



EUROPEAN CLUSTER  
COLLABORATION PLATFORM

# From Strategy to Action: Leveraging Clusters in Smart Specialisation Strategies

## Summary



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

An initiative of the European Union





## From Strategy to Action: Leveraging Clusters in Smart Specialisation Strategies

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the **EU Clusters Talk “From Strategy to Action: Leveraging clusters in Smart Specialisation Strategies” on 4 December, 8:30 – 9:45 CET**, to discuss how clusters can enhance regional strengths and foster sustainable growth through Smart Specialisation Strategies.

### Agenda of the meeting

Moderation: Zivile Kropaite

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform  
*Ángela Negrete Benedí, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform*
2. Smart Specialisation: 10 years of innovation-driven growth  
*Silvia Álvarez Santos, DG REGIO, European Commission*
3. Panel debate  
*Anders Olsson, Manager of Research and Innovation, Region Värmland*  
*Patrick Vuillermoz, General Director, POLIMERYS*  
*Christoph Reiss-Schmidt, Head National & International Projects, Business Upper Austria*  
*Gus Verhaeghe, Innovation Manger, Flanders' FOOD*
4. Funding opportunities  
*Ángela Negrete Benedí, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform*

### Key messages

- Clusters are essential in turning regional strategies into concrete innovation projects.
- Moving from strategy to action requires stable funding and tailored instruments like cascade funding.
- Successful Smart Specialisation requires clusters to act as connectors across sectors, regions, and governance levels. By bridging local ecosystems and European priorities, clusters ensure alignment between bottom-up innovation and EU-wide challenges.
- Public-private innovation thrives when clusters are embedded in regional governance structures. Models like Värmland’s—where each Smart Specialisation area is tied to a dedicated cluster—demonstrate the value of structured, long-term collaboration.
- Funding criteria must recognise the innovation potential of advanced regions, not just cohesion needs. Clusters from more developed areas are calling for inclusive funding schemes that reflect their critical role in maintaining Europe’s competitiveness.
- The transition to sustainability and digitalisation can only succeed with clusters at the forefront. Clusters are uniquely placed to engage SMEs, develop pilot projects, and bring green and digital solutions to market across diverse sectors.



# 1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Ángela Negrete, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Zivile Kropaite, the following news items were presented:

1. [Call for Expression of Interest](#) for organising workshops Clusters meet Regions, deadline 20 December 2024
2. [EU Business Hub](#): EU funded programme for supporting EU SMEs and startups in their expansion to the Republic of Korea and Japan and the incoming business missions to: [EU Business Hub @ Semicon Japan](#), Digital solutions, Tokyo 9 – 13 Dec 2024; [EU Business Hub @ Smart Energy Week Spring 2025](#), Green & Low-Carbon, Tokyo, 17-21 Feb 2025 and [Healthcare and Medical Equipment Korea 2025](#), Healthcare - Seoul, 17 – 21 Mar 2025

# 2. Smart Specialisation: 10 years of innovation-driven growth

Silvia Álvarez Santos, DG regio, G1 Unit

The European Commission representative provided an overview of the Smart Specialisation policy, its evolution over the past decade, and its role in driving regional innovation and development across the European Union. The speaker highlighted the policy's successes, challenges, and potential future directions, underscoring its importance in aligning regional strengths with broader EU objectives.

Smart Specialisation is a place-based innovation policy introduced in the 2014–2020 framework of the EU Cohesion Policy. It was designed to enable regions to focus on their comparative advantages and strengthen their innovation ecosystems. The strategy's success has been evidenced by evaluations that demonstrate its impact on fostering regional growth, collaboration, and innovation. The approach is structured around three pillars: **Localisation** ensures that strategies are tailored to regional strengths and needs, while **prioritisation** allows funding to be focused on areas with the greatest potential. **Participation** promotes collaboration among academia, industry, public authorities, and civil society.

Over the years, the Smart Specialisation policy has evolved, incorporating new governance elements and measures to address challenges such as weak linkages between universities and industries and limited industry involvement in innovation activities. For the **2021–2027 period**, the European Commission expanded the framework to include governance bodies, ongoing stakeholder engagement, and enhanced monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. A particular emphasis was placed on addressing the twin transitions—sustainability and digitalisation—and fostering interregional cooperation.

The role of clusters was emphasised as critical to strengthening regional and interregional innovation networks. Clusters have proven instrumental in aligning regional strategies with EU-level priorities, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) programme.



[Smart Specialisation Thematic Platforms and Partnerships](#), supported by the European Commission, were highlighted as effective tools for developing value chains and facilitating collaborative projects across regions.

The presentation also detailed the services offered by the [S3 Community of Practice](#), including customised support for partnerships, access to tools such as the [Smart Specialisation Observatory](#), and opportunities for collaboration. These initiatives aim to enhance capacity building, streamline collaboration, and improve the valorisation of research results. The speaker encouraged stakeholders to explore these resources and participate in initiatives such as open calls for partnerships and upcoming conferences, such as the [S3 Conference 2024](#) in Rimini, Emilia-Romagna.

