Evaluación de políticas clúster
El caso del País Vasco

Cristina Aragón / Mari Jose Aranguren / Cristina Iturrioz (Coords.)

Executive summary
Evaluating Cluster Policies: the Basque Country case

Executive summary

Cluster policy is an instrument of economic policy that has been extended to various countries since Michael Porter began to promote it in the context of diverse regional economic development projects undertaken in several geographical locations. These policies are considered to have “soft” roots because they are designed to promote cooperative relations, and in addition are systemic in character, bringing together different policies of science, technology and industry. Thus, their implementation depends on the implementation of other regional policies. On many occasions the implementation of cluster policy has been conducted by means of the creation and promotion of collaboration institutions that formalize cooperative relations between agents and that are generally both public and private in character. Cluster associations are a specific kind of collaborative institution aimed at improving the related activities of a particular region.

In the early nineties the Basque Country pioneered the design and implementation of an industrial policy based on clustering. Cluster associations are those that assume the role of dynamic agents of associated companies with the objective of improving their competitiveness through the implementation of strategic projects in cooperation. After almost two decades of operation and consolidation of this policy in the Basque Country, twelve cluster associations, corresponding to 6% of companies, now exist and account for 28% and 32% of the region’s employment and added value, respectively. Since 2009, there are six new pre-cluster supported by the Basque Government.

An assessment of Basque Country cluster policy success is difficult to establish. Principally, the policy’s own stated goal: “of improving competitiveness in order to respond to strategic challenges through cooperation” is, in itself, difficult to evaluate; and, in addition, association clusters can experience different realities.

The type of evaluation followed was principally the one derived from the length of time cluster associations were maintained and from the participation of members in their various activities. It consisted of a kind of self-assessment that has proved to be insufficient since it is unable to guarantee any evidence of the achievement of the policy objectives. Evaluations have also been made of particular actions carried out in each cluster association, as well as a Basque Government review of public spending on them. However, this type of assessment does not mean that they are approaching their final goal, nor does it necessarily imply that the objective of cluster policy, in general, to improve the competitiveness of the Basque economy through the development of strategic challenges in partnership, has been achieved. Thus, it is reasonable to say that the type of systematic evaluation that has been followed in the Basque Country with respect to cluster policy has focused on evaluating its efficiency regarding implementation and development through evaluation of processes and operational values achieved, rather than by measuring how effective it is at achieving goals or the impact of them.

Based on the needs identified in the policy cluster evaluation, a new line of research, from the University of Deusto was launched in 2003, called «Clusters and local networks», included in which were a series of research projects on the subject of cluster policy evaluation. Different stages undertaken in this line of research can be distinguished: (i) a first stage in 2003-2004, in which
the aim was to analyse the various stages of development of cluster policy in the Basque Country (also referred to in the book as “Evaluation of type III”); (ii) a second stage in 2004-2007, in which measurement of the effectiveness of cluster policy was pursued (also referred to in the book as “Assessment of type II”); and (iii) a final stage which began in 2007 within the Department “Territory, Innovation and Clusters” of the Basque Institute of Competitiveness – Orkestra in collaboration with the University of Deusto, in which a participatory type of methodology has been developed for the evaluation approach of institutional strengthening (or “type V”).

In the book the authors describe the various evaluation initiatives that have been developed and the conclusions drawn from them. In the second chapter, the genesis and evolution of cluster policy in the Basque Country and the process of creating cluster associations are described so that subsequent analysis can then determine to what extent the policy meets the general principles which, according to the literature, should be followed in the various stages of policy development. As a result, the challenges that cluster policy in the Basque Country faces are identified. Among these challenges is that of the need for a continuous identification of the emergence of new clusters and the reformulation of existing ones; the necessity of looking after the implementation of cluster policy, ensuring that the fundamental bases for progress towards higher stages in the cluster policy are generated; and, finally, the necessity of establishing mechanisms to assess efficiency and effectiveness in cluster policy implementation. Subsequent chapters of the book focus precisely on showing the different approaches to this last challenge.

The third chapter addresses the effectiveness of cluster policy by means of the evaluation of the representativeness of the beneficiaries of the policy cluster in the Basque Country on the one hand, and by means of the comparative analysis of results of competitiveness of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the policy, on the other. Both studies were conducted in two Basque Country cluster associations, the Basque Telecommunications Cluster (Gaia) and Basque Paper Cluster. From the results obtained, in terms of innovation, internationalization, quality and environment, it can be seen that in all cases, with some minor exceptions, companies that belong to the cluster association outperform those outside the association, regardless of their size and activity. Clearly, although this analysis shows the appeal that a priori a cluster association may have regarding the improvement of a company’s competitiveness, the improved performance of firms cannot be attributed to the fact that they belong to the association. Concerning the representativeness of the beneficiaries of the cluster policy by means of the analysis of the representativeness of the cluster associations, it is observed that these associations still have the challenge of incorporating smaller firms or those that belong to complementary parts of the chain of value and that could generate new opportunities for collaboration. It also proposes different formulas for the incorporation of these companies.

In the fourth chapter a model is developed to assess not only policy results with regard to promoting cooperation between companies and partner/associated institutions, but also the elements that determine them and to provide an assessment of their impact on the competitiveness of the members of the association. This methodology applies to the Paper Cluster and concludes that while the association has had some positive impact on their organizations, this has been in relation to rather more qualitative aspects such as facilitating cooperation, creating an environment of trust, and the sharing of knowledge and experience. In addition, it identifies two groups of members with different levels of social capital and perceptions of the impact the association has on their competitiveness, thereby identifying a major challenge for the above organizations regarding the management of member diversity.

In the fifth chapter the groundwork for implementing a participatory evaluation approach is presented, the justification of which in the context of the Basque Country and cluster policy is supported by the evolution of attempts to evaluate cluster policy in recent years. The main lessons learned from the experience of the pilot project to which this methodology applies are presented in the context of the Basque Aerospace Cluster (HEGAN). The first is that the process evaluation becomes integrated in the policy and ceases to be an external element; the second is the need to clearly
establish what the aim of the evaluation is; the third is that this approach requires other types of indicators to those traditionally used; and the last is that it is vital that all of the agents involved in the evaluation are acquainted with the new role that they will play as subjects participating in the evaluation.

Finally, the book ends with a chapter of conclusions and challenges.
La CAPV fue pionera en el diseño y puesta en marcha de una política industrial basada en clústeres a principios de los años noventa. A pesar de los años transcurridos y aunque la evaluación de la política es fundamental para la mejora de su diseño, desarrollo y adaptación a cada momento y contexto, esta evaluación es todavía un reto no resuelto, no sólo en la CAPV sino también en el contexto internacional. Este libro presenta distintas iniciativas de evaluación de la política clúster desarrolladas en la CAPV y las conclusiones extraídas de las mismas. Entre las experiencias recogidas, hay diversidad de metodologías aplicadas: bien fórmulas de carácter más cualitativo, bien de índole más cualitativa; ya sea metodologías de evaluación más tradicionales, como más innovadoras y adecuadas para la evaluación de este tipo de políticas sistémicas, como es la evaluación participativa. Por ello, su aportación radica, no sólo en contribuir a la evaluación de la política clúster de la CAPV, sino en aportar experiencias prácticas de la evaluación de este tipo de políticas.