



Developing Meta-Clusters in the Alpine Space: Proposal of Common Action Plans among Alpine Space Clusters

- Overcoming the Fragmentation of Cluster in the Alpine Space -



Contents

1	Introduction.....	2
2	Meta-cluster: Definition within the project Alps4EU	2
3	Establishment of a meta-cluster	3
3.1	Requirements and conditions for establishing meta-clusters.....	3
3.2	Barriers for and challenges of internationalisation.....	4
3.3	Structure of a meta-cluster	5
3.4	Establishment phase of a meta-cluster	6
3.5	Sustainability of meta-clusters	8
4	Activities of a meta-cluster.....	9
5	Pilot Actions for meta-cluster: proposal of Common Action Plans.....	10
5.1	Pilot activities for the companies (especially SMEs)	10
5.2	Pilot activities for the cluster management	11
5.3	Policy support for meta-cluster activities.....	13
5.4	New tools and services on a meta-cluster level.....	14
6	Conclusion	15

1 Introduction

Alps4EU aims to overcome clusters initiatives fragmentation and favour the emergence of meta-clusters, applying a macro-regional vision and driving Alpine area clusters to be more competitive in the European scenario for the benefit of the Alpine Space's economy.

Bringing the cluster initiatives in Europe together offers a great opportunity to combine innovation capabilities of different regions to develop new products and services, which are customised to the requirements of the different markets. Cluster initiatives can play an essential role to support SMEs in the internationalisation of their innovation processes. Cluster managers have good insights about the strength and weaknesses in their region. Besides, they know about the needs and requirements of their members.

Addressing both policy makers and cluster managers, the activities within the project comprised the mapping of Alpine Space cluster's strategic priorities and the development of guidelines and proposals for joint programming activities.

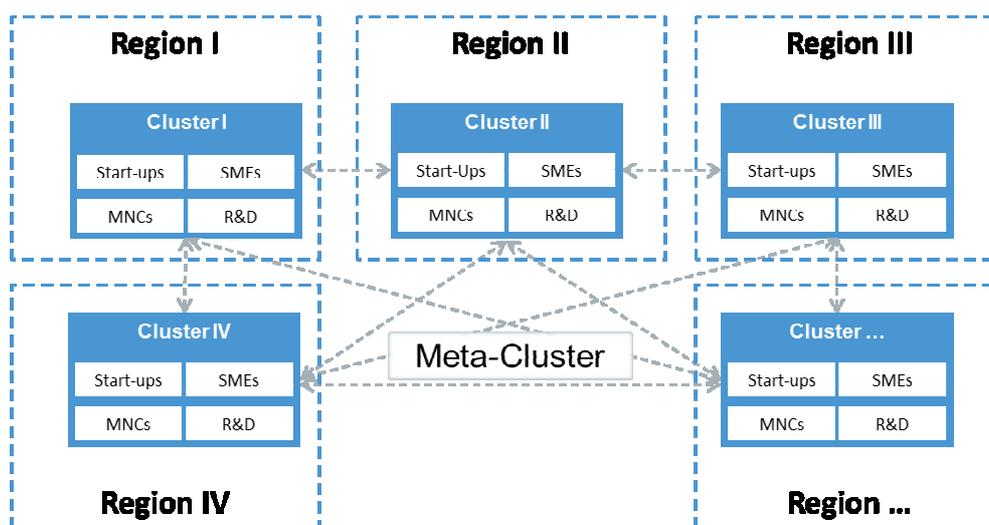
This Proposal of Common Action Plans among Alpine Space Clusters summarises the outcomes of the different project activities carried out within Alps4EU that explored the cooperation potential among clusters, with the aim of proposing activities to be undertaken in order to establish sustainable meta-clusters within the Alpine Space that are both taking into account the interests of cluster initiatives and their members.