### 3. Panel debate

Anders Olsson presented the **Värmland model**, where clusters are embedded as open platforms aligned with each smart specialisation area. The region's long-standing collaboration with clusters such as Paper Province and Compare, as well as its partnership with Karlstad University, has been recognised by the OECD as a global best practice. Olsson highlighted the importance of societal perspectives, such as digitalisation, gender inclusion, and circular economy, as cross-cutting themes in their strategy.

Patrick Vuillermoz shared the experience of Polymeris, a multi-regional French cluster focusing on polymers, sustainability, and advanced manufacturing. He emphasised the critical role of clusters in **bridging the gap between industry and regional policy** and outlined their involvement in several interregional partnerships and EU-funded projects, such as Vanguard and I3. Vuillermoz stressed that successful implementation requires moving beyond strategy to concrete projects involving SMEs, public authorities, and academia.

Christoph Reiss-Schmidt detailed the Upper Austrian model, where clusters have been deeply embedded in the region's S3 since its inception in 1998. The region hosts eight clusters with over 2,200 members and uses cluster advisory boards—composed mainly of SMEs and academic representatives—to shape strategy development. Reiss-Schmidt explained the use of **dedicated regional funding instruments** aligned with S3 objectives, which have evolved to support collaborative innovation and resilience building. He also discussed support mechanisms including patent advisory services, start-up incubation, and design thinking workshops.

Gus Verhaeghe described Flanders' FOOD as an **industry-driven innovation platform** in the agri-food sector. With over 300 member companies, the cluster operates on three pillars: innovation, strategy, and collaboration. Verhaeghe underlined the importance of **bottom-up strategic development with long-term roadmaps** and the role of clusters in facilitating both regional and interregional collaboration. He outlined their participation in S3 partnerships such as "Ingredients for Circular Economy" and emphasised the use of European instruments (e.g., COSME, Euroclusters, I3) to move strategies into implementation. He also called for more support for advanced TRLs and greater inclusion of highly developed regions in funding mechanisms.

There was broad agreement among speakers that **clusters are essential intermediaries** for translating strategic objectives into collaborative projects with industry. All panellists underscored the importance of **long-term funding frameworks** and the need for dedicated instruments such as



cascade funding or regional earmarked budgets. The use of clusters as connectors—between industry, research, and policy—was a recurrent theme. However, there were concerns about regulatory and structural limitations that hinder innovation, particularly regarding market access and state aid rules.

In terms of divergence, while all acknowledged the effectiveness of S3 strategies, some pointed to the **challenges of full implementation** and the **need to support regions at varying stages of development**. For example, Verhaeghe expressed concern about the limited opportunities available to more advanced regions within certain EU funding schemes, emphasising that supporting their continued innovation is essential to sustaining Europe’s overall competitiveness while Patrick Vuillermoz and Christoph Reiss-Schmidt mentioned the need for appropriate instruments and long-term funding to support implementation and innovation, especially for SMEs.

During the debate, one key question focused on **how clusters can support companies in accessing public procurement opportunities for innovation**. In response, Anders Olsson presented a concrete example from the Compare Cluster in Sweden, which has developed a **“demand accelerator” methodology**. This model enables public authorities to define innovation challenges and engage companies through an iterative process, ultimately selecting and supporting one provider while allowing the innovation to remain company-owned and scalable. Another question addressed **regulatory barriers** in the agri-food sector that hinder the scaling of innovative products, particularly regarding novel ingredients. In response, Gus Verhaeghe called for **the creation of regulatory sandboxes at the EU level to enable faster market access**, arguing that excessive regulatory delays are driving some of Europe’s most innovative companies to launch products outside the EU. His intervention pointed to the need for more agile frameworks to ensure that Europe remains competitive in strategic sectors.

The panellists concluded the discussion by agreeing that clusters play a pivotal role in strengthening regional innovation ecosystems and ensuring the relevance of S3 strategies. The discussion called for **more flexible, long-term funding instruments, stronger interregional cooperation, and better regulatory alignment**. The panellists highlighted the importance of inclusiveness—ensuring broad stakeholder engagement, from SMEs to civil society—and urged a shift from strategy formulation to action and measurable impact.

## 5. Funding opportunities

Ángela Negrete, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

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

1. [Interregional Innovation Investments Strand 1](#); deadline 5 December 2024.
2. [Interregional Innovation Investments Strand 2a](#); deadline 5 December 2024.
3. [Maritime regional cooperation fostering Smart Specialisation and Innovation in the Sustainable Blue Economy \(Topic 1\)](#); deadline 18 February 2025.
4. [EUROCLUSTERS for Europe’s recovery](#); deadline 5 February 2025.
5. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#).