EUROPEAN CLUSTER COLLABORATION PLATFORM

Support programmes and funding schemes: Cluster policies in the EU

Summary

EU Clusters Talks
21 February 2024, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union

Support programmes and funding schemes: Cluster policies in the EU

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the EU Clusters Talk "Support programmes and funding schemes: Cluster policies in the EU" on 21 February, 8:30 – 9:45 CET, to give an overview of different cluster policies that exist in the European Union, discuss how they help to develop the future cluster landscape, and analyse what is needed to further enhance the support.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderation: Chris Burns

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
   Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Introduction from the European Commission
   Mariella Masselink, Head of Unit, DG GROW, European Commission
3. Overview of cluster policies in the EU
   Jan-Philipp Kramer, Head of EU-Services, Prognos, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
4. Panel debate
   John Hobbs, Senior Lecturer, Munster Technological University
   Monika Antonowicz, Expert in Strategy and Analysis Department, Polish Agency for Enterprise Development
   Pauline Capus, General Manager, French Association of Competitiveness Clusters (AFPC)
   Tej Friis Egefjord, Team Leader Innovation & Clusters, Danish Business Authority
5. Funding opportunities
   Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

- Cluster-relevant policies can be distinct cluster policies and broader or sectoral policies. Over 50% of the EU Member States have dedicated cluster policies at different level.
- The cohesion policy programmes are a key funding mechanism where clusters form a key pillar.
- Trends in cluster policies show an increasing use of clusters as institutional infrastructure for addressing grand challenges like the green and digital transition and resilience building, the integration of cluster support with smart specialisation strategies, and the explicit focus on reindustrialisation as a policy goal.
- There are efforts by European projects to harmonise approaches, to learn from each other's best practices, and to translate those best practices into the own cluster policy landscape.

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1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Chris Burns, the following news items were presented:

1. Register now for the European Cluster Conference on 7-8 May 2024 and the matchmaking event.
2. Register for Clusters meet Regions in Milan, Italy, on 26-27 March 2024.
3. Free trial of the Trend Universe for all ECCP users with a profile and new innovation trends
4. Invitation to Advanced Manufacturing Industry Conference on 16 April 2024
5. The 2024 Annual Single Market and Competitiveness Report was published.

2. Introduction from the European Commission

Mariella Masselink, Head of Unit, DG GROW, European Commission

Mariella Masselink emphasized the importance of having an interactive dialogue on the cluster policies in different countries. She noted that **over 50% of EU Member States** have over a decade of experience with dedicated cluster policies at various levels. Despite the diverse landscape of cluster policies in the EU, common goals include strengthening innovation ecosystems, fostering links between research and industry, supporting SMEs in transitions, boosting internationalisation, and upskilling the workforce.

She explained that, for the first time, the analysis of the cluster policies will be fed into the **European Semester process**. The European semester is the framework for coordination and surveillance of economic policies in the Member States. It comprises country reports and country-specific recommendations that could help countries advance in their economic development in structural reforms. The findings from the cluster policy factsheets, which will be published for 2023, can show how clusters can also support this economic development, which will be a great asset for the European Semester process.

3. Overview of cluster policies in the EU

Jan-Philipp Kramer, Head of EU-Services, Prognos, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Jan-Philipp Kramer presented an overview of the initial insights from the updated 2023 cluster policy mapping, with a detailed discussion on the findings and the role of clusters in supporting cohesion policy programmes across the EU and beyond. The 56 updated factsheets cover the diversity of approaches across different regions and countries. He outlined the methodology of desk research and validation by national authorities for gathering information on cluster policies.

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In total, the team identified 50 relevant policies in the EU27. They can be classified into **distinct cluster policies and broader or sectoral policies**, with a focus on how these policies support innovation, SMEs, and transitions towards greener and digital economies. Jan-Philipp Kramer highlighted the significance of clusters in the **cohesion policy programmes** for the 2021-2027 period, with a budget of 350 billion euros, showing that clusters are a key pillar in 24 out of the 27 EU Member States' cohesion policy programmes. Three examples from the Netherlands, Croatia, and Portugal illustrate different approaches to implementing cluster policy and cohesion policy funding, showcasing the importance of clusters in innovation, internationalisation, and transitions towards sustainability.

Jan-Philipp Kramer also addresses how cluster policies align with European Commission priorities on **digital and green transitions and resilience building**, emphasizing the potential for clusters to support the implementation of European Semester recommendations in areas like green transition, digital adoption, skills development, and innovation systems. These alignments are also reflected in trends in cluster policies, where we see an increasing use of clusters as **institutional infrastructure** for addressing grand challenges. Furthermore, we can observe the integration of cluster support with smart specialisation strategies, and the explicit focus on reindustrialisation as a policy goal.

He concluded that cluster support today is delivered through different types of policies and programmes, and that cluster policy is used as institution-building for critical transitions.

4. Panel debate

John Hobbs presented the collaborative project [AccelerateGDT](#) aimed at **understanding and enhancing cluster policies across seven different regions in Europe**, focusing on integrating supports and good practices to make cluster policies more effective, particularly concerning the twin transition. The project involves various regions, each with unique approaches to cluster development and support:

- Ireland: A national cluster programme is currently being developed.
- Spain: Catalonia, with 30 years of experience in clustering, runs one of the longest-standing programs internationally, focusing on cluster training, management, and collaboration.
- Italy: The Piedmont region supports seven large regional clusters using European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) funding mechanisms.
- Austria: The investment agency connects different clusters at regional levels, utilizing both ERDF and regional innovation funding across various programmes.
- Hungary: Launch of a new centralised national-level program for cluster development.
- Czech Republic: The innovation agency runs a cluster collaboration programme, mainly focusing on SME competitiveness with aspirations to develop a dedicated regional cluster programme.
- Germany: The business and innovation organisation supports regional programmes and the development of new clusters, particularly in the green transition area.

