EUROPEAN CLUSTER COLLABORATION PLATFORM

From Policy to Practice:

The Clean Industrial Deal in Action

Summary

EUCLUSTERS TALKS

EU Clusters Talks
12 March 2025, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union

Policy to Practice: The Clean Industrial Deal in Action

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the EU Clusters Talk **"From Policy to Practice: The Clean Industrial Deal in Action" on 12 March, 8:30 – 9:45 CET,** to give an overview of the measures outlines in the Deal, speak about its importance to support competitiveness, and discuss cluster actions for its implementation.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderator: Jennifer Baker

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
   Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Clean Industrial Deal
   Zuzana Gentner Vavrová, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission
3. Panel debate
   Prof. Dr. Hannes Utikal, Project Lead, Cluster Process4Sustainability, Provadis School of International Management and Technology
   Katia Ferrari, Cluster Manager, Clust-ER Greentech
   Oana Raita, Executive Director, Transilvania Energy Cluster
   Steffen Helledie, International Business Consultant, North Denmark EU-Office, Enterprise Europe Network
4. Funding opportunities
   Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

- Clusters are essential in turning decarbonisation into a business opportunity for European industry.
- Access to affordable energy is critical. Clusters must help industry navigate contracts, permits and infrastructure challenges.
- Green public and private procurement will push SMEs to decarbonise. Clusters can guide this transformation.
- Social acceptance of clean technologies is vital. Clusters must engage citizens as well as companies.
- Investing in skills and awareness can unlock SME action even with limited funding.
- Cross-border collaboration strengthens raw materials supply, research and innovation. Clusters should lead this effort.
- Regulation should support progress, not create barriers. Clusters must advocate for clarity and policy alignment.
- Clusters serve as innovation bridges by connecting industry, research and public authorities.

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

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

1. Presentation of the EC's 2025 work programme.
2. Apply for the Young European Entrepreneur Award.
3. Public consultations open for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).
4. Save the date for the EU-Ukraine Business Summit.
5. Register for the C2Lab in Zaragoza, 19-20 March 2025.
6. Register for CmR Eindhoven, Netherlands, 26-27 March.
7. Register for CmR Heilbronn, Germany, 9-10 April.

2. Clean Industrial Deal

Zuzana Gentner Vavrová, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission

Zuzana Gentner Vavrová emphasised that Europe's response to current geopolitical and economic pressures must go beyond climate objectives and actively strengthen competitiveness. The Clean Industrial Deal, adopted on 26 February, is one such response. It targets two interdependent sectors: energy-intensive industries and the clean tech sector. The former are in immediate need of support to decarbonise, reduce energy costs and withstand global competition, while the latter represent the backbone of Europe's future industrial transformation.

She presented **six strategic "business drivers"** that structure the Clean Industrial Deal. The first is access to affordable energy. Zuzana explained that energy prices remain the top concern for European industry, particularly for energy-intensive sectors where energy costs can account for up to 40% of total production. The Deal promotes instruments such as Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs), Contracts for Difference, and European Investment Bank (EIB)-supported counter-guarantees to stimulate clean energy uptake. It also proposes the Industrial Decarbonisation Accelerator Act to streamline permitting procedures and enable faster access to energy infrastructure.

The second driver, **lead markets**, addresses the need to stimulate demand for low-carbon products. Zuzana introduced the concept of low-carbon labelling for key sectors such as steel and cement, and the planned revision of EU public procurement rules in 2026 to incorporate resilience and sustainability criteria.

The third driver focuses on **access to materials and circularity**. The Commission is already operationalising the Critical Raw Materials Act, and Zuzana noted the recent announcement of strategic projects aimed at securing raw material supply. She also mentioned the forthcoming Circular Economy Act and the establishment of a Critical Raw Materials Centre to support joint purchasing and market coordination.

On **funding and finance**, the speaker outlined the proposed creation of an Industrial Decarbonisation Bank to mobilise up to €100 billion, leveraging Innovation Fund resources and EU Emission Trading System (EU ETS) revenues. She explained how expanding InvestEU's risk-bearing capacity could

unlock an additional €50 billion for clean technologies, clean mobility and waste reduction, while EIB initiatives would further help de-risk private investment.

Turning to the **external dimension,** Zuzana described how the Commission will launch the first Green Trade and Investment Partnerships to secure supply chains and develop mutually beneficial trade agreements. She also mentioned updates to the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), including the intention to close loopholes and expand its coverage to new sectors. The importance of aligning foreign direct investment policies with Europe's strategic interests was also raised, with the aim of ensuring that incoming investments contribute to long-term competitiveness.

The final driver presented was **skills**. Zuzana underlined that Europe's capacity to equip its workforce with the skills required for industrial transformation is crucial. The Union of Skills Strategy and the Quality Jobs Roadmap will be central tools to anticipate change, support restructuring processes, and ensure a socially fair transition.

