

Missions and Cohesion Policy: is there a match?

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This paper explores possibilities for cross-fertilization between the mission-oriented approach (MOA), informing the European Union (EU) Missions, and Cohesion Policy (CP). It argues for mutual policy learning between CP and MOA to address their shortcomings: CP faces a gradual erosion of its identity, while MOA lacks a territorial perspective. MOA can offer a theoretical ‘blueprint’ for reorganizing and clarifying CP’s ever-expanding and blurred thematic scope, providing direction to strengthen CP’s result orientation, and encouraging the adoption of ‘whole-of-government’ approaches to streamline CP’s complex governance relationships. MOA can benefit from adopting the CP architecture, which allows for common broad priorities to be adapted to territorial contexts and to regional strategies. MOA could also learn from CP’s goal of maximizing equity and efficiency, its focus on empowering regions, and its redistributive approach for fostering the full potential of all regions to address societal challenges to support the objectives of the EU Missions.

Keywords: Cohesion Policy; European Union; EU Missions; mission-oriented approach; policy learning; societal challenges.

1. Introduction

We set out here to examine two areas of the European Union (EU) policy landscape and their possible crossovers. The first one refers to the mission-oriented approach (MOA), a policy concept aimed to direct innovation towards problems with high societal values: the so-called grand societal challenges (SCs). The latter one is the EU Cohesion Policy (CP), a dominant policy instrument aimed to promote social, economic, and territorial cohesion in the EU. In order to ensure consistency in our comparative analysis, we consider the EU Missions as a first tentative implementation of MOA at the EU level. The EU Missions cover five different domains: (1) adaptation to climate change, (2) beating cancer, (3) restoring our ocean and waters, (4) 100 climate-neutral and smart cities, and (5) a soil deal for Europe (European Commission 2023a).

In principle, CP and MOA are ambitious and should contribute to the quality of life of all EU citizens. They leverage EU investments in a few common areas [research and innovation (R&I), environmental restoration/protection, and economic competitiveness] although CP covers a broader list of intervention fields and priorities. However, they pertain to two different silos as the EU Missions are framed under Horizon Europe whose synergies with CP are scant in many areas (Doussineau and Bachtrögl-Unger 2021). To date, the implementation of CP and MOA remains largely separated and there is no regulatory link between the two although CP funds are understood as one of the additional instruments that should support the objectives of the EU Missions (European Commission 2023a). Although at very different

maturity stages, the two policy instruments can offer potential ‘spillovers’ to one another, MOA has gained prominence in the contemporary policy debate as a framework informing the EU Missions to orient innovation towards the SCs that threaten our society and humankind. The need to pursue a directionality in innovation policy is well rooted in the academic literature, notably in the innovation studies scholarship (e.g. Weber and Rohrer 2012; Edler and Fagerberg 2017; Fagerberg 2018). While gearing innovation policy towards the creation of public good prompted a normative turn in policy-making (Uyarra, Ribeiro, and Dale-Clough 2019), several gaps in knowledge and practice hamper the implementation of MOA and offer room for reflections. Yet, its high strategic directionality size offers opportunities for policy learning to CP. CP—which accounts for about a third of the EU budget—is tasked with addressing a growing number of priorities and polarization trends across and within EU regions (European Commission 2022). However, its objective to promote territorial convergence can further inspire MOA and its implementation in EU policy-making.

While discussing how strategic directionality and the goal of territorial convergence can inform mutually the two policy instruments, we also draw on what academics from different scholarships claim to be their shortcomings or weaknesses to play a matchmaking exercise to evaluate the potential for a synergetic approach. Our aim is, thus, to provide room for learning in both policy areas.

Scholars and policy practitioners challenge MOA, since it adopts a normative standpoint when defining SCs (Flanagan, Uyarra, and Wanzenböck 2022) and takes for granted

a narrow technological scope of innovation envisioned in MOA (Tödtling, Trippl, and Desch 2022). This undermines the possibility of turning challenges into business opportunities at the local level (Wanzenböck and Frenken 2020) hampering a sort of local ‘sense-making’ process of the SCs. Scholars question the governance of MOA, as the role of sub-national governments needs to be better defined in MOA, both at the design and the implementation stages (Cappellano and Kurowska-Pysz 2020; Wanzenböck and Frenken 2020). While considering MOA as a default policy choice (Janssen *et al.* 2021), such a top-down approach can ignore the local policy dynamisms and areas of expertise (Bours, Wanzenböck, and Frenken 2022; Bugge, Andersen, and Steen 2022). All these claims explicate further why scholars are concerned about the risk to turn missions under a place-blind policy (Coenen, Hansen, and Rekers 2015) that might even accentuate the ever-increasing territorial imbalances across and within the EU regions (Rodríguez-Pose 2018).

Simultaneously, the economic and political developments in the past 3 years have significantly intensified questions about CP’s principles and purpose (Bachtler 2022). Since the early 2000s, scholars had already warned about a gradual erosion of the theoretical bases of CP due to budgetary pressures, widening priorities, and mixed results of the policy, national interests, etc. (Hooghe 1998; Hooghe and Marks 2001; Allen 2010; Begg 2010). The conceptual foundations of CP have been further challenged by its deployment against short-term shocks, increasing extension and heterogeneity of its investment priorities, overlap and competition with new funding streams, and declining additionality (Molica and Lleal Fontàs 2020; Böhme *et al.* 2022). Historically, the case for CP has also suffered from unstable evidence of its economic impact (Bachtrögler, Fratesi, and Perucca 2020). In addition, awareness of its benefits, as well as ownership, is still modest in many countries (Molica and Salvai 2019).

This study assesses whether MOA, or selected elements thereof, can exert an influence in (re)building a robust identity and purpose for CP and identifying avenues for future reforms. Conversely, the paper will discuss if CP could contribute to addressing questions as to whether a place-based application of MOA is viable. The literature has demonstrated the positive impact of CP in accelerating the devolution process in many countries, improving the multilevel governance (Bache *et al.* 2011), enhancing the capacity-building potential of local authorities (Polverari, Domorenok, and Graziano 2022), and facilitating the adoption of reforms and policies (Berkowitz, Rubianes, and Pienkowski 2017). Considering this, could it play a role in enabling place-based missions? In the following, we will first briefly introduce the two policy concepts and their main shortcomings. In the second part of the study, we will provide a conceptual discussion on the potential for mutual policy learning between CP and MOA.