2 Meta-cluster: Definition within the project Alps4EU

A cluster can be broadly defined as geographically co-located end producers, suppliers, services providers, research laboratories, educational institutions and other institutions in a given economic field, that are important drivers of dynamic regional economies. Clusters are powerful engines of economic development and drivers of innovation in the European Union. They provide a fertile business environment for companies, especially small and medium sized enterprises (SME), to collaborate with research institutions, suppliers, customers and competitors located in the same geographical area. They should take into account the "triple helix" model: the involvement of university, industry and government institutions.

A meta-cluster, as understood within the Alps4EU project, can be defined as a trans-regional network of cluster initiatives, which focus on the same or complementary specific technological field or sector. A meta-cluster consists of at least three cluster initiatives in three different regions from different countries. Figure 1 shows the structure of a meta-cluster.

Figure 1 Structure of a meta-cluster



It has to be noted that the term “meta-cluster” is used to refer to the cooperation of different regional clusters. The construct of a meta-cluster does therefore not correspond to a concept of physical proximity.

The aim within Alps4EU was to trigger the establishment of four meta-clusters within the project’s four key-sectors Energy & Green Technologies, Engineering & Mechatronics, Chemistry & New Materials and ICT in the Alpine region. Regional clusters with the same or interdisciplinary thematic focus should be strengthened and linked in order to provide synergies, improve capacities and formulate joint activities (joint programming of specific actions). The overarching aim was to increase the global competitiveness, research and innovation potential for a sustainable development.

3 Establishment of a meta-cluster

3.1 Requirements and conditions for establishing meta-clusters

Within the Alps4EU activities, feedback in meta-clusters was collected e.g. by surveys carried out¹ and interviews with EU projects. Hence, the activities of a meta-cluster:

- Should go beyond inter-cluster cooperation: not only reach a critical mass but also and mainly provide added value services that a single cluster could not have.
- Would strongly contribute to increase the cooperation culture and needs, but it has to be supported by national policies.
- Could play an important role in consolidating the positioning of our clusters towards stakeholders (European commission, ministries, etc.)
- Before cooperating, clusters should know very well their reciprocal competencies (generic data are not enough).

¹ Survey done in Vienna, 18.-20. April 2012, and by interviews of cluster managers in summer 2012 in the frame of WP4 with 46 cluster managers from 6 countries have been interviewed, representing 7.100 companies.

The following requirements for establishing a meta-cluster were mentioned:

- Commitment of cluster managers and members, establishing trustful (personal) partnerships
- Sharing a common vision and commitment about the objectives and activities of the cooperation
- Knowledge of potential and synergies of involved clusters as well as strengths and weaknesses of the different participants in order to fully exploit the competencies
- Funding /Finances sources: cluster cooperation needs additional investment, such as efforts, energy and time. To accept this fact while acknowledging the opportunities that lie in the international cooperation is the basis for international cluster collaboration activities.
- Define common policy strategies → ensure policy support

3.2 Barriers for and challenges of internationalisation

While the vast majority of cluster managers that participated in the Alps4EU activities is interested in international activities, different business cultures and also language problems can hinder international cooperation of especially SMEs. In order to convince SMEs of participating in international activities, very concrete topics of collaborations must be identified that do clearly show the added value for them.

Possible challenges for an inter-cluster cooperation can be:

- *Selection of the target group/ Addressing the target group:*
The identification of the target group in foreign regions and markets is a big challenge. After identifying the right target groups and potential customers, it is also difficult to address these actors in the right way.
- *Finding the right partners:*
The finding of the right partners is also a big challenge for SMEs and start-ups. It is very important to organise meetings and conferences to meet partners to exchange.
- *Marketing Strategy:*
For small and young companies it is not easy to raise awareness by themselves, due to the small resources they can afford for marketing activities. Thus, the position and marketing of the region where they are located can help them to go a first step into the new market. Participation in international fairs organised by a cluster initiative can be very helpful here. Freiburg for example is known in the world as the “Green City”, which is very helpful for the green tech companies located there.
- *Payment schedule:*

It is quite difficult for SMEs to realise big projects abroad. Especially projects with a large investment into materials and human resources are very risky. Thus, investments in foreign countries require a large scale of trust.

