



EUROPEAN CLUSTER
COLLABORATION PLATFORM

Innovation through integration: How to create and engage a meta-cluster

Summary



EU Clusters Talks
24 April 2024, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union





Innovation through integration: How to create and engage a meta-cluster

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the EU Clusters Talk “Innovation through integration: How to create and engage a meta-cluster” on 24 April, 8:30 – 9:45 CET, to discuss the potential of meta-clustering, talk about the benefits and challenges of cross-sectoral and cross-border cooperation, and hear about meta-clustering initiatives in Europe.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderation: Jennifer Baker

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Introduction on meta-clustering
Marek Przeor, Team Leader Cluster Policy, DG GROW, European Commission
3. Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument
Eric Koch, Head of Sector for I3, EISMEA, European Commission
4. Panel debate
Erasmia Dupenloup, Chairwomen, Silicon Europe
Giovanni Scaramuzzo, Project Manager, EXO Ricerca
Maurizio Malè, Project Manager, Venetian Cluster
Montse Daban, President, Council of European BioRegions (CEBR)
Thomas Röhr, Secretary General, European Automotive Cluster Network (EACN)
5. Funding opportunities

Key messages

- Being part of a meta cluster can have several benefits, among which are increased collaboration, better market integration, access to best practices and information, improved services to the own members, or new internationalisation opportunities.
- For maintaining a meta cluster, it is critical to have a strategic goals and concrete activities, enough financial and human capital resources for long-term sustainability, engaged members, and inclusivity.
- To build a meta cluster, it helps to have a strong initial partnership, a shared vision and joint action plan, the commitment from members with personnel, and ideas about forming a legal entity.
- The Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument aimed at regional development and competitiveness could be an interesting funding opportunity to initiate a meta cluster.



1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

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

1. Register now for the [European Cluster Conference](#) on 7-8 May 2024 and the matchmaking event.
2. Save the date for [Clusters meet Regions in Graz](#), Austria, on 18-19 June 2024.
3. Register for the [EU – Taiwan Matchmaking Event](#) in Germany on 10-12 June 2024 and the respective [info webinar](#) to get all the details on 18 April, 9:30 – 10:30 CET.
4. Register for the [EU – South Med Matchmaking Event](#) in Germany on 11-13 June 2024.
5. Invitation to watch live stream on [“Investing in EU Industry” at Hannover Messe](#) on 25-26 May 2024.

2. Introduction to meta-clustering

Marek Przeor, Team Leader Cluster Policy, DG GROW, European Commission

Marek Przeor provided an overview of the current policy context in the European Union, emphasizing its relevance due to the forthcoming European elections and the impending new Commission. He referenced the significance of the Single Market for the EU's industrial competitiveness and highlighted several key policy documents and reports, including the Single Market Report and Competitiveness Report, the Clean Transition Dialogues communication, and recent conclusions from a Council session. He further said that clusters play an important role to leverage the Single Market effectively. Practical steps towards achieving this are fostering connections between clusters and utilizing the “Euroclusters” programme, which supports the formation of meta clusters at the EU level across various sectors. Additionally, the European Regional Development Fund and the Horizon Europe partnerships, which although are not exclusively dedicated to clusters, offer opportunities for cluster involvement.

3. Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument

Eric Koch, Head of Sector for I3, EISMEA, European Commission

Eric Koch presented the Interregional Innovation Investments (I3) Instrument aimed at regional development and competitiveness. The instrument belongs to the cohesion policy, one of the EU's main investment policies to support job creation, business competitiveness, economic growth, sustainable development, and improve citizens' quality of life. It is backed with 490 million EU from the 2021-2027 budget. The instrument fosters collaboration across different countries to drive innovation and market proximity, with projects designed to be close to commercialization. It is built on three pillars:

- **Interregional:** creating links between EU regions around shared or complementary smart specialisation (S3) areas



- **Innovation:** testing, demonstration, piloting, large-scale product validation and market replication
- **Investments:** financial and advisory support for joint innovation projects and direct investment to companies (mainly SMEs)

There are two main strands of funding: one focusing on investment and the other on capacity building. The three central topics are green transition, digital transition, and smart manufacturing. A Support Facility was initiated to enhance the understanding of the impact of smart specialization strategies and aid regional authorities in their applications. The types of activities include actions to bring innovative ideas and products to the market, test beds and post-prototyping activities, and testing in real environments. The role of clusters as key ecosystem players is underscored, suggesting their involvement is crucial for integrating regional efforts into broader value chains.

Closing the presentation, he presented the upcoming funding opportunities. The next call for Strand 1/2a is foreseen for June 2024 and closing in December 2024, for Strand 2b closing in November 2024. Project sizes can vary between 2-10 million EUR with a funding rate of 70% for all other cost categories and 100% for financial support to 3rd parties. Eric Koch also spoke about the relaunch of the S3 Thematic Platforms and the S3 Community of Practice, which are open to cluster organisations.

4. Panel debate

Presentation of meta clusters and benefits

Erasmia Dupenloup presented the Silicon Europe Alliance, which is a major group in the European electronics sector. This meta cluster combines the best technologies and skills along the whole electronic software value chain. The main benefit of its structure is its ability to **improve collaboration and innovation** across different sectors and borders by enabling fast R&D progress and supporting business links among its members.

Giovanni Scaramuzzo reported on the progress of creating a meta cluster from their existing “Eurocluster” project. This initiative aims to improve connections within the creative and cultural industries, which are mainly composed of small businesses. The meta cluster seeks to **better integrate these businesses into the larger European market**, especially by forging ties with central Europe.