2. Policy backgrounds

2.1 CP and its quest for a (new) identity

CP is one of the most consequential policies of the EU given its political salience, thematic breadth, budgetary size, and geographical scope. Its relevance is also epitomized by the sheer financial size, accounting for a third of the EU budget. Since its inception, the overall mission of the policy has not

changed in essence. It lies in tackling disparities by fostering the development of EU regions, with a particular focus—though less pronounced than in the past—on lagging ones. However, the shape and objectives of the policy have been steadily evolving as a result of internal dynamics and external factors ranging from globalization to enlargement, to shifting priorities at the EU level (Piattoni and Polverari 2019; McCann and Ortega-Argilés 2021). The geographical coverage of the policy has been enlarged so as to encompass all EU regions, which has in turn affected both the allocations breakdown and objectives. Thus, the focus of the policy has shifted from a purely integrated regional development to a broader competitiveness perspective (Mendez 2011; Sielker, Rauhut, and Humer 2021), that is, from aiding less developed regions to fostering endogenous growth in all territories. Accordingly, the emphasis on supporting physical infrastructures and manufacturing clusters has increasingly given way to promoting knowledge-based growth and de-carbonization. Lastly, the structure of the policy has been given more strategic focus, by reinforcing the long-term planning and result-orientation dimension. In fact, since the programming period 2014–20, the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) approach has been mainstreamed into CP as an *ex ante* conditionality to orient CP funds towards innovation-related activities yielding regional development externalities. S3 added a participatory process involving regional stakeholders to shed light on competitive areas for the regions. In so doing, S3 imbued CP with a sharper result-oriented ‘attitude’. At the same time, S3 has been criticized for pursuing a diversification of the regional economic portfolio rather than a specialization in some selected domains where to excel (Hassink and Gong 2019). Another critique is that the Smart Specialisation concept is designed to benefit developed regions that already rely on high value-added specialization and have adequate technological endowments (Wigger 2023).

These changes in CP have occurred against a background of intense discussions among scholars, analysts, practitioners, and governments. The most prolific debate pertains to the economic effects of the policy. The economic literature has been traditionally inconclusive in this respect. Several works have questioned the impact of CP (Boldrin and Canova 2001; Dall’Erba and Le Gallo 2008) and its permanent or transformative effects on local economies (Aiello and Pupo 2012; Barone, David, and De Blasio 2016). S3 has (also) been introduced as a process to urge regional economic structure transformation (Foray 2018) with ambivalent outcomes (Benner 2022). More recently, consensus has emerged around the existence of positive though very diverse impacts of CP across regions (Di Caro and Fratesi 2022). This heterogeneity can be explained by two main circumstances: the first stems from the diversity of interventions or objectives delivered under the different CP programmes and the second relates to the context of implementation (Bachtrögler, Fratesi, and Perucca 2020). In relation to the latter, empirical studies have found that the effects of the policy may be influenced by many variables such as the economic structure of regions (Percoco 2017), the quality of government (Rodríguez-Pose and Garcilazo 2015; Mendez and Bachtler 2022), human capital (Becker, Egger, and Von Ehrlich 2013), and regional innovative capacity and infrastructural endowment (Crescenzi and Giua 2016). This resonates with what is termed the ‘regional innovation paradox’: the lack of technical capacity in lagging regions to

‘absorb public funds earmarked for the promotion of innovation and to invest in innovation related activities’ (Oughton, Landabaso, and Morgan 2002: 97), despite the greater need to spend on innovation compared to more advanced regions.

The lack of unequivocal and, thus, compelling evidence about the impact has not been the only debated aspect of the policy. Its complex organization and wide thematic focus have also attracted criticism (Manzella and Mendez 2009). Moreover, the political discourse at both the EU and domestic levels has revolved essentially around financial absorption and irregularities, often fuelling negative narratives (Molica 2022). Lastly, the political ownership of the policy remains limited, and awareness of its benefits varies a great deal across Member States (Molica and Salvai 2019).

All the aforementioned factors have led to growing scrutiny—and ultimately questioning—of CP’s rationale and organization, despite a fresh rise in regional disparities since the financial crisis of 2008 (Monfort 2020). While the convergence process has slightly resumed in the past few years driven by Eastern European regions, a significant number of regions are locked in what has been termed as ‘development traps’ (Diemer et al. 2022): less developed, middle-income, or rural regions have kept declining or stagnating (European Commission 2022). Regional differences in relation to labour market indicators have not gone back to the pre-crisis levels, whereas regions have performed very differently in relation to other key indicators (e.g. innovation). Empirical studies have acknowledged that in some EU regional contexts S3 has failed to reverse these trends, as regional policymakers approached S3 as a box-ticking practice—a mandatory requirement to invest CP funds—rather than a strategic intelligence exercise to find and invest in knowledge domains where each region had a comparative advantage (Kroll et al. 2016; Benner 2020; D’Adda, Iacobucci, and Perugini 2022).

The ‘soul searching’ process—that CP is going through—has further deepened in the wake of the multiple crises that have struck the continent in the past 3 years. Four circumstances have come into play. First of all, since the pandemic, a non-negligible share of CP funds has been redirected to crisis mitigation measures. This has resulted in shifting funds away from high-value-added investments, notably from R&I (Böhme et al. 2022), as well as eroding the place-based dimension of the policy (Molica and Leal Fontàs 2020). The use of cohesion funds for addressing the short-term effects of negative shocks, which to a lesser extent also took place during the financial crisis, marks a departure from the structural and strategic goals of the policy. Thus, it has triggered questions on both its purpose and principles (Bachtler 2022).

Second, the establishment of the EU Recovery Instrument or NextGenerationEU in response to the pandemic has come to challenge the pre-eminent role and specificity of CP under the EU budget. The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF), the main pillar of NGEU, represents a parallel funding stream that delivers investment in areas essentially overlapping with CP's thematic priorities. Yet, RRF also enjoys features that differ considerably from CP in terms of a centralized governance, a largely place-blind approach, and disbursements based on performance (Conte and Molica 2022). While RRF has been conceived as a one-off instrument, analysts and policymakers are already debating whether it should be made permanent (Rubio 2022) or which of its elements could be mainstreamed to CP. Either scenario will result in a reassessment of CP's core missions and features.