- *HR policy:*

Cooperation with big companies can be seen as a good door opener to new customers, especially in the foreign markets. They bring the SMEs automatically to their partners in the regions.

In this respect the Smart Specialisation Strategy² of the European Commission supports meta-cluster concepts in the way that clusters should evaluate their strengths and weaknesses in order to build up strategic synergies with other clusters (cluster connectivity).

Therefore and according to the European Strategy on Key Enabling Technologies (KET)³ the meta-clusters should focus on multi-disciplinary or cross-cutting technology cooperation using KET⁴. Hence KETs will catalyse the strengthening and modernising of the industrial base as well as drive the development of entirely new industries in the coming years.

3.3 Structure of a meta-cluster

It is not an easy task to find the right structure of a meta-cluster. During the Alps4EU project a variety of different ways to organise inter-cluster cooperation have been found. Often, the initiation is based on money from European projects. After the ending of such projects it is quite challenging to keep the meta-cluster sustainable. That is the reason why in general cluster managers were quite sceptical about the idea of the establishment of an additional meta-structure of (international) cluster cooperation. It implies an additional governance level that is not necessary. Reasons were mainly seen in non-project oriented workload for cluster managers and the missing work on cluster members' specific topics and projects.

During the Alps4EU project both very well structured forms of meta-clusters with regular meetings every year have been found as well as loose networks working more in an ad-hoc manner. It was evident that there is not much money in the budget of the cluster initiative to initiate such a meta-cluster network.

However, the instalment of an inter cluster committee might be helpful. The duties of this committee would be the coordination of communication and information between the clusters, initiation of common projects, establishing information and data warehouses, communication of common strategies / policies

²S3platform: <http://s3platform.jrc.ec.europa.eu/home?jsessionid=qB2wQ3fDKN8MT1178jDTnBt2D4G2h3hHmv2Tf6GTwQ98fBwSrZW8!-708817784!1350033187721>

³http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/sectors/ict/key_technologies/index_en.htm

⁴ KET: micro-/nanoelectronics, nanotechnology, photonics, advanced materials, industrial biotechnology and advanced manufacturing technologies

3.4 Establishment phase of a meta-cluster

The establishment of a sustainable meta-cluster is not a simple process and especially the starting phase is difficult, but also very essential. A lot of cluster management guidelines exist, dealing with the topic of internationalisation (e.g. institute for innovation and technology (iit): European Clusters Go International⁵; CLOE: Cluster Management Guide⁶), but they are focussing on the individual perspective of one cluster initiative. These guides suggest a very structured way to develop an internationalisation strategy. They describe a step-by-step process from “identifying gaps and needs” to the “implementation of an internationalisation strategy with concrete measures and activities”. The development and implementation of a complete internationalisation strategy is a very complex process, which requires a lot of efforts and resources.

The advantage of a local cluster initiative working on an individual internationalisation strategy is a trustful atmosphere. Normally, cluster initiatives start with the internationalisation process when they are in a mature status. Thus, the cluster manager knows his regional members quite well and they work together in a lot of projects and activities. In such status the development of an internationalisation strategy is still challenging, but the trust between the different actors is the base for a successful implementation of such a strategy.

If we now look on the establishment of a meta-cluster, a trustful atmosphere between the actors does normally not exist yet and has to be created. Compared to the individualistic method of cluster initiatives starting with the development of a full internationalisation strategy, when establishing a meta-cluster you have to start one step earlier: with the trust building phase. One opportunity to build trust is the development and successful implementation of common projects and activities. This procedure – starting first with concrete project and activities instead of implementing a structured strategy process – is related to the internationalisation process described in the Tactics-Guide for cluster internationalisation⁷.

