



EUROPEAN CLUSTER
COLLABORATION PLATFORM

Green, digital and resilient through clusters: Takeaways from the European Cluster Conference

Summary



EU Clusters Talks
15 May 2024, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union





Green, digital and resilient through clusters: Takeaways from the European Cluster Conference

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the EU Clusters Talk “Green, digital and resilient through clusters: Takeaways from the European Cluster Conference” on 15 May, 8:30 – 9:45 CET, to reflect on the key learning from the different keynotes and parallel sessions of the European Cluster Conference and discuss the vision for the future of clusters.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderation: Zivile Kropaite

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Key messages from the European Cluster Conference
Mariella Masselink, Head of Unit, DG GROW, European Commission
Marek Przeor, Team Leader Cluster Policy, DG GROW, European Commission
3. Panel debate
Carolina Garcés, Project Manager Internationalisation, Mobile Heights
Glenda Napier, CEO, Energy Cluster Denmark
Kristina Šermukšnytė-Alešiūnienė, General Director, AgriFood Lithuania
Susana Remotti, Cluster Project Manager, PROPLAST Italy
4. Funding opportunities

Key messages

- Clusters are integral to the EU's industrial policy, fostering regional economic development and public-private partnerships.
- Clusters are seen as strategic partners in driving the green, digital, and resilient transition, attracting investments, building trust, pooling resources, and creating social value.
- In the short term, there is a need to improve communication strategies to highlight the impact and achievements of the clusters.
- Long-term financing and the creation of meta-clusters are next important steps.
- Building trust within and between clusters, understanding members' needs, and having contingency and mitigation plans in place are crucial for resilience.
- Speakers agree on the need for coordinated efforts at national and European levels to align cluster activities with broader policy goals.



1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

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

1. Save the date for [Clusters meet Regions in Graz](#), Austria, on 18-19 June 2024.
2. Register for [EU-Taiwan Matchmaking](#), Berlin, on 10-12 June 2024.
3. Register for [EU-South Med Matchmaking](#), Frankfurt, on 11-13 June 2024.
4. Register for [EU-Canada Matchmaking](#), Montreal, on 10-12 September 2024.
5. Access to [Trend Universe](#) open to all users from the EU
6. Information about [new country factsheets](#) on cluster policies to be published in the next weeks.

2. Takeaways from the European Cluster Conference

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

Mariella Masselink spoke about the success of the cluster conference, emphasizing the work of their dedicated team. The event **exceeded expectations** with more than 700 participants, 800 matchmaking meetings, 56 speakers and around 70 exhibition stands.

Key takeaways from the conference included the recognition that clusters are integral to the EU's industrial policy, fostering regional economic development and public-private partnerships. As Mariella Masselink remarked, clusters play a crucial role in building cross-border value chains, enhancing resilience, and providing policy feedback. Especially in the EU, clusters secure value chains and are a magnet for attracting investments. She stressed the need to continue holding such events to promote the benefits of clusters, which include bringing together companies, policymakers, and research actors for scaling up, technology transfer and knowledge sharing. Finally, she remarked that clusters are seen as strategic partners in driving the green, digital, and resilient transition, attracting investments, building trust, pooling resources, and creating social value.

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

Marek Przeor provided a detailed recap of the agenda. The event featured high-level panels with notable speakers, highlighting that clusters are central to Europe's industrial agenda. A quote that perfectly sums up the spirit of this event was from Commissioner Breton: "**Clusters are at the heart of Europe's industrial agenda**". Marek Przeor started by talking about how clusters increase regional competitiveness, dynamism and value, which calls for their strategic integration into national and EU industrial policies. **Public-private partnerships** are crucial to achieving transition and resilience objectives, and clusters play a key role. They can be key **investment hubs**, especially in the cleantech and defence sectors. Related to the next EU mandate, he commented that the European strategy should take advantage of the existing actors and structures in clusters to attract investments, so that private investments can be effectively combined with public funding, providing the stability and reliability that private investors are looking for.

The next item of his explanation was the Parallel Sessions that took place on 7th May. The following topics were discussed at these sessions: green transition, digital transition, resilience, skills, funding and technology.