Third, pressure has been building on CP to address an ever-larger number of objectives (e.g. integration of migrants and energy independence), which heightens the risk of turning it into a ‘catch-all’ policy at the expense of its core goals. This problem stems from long-standing confusion and ambiguity about the key goals of the policy (Begg 2010) as we shall discuss in Section 3. Enlarging the number of CP’s objectives might be harmful, as it reduces the marginal financial shares per each objective, hampering a critical funding concentration on few priorities. Therefore, CP might lose efficiency to engender results appreciated by EU citizens.

Fourth, S3 has been introduced as a place-based innovation policy concept to guide regional prioritization in innovative sectors, fields, or technologies. However, EU regions showed ambivalent responses in terms of specialization, since they were found to adopt non-selective sectoral or technological prioritization (Trippel, Zukauskaitė, and Healy 2019; Gianelle et al. 2020; Benner 2022). Most likely, the poor adoption of the S3 logic harmed the ambitious goals to (1) secure territorial convergence across EU regions, (2) attain the efficiency principle of EU financial incentives (EU regions failed to earmark a critical mass of investments into a small sample of directions); (3) restructure the socio-economic institutions of EU regions.

To sum up, the main consequence of the aforementioned shortcomings is that the identity of CP is increasingly becoming blurred. Specific work to focus its objectives and conceptualize its foundations is very much needed (Barca 2009) in view of designing the post-Brexit EU27 CP.

2.2 Challenges of the MOA to innovation policy

Arguments in favour of MOA were first drawn by [Ergas \(1987\)](#) who put forward the notion (to apply) ‘big science for big problems’. Until then, missions were mainly connected with the defence sector research and development (R&D) venture. In the last decade, missions and the underlying mission-oriented concept have been linked to social objectives, since our societies were investing disproportionately in economic targets rather than solving societal issues ([Nelson 2011](#)). At the EU level, an early plea to incorporate MOA within the EU policy agenda can be dated back to the ‘Lamy report’ ([European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2017](#)). The document recommended that the ‘post-2020 EU R&I programme should thus translate global societal challenges (social, economic, environmental) into a limited number of large-scale research and innovation “missions”’ ([European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2017](#): 25). Building on this, the report of the Expert group on the economic and societal impact of research and innovation discussed how to frame the missions in alignment with the EU agenda and what would be the best tools to mobilize them. Two concepts emerging from this report were (1) the need to set a right level of granularity in linking SCs to specific and measurable goals (i.e. missions) and (2) the employment of a modular approach to manage the complexity of missions by allowing for coordination across different levels of government, sectors, policies, and ultimately funding tools. In this sense, the authors envisioned the mobilization in synergy of a panoply of funds, including from CP, to deliver the missions ([European](#)

Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2018b). In parallel, the Research, Innovation and Science Expert group report (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2018a) placed emphasis also on building an effective governance encompassing all levels of governments as well as engaging citizens.

MOA is by its nature linked to societal objectives with the aim of generating a transformative change (Mazzucato 2018a). The main pillars defining the application of MOA on the EU R&I agenda were described by Mazzucato in her report for the European Commission (Mazzucato 2018b): (1) pursuing bold and societally relevant targets, (2) setting time-bound verifiable outcomes, (3) devising R&D actions at the cross-road of high risk and technical feasibility, (4) harnessing knowledge from multiple disciplines and moving across several policy sectors, and (5) providing room for bottom-up experimentation engaging multiple actors from different backgrounds. However, there are several shortcomings in the implementation of MOA.

As Larrue (2021: 90) pointed out, there is a striking caveat in addressing the trade-off between the engagement of citizens in the mission definition and the design of an inclusive orientation process that does not lead to ‘an inflation, broadening or dilution of ambitions’. As such, more research on the practicalities of missions is needed. In fact, except for the anecdotal evidence referring to archetypical historical missions such as the man-on-the-moon project (Mazzucato 2018a), relatively little was known about the concrete feasibility of MOA before its implementation. As summarized by Janssen *et al.* (2021: 438):

While the attention for mission-oriented innovation policy is rising, there are still many questions regarding both the governance and the conduct of missions as well as the (adverse) effects they might have on innovation and societal challenges.

The mission’s governance is reported to require alignment as well as active involvement between sectoral ministries that are directly related to the SCs (Larrue 2021). Obviously, this opens questions on the horizontal and vertical governance coordination, the latter having been extensively underlined in the literature (Cappellano and Kurowska-Pysz 2020; Wanzenböck and Frenken 2020). There is also a shortage of evidence about the practical articulation of supply-push and demand-led policy instruments (Larrue 2021) that should mainstream the policy mix in missions (Mazzucato 2018b). This would require nonstandard policy instruments and administrative capacities that as in the case of the S3 assessment were not necessarily within the reach of all EU regions (Kroll *et al.* 2016). Therefore, MOA seems to be more appropriate for territorial stakeholders that have already proved the capacity to mobilize existing (critical mass of innovative) actors and resources, well-functioning networks (i.e. regional innovation systems), and good public institutions (Interreg Europe 2020; Tödtling, Trippl, and Desch 2022). At the same time, relying on established communities and institutions might be hampering the introduction of disruptive solutions (Larrue 2021) heightening the risk of lock-in due to policy path dependency (Brown 2021).

Finally, there is a lack of evidence concerning the development of evaluation procedures and methodologies that

are suited for systemic policies (Larrue 2021). This brings about a 2-fold problem. First, the success of systemic policies (such as those informed by MOA) is hard to measure. Second, those studies that have made an effort to do so have often produced mixed results. Therefore, given the complexity and the case-specificity of missions, their evaluation is not a straightforward task (Wittmann *et al.* 2021). This generates ambivalent outcomes. In fact, while the advocates of MOA (e.g. Deleidi and Mazzucato 2021; Bugge, Andersen, and Steen 2022; Craens, Frenken, and Meelen 2022) have produced favourable assessments, other scholars have been more critical. Brown (2021) criticized MOA implemented in Scotland due to its fuzzy policy-making, high opaqueness, lack of sufficient detail, and failure to align itself properly with the local demand conditions. Rohrer, Coenen, and Kordas (2023) have shown with an evaluation of Swedish innovation programmes that there is a mismatch between the dominant mission-oriented policy discourse and the traditional way programmes are still designed, implemented, and monitored leading to controversies and tensions between stakeholders. This hampers the potential of MOA to reach the envisioned targets to tackle SCs. This is the case of the EU Mission concerning climate-neutral cities, where ‘a lack of standardised approach to measure climate resilience has emerged’ (Reid *et al.* 2023: 10).

