



EUROPEAN CLUSTER
COLLABORATION PLATFORM

Cluster development in EU Member States: Initiatives and funding options

Summary



EU Clusters Talks
4 September 2024, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union





Cluster development in EU Member States: Initiatives and funding options

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the **EU Clusters Talk “Cluster development in EU Member States: Initiatives and funding options” on 4 September, 8:30 – 9:45 CET**, to give an overview of different funding 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
Ángela Negrete Benedí, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Overview of the European Cluster Panorama
Jan-Philipp Kramer, Head of EU-Services, Prognos, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
3. Panel debate
Anna Monjo Gallego, Team Leader of the Catalunya Clusters Program, ACCIÓ
Annie Renders, Head of Unit Cluster Policy & Strategic Relations, Government of Flanders, VLAIO
Michael Liebminger, Cluster Coordinator, Styrian Business Development Agency (SFG)
Jiri Herinek, President, CZ National Cluster Association
4. Funding opportunities
Ángela Negrete Benedí, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

- The **Cluster Panorama 2024** showcases the European cluster ecosystem’s contribution to innovation, competitiveness, and economic growth.
- Clusters are critical platforms for **fostering collaboration** between industries, governments, research institutions and society, driving innovation, economic growth, and solutions to societal challenges.
- A **balanced approach to funding** is crucial. While public funding is essential for supporting long-term societal goals, clusters need to move toward financial sustainability through private contributions, membership fees, and project-based revenue.
- Much of the **cooperation in the European market diversity** is thanks to clusters, which play a key role in matching the right organisations with the right skills, contributing to both economic and social value.



1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Ángela Negrete, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Jennifer Baker, the following news items were presented:

1. Invitation to register for the [next C2Lab in Strasbourg](#), France, on 25-26 September 2024.
2. Invitation to register for the next [Cluster Booster Academy](#), 3-4 March 2025 with previous online sessions.
3. Save the date for the upcoming [Clusters meet Regions](#) in Chisinau, Moldova, on 10-11 October, Palma de Mallorca, Spain, on 24-25 October, Heilbronn, Germany, on 13-14 November and Charleroi, Belgium, on 27-28 November.
4. Apply for EU [India Matchmaking in Bengaluru](#) on 19-21 November 2024.

2. Overview of the European Cluster Panorama

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

Jan-Phillipp Kramer presented the **Insights from the ECCP Cluster Panorama 2024**, published in May 2024, which aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the European cluster ecosystem, highlighting its role in fostering innovation, competitiveness, and economic growth. It seeks to:

1. **Map and analyse cluster organizations** across Europe, emphasizing their impact on regional and national economies.
2. **Assess the services and support** these clusters provide, particularly in driving **funding opportunities, collaboration, and skill development**.
3. **Evaluate the contribution of clusters** to the **digital and green transitions**, highlighting their role in boosting innovation, employment, and sustainable development.
4. **Examine the role of cluster policies** in different EU countries, focusing on how **dedicated cluster policies** or broader industrial strategies shape cluster development.
5. **Showcase success stories and examples** of regions benefiting from strong cluster ecosystems, attracting investments, and advancing technological and industrial capacities.

Jan Philipp's presentation focused on the critical role that clusters play in business development and economic growth across Europe, highlighting their influence on innovation, productivity, and employment. He emphasized how clusters, which are networks of interconnected companies and institutions in specific sectors, are key to fostering the creation of startups and shaping firm behaviour, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), by **boosting research and development (R&D) investments**.

Jan Phillipp provided examples of successful European regions such as **Catalonia, Baden-Württemberg, and Finland**, where well-established cluster policies have led to significant R&D investments and high patenting rates.



He also noted the positive correlation between the presence of **clusters and digital transformation**, such as the increased hiring of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) specialists and the development of digital patents.

However, he acknowledged certain challenges, like the rise in industrial emissions in regions with strong cluster presence, which reflects the concentration of resource-intensive industries. To address these issues, Jan Philipp pointed to European Union (EU) efforts, including the introduction of support services for green and digital transitions.

A central theme in his presentation was cascade funding, a popular concept in the cluster world that allows clusters to distribute funds directly to SMEs, making it easier for them to implement innovative projects. Jan Philipp also highlighted the crucial importance of cooperation between clusters and across European countries, stressing that **collaboration is a key driver for long-term success**. Additionally, he emphasized the need for EU member states to better align their national cluster policies with broader EU strategies.

Jan Philipp concluded by reaffirming that clusters are essential for fostering competitiveness and sustainable economic development in Europe. He argued that dedicated funding streams and support services are crucial to ensuring that clusters maintain their long-term impact and spread their benefits throughout the economy.

3. Panel debate

The panellists explored the role of clusters in fostering collaboration between industries, governments, research institutions, and society to promote innovation, and economic growth, and address societal challenges. The discussion focused on the significance of cluster cooperation across various European regions, exploring how cluster policies can drive innovation, facilitate public-private partnerships, and develop effective funding strategies to support businesses and industries. Representatives from Catalonia, Flanders, Austria, and the Czech Republic presented their cluster initiatives and exchanged valuable insights.

