



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs

Innovation and Advanced Manufacturing  
Clusters, Social Economy and Entrepreneurship

## Call for the expression of interest

# Towards European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for smart specialisation investments



### 1. Objectives

The overall aim behind this call is a **mobilisation of European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for smart specialisation investments**. Such mobilisation is envisaged to strengthen industry participation and the European dimension in the implementation of national and regional smart specialisation strategies.

The specific objective with this call for the expression of interest is to **put a partnering process in place** for strategic inter-regional collaboration, through which notably SMEs, together other innovation actors in clusters, can be supported in finding partners with complementary competences, accessing value chains that cut across national, regional and sectoral boundaries as well as facilitate their access to technology centres, including KETs infrastructures and digital innovation hubs. This shall better position them to tap into and benefit from investments and initiatives in the context of smart specialisation.

This call for the expression of interest is **addressed to cluster organisations, other business network organisations, technology centres and science parks** from EU Member States or countries participating in the COSME programme<sup>1</sup>, interested in teaming up around similar or related industrial thematic areas.

The focus of this call is to encourage the partnering process in the context of **industrial modernisation**, such as in relation to Key Enabling Technologies, ICT, service innovation and resource efficiency. This includes advanced manufacturing, digital transformation/industry 4.0, digital platforms, big data analytics, space data services, advanced material and disruptive business models and service concepts including in creative industries, textiles and tourism.

### 2. Rationale

Member States and regions across the EU have developed research and innovation strategies for smart specialisation investments (RIS3) that guide **€121 billion of innovation-related investments from the European Structural and Investment Funds** until 2020.<sup>2</sup> These strategies are now being implemented to foster growth in regional, national and European priority areas. Additional support for investments has been made available through the **Investment Plan for Europe**<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> For a list of third countries' participation in COSME see: <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cosme/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/ris3-guide>

<sup>3</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/jobs-growth-and-investment/investment-plan\\_en](http://ec.europa.eu/priorities/jobs-growth-and-investment/investment-plan_en)

To benefit from the experience outside their geographical area, some regions<sup>4</sup> have strategically **strengthened interregional collaboration** along similar or complementary smart specialisation priorities. These efforts aim at linking competences, infrastructures and innovation efforts in European networks as a path for opening up new growth opportunities for companies and their regions in new European value-chains. Such regions have realised that this could not be done with a focus solely on their own individual region and that building a joint critical mass and strategic linkages is a more promising approach for their future growth.

The impact of these efforts depends upon the **strong involvement of industry**. Clusters and its business support organisations are promising tools to mobilise industry and intensify practical inter-regional cooperation.

To facilitate the overall process of interregional cooperation and strong industry involvement which can contribute to create a project pipeline for smart specialisation investments across Europe, the European Commission is offering support to regional authorities, clusters and industry stakeholders through an **integrated approach to smart specialisation, clusters and industrial modernisation**. It basically combines two key initiatives:

First, the European Commission's services have started establishing **Thematic Smart Specialisation Platforms** to bring together *regional authorities* interested in joining forces in the implementation of their RIS3 strategies. This approach was launched in 2015 with the set-up of the Smart Specialisation Platform on Energy<sup>5</sup> (S3p-Energy). It is being followed with the establishment of two additional Thematic Platforms on Industrial Modernisation<sup>6</sup> and on Agri-Food<sup>7</sup> at the Smart Regions conference in June 2016<sup>8</sup>, with possibly others to follow.

Second, through this call for the expression of interest, the Commission's services aim to start mobilising **European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for smart specialisation investments** composed of cluster organisations, other business network organisations, technology centres and science parks to boost inter-regional collaborations, innovation activities amongst groups of SMEs in specific thematic areas, related industries and value chains. This call focuses on triggering a partnering process linked to the Thematic Platform on Industrial Modernisation.



The partnering process that will be initiated by this call should lead to preparatory actions towards the establishment and shaping of European Strategic Cluster Partnerships. The Partnerships shall have the ultimate objective to prepare and present joint business cooperation projects for co-investments in innovation through **common concrete activities**,

<sup>4</sup> The regions involved in the Vanguard Initiative are a prominent example. See [www.s3vanguardinitiative.eu/](http://www.s3vanguardinitiative.eu/)

<sup>5</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/s3p-energy>

<sup>6</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/industrial-modernisation>

<sup>7</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/agri-food>

<sup>8</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/conferences/smart-regions/](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/conferences/smart-regions/)

such as:

- strategy-setting and road mapping,
- virtual and physical matchmaking activities among partners and their SMEs,
- demonstration and pilot projects, and
- shaping business concepts into viable and bankable proposals for investments.

### 3. Background

This call for the expression of interest is based on the experience of establishing **European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for going international (ESCP-4i)**<sup>9</sup> However, the focus under the current call is not on supporting SME internationalisation with strategic partners in third countries *beyond Europe* but on trigger a partnering process for benefit of SMEs, their scale-up and joint investment projects *within Europe*.