This is the reason why we divided the establishment of a meta-cluster into three different steps (see Figure 2):

- *Phase 1 – Understand each other*

Personal relationships are essential assets for the internationalisation of a cluster organisation and of course also for the SMEs. For the establishment of meta-cluster a common understanding of each other’s needs and objectives should be defined. Events like trade fairs or delegation visit can be used to get in contact with other cluster initiative.

After getting in contact, an international workshop can help to elaborate concrete projects and activities, which can be realised in a short term perspective, without putting too much time and efforts into it. From our point of view those activities should not be too ambitious. Their main aim should be to build up trust and relationships.

⁵ Institute for Innovation and Technology (iit) : European Clusters Go International - Networks and clusters as instruments for the initiation of international business cooperation

⁶ CLOE 2006: Cluster Management Guide – Guidelines for the Development and Management of Cluster Initiatives

⁷ TACTIC 2012: Cluster internationalisation. Brussels

- *Phase 2 – Pilot activities to support cross border cooperation*

The development and implementation of the pilot activities should be accomplished in a structured way. It is important to have a look at the different target groups of meta-cluster activities. Of course all activities of a meta-cluster should be focussing on the support of the cluster members on a long term perspective, but on a short term perspective in could be useful to differentiate between measures which are rather aimed at the cluster management

level and those which are directly connected to the cluster members, such as SMEs.

The experiences from the project showed that it is easier, as a first step, to act on the cluster managers level. Since smaller companies have a lack of resources to handle internationalisation processes, it is quite important to offer them very concrete activities, where they can generate direct benefits. Thus, in such an early phase of the establishment of a meta-cluster network it is better to work on the cluster management level first in order to develop such concrete measures.

Another important aspect is the decision about which tools and instruments could be used to achieve the own goals and objectives. Examples for such tools are data warehouses, workshops, online platforms or competence atlases. In summary you have to decide, which level you want to address and which tool you want to choose.

During the project, the Alps4EU consortium elaborated a lot of possible pilot activities for meta-clusters. You can find them in chapter five. A very concrete one, which is also closely related to companies, is the instrument of brokerage events and company mission. These are events carried out by the European Enterprise Network connecting companies from all over Europe⁸.

Phase 3 – Common Action Plan for future activities

After one or more pilot activities are realised, the next step is to think about a long term strategy with common objectives and activities. This is an essential step for a sustainable implementation of a meta-cluster network.

