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CANTABRIA AND CHIHUAHUA COLLABORATE ON BIOMEDICINE, AGRICULTURE AND SMART TOURISM

Cantabria and Chihuahua have come together to exchange on diverse issues such as biomedicine, agriculture, and tourism. Chihuahua is particularly interested in learning from Cantabria's experience of developing a region-wide innovation strategy.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Spanish region of Cantabria and the Mexican region of Chihuahua kicked-off their first ever cooperation through the IUC programme in November 2017. The regions are jointly working to increase innovation in a variety of fields.

As part of the cooperation, Cantabria has shared its experience of developing an innovation strategy for the region and outlined its efforts in the field of smart tourism. Chihuahua impressed the Spanish region with the depth and breadth of initiatives it has implemented despite limited resources.

The pairing benefits from frequent communication, which ranges from formal phone calls to sharing jokes via WhatsApp.

The creation of a cluster collaboration platform will be a focus for the pairing in the next period of their IUC cooperation.

The cooperation has proven so successful that the regions have not set an end-date for their pairing, instead looking for potential funding programmes (in both Europe and North America) to sustain the cooperation for years to come.



CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Cantabria had experience of participating in EU-funded programmes (most recently the DG REGIO-backed Industrial Transition Regions initiative) and saw the IUC programme as a means to exchange and discuss new ways of approaching common development problems with a region from Latin America.

Paz Díaz Nieto, Coordinator of the European project office for the Regional Government of Cantabria, had personal experience of interacting with Chihuahua, having lived and worked in Mexico for two decades. This personal connection and first-hand experience of the development issues and the working culture of the region acted as further encouragement for Cantabria to engage in the IUC programme.

In Spain, compared to other European countries, regional states have a large variety of powers. Mexico has a similar regional setup, with states granted the mandate to implement public policies. The fact that both regions have a similar level of power helped the pairing when discussing public policies in depth.

The cooperation started in November 2017, with representatives meeting for the first time at the IUC Coordination Meeting in Brussels (Belgium). From this meeting a close working relationship quickly developed.

The pairing has Skype and telephone calls on a regular basis (at the pairing's initial stages, calls occurred on a weekly basis). Those involved in the IUC programme have also joined a dedicated WhatsApp group in which messages are posted almost daily.

These messages go beyond purely work-related content to encompass photos, comments and even jokes. Through this group, Ms Díaz Nieto believes that personal relations between the regions have been strengthened. Face-to-face meetings were also held, which greatly helped the pairing to progress.

Although both regions speak the same language and have some similarities in terms of culture, the working culture is quite different. For the regional staff that

travelled to Mexico, this experience was said to have "opened their minds" to new ways of doing things. The travelling delegation was particularly interested in how the region worked with entrepreneurs and Chihuahua's work in strengthening the social sector.



In comparison to Cantabria, the Chihuahua Region has fewer resources and is faced with a challenging economic environment. Seeing how the region implements innovative tools and measures despite their more limited resources was particularly helpful for Cantabria.

"It was really an exchange of best practices for both sides," said Ms Díaz Nieto.

Chihuahua was an exemplary host to the travelling delegation. It was explained that due to negative media coverage of Ciudad Juárez, which is often depicted solely in terms of Mexico's drug war, it had become rarer to receive international delegations. Both regions greatly appreciated the ability to visit each other and exchange face-to-face.

One potential challenge is changes that may come as a result of elections. The question would be how to successfully continue with the pairing if a new political party comes to power in either region. This topic will be dealt with by the pairing based on the evolving situation in each region.



RESULTS AND IMPACT

The pairing has decided to focus their collaboration on a diverse array of topics, including biomedicine, agriculture, and smart tourism. A cluster collaboration platform is also being created, through which the pairing can work more efficiently. Chihuahua will soon join the European cluster collaboration platform. In the past the Mexican national level was part of the platform, but they have recently dropped out. Cantabria suggested that Chihuahua take the position vacated by the national level.



Tourism is a major topic for both areas. The pairing is currently preparing two proposals, one related to the cluster collaboration platform, the other related to digital tourism (drawing heavily from Cantabria's experience with smart tourism).

The IUC has helped the pairing to keep abreast of EU activities and funding initiatives, particularly those related to Latin America.

Participating in the IUC shows a commitment to cross-border cooperation and sustainable development that speaks favourably when attempting to secure funding for other projects going forward. In this sense, the IUC can act as a bridge to bring regions into other sustainable development initiatives beyond this programme.

The pairing is not only applying to EU funding schemes to finance their innovation activities, but also to the inter-American development bank and national level funding schemes. "When you have a good development idea, you will always find a way to put it into action," said Ms Díaz Nieto.

Ms Díaz Nieto also believes that the IUC's focus on cities and regions is hugely beneficial, asserting that as regions have a greater focus on the problems and goings-on of the territory, they can have "the greatest impact".

Chihuahua is keen to learn from Cantabria's experience of developing an innovation strategy, with the long-term aim of developing a similar innovation strategy for their region. Cantabria has agreed to share the methodology they used with Chihuahua.

There is no fixed endpoint for the cooperation between the two regions. If a favourable political climate remains, it is hoped that the collaboration will continue for years to come.



LESSONS LEARNED



Going beyond the purely professional to establish a personal connection helps to ensure a successful pairing. Tools such as WhatsApp can keep the lines of communication open in a more relaxed, informal manner.



It is important to keep an open mind. If a region believes from the outset that their way of doing things is the "right" way, they are shutting themselves off to a significant learning opportunity.



Cantabria was inspired by what Chihuahua manages to achieve with a limited budget. Monetary resources do not always result in the most impressive results. Commitment and innovation are vital to realising projects successfully.



Even though the pairing spoke the same language, they found differences in approaches to issues and in working culture. Being open and respectful towards different ways of working leads to a more enriching cooperation.

THE IUC PROGRAMME

The International Urban Cooperation (IUC) programme enables cities in different global regions to link up and share solutions to common problems. It is part of a long-term strategy by the European Union to foster sustainable urban development in cooperation with the public and private sectors, as well as representatives of research and innovation, community groups and citizens. Through engaging in the IUC, cities will have the chance to share and exchange knowledge with their international

counterparts, building a greener, more prosperous future. The IUC programme is an opportunity for local governments to learn from each other, set ambitious targets, forge lasting partnerships, test new solutions, and boost their city's international profile. Its activities will support the achievement of policy objectives as well as major international agreements on urban development and climate change, such as the EU Urban Agenda, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the Paris Agreement.



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