Concerning the **green transition**, long-term financing and a platform for best practices at various levels are needed to achieve the EU's proposed goals. The panel reflected the interconnectedness of the green, digital, and resilience goals. The EU's green transition platform provides best practices for clusters, SMEs, and national policies. The main obstacles are the lack of long-term financing, climate change denial and resistance to change but solutions lie in greater collaboration, SME capacity building, the adoption of a 'climate jobs' mindset and a streamlined regulatory framework.

On the **digital transition**, Marek Przeor stated that cluster organisations know the value chain across different industrial ecosystems, and they can scale up businesses. Nevertheless, some of the barriers clusters must deal with are lack of digital awareness, change aversion (very conservative business), regulatory challenges, and global competition. Some helpful measures would be using clusters as digitalization monitors, impact-based funding, training cluster managers, and fostering cross-cluster collaboration.

Building trust within and between clusters and understanding members' needs is crucial for **resilience**. Marek Przeor highlighted the need for clusters to have contingency and mitigation plans in place. One of the big problems faced by clusters is the lack of skilled staff and strategic adaptability. Here, solutions include increased government support, continuous management training, increased collaboration and capacity building of cluster partners.

Regarding **skills and funding**, skills need to be upgraded and retrained first and foremost. In many areas of Europe, there is a lack of skilled people. So now one of the barriers is that more and more people need to be multitaskers and vocational training must be put at the centre of the problem. Companies have difficulties to retain knowledge and skilled staff and difficulty in prioritising skills. Improvements can be made through collaboration in training, academia-business partnerships, practical education, and consistent lifelong learning policies. On the other hand, **stable funding** of clusters is crucial, along with matching members' needs and navigating complex funding rules. It is necessary to increase cascade funding for SMEs. In this situation, barriers include financial resource instability and restrictive rules. In the Cluster Conference, a particular call was made for changes to the restrictive 10-year funding rule (state aid issue).

The last discussion of the day was about **technology**. Obstacles in this field are gaps in know-how, traditional mindsets, rapid obsolescence, slow adoption by the EU, innovation market challenges and the fact that research is given more importance than implementation. To alleviate these obstacles, agile public policy is needed to help clusters keep pace with technological developments.

One of the most important topics of the second day of the conference was **meta clusters**. Marek Przeor explained the concept of meta clusters as high-level organisational structures that connect multiple clusters across regions or sectors to promote collaboration, knowledge exchange, and large-scale innovation. Funding opportunities through **Euroclusters and interregional investments in innovation (I3 Instrument)** can be good starting points for meta clusters. The goals are to create new value chains or reconfigure existing ones in Europe and to generate shared value through clusters. Marek highlighted the Catalonia region as an example of this practice.

Regarding the topics of **defence, health, energy, and the EU's economic security**, Marek Przeor emphasised that mitigation strategies and contingency plans must be implemented in each cluster as soon as possible. There was also a discussion on boosting the competitiveness of clusters through internationalisation, with a focus on the Global South. His main message was that clusters are most



interested in trade missions and support in identifying local partners. The development of a successful business model for clusters depends on a multitude of factors, and there is no perfect formula for all. Clear examples of success include the cases of Canada and Iceland.

Finally, in the session on **supporting startups and scale-ups**, the conversation revolved around the creation of supportive ecosystems and the issue of funding. As Marek Przeor highlighted, it is frustrating that due to the fragmentation of funding in the EU, many startups and scale-ups go to the United States to secure the money needed to grow or find investors who can provide it.

3. Panel debate

The panellists spoke about the importance of collaboration, partnerships, and strategic actions within meta clusters and European innovation ecosystems and, specifically, their activities and views on the best ways of supporting the European clusters network.