This call notably builds upon the interest gathered and experience of the set-up of two pilot projects to reinforce collaboration among clusters and technology centres entitled **“Towards EU Regional Economic Convergence”**, for which a call for proposals was launched in 2015 with funding from the European Parliament.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, this call for the expression of interest is relevant to stakeholders from among the many good quality but non-funded applications of the **“Cluster facilitated projects for new industrial value chains” call for proposals under Horizon2020**<sup>11</sup>. This would allow to seek alternative ways to implement at least parts of their ideas for fostering cross-sectoral and cross-regional collaboration, in the context of smart specialisation and to bring their ideas to the attention of regions gathered under the Thematic Smart Specialisation Platform that are seeking to support such efforts.

Equally, **other relevant strategic partnerships** that have already emerged, e.g. as part of the Regions of Knowledge initiative, the 'Vanguard Initiative', transnational and interregional cooperation programmes (Interreg B and Interreg C/Europe) could also benefit from getting associated to the Thematic Smart Specialisation Platform and being mobilised towards European Strategic Cluster Partnerships.<sup>12</sup>

### 4. What is the partnering process and potential benefits?

To help achieve the objectives outlined in this call the Commission services are putting in place a number of steps and will use a series of dedicated events to offer opportunities for interested stakeholders to further team up, to consolidate and mature their partnerships and to get associated with the activities under the Thematic Platform on Industrial modernisation. This includes the following **events during 2016** that will all take place in Brussels following a first Info Day / pre-partnering for the S3 Platform on Industrial Modernisation on 11 May<sup>13</sup>:

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<sup>9</sup> As part of the Cluster Internationalisation Programme for SMEs under COSME:

<http://www.clustercollaboration.eu/cluster-partnerships>

<sup>10</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item\\_id=8242&lang=en](http://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=8242&lang=en)

<sup>11</sup> A total of around €130 million are estimated to be available until 2020 to support value chain innovation of groups of SMEs under annual calls for proposals for this call topic (INNOSUP-1). For more information see <http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/6084-innosup-01-2016-2017.html>

<sup>12</sup> Already in 2016, Interreg Europe explicitly “welcomes projects seeking to go beyond the improvement of each regional policy instrument to achieving interregional synergies between the economic sectors of the participating regions” and those “leading to European strategic cluster partnerships for smart specialization.”

<http://www.interregeurope.eu/news-and-events/news/48/second-call-for-project-proposals-open-5-april-13-may-2016>

<sup>13</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/-/information-day-industrial-modernisation-s3-platform>

- 1-2 June: Launch of Thematic Platforms at high-level Smart Regions event<sup>14</sup> with 600 stakeholders, including a parallel session and partnering on Industrial Modernisation
- 10-13 October: European Week of Regions and Cities (Open days)<sup>15</sup> with some 6 000 participants in over 100 workshops
- 30 November - 2 December: Gathering of 250 cluster stakeholders at cluster matchmaking event and high-level European Cluster Conference<sup>16</sup>

These events, as well as other dedicated events on specific topics, together with a partner search function under the European Cluster Collaboration Platform shall offer opportunities for interested parties to engage in the **partnering process**. This shall, among others, allow cluster organisations, business network organisations, technology centres or science parks to:

- identify potential partners for cooperation on the basis of common areas of interests;
- elaborate scope for collaboration and teaming up into building a Partnership;
- discuss possibilities of joint agendas for cooperation and if applicable prepare possible future joint activities;
- reach out to relevant external public/private bodies, incl. the Enterprise Europe Network and its cluster contact points or Knowledge and Innovation Communities;
- liaise with advisory organisations, financial actors etc.; and
- establish close contacts and engage with regional authorities managing European Structural and Investment Funds and identify related activities and support opportunities, including through the Investment Plan.

Following this partnering phase, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs will then launch a separate dedicated call in early 2017 for selecting European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for smart specialisation investments (ESCP-S3) that shall be awarded an **ESCP-S3 Label**. This Label is foreseen not to be binding or create any legal rights nor financial obligations but will help to promote the joint efforts further by signalling that the Partnerships attain the following key principles and characteristic:

- "*European*", meaning being composed of partners established in a minimum of three different EU Member States or countries participating in the COSME programme;
- "*Strategic*", meaning the partnerships shall develop and implement a joint European smart specialisation strategy promoting cross-sectoral and cross-regional value chain cooperation in support of industrial modernisation;
- representing "*Clusters*" through cluster organisations or equivalent other business network organisations with an own legal entity, science parks and technology centres that are providing or channelling specialised business support services especially to SMEs.
- forming "*Partnerships*" with the aim to develop a long-term cooperation agenda, joint actions and an implementation roadmap around similar or related industrial thematic areas.
- working towards encouraging "*smart specialisation*" by striving to successfully support cross-sectoral and cross-regional value chain collaboration and joint "*investments*" of their SME members and other innovation actors as well as promote actions in support of the implementation of smart specialisation strategies of their regions in view of supporting growth and jobs in Europe.