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The Interreg Europe-funded project offers opportunities to share good practices and learn from each other. This includes workshops, seminars, and webinars where local stakeholders and clusters present their practices. The policy learning platform of Interreg Europe further disseminates these good practices, making them accessible to a broader audience both inside and outside Europe. The project also explores digital discovery initiatives and investment opportunities for clusters.

Monika Antonowicz provided an **overview of Poland's cluster policy development** and support mechanisms, emphasising a continuous effort since 2004 to foster cluster growth and cooperation. She explained several milestones and initiatives that developed the cluster policy frameworks. Since 2010, they conduct benchmarking surveys to maintain close contact with clusters, understanding their activities, needs, and potential for further development. The National Key Clusters Competitions started in 2015, where they identified and supported the best clusters in Poland that demonstrate excellence and have the potential for international recognition and contribution to Poland's economy. The cluster policy was updated in 2020, establishing the continuity of cluster support.

Poland's policy categorises clusters into **emerging, growing, and national key clusters**, with additional consideration for super-regional growing clusters that operate across multiple regions. This categorisation allows for tailored support and recognition of clusters at different development stages. They are supported by a funding mechanism aimed at strengthening the potential of cluster coordinators and professionalising activities through investment in services related to smart specialization, green and digital transitions, lifelong learning, and resilience. This instrument, still evolving, includes calls for proposals to adapt to changing needs and enhance cluster services. Monika Antonowicz highlighted Poland's participatory approach to cluster policy development, involving ministries, regions, and clusters themselves, to create a comprehensive and adaptable support framework.

Pauline Capus introduced the CAFEIN project, which focuses on developing a **joint action plan to address the green and associated industrial transition challenges of SMEs and clusters**. It takes an inclusive and collaborative approach, facilitated by the involvement of five national cluster associations from France, Spain, Italy, Sweden, and Poland, alongside their respective national innovation funding agencies. The project leverages these partnerships to develop concrete actions and proposals to make a **cohesive effort across different national contexts**. During the first year, the project undertook a comprehensive review to understand the specific policies and good practices of each participating country, aiming to leverage these insights for the joint action plan. The second part of the project focuses on action, with working groups dedicated to addressing funding for SMEs, skills development, green industrial solutions, and the scaling up of innovation ecosystems and supports. The project is moving towards finalizing the action plan. The goal is to present this action plan at the European Cluster Conference in Brussels, where it will be shared with other national and international networks for further feedback and potential adoption in other countries.

Tej Friis Egefjord explained the evolution of Denmark's business promotion scheme, highlighting a significant **shift from regional to national specialisation** six years ago. This transformation involved the development of a new national cluster programme. The programme, aimed at fostering national super clusters, aligns national funding with regional development funds to support SMEs, innovation, and transmission initiatives. Denmark has 14 smart specialisation areas, reflecting its diversified economy. The current strategy aims to continue this broad approach to specialisation while consolidating the number of actors receiving public funding. An analysis of regional development

strategies in 2018 and 2019 revealed a high degree of overlap in specialisation areas across Danish regions, particularly in food, agriculture, and maritime industries. By **adopting a national strategy**, Denmark has been able to create cluster organisations that span the entire scope of Danish knowledge institutions and SMEs. However, this approach has identified limitations in geographic outreach and engagement with diverse target groups. To address this, efforts are being made to introduce more flexible funding mechanisms for cluster organisations. Despite these challenges, the high quality of service has fostered loyalty among participating companies and institutions, encouraging them to re-engage with cluster organisations year after year. The challenge remains in attracting new actors and companies. Future programming and funding strategies are being considered to specifically support the recruitment of SMEs. The goal is to communicate the value of cluster services to these enterprises, demonstrating how participation can contribute to their growth and resilience in a fluctuating economic landscape.

Regarding the question of how they see the future development of cluster policies, John Hobbs highlighted the **effectiveness of cluster policies** in Europe. Experienced countries and regions serve as a model for how cluster policies can be developed and managed effectively, and other countries can draw inspiration from such examples to better integrate various government policies. By **connecting smart specialisation strategies with cluster policies** and educational and training policies, a more cohesive and supportive framework could be established. Monika Antonowicz emphasised the cooperation with the European Cluster Collaboration Platform and the European Commission. Their strategy includes making Polish clusters **more visible** through a national cluster map and benchmarking surveys, aiming to showcase the achievements and potential of Poland's cluster ecosystem next year. Pauline Capus added that we can improve the cluster landscape at European level through exchange and common actions to **harmonise our practices**, as the countries and regions are quite different. For Tej Friis Egefjord, the next step for the clusters that have been consolidated nationally is to look abroad and learn from best practices that can be spread throughout the cluster landscape in Denmark.

5. Funding opportunities

Closing the EU Clusters Talk, Nina Hoppmann shared the following examples of funding opportunities:

1. [Experimentation and exchange of good practices for value creation](#); deadline 5 September 2024
2. [Alliances for Education and Enterprises](#); deadline 7 March 2024
3. [I3 Capacity Building, Strand 2b](#); deadline 14 November 2024
4. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#)

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