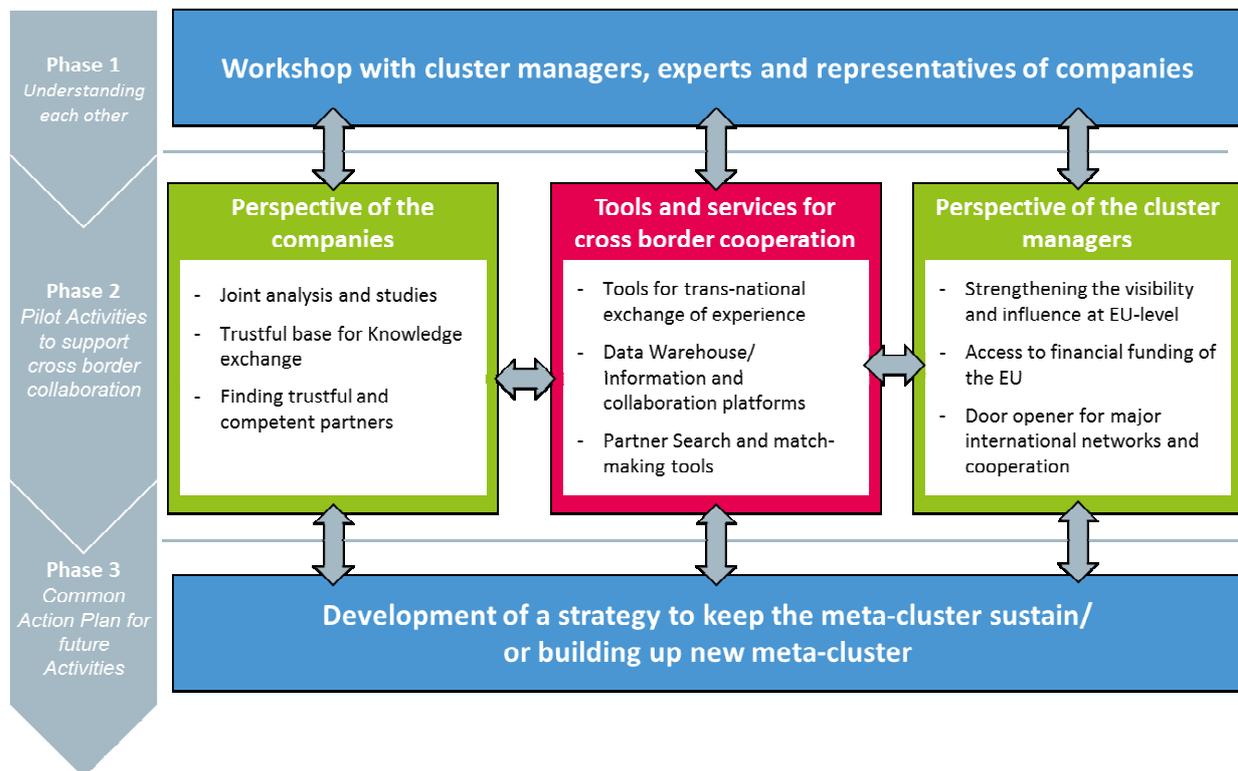
It is important that the actors involved in the strategy process have a clear picture about the idea of internationalisation. On the one hand, there are the cluster managers, politicians and the representatives of the regional development agencies. Normally, they have the aim to strengthen their companies and to build up competencies in their own region. But Internationalisation in the context of a meta-cluster also means the adaption of competencies from other regions. Thus, the objective of a region is not to build up new excellence centres (e.g. smart grid centres). The aim is rather to identify those regions with the highest competence in a specific field and to connect them with the own region. The adaption of those competencies is the main challenge. This requires an open minded way of thinking from the public side.

⁸ Enterprise Europe Network: <http://een.ec.europa.eu>

But also the companies have to broaden their view on internationalisation. Internationalisation is not just “doing business”, it is more important to focus on innovation. Especially for a long term relationship the implementation of common cross border innovation processes are essential.

If both the public and the private side take this more open view on internationalisation, it would be a perfect starting point to develop a common action plan and long term strategy.

Figure 2 Establishment of meta-cluster



These three steps for the establishment of a meta-cluster are just an idea to structure the meta-cluster process and should be rather seen as an orientation for cluster managers trying to implement such an international network. The important message can be to think rather in projects and activities than in long term strategies covering the entire process as normally there are not enough resources to elaborate such strategy plans.

3.5 Sustainability of meta-clusters

One of the biggest challenges for meta-clusters is to keep the network sustainable. Usually, funding programmes are used to establish the network and to finance the first activities, but after the funding programme ends, it is quite challenging to keep the process ongoing.

The topic of the sustainability of the meta-cluster is thus one of the main aspects within EU funded projects. In the focus of the activities of a meta-cluster should be aspects and topics that are interesting to the companies, so as to convince them of the value of such cooperations. The focus on concrete topics which have a high relevance for future markets and which offer great opportunities for international cooperation is useful.

A clear profile and a common action plan can also help the meta-cluster to become better established. In order to make the meta-cluster sustainable, a suitable collaborative model should be defined right at the beginning of such a project, able to survive after the end of the project and sustainable in the long term.

4 Activities of a meta-cluster

Within Alps4EU the views on the most important possible activities of a meta-cluster have been collected.

The most important activities of a meta-cluster should be the strengthening of the visibility on EU level, doing joint analysis and studies and defining common cluster action plans.