Montse Daban introduced CEBR, a formal association of bioregions and cluster organisations that span a diverse ecosystem encompassing academia, hospitals, investors, SMEs, large corporations, pharmaceutical companies, and digital health sectors. The network serves as a vital instrument for **fostering trust, promoting resilience, facilitating reindustrialisation, and supporting internationalisation**—key areas of focus for Europe's strategic economic agendas. Montse Daban emphasised the critical role of networking within the health sector, highlighting its complexities and regulatory challenges.

Thomas Röhr gave a summary of the European Automotive Cluster Network (EACN), a meta cluster with 31 member organisations across 15 countries in Europe. EACN's focus is on providing internal



support to its members. This involves fostering a strong **exchange of information and best practices** among members, which improves their skills and operational performance. Moreover, EACN has a key role in assisting members in finding partners for projects and showcasing activities done by these partners, which is seen as a major benefit for members.

Maurizio Malè highlighted the major benefits of connecting regional European clusters into a wider, more integrated European network, especially for the tourism sector. The main advantage of such networks is the ability to **offer comprehensive support and services to SMEs**, ensuring that even the smallest businesses benefit from improved access to innovation, new services, and wider market insights. Businesses within a meta cluster are not restricted to the expertise and experiences available within their local or regional cluster. Instead, they have access to a large resource of knowledge shared from across all clusters within the network. The meta cluster also enables the diffusion of successful practices and solutions from one region to another.

The speakers explained additional benefits originating in meta clusters. By collaborating at the European level, clusters are exposed to different operating environments, funding models, and revenue strategies that differ greatly among different countries. This **diversity** helps clusters learn and adopt practices that work well in some countries but may not exist in their own. In addition, the speakers emphasise the benefit of **joining European-funded projects**, which further facilitate the exchange of knowledge and resources among clusters, and the tackling common issues such as talent attraction, technology transfer, and large-scale sustainability actions. By cooperating, the clusters use their combined skills and resources to make a difference. Also, the speakers talk about the role of these clusters in **affecting policy at various levels**—from local and regional to national and EU levels. By offering informed opinions and information, clusters help create policies that are favourable to regional development and growth.

Critical elements of meta clusters

Erasmia Dupenloup highlighted that it is important to have **strategic goals and concrete activities** of the meta cluster. The meta cluster facilitates relationships and partnerships, particularly in fostering open innovation. For example, the Silicon Europe Alliance organises specialized open innovation events that bring together corporations, SMEs, and startups to spur cooperation and create business opportunities. These events serve as platforms for SMEs and startups to engage directly with larger corporations, potentially leading to partnerships and business deals. Furthermore, they organise networking events that are open to all members of the alliance. These events are significant for networking, sharing industry news, and exploring collaborative opportunities.

Giovanni Scaramuzza sees a challenge in **keeping different actors in the network engaged**. It is harder to show them why they should join a bigger, international network than a smaller, regional one. Unequal participation among associates requires strong efforts to create the real benefits of being part of a larger meta cluster. Networks build a tight community where members trust each other and are active. This "close circle" of trusted relationships within the meta cluster can make it easier for members to enter more challenging and bigger environments.

Montse Daban highlighted the importance of the network's **long-term sustainability**. This involves financial stability, member involvement, and showing value to stakeholders. As the network expands, its complexity also increases, affecting its relevance and efficiency. Communicating the results and



advantages of the network is vital. Robust leadership and management are needed to cope with the challenges of managing a meta cluster.

For Thomas Röhr, allowing **new members to have a say** in shaping the direction and structure of the meta cluster is vital. This inclusivity ensures that the organisation remains adaptable and responsive to the needs and ideas of all members, rather than being rigidly controlled by its founders.

Building a meta cluster

Maurizio Malè and Thomas Röhr advised on the essential strategy for creating a successful meta cluster, which is to form a **solid initial partnership**. This first step requires choosing a few entities that have a lot of knowledge and practice in the sector, as well as understanding of European networks and policies. The main steps to create a meta cluster are **choosing the right partners, forming a strong core, expanding gradually, communicating advantages, and building momentum**.

Erasmia Dupenloup added that having a **shared vision** is essential for trusting each other, and that there should be a regular and transparent communication among the meta cluster members. It is a process, and there is a need for a foundation to establish a meta cluster. The Silicon Europe Alliance resulted from a European project and for three years, they defined the objectives and had time to see how they were going to implement the actions to achieve the goals. Building on the shared vision, the creation of a **joint action plan** is essential. It serves as a roadmap for collaboration, detailing the roles, responsibilities, and contributions of different members.

The speakers agree that allocating **enough resources to management and operational activities** is essential to keep the network functional and influential. This requires not only **financial** investment but also **human capital**—people who can spot opportunities, manage projects, and pursue the actions. Thomas Röhr and Erasmia Dupenloup added that members need to commit resources not just for participation but also to contribute back to the network. This reciprocal engagement helps in maintaining a balanced and dynamic meta cluster, where all parties feel invested and benefit from shared successes. Giovanni Scaramuzzo reaffirmed that building a meta cluster is not a passive endeavour; it requires active involvement and contribution from all participants. A potential pitfall in forming a meta cluster is the misconception that participation is solely based on voluntary interest. This misunderstanding can lead to insufficient commitment and undermine the effectiveness of the cluster. The speaker advised being selective about who is involved in the meta cluster.

Moreover, active participation in **large-scale projects** is vital. These projects bring not only financial support but also more visibility and credibility for the network. Thomas Röhr explained that while membership fees provide some income, public funding and other financial supports are often necessary and not always easy to secure.

Creating a **legal entity** for a meta cluster can be difficult because of different national laws that apply to associations. Thomas Röhr emphasized that choosing a suitable legal framework is crucial, referring to the challenge of setting up a legal entity that operates across national boundaries. A European Association status could provide a way out without being restricted by national rules.