

Nordic-Baltic Network of Living Labs – Collaboration towards a joint research and innovation programme

Ladies and gentlemen, dear Professor Gricar. It is a true honour for me to be invited to this beautiful country. The ambience and the people are warm and welcoming.

Slovenia, to me, represents the core essence of the innovative power needed across Europe today. Although the European-wide efforts to stimulate innovation for job creation and business growth are visible and to a large extent successful, they need to be enhanced. It will be necessary to undergo changes on national and regional levels in areas regarding institutional, structural and financial matters, so that focussed and innovation-based growth for global competitiveness of all of Europe can be facilitated.

The Baltic Sea region, as other regions in Eastern Europe, has undergone a fantastic development during the past fifteen years. The Baltic countries have moved from being separated from the west by the iron curtain, to the dynamic region we see today. It is characterized by trade, cooperation and exchange on several levels. Today, eight out of nine Baltic Sea states are members of the European Union.

It is well-known that investments and use of ICT have boosted and still do boost the overall productivity of the society. From a Nordic and Baltic perspective, there are several reasons for stimulating innovations, as well as development and deployment, in the services and ICT-applications areas.

First of all we need user friendly and effective ICT-enabled services in numerous public and private sectors. This will secure and further develop the well-being of our population. The matter is cost-related as well as it is a qualitative matter.

Secondly, ICT applications represent an export and growth opportunity. This in turn requires a leading market for development, testing and deployment in order for competitive ICT applications to be created.

And thirdly, an increased up-take of ICT applications in the Nordic and Baltic countries will have an effect on other countries in the EU as well. Consequently this will boost the need for communication equipments, which represents a growth opportunity in an area where the Nordic countries, mainly Sweden and Finland, are already strong.

In Strasbourg in December of last year, the Swedish Minister for EU Affairs, Ms. Cecilia Malmström talked about the need for an EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region. The strategy will need to reflect the specific circumstances of the Baltic Sea Region, she said. But it must also serve as a source of inspiration to other European regions with similar characteristics. In order to fulfill such a strategy we need true commitment, we need to work hard at all levels, and we need an even closer cooperation between our countries.

VINNOVA, the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems, has taken one step on this path by initiating several projects on the Nordic-Baltic Level. One of those is the Nordic-Baltic Network of Living Labs.

One of the aims of this project is to stimulate cross-Nordic-Baltic cooperation in Living Labs R&D by initiating collaboration, knowledge transfer & good practice exchange between national programmes, thus creating a *solid understanding and increased speed for results uptake*.

Another aim is to increase Nordic and Baltic international competitiveness for creativity and productivity through the support of Living Labs, which will *leverage Nordic-Baltic multi-regional, multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary and multi-thematic strengths and assets*.

The third and final aim is to define a programme that will fund, promote and support research stemming from heterogeneous dimensions and disciplines, that integrates different vertical themes into a unified horizontal programme. In short this can be described as *acting smart and deploying User-Driven Innovation and User-Centric Research through the concept of Living Labs*.

Malmström also stated in her speech last year that an important way to promote deeper integration and competitiveness in the Baltic Sea Region is by collaborating in three important areas: energy, transport and innovation. Here we should take stock of existing initiatives and find solutions through joint projects, as well as further the implementation of actions and projects already agreed.

Nordic and Baltic countries are, I believe, taking the lead in user-driven innovation and knowledge creation in the area of Living Labs. A Living Lab is defined as, *an experimentation environment in which technology is given shape in real life contexts and where end-users are considered co-producers – an implementation of UDI*.

It can even be argued that the Nordic countries are leading and guiding all of Europe in this area, with the Baltic countries, as well as the Adriatic region close behind. However, we should move from unique, single-handed thinking to scalable performance and increase our global competitiveness through enabling ICTs. Nordic and Baltic countries should further activate the private, public and civic sectors to participate in research, development and innovation. The Nordic-Baltic situation and advantage with creative and innovative people and a well, or rather well, developed and continuously developing ICT infrastructure provides a very good opportunity to care for and use the innovation force available in our population.

From a market and industry creation perspective, Living Labs offer a research and innovation platform which can enhance economical, social and cultural systems cross-regionally and cross-nationally – cross-border. Nordic-Baltic Living Labs should - as integral elements of the European Network of Living Labs, the ENoLL - be able to create Nordic-Baltic-scale experimentation platforms and pilot-user groups for new services, businesses and technological solutions. In this way, new markets and industries can be created.

The Finnish EU Presidency launched the ENoLL in November of 2006. The Helsinki Manifesto strongly supports the ideas of Living Labs as a powerful “tool” for innovation. After that launch, interest has raised substantially throughout the EU, with a strong support from the Slovenian Presidency. There are already several real-life settings and pilot-user communities in the Nordic and Baltic countries, which can serve as stem cells for the emergence of new Nordic and Baltic innovation eco-systems.

There is a need, especially from the industry perspective, to clarify the Living Labs field and related activities. Furthermore, there is a necessity to support industry to start and adopt new user-driven innovation practices. Industry wants to know how to take advantage of these new user-driven innovation opportunities in their own innovation processes. A first step in this development is the creation of a joint Nordic-Baltic Living Labs research and innovation programme.

There are numerous dimensions in which this joint Nordic-Baltic Living Labs-programme has a potentially long-term impact. They are for instance:

- The joining of forces in the research community – that is creating *scientific excellence*
- The development of new technological solutions – leading to new industries in the Nordic and Baltic countries
- The development of new methods, processes and knowledge in the area
- The bringing of new technologies to the society – boosting Nordic and Baltic productivity and creativity
- The benchmarking and validation of existing technologies, and methods for Living Lab environments
- The identification of Best Practices
- A definition of how to implement a coordinated programme, coordinated objectives and procedures

Malmström concludes in her speech that we need a European Baltic Sea Strategy that can serve as a model for strengthening growth and competitiveness, while at the same time acting responsibly in the field of the environment and climate change. This, we believe, can be achieved through a closer integration of end-users, citizens like you and me, in the R&D and innovation processes.

I conclude by saying that I believe that Living Labs is a suitable tool for closer collaboration across all kinds of borders, and provides with environments where active user participation and integration can be achieved.

Thank you!