For new and small sectors in which a lot of start-ups and SMEs are represented it is quite difficult to do lobbying at the EU-level. A meta-cluster can help to foster these activities and reach a higher influence and visibility on the EU level. Furthermore, increasing the international visibility of the involved clusters and their members can help to get a good start into new markets.

A useful activity is to design and test new solutions and pilot initiatives for international cluster cooperation. Supporting the development of R&D projects is a useful task: especially projects which require specific technological capabilities that can't be covered by one region should be realised in a collaborative way.

International projects require a lot of financial and human resources. Public funding programmes can help to support these activities. At the same time, there shouldn't be too much public funding involved: it is a fact that once the participating cluster initiative or SME pay e.g. a part or all of the participation fees to events by themselves, they show a stronger commitment to the activities.

One core question is: what can cluster initiatives specifically offer to the SMEs to support them in their internationalisation processes? There are two interesting aspects: Firstly, they have good insights in the companies located in their regions. They know their expertise and experiences. Besides, they have a good impression about the lack of possibilities and resources in their own regions. Secondly, the cluster managers have good market knowledge about the sector or branches their cluster is focused on. They know where the major clients and partners are and what they need. These two aspects are a good base to find new interesting cross-border cooperation opportunities. Hence, the main contribution of cluster initiatives in the field of internationalisation of SMEs could be the offering of interesting topics, market niches and new business opportunities, by matching the strengths and weaknesses of the different regions.

These topics and relevant ideas should be the basis for further cross border cooperation. Reasons for these further cooperation activities are:

- Getting an overview of international expertise
- Implementing Knowledge transfer/ technology transfer
- Gaining the right market knowledge

- Generating new ideas (crowd sourcing): potential of ideas, knowledge and partners (cross-sectoral): platform for knowledge exchange / innovation
- Joining forces for getting stronger and have a stronger visibility (even worldwide)
- International campaigns for joint projects / idea exchange with clusters on possible joint projects

Two aspects are in this respect very relevant for the internationalisation of SMEs. Firstly, it is important to find the right partners who could be a door opener for the foreign markets. Secondly, it is necessary to achieve worldwide awareness with the help of the region, in which they are located. Both challenges can be solved with the help of meta-clusters.

Helpful activities could be:

- To offer to young companies from one region a one day conference once a year to present their activities to an international audience
- Cooperation with other regions (and clusters).

5 Pilot Actions for meta-cluster: proposal of Common Action Plans

To identify possible pilot activities for meta-clusters a survey was conducted during the Alps4EU project. In the summer of 2012 representatives of 46 cluster initiatives in six different countries were interviewed. The results had shown that there is a really broad spectrum of objectives and activities, which could be covered by a meta-cluster. This is the reason, why the pilot activities should be subdivided into three different groups (see Figure 2). There are not clear cuts between these groups, they are just an orientation for to get an idea in which areas pilot activities can be realised.

5.1 Pilot activities for the companies (especially SMEs)

The most important target group of the pilot activities are the companies, especially the SMEs. The survey of the Alps4EU project shows that one of the biggest challenges for the international cluster cooperation is the motivation of the companies. One important step to motivate the companies is to offer them interesting topics and market perspectives for cross border cooperation. This is the reason, why the pilot activities should be focus on the idea to find out those interesting perspectives for companies. Such pilot activities could be:

- **Joint analysis and studies**

One possibility to offer interesting ideas to the companies is to start with joint analysis and studies of the specific sectors. The variety of the different cluster initiatives in a meta-cluster can offer an interesting base for such a study. The cluster initiatives have different strengths in research, human resources and focus of their sector, technology or branches. This opportunity can be a starting point to identify interesting fields of cooperation in specific market niches. Those niches can be elaborated with the help of joint studies and analysis, conducted in a meta-cluster.