<sup>14</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/-/smart-regions-conference>

<sup>15</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/regions-and-cities/2016/index.cfm](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/regions-and-cities/2016/index.cfm)

<sup>16</sup> Information on the event will become available at <http://www.clustercollaboration.eu/>

To be considered to be awarded the **ESCP-S3 Label**, Partnership will have to fulfil at least the following **conditions in terms of composition** of the Partnership:

1. Being composed of cluster organisations, business network organisations, technology centres or science parks with an own legal entity established in a minimum of three different EU Member States or countries participating in the COSME programme<sup>17</sup>;
2. Including at least one organisation established in a region classified as less developed or in transition, according to the mapping proposed for Structural Funds eligibility for the period 2014-2020<sup>18</sup>; and
3. Being able to demonstrate relevant smart specialisation prioritisation or support from the regional authorities corresponding to the proposed Partnership members.<sup>19</sup>

The list of labelled European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for smart specialisation investments will then be listed under a dedicated corner of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform. **Further visibility** will be provided through the S3 Platform, notably in the context of the Thematic Smart Specialisation Platforms.<sup>20</sup> This will allow them to profile their partnerships and promote its activities and interest for cooperation also in relation to the regional authorities.

The labelled Partnerships shall serve as models for others and pave the way for possible future approaches to mainstream a more strategic interregional partnering at European level. The European Commission will therefore support labelled European Strategic Cluster Partnerships as part of its integrated approach to smart specialisation, clusters and industrial modernisation.<sup>21</sup> This will be done by focussing **existing and forthcoming measures**, for example under COSME, Horizon 2020 and INTERREG Europe programmes to facilitate their efforts, notably those related to the thematic Smart Specialisation Platform for Industrial Modernisation.

For instance, the forthcoming European Observatory for Clusters and Industrial Change, that will bring together the current European Cluster Observatory and the European Service Innovation Centre, will provide **dedicated advisory support services** to the labelled European Strategic Cluster Partnerships in 2017 and 2018, such as dedicated value chain analysis and technical assistance to shape partnering activities.

Moreover, the Cluster Partnerships will be able to benefit from support and guidance from the RE-CONFIRM measure to be launched in 2017 for facilitating interregional cooperation for industrial modernisation. They may further benefit from COSME support activities, such as for networks of regions, cross-regional business partnerships for co-investments & matchmaking for digital transformation & KETs. Links with other COSME actions, such as the Worth Partnership Project, could also be explored, where the Cluster Partnerships could help identify and reaching companies to take part in partnering activities with creative industries companies.

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<sup>17</sup> In case of doubt, please consult the "Third countries' participation in COSME" pdf in the background section of the following link: [http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cosme/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cosme/index_en.htm)

<sup>18</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/sources/what/future/img/eligibility20142020.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/what/future/img/eligibility20142020.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Possible criteria in this respect could be able to provide a clear reference to the respective regional smart specialisation strategies (such as those listed under the Eye@RIS tool of the Smart Specialisation Platform) in which the partnership member organisations are based in or, alternatively, a support letter from the national or regional authorities managing European Structural and Investment Funds or similar.

<sup>20</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/>

<sup>21</sup> at <http://www.clustercollaboration.eu/eu-cluster-partnerships>

## 5. How to express your interest?

Those cluster organisations, other business network organisations, technology centres and science parks from EU Member States or countries participating in the COSME programme<sup>22</sup> organisations interested in teaming up with others towards establishing a European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for smart specialisation investments should make use of the new **partner search function under the European Cluster Collaboration Platform** at <http://www.clustercollaboration.eu/partner-search>

The partner search tool allows cluster organisations to create a partner search request under the dedicated reference of this call for the expression of interest and to profile their prospective partnership by outlining the following information:

- a) Title of the prospective partnership (ideally indicating the common thematic priority area linked to industrial modernisation)
- b) Target sectors, technology fields and smart specialisation (S3) priority areas<sup>23</sup>
- c) Cluster organisations and other organisations already associated to the partnering (which should eventually come from a minimum of 3 countries)
- d) Description in which the vision, objectives and ambitions of the prospective Partnerships and other information can be outlined.

Other organisations will be able to contact the cluster organisation that launched a specific partner search request for a prospective Partnership and can ask to be associated and listed in the group of organisations. The partner search function can therefore be a "living" tool to encourage continuous partnering and also serve others, like regional authorities, to see where interest areas in the cluster related stakeholders are strong.

## 6. Timetable

This call for the expression of interest and the subsequent partnering process towards European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for smart specialisation will open in May 2016 via the partner search tool at <http://www.clustercollaboration.eu/partner-search> and is intended to remain **open until the end of December 2016**.

For more information, please see the EU Cluster Portal at <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cluster>. and the forthcoming Smart Guide to Cluster Policy that should become available in June 2016 at <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/business-friendly-environment/regional-policies/>. For further questions, please contact [GROW-F2@ec.europa.eu](mailto:GROW-F2@ec.europa.eu).

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<sup>22</sup> For a list of third countries' participation in COSME, please visit the COSME Portal where the most updated lists are published: <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/smes/cosme/>

<sup>23</sup> <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/eye-ris3>