Carolina Garcés explained how for her the conference had increased her sense of belonging, bringing her whole team together and highlighting the importance of feeling part of a wider community. This experience reinforced her idea of the importance of working towards European priorities and strategies beyond the regional or national levels. She also indicated the need to create greater awareness of the role of clusters among policymakers and other innovation actors. Sometimes clusters, depending on their maturity, such as those in Sweden, need to continuously demonstrate their value and how they complement other innovation efforts, particularly in regions where they may be less established compared to countries such as Spain or France. She emphasised the need for **better coordination at the national and European levels** to avoid the narrow focus of regional clusters. Also, a good point was the focus on the meta clusters as a way of “national coordinator”. As Carolina said, *“I think like when we are regional clusters, we become blind in some point we can help at the regional level that we need someone that coordinates the effort at the national level”*.

Glenda Napier made it clear that raising the visibility of cluster organisations is a vital aspect of cluster development. For instance, she pointed out there are **1600 clusters in Europe, helping more than 100,000 companies and 20 million jobs** and *“we should also use these numbers a little bit more”*. Despite their key role in facilitating partnerships and technological breakthroughs, cluster organisations often remain in the background. She argued that clusters should actively communicate their achievements, particularly the development of new technological solutions, rather than just their networking activities. She also commented on the concept of meta clusters, and their enormous potential. Glenda Napier supported the idea of meta clusters, suggesting that they could be beneficial not only for different sectors but also within a sector. She proposed the creation of a **Europe-wide energy meta cluster** to pool efforts in this field and improve collaboration between energy companies, thereby streamlining efforts and maximising the impact of shared objectives and resources within the energy sector. She also addressed the issue of the limitations of public funding. The limitation imposed by Article 27 on long-term public funding of clusters restricts public funding to a maximum of 10 years, which is a challenge for sustainable support. Her suggestion was to call for a collective effort among European clusters to address and potentially amend this issue.

Kristina Šermukšnytė-Alešiūnienė began her intervention by supporting, like her colleagues, the importance of collaboration and visibility among clusters. She commented that clusters play a key role



in the industrial policy agenda, yet we often act modestly, underestimating our impact. An interesting observation was the need for knowledge sharing between established and new clusters, particularly those in the creative industries which are relatively new compared with other industries. Established clusters have valuable experience, while newer ones bring innovative business models. **Sharing this knowledge can lead to new opportunities for collaboration and improved cluster effectiveness.** She also stressed the importance of finding a common language to communicate engagements and create a common European policy cluster. Additionally, she encouraged cluster managers to engage with governments and policymakers to advocate for cluster policies and recommended registering with the European Cluster Collaboration Platform as a starting point.

Susana Remotti spoke about the importance of meta clusters, where she highlighted the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration within them. One of the takeaways she drew from the conference was the importance of collaboration between clusters in different sectors. Another theme to which she attached great importance was the ecological transition. She identified the **emergence of new jobs and the need to upgrade and retrain workers' skills** as vital for the green transition. Moreover, Susana Remotti highlighted the importance of continued collaboration and problem-solving within cluster networks. In the long term, she anticipates challenges related to **member engagement and retention.**

The panellists concluded the discussion by sharing their opinions on what actions they foresee for their clusters. They all agree on the necessity for stronger structures and coordination to effectively convey research and market findings to policymakers. Sustainability and independence from public funding were underscored as crucial, with a call to analyse both successes and failures to enhance future initiatives and suggestions were made to collectively address challenges, such as potential funding issues due to Article 27 restrictions. Carolina outlined her vision on the need to be **more sustainable and independent** from public funding; Glenda supported the idea of **creating more technologies** together; Kristina emphasised the importance of **active engagement of strong managers** to develop opportunities; and Susana concluded her intervention by proposing the creation of **more meta clusters.** Finally, in response to a participant's question about what concrete support clusters can expect from the European Commission authorities, Marek Przeor replied that we are awaiting the composition of the new Commission, which will build new dynamics. Nevertheless, Europe's objectives will remain the same: **green transition, digital transition and resilience building.**

4. Funding opportunities

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

1. [Enterprise Europe Network](#); deadline 19 September 2024
2. [EU-Ukraine Cluster Partnership Programme](#); deadline 4 June 2024
3. [Expanding Academia-Enterprise Collaborations](#); deadline 19 September 2024
4. [Transition towards climate neutrality within cities](#); deadline 5 September 2024
5. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#)