3. Panel debate

Hannes Utikal opened by highlighting the urgency of **supporting industrial competitiveness alongside decarbonisation.** He noted that in Frankfurt's chemical and pharmaceutical industrial park, many basic infrastructure prerequisites for large-scale decarbonisation, such as hydrogen pipelines and national grids, are not yet in place. His cluster, therefore, focuses on regional and national collaboration to fill these gaps, while also developing and scaling up green technologies like carbon capture and sustainable aviation fuels.

Katia Ferrari emphasised the need to include **social acceptance** in the conversation, pointing out that technological progress and financing are insufficient if public resistance to new infrastructure persists. Her cluster is involved in major Horizon projects on carbon capture and is working to build trust and awareness among policymakers and citizens. She also stressed the importance of unlocking the potential of agrivoltaics and energy storage by facilitating intersectoral dialogue and addressing fragmented regional governance.

Oana Raita described efforts in **north-western Romania** to support both innovation and civic engagement. Her cluster has developed a unique infrastructure for testing renewable energy solutions and is actively involved in creating digital tools to support energy security. Through the European Digital Innovation Hub and net-zero city initiatives, the cluster also works on behaviour change and public training programmes to increase awareness of energy efficiency.

Steffen Helledie presented learnings from the **EE Energy project in Denmark,** which provides micro-grants to SMEs that achieve measurable energy savings. The project revealed that advisory support alone can trigger substantial investment, even when grants are not awarded. He argued that simple interventions such as skills development and business case awareness can unlock significant change, particularly in energy-intensive industries where investment multipliers are high.

There was broad consensus among the panellists that aligning industrial competitiveness with **climate goals** requires not just regulation, but engagement, coordination, and knowledge transfer. All speakers agreed on the central role of clusters in facilitating this through education, innovation,

and intersectoral partnerships. The importance of tailoring solutions to different industries and production models (such as discrete versus continuous manufacturing) was also widely accepted.

Steffen Helledie and Katia Ferrari both highlighted the challenge of **SME engagement**. While Steffen focused on the importance of economic incentives and simplified messaging, Katia stressed the value of training and clustering support services to match SME needs with available expertise. Hannes added a strategic perspective, noting the conflict between different levels of ambition among global companies, national governments and local authorities, and calling for coherent policy alignment.

A minor divergence emerged around the **role of regulation.** Oana Raita expressed support for **targeted regulatory frameworks** that enable and accelerate progress, particularly in facilitating energy communities. She clarified that her position was not in favour of increased bureaucracy, but rather of legislation that removes existing barriers and allows companies within industrial parks to share energy more efficiently. Similarly, Katia Ferrari underscored the **importance of regulation** as a mechanism to align actors across the value chain, noting that green public and private procurement can act as a powerful lever for encouraging SMEs to engage in decarbonisation efforts. At the same time, Steffen Helledie warned against **regulatory overload,** especially for SMEs with limited administrative capacity. He pointed out that even when exempt from formal requirements, such as those under the CSRD directive, SMEs are indirectly affected through obligations passed down by larger clients. Helledie called for **harmonised EU-wide regulations** to reduce fragmentation and complexity, emphasising the need for economic incentives and streamlined processes over mandatory compliance. Despite these differing perspectives, all panellists agreed that regulation should act as a catalyst and not an obstacle for innovation and transition.

Another topic concerned the **feasibility of flexibility in energy-intensive industries.** Hannes Utikal clarified that flexibility depends heavily on the production process. In chemical sectors, for example, continuous processing makes it difficult to adjust operations based on energy availability. However, in other sectors with modular production, flexibility is more achievable.

A question on **raw materials** led to reflections on the need for a stronger internal EU market for secondary raw materials. Steffen noted this is an emerging priority within the Enterprise Europe Network. The topic of regional fragmentation was revisited, with several speakers calling for pan-European coordination in raw materials, battery recycling and supply chains.

The panel concluded by identifying key takeaways for moving from policy to practice. Hannes called for greater focus on the **growth opportunities** inherent in decarbonisation, underlining the need for an entrepreneurial, forward-looking narrative. Katia and Oana urged **stronger European cooperation** across regions and sectors, with better alignment of research efforts and public-private investments. Steffen emphasised the **dual role of regulation** as both a constraint and an enabler, advocating for harmonised frameworks to reduce administrative burdens while ensuring climate ambition.

4. Funding opportunities

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

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

1. Innovation Fund 2024 Net Zero Technologies – Clean-tech manufacturing; deadline 24 April 2025.
2. Innovation Fund 2024 Net Zero Technologies – General decarbonisation (large-scale projects, medium-scale projects, small-scale projects); deadline 24 April 2025.
3. Demonstration of stationary fuel cells in renewable energy communities; deadline 23 April 2025.
4. Innovative hydrogen and solid carbon production from renewable gases/biogenic waste processes; deadline 23 April 2025.
5. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on European Cluster Collaboration Platform.