Since there are no ‘one-size-fits-all’ innovation policy frameworks (Tödtling and Trippl 2005), solving SCs in different regions is highly context specific. Scholars contested that missions allow limited space for non-technological solutions (Brown 2021; Larrue 2021; Flanagan, Uyarra, and Wanzenböck 2022). Scholars warn that a normative approach to the space yields to ignoring the diversity of potential solutions to SCs, the regionally differentiated capacities and endowments, and highly geographic contextual exposure to SCs. Such an approach hinders taking advantage of the full potential of EU regions by leaving it underutilized: every region will have a comparative advantage to tackle at least one SC (Cappellano *et al.* 2022). Policymakers are required to have deep knowledge about the territorial-specific economic activities and the environment in which they operate in (Kattel and Mazzucato 2018). This might be challenging in terms of the required policy intelligence, skills, and capabilities of regional stakeholders (Guzzo, Gianelle, and Marinelli 2018). The complexity of the goals and the implementation of innovation policy have arguably increased—compared to earlier capacity and system-focused paradigms—after the introduction of MOA (Hjalager and von Gesseneck 2020). Therefore, territorial policy capabilities might be too generic and fragmented to trigger the desired changes via MOA (Karo 2018).

The EU Missions were launched to tackle relevant SCs. However, the EU approach to the missions displays a limited adoption of MOA principles. In Table 1, we discuss the EU Missions vis-a-vis MOA principles. All the EU Missions have been planned to target challenges with an ambitious nature. Most of them pursue a clear directionality highlighted by a measurable and time-bound target. The first study supporting the assessment of the EU Missions, which concluded in September 2023, evaluated the EU Missions against other international efforts to conduct mission-oriented policies (e.g. Japan and Iceland). It recognized the societal relevance of the five missions’ areas although pointing out that there is still a need to further combine interdisciplinary R&I by also

including the scientific standpoints of social sciences and humanities (Reid et al. 2023).

The EU Missions are reported to have a primary focus on technological innovation, which has been criticized as an archetypal caveat of MOA (Wanzenböck and Frenken 2020; Janssen et al. 2021; Flanagan, Uyarra, and Wanzenböck 2022), whereas other forms of innovation have received little attention. This resonates with the early critique towards missions (Ergas 1987), as well as the ongoing EU Missions. For instance, the Cancer Mission has been found to be strictly limited to R&I. While new technologies can enable relevant progress in identifying and treating cancer, a systematic approach to cancer should span from ‘prevention to survivorship and quality of life’ (Reid et al. 2023: 42). Also, the EU Mission for climate-neutral cities has been reported to focus mainly on R&I. However, the social acceptance and implementation of the outcomes of R&I activities (breakthroughs) is an equally critical factor for the green urban transition as the actual innovations. In fact, while the mission on climate-neutral cities does include social justice in its scope, there is a predominant focus on the economy and the business sector rather than on the society as a whole (Reid et al. 2023). At this stage, there is a limited understanding of the extent of scalability of these missions that possibly undermines their value.

For the information available, in contrast with MOA principles, the EU Missions do not display a policy mix that would work on both the supply and demand side. Instead, they seem to focus on funding R&I projects rather than using other available policy tools (e.g. public procurement). The private sector does not seem as engaged in the EU Missions as it should be according to MOA principles. Furthermore, the degree of bottom-up experimentation, highly envisaged by [Mazzucato \(2018b\)](#), seems to be lacking at this stage.

3. Policy learning

3.1 A mission-oriented CP?

We argue here that the mission-oriented paradigm is relevant in identifying potential avenues to address the aforementioned challenges facing CP. The expanding remit of CP to address an ever-wider spectrum of objectives, coupled with a departure from the exclusive focus on regional development and a more recent pressure to tackle short-term emergencies, is generating confusion around the identity and role of CP and ultimately defying its rationale. Therefore, a major risk is that the CP scope is stretched to the point where, in the words of Ian Begg, ‘the EU is not entirely sure why it has a Cohesion Policy’ (*Source*: <https://www.politico.eu/article/cohesion-or-confusion>). Indeed, results of past evaluations have found that the effectiveness of CP was harmed by fragmented spending across too many priorities (Bachtler et al. 2017). The issue was extensively discussed in the Barca report (Barca 2009) and addressed in the 2014–20 reform of the policy, but the recent pressure to address new priorities and short-term shocks has revived talks of a ‘catch-all’ policy. The streamlining of the thematic scope under the programming period 2021–7 (from eleven to five macro-objectives) could be seen as no more than a simple reorganization of existing priorities. A trend towards fragmentation is also emerging in the architecture of the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), with

an increased number of instruments directly and indirectly delivering cohesion goals (Molica and Lleal Fontàs 2020; European Parliament 2022). Considering this, we explore the potential influence of MOA in relation to four aspects of CP.

