORDINARY" CLUSTERS

In 2003, although the State considered supporting some fifteen clusters regarded as showpieces of French industry, it actually certified 71 competitiveness clusters in 2004, not all of which conform to the Silicon Valley model initially envisioned. The local ecosystems at the origin of competitiveness clusters are very heterogeneous (Renou 2016).

Take the example of clusters in the South-West[4], some of which are real industrial showpieces, whilst others emerge from more "ordinary"[5], even rural, territories; still others are encouraged by local authorities to serve their territorial development project.

- The South-West cluster that best matches the legislator's initial objectives is Aerospace Valley. The aeronautics and space industries are considered as jewels of French industry. Its initiative is industrial and led by Airbus. Local authorities and the Ministries of Industry and of Defence alike strongly support it. The cluster benefits from long-lasting industrial structuring, studied on multiple occasions, and which has been described as a "local skills system" (Zulani, Grossetti and Jalabert, 2005).

- In contrast, other clusters originate from academic initiatives supported by small industrial actors (SMEs): agricultural, agrifood and forest clusters; this is the case for the Xylofutur and Qualiméditerranée clusters. These fields account for a large number of jobs[6], but their candidacies were ignored by local authorities in 2004 as they did not match the Silicon Valley image. However, some initiatives are emerging and being taken up by the Ministry of Agriculture, which is progressively positioning itself to support them as part of the IWG. Although their production in terms of collaborative innovation is not comparable with that of the preceding cluster, the actions that they imple-

4. Lucie Renou. La politique des pôles de compétitivité : une production de territoires (Competitiveness cluster policy: a production of territories). Doctoral thesis. October 2016
5. The notion "ordinary" territory is used in opposition with that of metropolitan territory according to the Regional Studies Association ("Innovation in "ordinary" regions and "boring" sectors" session, 2015)
6. The agrifood and forest sectors are the leading industrial employers in the Midi-Pyrénées and Aquitaine regions. For example, the forest-timber-paper sector accounts for over 33,000 jobs in the Aquitaine region.

ment provide structure to drive collaborative innovation dynamics in their local environments.

• Lastly, other clusters are neither industrial showpieces nor account for large numbers of jobs, but are rather emerging technological niches supported by local authorities as part of their local development strategy. Candidacies submitted by the 'Cancer Bio Santé' and 'Route des Lasers' ('Laser Road') clusters, for example, originate from political decisions and are an integral part of the pre-existing spatial planning project promoted by public actors (the Oncopole in Toulouse and the Route des Lasers in Bordeaux respectively).

Hence, the State has adapted to feedback and awarded certification to a wide range of clusters in highly contrasting situations as regards competitiveness. But how can such diversity be managed over time whilst supporting these clusters? After ten years of existence, we observe that 20% of clusters benefit from 80% of the Single Interministerial Fund (FUI) dedicated to collaborative R&D projects.

AN IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS THAT PROMOTES SHOWPIECE CLUSTERS AT THE EXPENSE OF "PEDAGOGICAL" CLUSTERS

Competitiveness clusters are assessed at the end of each of the policy's phases (2005-2008; 2009-2012, 2013-2018). Such national assessments aim to compare clusters with each other and ensure that they remain "competitive". A brief examination of French clusters reveals a degree of correlation, after the 2012 assessment, between being a "global"[7] and/or a high-tech[8] cluster and being ranked amongst the best-performing[9] clusters, and, conversely, between being a "national" and/or low-tech cluster and being ranked amongst the "poorest-performing".

However, we consider that assessing clusters' "performance" based on a homogeneous (but not very transparent) framework for all 71 French competitiveness clusters erases territorial differences and does not take account of the added value of public intervention in a given context. Furthermore, these national assessments, which focus on the performance of clusters to develop collaborative R&D projects, appear far too dependent on the collaboration and innovation abilities and habits (where they exist) of member companies. In this sense, it seems logical that a cluster supported by aeronautical industry decision-makers is deemed better "performing" than a cluster supported by SMEs in the timber-forest sector, which are not used to working together and developing innovative projects. Several actors within these clusters insist on the highly "pedagogical" nature of their activities: "in the first three years, the aim was to provide a lot of teaching on innovation".

However, a useful way of measuring the role of public intervention (and associated funding) would be to consider clusters' success based on their added value in comparison with a pre-existing situation. Hence, some clusters could promote their pedagogical role, even more so when they belong to sectors accounting for a large number of jobs. It should be borne in mind that performance contracts signed by the president of the cluster, the regional prefect and the president of the Regional Council already set out the clusters' goals based on their sectorial and territorial context – with a view to assessing the clusters' added value within their territory. Yet they have been decoupled from assessments, according to actors encountered, which raises a problem of internal consistency in the competitiveness clusters policy's assessment system.

7. Clusters are classified into three categories upon certification: global clusters, globally-orientated clusters, and national clusters. Global and globally-orientated clusters, of which there are approximately fifteen, are without a doubt those that best meet the State's initial projections (showpiece clusters). They are the subject of special monitoring and financing.
8. According to European classification of economic activities (NACE Eurostat), high-tech, medium-tech and low-tech activities are differentiated based on the technological intensity that they mobilise (e.g.: aeronautical activities, pharmaceutical activities, ICT, lasers, etc. are considered high-tech while forest-timber-paper and agri-food sectors are considered low-tech).
9. According to the Government's classification of clusters in 2012 following the audit carried out by the Erdyn, Technopolis Group-ITD and Bearing Point consultancies.

Table 1. Assessment of clusters based on type of activity

	«GLOBAL / GLOBALLY-ORIENTATED» CLUSTERS	«NATIONAL» CLUSTERS
Work force in number (2012)	17	54
Economic activities		
«High tech»	9 (53%)	7 (13%)
«Medium tech»	7 (41%)	26 (49%)
«Low tech»	1 (6%)	21 (38%)
Assessment (2012)		
«High-performance»	11 (65%)	9 (17%)
«Average performance»	5 (29%)	30 (55%)
«Low-performance»	1 (6%)	15 (28 %)

Source : Renou, 2015

It is all the more important to pay attention to the assessment process as incorrect classification has direct consequences on how clusters operate and their strategy. A wrongly assessed cluster is placed under trusteeship and is likely to lose its certification[10]. Thus, by strengthening already innovative industries, the assessment process tends to increase social and geographical inequalities between industrial territories.

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In conclusion, unlike what was initially planned, the CCP has adapted to territorial feedback to allow certification of a wide range of clusters in highly contrasting situations. The positive result was to "boost" (and in some cases, launch) collaborative innovation dynamics in many territories, in particular "ordinary" territories that local authorities themselves did not provide much support to prior to 2004. However, over time, the process for supporting clusters tends to promote national champions at the expense of other clusters. In our opinion, this trend does not encourage the leverage effect that public funds could have on these "ordinary" territories which nonetheless accommodate clusters/sectors that lead the field in terms of employment. We agree with Olivier Bouba-Olga and Michel Grossetti's analyses, which have demonstrated that policies focused on competitiveness and excellence, are "seductive" but do not "withstand the test of facts" and worsen social and geographical inequalities.

Ultimately, from a territorial development perspective, the main purpose of the cluster policy is creation of relationships, interconnections and interactions between public and private actors, between research and industry, and State action and regional action. Such networking of stakeholders and their incentive to cooperate could become useful assessment criteria. However, such criteria could not be assessed using a uniform framework. New methods could be launched to analyse clusters' added value within their sectorial and territorial contexts.

10. During the 2008 assessment for example, of the thirteen clusters deemed to be "less-performing", six had their certification removed.

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