- **Trustful base for knowledge exchange**

Joint analysis and studies require large efforts from cluster initiatives, companies and research institutes. Another disadvantage is that those big studies are very time consuming. But modern innovation processes are very complex and the innovation cycles are quite short. A meta-cluster can establish a trustful atmosphere to work together to adapt global trends and technologies very fast. Cluster managers, experts, researchers and representatives can work together to identify interesting opportunities for cross border cooperation.

- **Finding trustful and competent partners**

The cluster managers also emphasised another important possibility, which can be offered by meta-cluster. It could be a very good platform for the SMEs to find new, trustful and competent partners abroad. Cluster managers have the knowledge about the strengths and weaknesses in their own members and they know, which competences they can offer. Thus they are a good contact point for SMEs, which are searching new partners in other regions. A meta-cluster can help to establish those contacts between cluster managers and SMEs.

5.2 Pilot activities for the cluster management

But not just the perspective of the SMEs could be interesting. A meta-cluster does also offer the possibility for the cluster managers to work together more intensively. Thus there are also some pilot activities, which can foster the cooperation of the cluster managers:

- **Knowledge atlas**

To adopt new trends requires often a lot of different competences, which are not always located in the own region. International cooperation is therefore essential to combine different knowledge bases. A knowledge atlas can help to find these competences abroad. Not just future trends and new technology are the source for new products and services. Also the combination of existing knowledge can be an interesting starting point for new innovations. Also in these cases a knowledge atlas could be an interesting motivation for cross border cooperation.

Within the Alps4EU project, a web based Alpine Space Knowledge Atlas⁹ has been developed as a pilot action, presenting the competencies of the Alpine Space companies, research institutions and cluster initiatives regarding “green technologies” in the fields of E-mobility, Smart and Green Technologies for sustainable constructions, Smart Grids and Intelligent Production Systems.

- **Strengthening the visibility and influence at EU level**

⁹ <http://alps4eu-ka.si/doku.php>

On the cluster management side, one of the most important advantages of a meta-cluster is to start activities to strengthen the visibility of the influence on EU level. Cluster initiatives, which are organised in a meta-cluster, can achieve a bigger influence on the EU institutions.

- **Access to financial funding of the EU**

There is a gap between the strategic relevance of international cooperation in the future and the extent of experience in international cooperation in past and present. Taking into account that 98 % of the cluster managers consider an increase of international cooperation in the future, the barriers have to be removed as quickly as possible and an upgrading of competences in participating in EU programmes and using EU funds will be crucial. Therefore, qualification and training measures with regard to the program portfolio of the next EU period from 2014 – 2020 seems to be reasonable. Besides, the diverse benefits of international cooperation have to be stronger enlightened. Clusters managers believe that the benefit of setting up a meta-cluster essentially lies in network-building. This provides additional leverage to support the economic development and expertise of their cluster.

- **Door opener for major international networks and cooperation**

A lot of global and international networks already exist, such as company networks, research networks, cooperation networks, etc. A meta-cluster can help to structure these networks and to identify the relevant ones for the own technological or sectorial focus. It can also integrate companies (especially SMEs) into those networks.

- **Community building**

A trustful relationship between the actors is the best starting point for technology and knowledge exchange. In the environment of a meta-cluster, new opportunities for experience exchange, to stimulate cross border cooperation can develop over time. For this a strong community building is essential. Two Activities can help to foster the community building process.

o *Physical Meeting*

Physical face-to-face contacts are still the base for a trustful partnership. This applies especially in the field of international cluster cooperation. One possible pilot action is to organise a meeting of cluster managers twice a year combined with a visit of each cluster initiative in the group. This is a good possibility for getting to know each other.

o *Web-platforms/Webinars*

In addition to these physical meetings, web-platforms should be used to exchange knowledge and data. Web meetings and forums could be organised. Webinars are another possibility to get ideas and knowledge about future cooperation opportunities.