First, SCs are by definition complex, multidimensional, and systemic. They therefore require cross-disciplinary and cross-sectoral actions in order to be addressed (Mazzucato 2018a). It appears unlikely that the range of priorities that CP has come to cover will be reduced in the future, due to various factors such as the EU expanding agenda and rent-seeking dynamics at the national and local levels (Crescenzi, Fratesi, and Monastiriotis 2017). Bearing this in mind, a key aspect worth exploring is whether MOA can provide a theoretical blueprint for rearranging CP's multiple priorities in a more efficient and consistent direction: namely by regrouping them under a few cross-sectoral goals linked to specific SCs. The extent to which a reorganization of the objectives around common themes in the shape of missions, or more broadly around challenges, could also prevent dispersion of spending and achieve critical mass in terms of investments should be discussed. It is clear that this reorganization can dispel confusion about CP goals. The potential impact of MOA should be seen not only in terms of a revision of the thematic menu of the CP, which implies a shift in the strategic and intervention logic, but also in terms of tackling fragmentation across several funds (Mazzucato, Carreras, and Mikheeva 2023). In fact, it would entail a further integration of CP with other EU sectoral policies towards joint goals under an approach that is reminiscent of the Europe 2020 strategy. At the very least, the operational application of MOA would require more coordination between various policy fields and arenas (Janssen et al. 2023), breaking 'silos' and triggering more synergies across thematic axes, programmes, and funds. In this sense, envisioning the incorporation of the mission-oriented paradigm into CP would not be a brand-new exercise. In fact, it would build upon the mission-oriented thinking that already lies *in nuce* in the Smart Specialisation approach (Foray 2018). However, this paper understands MOA as an organizing principle applying to CP thematic structure as a whole, beyond S3. With this in mind, the emerging concept of Partnerships for Regional Innovation (PRI) acquires particular salience in that it provides a more comprehensive framework (than S3) for coordination among different policies, funding streams, and various levels of government (Pontikakis et al. 2022). The mainstreaming of MOA into CP could therefore draw on the theoretical aspects of PRI and take into account the results of its current operationalization. The S3 concept itself needs to be revamped to acquire more directionality so as to steer place-based innovation and industrial policy towards tackling SCs (McCann and Soete 2020; European Commission 2022).

The possibility to use MOA as an organizing principle for the thematic structure of CP brings significant challenges. The most important is how MOA can be applied to the design of CP's overarching thematic structure and of the thematic structure of CP (national/regional) programmes without this leading to tensions or conflicts. A potential solution is that missions at the EU level are framed in such a general and strategic way to ensure that programmes have sufficient room to reflect all or some of them into tailored local/national missions. This implies clear constraints in the definition of missions by the programmes. It could still give rise to tensions.

Table 1. An overview of EU Missions.

MOA dimension	Adaptation to climate change	Beating cancer	Restoring our ocean and waters	100 climate-neutral and smart cities	A soil deal for Europe
Having an ambitious nature and addressing societal value	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pursuing a clear direction: targeted, measurable, and time-bound	Targets by 2030: prepare Europe to deal with climate disruptions, accelerate the transition to a healthy and prosperous future within safe planetary boundaries, and scale up solutions for resilience that will trigger transformations in society.	Targets by 2030: more than 3 million more lives saved, living longer and better, achieving a thorough understanding of cancer, preventing what is preventable, optimizing diagnosis and treatment, supporting the quality of life of all people exposed to cancer, and ensuring equitable access to the above across Europe.	Targets by 2030: cleaning marine and fresh waters, restoring degraded ecosystems and habitats, and decarbonizing the blue economy to sustainably harness the essential goods and services they provide. In particular, the Missions aims to: 1. Protect a minimum of 30% of the EU's sea area and integrate ecological corridors, as part of a true Trans-European Nature Network, 2. Restore at least 25,000 km of free-flowing rivers, and 3. Contribute to relevant upcoming marine nature restoration targets including degraded seabed habitats and coastal ecosystems.	Targets by 2030: support, promote, and showcase 100 European cities in their systemic transformation towards climate neutrality by 2030 and turn these cities into innovation hubs for all cities, benefiting the quality of life and sustainability in Europe.	Targets by 2030: establish 100 living laboratories and light-houses to lead the transition to healthy soils by 2030.

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

MOA dimension	Adaptation to climate change	Beating cancer	Restoring our ocean and waters	100 climate-neutral and smart cities	A soil deal for Europe
Being cross-sectoral, cross-actor, and cross-disciplinary	Activities aimed at testing and demonstrating transformative solutions to: 1. Increase climate resilience of the agriculture and/or forestry sector 2. Protect critical infrastructure from climate change, mainstreaming nature-based solutions 3. Build resilience towards health risks caused by the effects of climate change	Five effective interventions are needed to improve: 1. Prevention 2. Diagnostics and treatment of cancer 3. The quality of life of cancer patients, survivors, and their families and carers 4. Equitable access to all the aforementioned areas. As such, these areas are considered the main intervention areas of the Mission. Effective interventions in these areas all require a thorough understanding (fifth intervention) of cancers, causal factors and mechanisms, and their impact on cancer; therefore, understanding is considered the basis for actions	Restoring our oceans and waters will directly contribute to SDG 14 Life below water and SDG 6 Clean water and sanitation. Restoring the EU ocean and waters will interact and indirectly support most of the other SDG.	One topic covering co-designed smart systems and services for user-centred shared zero-emission mobility in urban areas, with an indicative budget of €50 million. One topic covering positive clean energy district digital twins, with an indicative budget of €20 million.	1. Reduce land degradation relating to desertification 2. Conserve and increase soil organic carbon stocks 3. No net soil sealing and increase the reuse of urban soils 4. Reduce soil pollution and enhance restoration 5. Prevent erosion 6. Improve soil structure to enhance habitat quality for soil biota and crops 7. Reduce the EU global footprint on soils 8. Increase soil literacy in society across Member States

(continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

MOA dimension	Adaptation to climate change	Beating cancer	Restoring our ocean and waters	100 climate-neutral and smart cities	A soil deal for Europe
Involving multiple competing solutions and bottom-up experimentation	Example: The 'Climate-resilient buildings in Stiefingtal, Austria' represents a collective action towards the transformation of existing and new building construction method to offset the new warmer temperature.		Activities: 1. Setup of 'lighthouses' for the major European sea and river basins, based on existing structures, as the Mission sites to promote basin-wide cooperation, commitment, and deployment of solutions addressing the three Mission objectives 2. A core of scalable and replicable, excellent, and impact-driven R&I solutions (technological, business, social, and governance) and demonstration activities tailored specifically for each of the three specific Mission objectives 3. Scale up projects throughout European sea and river basins to achieve the mission objectives and targets 4. A digital ocean and water knowledge system including an environmental and biodiversity monitoring system to better understand, monitor, and forecast the health of the water system as a whole and measure progress towards the targets of this Mission 5. Public mobilization and engagement: with tried and tested deliberative democracy mechanisms and social innovation practices, participatory governance approaches, and mobilizing and empowering citizens for the co-design and co-implementation of solutions	The 100 selected cities are now being invited to develop Climate City Contracts, which will include an overall plan for climate neutrality across all sectors such as energy, buildings, waste management, and transport, together with related investment plans. This process will involve citizens, research organizations, and the private sector.	Soil living laboratories to be set up under the Mission 'A Soil Deal for Europe' are defined as user-centered, place-based, and interdisciplinary R&I ecosystems. They are understood as collaborative initiatives between multiple partners to co-create, test, monitor, and evaluate solutions to a common problem.