Anna Monjo Gallego, from Catalonia, pointed out the region's well-established cluster policy, which spans over 30 years and encompasses 27 clusters with more than 2,900 members. These clusters significantly contribute to the region's industrial turnover, engaging in key activities such as providing grants, capacity building, and accessing European Union funds to **foster collaboration between the public sector and industry**.

Annie Renders provided comprehensive insights into Flanders' cluster policy. She explained that **clusters are collaborative organizations** where companies work with research institutions and the government to drive innovation. For instance, the food cluster in Flanders is actively working on product improvement, such as enhancing the fibre content in food. Flanders follows a **co-funded model**, with 50% of the funding coming from the government and the other 50% from private companies. This funding model ensures that businesses have a strong interest in the cluster's success, while also aligning with governmental priorities such as digital transformation and the green transition.



Michael Liebminger shared the approach from Styria, emphasizing the importance of **naturally formed clusters** that evolve based on industry needs. These "natural clusters" often come together without direct government intervention, though they can later benefit from public-private partnerships. He also highlighted the importance of European collaboration, particularly in the context of large-scale funding programs like the **EU's Chips Act**, which supports innovation. By forming "meta-clusters," local clusters can collaborate more effectively across Europe and tap into these broader funding schemes. On that point, Anna Monjo explained that before forming a cluster organization, it is crucial to first identify and analyse a natural cluster—an interconnected value chain that already exists in a region. This natural cluster serves as the **foundation for creating a formal cluster** organization, which can then address sector-specific challenges and foster innovation. Catalonia uses a competitive process to allocate funding to cluster projects, ensuring that projects address challenges shared by both the public and private sectors.

From the Czech Republic's perspective, Jiri Herinek described how clusters have been sustained since 2004 through **EU operational programs**. These programs have been vital for funding cluster development in areas such as R&D and infrastructure, for example, in nanofiber technology. While public funding played an essential role in the initial stages of cluster development, he made a point on how clusters need to evolve toward financial sustainability, with increasing private sector contributions over time. He also talked about the role of **the Czech National Cluster Association**, comprising approximately 40 members, including clusters, technology platforms, and universities. This association focuses on representing innovative companies and shaping cluster policies according to member needs. The discussion also delineated between natural clusters—interconnected value chains that form organically—and structured cluster organizations designed to address specific challenges.

A critical point of discussion was the relationship between **economic activity and cluster development**, with participants debating whether economic activity drives cluster formation or vice versa. The consensus suggested that while some clusters emerge naturally, structured organizations can accelerate growth through collaboration. Additionally, the societal impact of clusters was underscored, with a focus on addressing larger issues such as environmental sustainability and digitalization.

The speakers further explored how strategic domains, such as food and nanotechnology, leverage cluster collaboration to address policy priorities and societal challenges. The debate delved into the **balance between public and private funding** for clusters. Annie Renders explained that in Flanders, the 50/50 funding split ensures a balance between government support and private-sector engagement. Michael Liebminger noted that in Styria, funding is split into thirds, combining public funds, private membership fees, and project-based funding, such as contributions from European Union initiatives. He advocated for aligning local clusters with EU-wide goals to access funding opportunities. A similar approach was by Jiri Herinek. He stressed the importance of **financial sustainability**, particularly as public funding—while essential at the initial stages—should eventually be supplemented by increased private sector contributions. The aim is for clusters to evolve and become more self-sufficient over time, relying less on public grants and more on private investment, membership fees, and project-based revenue.



Despite differing models, the panel agreed that public funding remains critical, particularly for addressing **long-term societal challenges**, such as environmental sustainability and industrial transformations, where **private investment alone is often insufficient**.

The role of clusters in addressing **broader societal challenges** beyond economic growth was another important theme. Clusters were seen as effective platforms for promoting sustainable environmental practices and social responsibility. Michael Liebminger emphasized the importance of public funding for these long-term societal projects, while Annie Renders pointed out that clusters help facilitate collaboration between SMEs and large companies in areas like green and digital transitions.

Looking to the future, Annie Renders mentioned a **green paper** being developed in Flanders to assess the achievements of existing clusters and suggest future policy directions. This paper will guide cluster development as the region prepares for new governmental leadership. However, the discussion raised concerns about the **upcoming expiration of the European Union's 10-year cluster funding programs**. The panellists agreed that ongoing public support will be necessary to maintain the clusters' ability to contribute to societal challenges in the long term.

In conclusion, the panel highlighted the need for a balanced approach to cluster funding and operations, recognizing that clusters produce both economic and public benefits. This makes them essential for supporting Europe's broader policy objectives, especially in tackling societal challenges.

4. Funding opportunities

Closing the EU Clusters Talk, Ángela Negrete shared the following examples of funding opportunities:

1. [Experimentation and exchange of good practices for value creation](#); deadline 25 September 2024.
2. [Accelerating uptake through open proposals for advanced SME innovation](#); deadline 20 November 2024.
3. [Teaming for Excellence](#); deadline 10 April 2025, 20 January 2026.
4. [Support to the activities of the SET Plan Key Action area Renewable fuels and bioenergy](#); deadline 04 February 2025.
5. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#).