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## Reconsidering Smart Specialization Policy

### ABSTRACT

Smart specialization (SS) has become a hallmark of the EU's Cohesion Policy (Barca, 2009; Foray et al., 2009; 2011; McCann and Ortega-Argilés, 2015). The goal of SS is not to make the economic structure of regions more specialized, but instead to leverage existing strengths, to identify hidden opportunities, and to generate novel platforms upon which regions can build competitive advantage in high value-added activities. SS emanated from the idea that regions across the EU have different economic and institutional structures that shape possibilities for their future development. The result was a clear denunciation of the top-down 'one size fits all' policy. SS aims on building competitive advantage in research domains and activities where regions possess strengths and leveraging those capabilities through diversification into related activities (Foray et al. 2012).

However, the operationalization of SS has been criticized, as a 'perfect example of policy running ahead of theory' (Foray et al., 2011), lacking 'evidence base' (Morgan 2015; Unterlass et al., 2015), and building on 'anecdotal evidence rather than the application of theoretically grounded methodologies' (Iacobucci and Guzzini, 2016; Santoalha, 2016).

To tackle the weak theoretical and empirical underpinning of SS policy, I will propose a policy framework that builds on recent insights derived from the empirical literature on regional diversification. It will address, among other things, the following questions: can we identify opportunities for regions to move into new, promising and more complex activities, and if so how, under what circumstances should policy aim for related or unrelated diversification, what types of institutions are needed to enable such a transformation process, what role policymakers and other local stakeholders (as highlighted in the entrepreneurial discovery process) can play to enable that process, and what can SS policy possibly mean for lagging regions?

### Short Bio:

**Ron Boschma** is Full Professor in Regional Economics at Department of Social Geography and Planning at Faculty of Geosciences, Utrecht University, Netherlands since 2005. He is a Professor 2 at UiS Business School of Stavanger University, Norway since 2017 and Visiting Professor in Economics (Bernard Maris Chair), University of Toulouse, 2018-2021. He is member of advisory group for European Commission DG Urban and Regional Policy, 2018-2020 and furthermore he was a Full Professor in Innovation Studies at Lund University, Sweden, 2013-2017. In the period 2013-2015, Boschma has been director of the Centre for Innovation, Research and Competence in the Learning Economy (CIRCLE) at Lund University. Professor Boschma has been research director at the Department of Social Geography and Planning at Utrecht University and Member of the Research, Innovation and Science Experts (RISE) High-Level Advisory Body to European Commissioner Carlos Moedas in the period 2015-2016. Member of the Scientific Advisory Group of DG Regional and



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Urban Policy 2018-2020. Member of Commissie Sectorplan Social Sciences and Humanities in Netherlands (National Advisory Group to the Minister of Education, Culture and Science) 2018-2025. Member of the Board of the International Regional Studies Association since 2015. From 2016, he is head of the scientific committee of International Regional Studies Association. Boschma has published in international journals on Evolutionary Economic Geography, the spatial evolution of industries, geography of innovation, regional resilience, the structure and evolution of spatial networks, agglomeration externalities and regional growth, and regional diversification. He has been one of the founders of Evolutionary Economic Geography, a new and successful stream in Economic Geography.

Boschma was ranked by Thomson Reuters among the top 1% of cited researchers worldwide in all scientific fields in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. Boschma has done research assignments for Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, European Commission DG Research, European Commission DG Urban and Regional Policy, European Science Foundation, OECD, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Scientific Council for National Government (WRR), National Government of Italy, and IPTS in Seville.

Boschma is Editor of Cambridge Journal of Region, Economy and Society and working paper series Papers in Evolutionary Economic Geography. Associate Editor of Industrial and Corporate Change, Papers in Regional Science and Regional Studies, and member of the Editorial Boards of Economic Geography, Review of Regional Research (Jahrbuch für Regionalwissenschaft) Regional Studies, Regional Science, Italian Journal of Regional Science (Scienze Regionali), German Journal of Economic Geography (Zeitschrift für Wirtschaftsgeographie) and Area, Development and Policy. Deputy Chief Editor of Regional Studies 2008-2013.

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