Source: EU official documents (see below).

Note: SDG: Sustainable Development Goal Sources:

1. Soil health has been defined as 'the continued capacity of soils to support ecosystem services'.
2. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Chimini, G., Failler, P., Galgani, L. et al., Portfolio analysis, EU mission 'Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030' – Analysis of a portfolio of projects financed by sixteen EU programmes contributing to the objectives and enablers of the mission ocean and waters, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/683>.
3. European Commission (2021), EU Mission Restore our Ocean and Waters Implementation Plan.
4. European Commission (2021), Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on European Missions.
5. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Pita Barros, P., Beets-Tan, R., Chomienne, C. et al., Conquering cancer – Mission possible, Publications Office, 2020, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/045403>.
6. European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation, Chimini, G., Failler, P., Galgani, L. et al., Portfolio analysis, EU mission 'Restore our Ocean and Waters by 2030' – Analysis of a portfolio of projects financed by sixteen EU programmes contributing to the objectives and enablers of the mission ocean and waters, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2777/683>.

Probably, the less contested governance arrangement would entail leaving to the EU level alone the identification of main challenges and relative missions, while programmes are only tasked with developing and experimenting context-specific solutions/answers to part of all those problems. This governance approach would fit the ‘global problems-local solutions’ model discussed in [Uyarra, Flanagan, and Wanzenböck \(2023\)](#). Moreover, it is consistent, *mutatis mutandis*, with the governance defined in the Barca report according to which the higher levels of government (EU and Member States) set the main goals and rules for managing CP funds, while the local and regional authorities translate them into specific solutions according to the context ([Barca 2009](#)). Another possibility is that MOA applies only to programmes: the identification of challenges will be the responsibility of programmes’ authorities as long as the resulting missions fall under the range of priorities contemplated by CP. The potential benefits in terms of clarifying the goals of CP will be partially lost, however.

Second, a more critical question is whether MOA can help to restore a strong sense of purpose to CP. As argued in previous sections, the policy is increasingly facing questions about its *raison d’être*. As a corollary, its reputation—political ownership and capacity to mobilize policymakers and citizens alike around its objectives are all impacted. In all these areas, CP has yielded mixed results over time and less visible effects in more well-off territories ([Molica and Salvai 2019](#)). With this in mind, openly framing CP around a narrow set of well-defined and measurable missions (as long as they contribute to territorial convergence) could feed into a more clear-cut and robust rationale. CP is already geared towards tackling SCs, such as climate change. Thus, applying a mission-orientation thinking to the policy would not entail repurposing it, nor altering its original mission enshrined in the Treaty. Rather, it could contribute to bringing its objectives into focus in a clearer way. It could also be conducive to forging a compelling and shared narrative around the policy. [Mazzucato \(2018a\)](#) highlights the potential impact of missions in inspiring and engaging widespread support because they refer to problems that resonate with the general public. By the same token, missions can provide a more straightforward idea to policymakers as well as the general public of what CP is intended for, thus triggering higher support, ownership, and engagement. Moreover, the key role given to bottom-up processes (at a conceptual level—but not grounded in practice) in the definition of missions is also relevant in light of the recent emphasis on increasing citizen engagement in CP ([European Commission 2022](#)).

Third, one could look at how the idea of directionality can be employed in the context of CP. CP is the most measured and evaluated policy in Europe ([Darvas et al. 2019](#)). As stated earlier, evidence of its achievements has been mixed. Insufficient emphasis on results and an inadequate strategic focus have been identified as weak spots of the policy ([Barca 2009](#)). Therefore, a strong focus on these two aspects has informed the design of the policy since the 2014–20 period. Results of this shift are still being assessed. Again, the early evidence is mixed. The so-called performance-based framework—proposed as a means to assess the results of CP—encountered several obstacles ([European Court of Auditors 2021](#)). The strong progress in terms of evaluation is tempered by Member States’

reluctance to feed the evaluation findings into policy processes ([Pellegrin and Colnot 2020](#)). Directionality—entailing the establishment of political and normative goals, better clarifying the expectations, and specifying what requires attention and what does not ([Miörner 2022](#))—could facilitate the consolidation of the result-orientation focus and strategic dimension of the policy. In regard to this, one should look in particular at the fact that MOA is based on broad measurable, ambitious, and time-bound targets. This logic acquires particular salience also in the context of discussions around the possibility of mainstreaming the payment-by-result model underpinning the RRF into future CP ([Bachtler 2022](#)). Moreover, the intervention logic of CP programmes largely focuses on outcomes and results. Less attention is paid to the broader impacts given the longer time-horizon and objective methodological obstacles to assess those (e.g. as to how to discern the impact of CP on a certain indicator from that of a domestic policy). MOA can influence the design of the policy towards a more transformative orientation.

Fourth, MOA can play a role in streamlining the intricate decision-making process of CP without affecting its peculiar participatory dimension epitomized by the partnership principle. The multilevel governance, which defines CP, implies complex vertical and horizontal relationships ([Bache 2008](#)). Besides the benefits in terms of improving the effectiveness of policy implementation, reinforcing the administrative capacity, and facilitating cooperation and mutual learning, studies have identified shortcomings. The complexity of this governance is associated with joint decision-traps ([Scharpf 1988](#)), bureaucratic burdens ([Radzyner et al. 2014](#)), and a mismatch between priorities at different levels or between the scale of policies and jurisdictions of actors involved ([Charbit and Michalun 2009](#)). Ultimately, it can affect the smooth implementation of the policy ([Crescenzi, Giua, and Sonzogno 2021](#)). There is no silver bullet to solve these issues and there exists a very fine line between simplifying CP’s governance and undermining its place-based and multilevel dimensions. However, one could consider if MOA can serve as a catalyst for adopting (i.e. testing) whole-of-government approaches in CP ([OECD 2009](#)) to improve coordination between the plethora of entities involved in its decision-making. Thinking of this, the question is whether focusing the policy on a few missions can streamline the vertical and horizontal relations upon which CP is based.

