

New Cluster Policies – for Central Europe, and beyond!

Clusters are an essential trigger in innovation policy to make European SME more competitive. New market opportunities that result from major societal challenges request products and services which can only be delivered in a multi-disciplinary approach making use of the key enabling technology in Europe. The transnational consortium of the strategic project CluStrat has identified the major issues of new cluster concepts to support the necessary innovation processes in SME.

“Companies need to know the market opportunities related to the emerging industries and how to exploit them. Innovation at the interface of different technologies and industries is a key capacity in this respect” said Prof. Dr. Norbert Höptner, Commissioner for Europe of the Minister of Finance and Economics of the Baden-Württemberg and director of Steinbeis-Europa-Zentrum. “Cluster initiatives can function as an important leverage in this respect, but policy needs to create the right framework conditions.”

In order to stay competitive, Europe must take action to boost the innovation performance of its regional economies. The grand societal challenges – including, for instance, ageing societies or climate change – call for solutions, which Europe’s industry is in a good position to provide: Complex new products, services and business models that are developed at the interface of different industries and technology fields are needed. In 2011, 18 partners from eight central European countries have joined forces in the strategic project “CluStrat” to create framework conditions conducive of such cross-sector innovation, tapping the potentials resting with clusters.

Three main factors have been identified : (1) a systemic coordination of actors and competencies in order to achieve the quality and scope of collaboration that is needed – across all relevant technologies and branches; (2) a demand driven approach, including end-users in all stages of the innovation process; and (3) integrating knowledge on the possibilities of key-enabling technologies (KET) as identified by the European Commission (including micro-/nanoelectronics, nanotechnology, photonics, advanced materials, industrial biotechnology and advanced manufacturing technologies).

“It is impressive to see how CluStrat has already triggered a change in cluster policy and regional cluster landscapes in the participating regions” said Dr. Petra Püchner, managing director of Steinbeis-Europa-Zentrum and coordinator of CluStrat during the CluStrat conference on 17 February 2014 in Brussels. The already achieved results of the pilot actions in the participating regions underline this statement and are a signal to clusters in regard to their role towards smart specialization in view of the societal challenges of the Europe2020 strategy.

This project is implemented through the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme co-financed by the ERDF.

During the following months, CluStrat will issue recommendations to cluster policy on how to create framework conditions that are apt to unlock these cluster potentials, for instance through future ERDF programmes. Moreover, it has become apparent that cluster policy has a part to play in activating – at an early stage – the potentials of clusters in the light of the chances entailed by Horizon2020.

Background information

Clusters are – usually regional – hubs of competences along a value chain in a given industry or technology branch, representing a critical mass of actors from R&D, industry and other institutional contexts. Clusters have thus become an accepted part of today’s innovation framework, and innovation policy support for advancing the positive impact of professionalized cluster management organizations (cluster initiatives) on the regional competitiveness is available in many European regions, as well as at the EU level.

Cluster initiatives can not only play an important part in creating an awareness of the new market opportunities in the emerging industries among their member companies. They can also act as promoters of cross-fertilization with other industries and technologies, through cross-cluster collaborations within and beyond regions. The CluStrat project develops new cluster concepts and cooperation models that encourage this role and function, and issues recommendations to cluster and innovation policy at all levels with regard to their implementation.

In doing so, CluStrat has already shown that cluster policy has potentially an important role to play in raising awareness on the sides of cluster and innovation actors at regional and national levels, and in preparing them for the challenges and opportunities entailed by societal challenges, related emerging industries and smart specialization.

Several pilot actions are currently implemented by the consortium to test the new cluster concepts. The pilot actions are about establishing new forms of clusters – including a cluster of social entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic - , at experimenting new multidisciplinary cross-cluster collaborations and platforms, and clusters-based innovation partnerships, or at testing qualification schemes for the cluster management. One pilot action assesses possible applications of the KET advanced manufacturing.

Against the general policy framework of strategic reorientation of regional innovation systems through “smart” specialization of the given assets and competences, CluStrat contributes to bridging the gap towards new transnational value chains that are no longer targeting single industries, but provision of solutions for new cross-cutting areas such as “Active and Healthy Ageing”.

CluStrat is a strategic innovation project implemented through the CENTRAL EUROPE Programme co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. The consortium convenes 18 organizations from Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Seven institutions from Czech Republic, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia and Ukraine are involved as associated partners without financial contribution. The three years project has started in October 2011.

CluStrat is coordinated by Steinbeis-Europa-Zentrum in close coordination and with financial support from the Ministry of Finance and Economics Baden-Württemberg.

Further information: www.clustrat.eu

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