



European Cluster Conference 2019 report

Creating a blog on the European Cluster Conference and feeding it live – this was our task during the two days we spend in Bucharest. Quite challenging for three students without any experience in web design. But teamwork, enthusiasm and effort made it possible: in about one week we learned how to program a website, how to adapt it to our needs and how to make it look attractive.

What else have we taken home?

The mood of the conference

The European Cluster Conference was a great opportunity for all participants to exchange ideas. From the first day, during the icebreaker organized by Carsten Schierenbeck (Team Leader at the European Commission's Advanced technologies, Clusters and Social Economy Unit), we saw how much everyone wanted to expand their network and share their experience. We simply had to introduce ourselves to our neighbour, but no one wanted to stop talking because people were so easy to socialize.

The breaks were also good moments of exchange between each participant. It only took a few minutes in the lobby to see everyone talking to different people. There were many European countries represented at the event, so we could hear different languages in every corner, even though English was still the language that connected everyone.

The conference dinner was also a very special and convivial moment. We are sure that people were very happy to participate. The atmosphere was more relaxed than in parliament and participants were therefore even more open to discussion.

Finally, we also owe this warm atmosphere to the welcome from Romania throughout this conference. The small gifts and all the efforts of the people working on site really made everyone feel comfortable.

The organisation of the European Commission also played a major role in matchmaking.

Thank you for this moment, we think that the vast majority of participants are satisfied with this event.

The content of the conference

Having attended our university classes on cluster theory and cluster policy, business intelligence, microeconomics of competitiveness, cross-cultural studies, European public management and collective intelligence management, our theoretical basis for our future in cluster management is quite well developed. But what is about practice, about reacting to changing economies, changing attitudes and a changing climate? Are we prepared to "*Bridge. Inspire. Change*", to connect the ecosystems we will work in? We have already found some answers during our internships, but never has the learning success been as rapid as in the two days of our conference visit. The presentations on cluster excellence and evaluation and on cluster policy programmes in different countries activated and completed what we have seen in our classes. We saw that cluster policy is not isolated, but works only in the interaction of the different EU initiatives. It was very interesting to see the reflections on the future development of the programmes, how the policy makers try to learn from each other and look outside the box, beyond Europe! The exchanges with cluster stakeholders from all over Europe, especially during the breakout sessions, were inspiring: We understood the challenges they face in their respective ecosystems, found out how they proceed in fostering digitalisation, circular economy and social impact, and listened to their "lessons-learned". In addition to the organised programme, it was meeting all the other cluster practitioners that taught us a lot! Seeing how inspired they spoke about their daily work, their enthusiasm and their efforts confirmed us that we have chosen the right path for our future (even if our families and friends do not always understand what we are actually doing)! We want to "*be best, not in, but for the world*" (cit. Bianca Muntean, Cluster Manager of the Year 2019)!

Value of the experience for us students

"Bridge. Inspire. Change." This has been the motto of this year's conference in Bucharest. Before entering the Palace of the Parliament, it sounded quite ambitious to the three of us.

As students of the master's degree in Cluster Management and Regional Networks at the University of Strasbourg, being present at such a massive event has been an honour, but also a significant responsibility. However, after the very beginning of the conference, this feeling of being fish out of water was suddenly swept away. Carsten Schierenbeck introduced us and our blog in front of the whole audience. From that point onwards, making an interview with a well-known cluster manager or taking a selfie with an important cluster practitioner was no longer a burden: it soon became a genuine, spontaneous pleasure of meeting these experts and deepening our knowledge through concrete facts and figures.

For this reason, far beyond the brilliant speeches and breakout sessions we have had the chance to attend, we believe that our most valuable takeaway of the European Cluster Conference 2019 is that we have been considered like peers right since day one. This really means a lot to us, and everything became much easier for this blog.

To sum up, it has been a great adventure! Clusters are all about connecting ecosystems and this conference showed us how true this statement is: innovative cluster management practices have been shared, new policy guidelines have been set out, new strategic partnerships and projects are now ready to be sealed and launched.

As for ourselves, that motto really does have a meaning now, because we have realised that we, too, are part of the European clusters' ecosystem. This conference has successfully helped us *Bridge* contacts to test our future employability; it has brought us to be *Inspired* by various success stories that proved that clusters are the most appropriate way to increase competitiveness and, in the meantime, create real shared value; it has presented us the needs for *Change* in terms of circular economy, sustainable development and access to innovation that today's Europe should responsibly claim for.

Yes, "*We are stronger together!*" (cit. Bianca Muntean, Cluster Manager of the Year 2019).

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