A corollary to the previous point is whether MOA can reinforce the role of policy experimentalism in CP. The Barca report famously recommended that CP embraces a form of experimentalist governance based upon bottom-up localism and agency empowerment ([Barca 2009](#)). According to this idea, the mobilization of local actors is an important factor for the identification and legitimization of the interventions and can potentially lead to test alternative solutions in a sort of policy-learning process. So far, the uptake of policy experimentalism in CP has been limited ([Coenen and Morgan 2020](#)), with an inconsistent application even under S3. S3 has been considered a sort of mission-oriented policy for its ambition to induce a structural change through transformative activities. As earlier discussed, the concept of S3 relies on the concentration of financial resources into a few selected priorities, highlighting—potentially—a policy orientation in line with MOA principles. The policy concept mirrors MOA in bundling multiple ‘actions’—R&D projects, partnerships, and

supply of new specific public goods — to explore the new area of opportunity and facilitate the implementation of collective actions between the different innovation actors concerned' (Foray 2018: 819). Yet, at a conceptual level, S3 should be considered a place-based innovation concept complementing a (short-sighted) territorial understanding of MOA.

S3 could conceptually guide CP to adopt MOA principles. However, as stated earlier, based on the first implementations of S3 into practice, it seems that policymakers approach S3 as a mandatory exercise rather than a strategic intelligence practice to unfold place-specific areas of expertise (Benner 2022). Moreover, the participatory practices that should be pursued through S3 have been reported to follow a traditional approach led by incumbent actors (Coenen and Morgan 2020). As a result, emphasis has been laid on the science and technology domains as per usual (Trippel, Zukauskaitė, and Healy 2019). Reid, Steward, and Miedzinski (2023) agree that MOA can inform S3—hence, the CP funding—with a 'stronger orientation towards sustainability goals' (10), recognizing that the S3 framework *per se* has limited potential to pursue challenge-driven innovation.

To sum up, CP should learn from MOA how to integrate different actions orienting them to a certain direction. Therefore, the solution should not be posed only on one policy instrument (S3) but to synergies across European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) and Horizon Europe funds as well as across multiple place-based policy tools (such as 'regional innovation valleys' or 'inter-regional innovation investments') with a 2-fold goal: first to leverage and empower place-based competences sparking their competitive profile and, second, to build networks across different territories providing room for learning in the field of SCs.

3.2 What can the MOA learn from CP?

We argue that CP can imbue MOA with a territorial perspective. As a (policy) concept focused on innovation, MOA is expected to generate regional development externalities. At the same time, the relationship between MOA and the territory is much more complex as they mutually interact with each other. In fact, territory is discussed here as a backdrop for originating inputs for MOA, since local actors produce valuable knowledge for SCs (Bugge, Andersen, and Steen 2022; Cappellano *et al.* 2022). Territorial stakeholders, questioning the legitimacy of missions according to their place-specific values, needs, and agendas (Flanagan, Uyarra, and Wanzenböck 2022), can pursue local policy attempts to tackle SCs (Bours, Wanzenböck, and Frenken 2022). Simultaneously, MOA produces economic and social externalities to territories. Therefore, we mediate this relationship through CP that is supposed to have a sharper territorial layer than MOA.

First, MOA can learn from CP's multilevel governance in order to enable the local stakeholders (governments, civic society, and private businesses) to set up their agenda within a list of priorities at the (supra-)national level. In fact, MOA has been criticized for its weak understanding of the needs and challenges lying on the ground neglecting the place-based nature of the SC framing and solution selection processes (Flanagan, Uyarra, and Wanzenböck 2022). Conversely, CP presents a list of priorities (or thematic objectives) that can be selected and adapted, albeit within specific legal and

thematic constraints, to a territorial context and regional policy agenda. Indeed, the governance of CP has increasingly moved towards an architecture where jointly set priorities are transposed into place-based frameworks (Begg 2010; Mendez 2011). The multilevel governance and shared management allow CP to support the EU regions with limited interference on the powers of regional and national government levels. In the same vein, MOA should clearly frame the role of subnational governments to pursue mission-oriented innovation policies that has, thus far, remained blurred (Cappellano and Kurowska-Pysz 2020; Wanzenböck and Frenken 2020; Wanzenböck *et al.* 2020). Therefore, there is a need to navigate a trade-off between directionality (issued, in practice, in a top-down logic) and the flexibility to adapt the SC-oriented missions to local needs. The emergence of 'mini missions' (Henderson, Morgan, and Delbridge 2023) can inspire a new wave of more local experimentation bundling territorial actors and resources with high directionality towards defined SCs. Hackathons and grands prix for local projects have proved to generate significant success to tackle SCs at a small scale and could help policymakers to sample local initiatives aligning them with national policies (Morisson and Pattinson 2023). Yet, there is a trade-off between the scale of implementation. Small projects can leverage local dynamisms and actors, but can they mass the necessary critical mass of resources to bolster a tipping point for tackling SC?

Second, another layer for policy learning concerns the dichotomy between what we term here as 'exogenously led MOA' and 'endogenous-oriented CP'. Although this juxtaposition can be provocative, it originates from the high directionality of MOA as orienting R&I assets towards a certain direction. While the final goal can be very ambitious and relevant for the whole society, this approach can be also considered as a 'predatorial' one from a territorial perspective. It mainly harnesses local resources (knowledge) to accomplish objectives that are exogenously issued. On the contrary, CP is intended to work on empowering local players as a way to create the preconditions for further endogenous growth (Bache and Jones 2000) as in the case of the European Regional Development Fund-sourced funds sustaining the (R&I) infrastructures of the majority of the EU regions. At the same time, MOA seems to orient the best resources towards the SCs which sound very fine-tuned with an efficiency principle. In so doing, it can entrench core-periphery patterns (Krugman 1991), notably by favouring agglomeration and industrial clustering trends, thus resulting in increased spatial concentration of technological activities (Gordon and McCann 2005) at the expense of less innovation-prone regions. Therefore, MOA could learn from CP's development model that seeks to maximize both equity and solidarity—although scholars have raised questions over its viability (Farole, Rodríguez-Pose, and Storper 2011). Creating preconditions in peripheral regions to thrive in their potential to fight SCs should combine both equity objectives (territorial and social cohesion) but also efficiency goals to maximize the specific contributions to global SCs from a 'global-local' perspective.

Third, in MOA rhetoric, Mazzucato (2018a) discusses how knowledge generated by the public R&I agencies was essential for generating innovation breakthroughs such as the World Wide Web. However, when discussing how mission should work, limited attention has been given to the knowledge production process apparent from the definition by Mazzucato and Semieniuk (2017: 33):

Mission-oriented policies can therefore be defined as systemic public policies that draw on frontier knowledge to attain specific goals.

MOA appears to have a functional approach to knowledge that should be used, shared, or exploited when oriented towards a certain SC. In other words, in MOA rhetoric there is a nuanced interest on existing local preconditions for generating knowledge (knowledge base). Instead, tackling an SC should also consider investing in knowledge generation (Tödtling, Trippel, and Desch 2022). This should include technological endowments and expenses to educate and train a new class of researchers aligning their curricula to the SC's needs. In this regard, MOA could learn from CP, which has invested greatly—notably via the European Social Fund—to increase the educational attainment within and across Member States.

Fourth, since the EU Missions have just started, there is no real data about the geographical distribution of funds to sustain SC-oriented projects. However, as discussed earlier, there is a risk that the majority of the funds are allocated to the existing innovation hubs of Europe. The fact that CP is designed to distribute its funds depending on the wealth of the territories should, therefore, also inform MOA. Indeed, lagging regions (those EU regions whose GDP falls below the EU 75 per cent average) receive more money than more developed regions within the ESIF distribution logic (Solís-Baltodano, Giménez-Gómez, and Peris 2021). Every territory should be in the position to generate its contribution to the SCs regardless of its income, and first analyses of the readiness of regions to tackle SCs demonstrate that this can be the case (Cappelano et al. 2022). For example, rural regions are anything but void of innovative activities (Makkonen et al. 2020). In fact, rural regions have been shown to host precisely those types of actors (notably social enterprises) that can help to tackle SCs (Richter 2019; Olmedo, van Twuijver, and O'Shaughnessy 2021). Furthermore, they are noted to be key locations for important parts of the economy, such as the circular bioeconomy (Brandão and Santos 2022), contributing to solving the EU Missions. Therefore, a redistributive approach should also be considered in the case of MOA to facilitate fostering the full potential of the EU area to tackle SCs.

4. Conclusions

We set out to discuss the possibility of mutual policy learning between two separated high-priority EU policy areas: CP, a dominant policy instrument aimed to ensure social, economic, and territorial cohesion in the EU, and the EU Missions building on MOA, to direct innovation towards solving SCs. The aims of these two policy areas are ambitious as they should contribute to the quality of life of all EU citizens. The contemporary academic debate has, however, raised concerns about their capacity to reach this goal. CP has been criticized for (1) including too many priorities (a 'catch-all' policy), (2) lacking a strong sense of purpose, (3) the mixed evidence of its achievements, and (4) its multilevel governance structure consisting of complex vertical and horizontal relationships. Similarly, MOA has been criticized for (1) disregarding the place-based nature of SCs; (2) favouring existing clusters of innovation over less innovation-prone regions; (3) focusing on existing knowledge bases, while neglecting investments

Table 2. Main policy-learning opportunities between CP and the MOA.

What can CP learn from the MOA?	What can the MOA learn from CP?
Rearrange CP's multiple priorities according to MOA under cross-sectional SCs to:	Imbue MOA with CP's territorial perspective to:
1. Improve coordination and trigger synergies between the thematic areas of CP	1. Enable local stakeholders to set up their own agendas based on territorial strengths
2. Engage support for themes that resonate with the general public and policymakers	2. Maximize equity, solidarity, and efficiency
3. Influence the design of CP towards a more transformative orientation	3. Increase educational attainment across EU regions
4. Streamline vertical and horizontal multi-governance relations	4. Harness the potential of all EU regions to tackle SCs

in education; and (4) ignoring the empowerment of all EU regions, while selecting which ones can contribute to missions.

Considering these shortcomings in CP and MOA, we elaborated the possibility of policy learning between the two policy areas. Our aim was to disentangle, whether MOA can exert a positive influence in (re)building a robust rationale for CP and identifying avenues for future reforms and, conversely, whether CP can contribute to addressing questions concerning the place-based application of MOA? We identified four key areas of potential policy learning for both approaches (Table 2).

Our aim here was to initiate and stir up further discussion on the possibility of mutual policy learning between CP and MOA. This is particularly relevant in the context of the embryonic debate on the future design of EU funding instruments for the post-Brexit EU27 programming period. Major changes in the global environment, ranging from geo-political shifts to trade fragmentation, are triggering a rethink of the EU agenda with profound implications for its investment policies such as CP (Hunter 2023) or Horizon Europe. The current situation begs for a major reform of the EU MFF after 2027 to bring it more in line with these emerging challenges. Understanding whether the conceptual frameworks underpinning MOA and CP can be mutually reinforcing is essential to inform this political discussion and suggest a viable direction. Both CP and MOA can be cornerstones of the EU investment agenda for the end of the decade, provided that they are capable of opening up to innovative approaches drawing on other policy frameworks and experiences. Otherwise, the risk, at least for CP, is a potential marginalization in the budgetary galaxy, which can hamper the EU's capacity to understand and address the increasingly multi-faceted dimension of territorial divides.

From a policy-making perspective, a closer alignment between the EU Missions and CP—as highlighted by the European Commission in its first assessment of the EU Missions (Reid et al. 2023) and explored in the case of the Czech Smart Specialisation Strategy incorporating Missions (Reid, Steward, and Miedzinski 2023)—appears desirable to ensure more consistency across EU R&I investments (including CP funds and Horizon Europe) and to maximize their impact. This could bring mutual benefits to CP and the EU Missions along the lines of some of the principal arguments raised in

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