This pilot activity will be put in place and tested after the end of the project by four clusters from the key-sector Chemistry & New Materials (Clusterland, Plastipolis, Proplast, Réseau plasturgie) and two clusters that were not part of the Alps4EU project (Veneto Nanotech and Tecost). Based on an initial MoU, they will exchange virtually and physically. They will add a fifth thematic to the developed knowledge atlas in order to share more specifically university competencies in the area of plastics processing.

- **Identifying future technology trends**

The adaption of future technology trends is an important issue for the cluster managers. The bundled forces in a meta-cluster can help to identify those future trends. But not just the identification of those trends is necessary. More essential is the adaption of these new technologies to develop new products and services. Dealing directly with the SMEs and talking about these trends can help.

- **International experts list**

An international expert list can help to identify and contact the right person for very specific topics. If cluster initiatives organise events or workshops they can invite and contact these experts. It may also help in the identification of future trends.

5.3 Policy support for meta-cluster activities

Another aspect is the question what the political support of international cluster cooperation can look like.

Financing:

There are two main sources of financing cluster initiatives: through the regional government or membership fees. Funding by national government, income from services and activities and funding by European programmes constitute other relevant sources of financing. We note that the increasing tendency of international cluster cooperation in the future could require new cluster strategies and policies. As cluster initiative's future business model or financing strategy express a high decreasing tendency for public funding by regional and national authorities as well as a higher participation in EU-funded projects expected for the next years, it should be taken into account that this translates a turn into a higher source of opportunities at a European level than on a regional and national level.

The evaluation of cluster performance should be part of cluster initiative policies (even if an integrated self-evaluation is often used as a management tool) in order to enhance the performance and to maximize the chance of successful operation.

Future cluster strategies need to be defined in a collaborative process between the cluster and the financing institution. Concerning the financial support in the future, a major issue, the solution would be to require specific field support by focusing on internationalisation.

A high strategic relevance of international cooperation for cluster initiatives is requested and the majority of the cluster initiatives are involved in EU programmes for international cluster cooperation. As a lower experience in international cooperation was reported by cluster managers, the tendency should increase by having resources to match the expectations in the following years.

Funding of meta-cluster activities:

Within the activities different ideas were analysed:

- **Vouchers for travelling**

One possibility for political support is the offering of vouchers for travelling, so that SMEs don't have to pay for the travel costs. But it is still necessary to offer the companies really interesting events, topics and possibilities of specific networking. The problem for most of the companies is not the money as such, it is the time these trips are consuming. Hence it is absolutely necessary to explain the companies the necessity of those trips.

- **More awareness raising events/tools of internationalisation chances for SMEs**

Visibility is an essential part for the beginning of internationalisation processes. Especially young entrepreneurs and SMEs don't have the resources to implement a global marketing strategy. The branding of a region (e.g. Green City) can help to raise the international visibility. Companies can use the positive image of their regions to promote their products and services. Policy should support these marketing activities.

- **More events to plan and establish activities**

It is important to give the cluster managers the possibility to organise more meetings or events for planning international activities. For bringing the companies together it is not enough to organise a room and some catering. Especially international meetings or activities require a lot of preparation. To give the cluster managers more opportunities to meet is a good political support to prepare international meetings and cooperation better.

Within the Alps4EU activities a **Transnational Pilot Action on Policies in support to meta-clusters** has been carried out, developing a "Feasibility Study for the implementation of a trans-regional funding scheme, based on regional programmes, to support the development of meta-clusters". This document presents possible activities to be funded by transnational funding schemes.

5.4 New tools and services on a meta-cluster level

A meta-cluster is also a great platform to establish new tools and services for inter-cluster cooperation. Over the last decade a lot of tools, instruments and services for cluster managers were

developed and tested. But they were mainly focused on a regional level. The overall objective was to bring the actors together in one region (intraregional). As the focus of a meta-cluster is on the interregional level this is the new and innovative way to use these tools. A meta-cluster offers the opportunity to use existing tools in a new way or inventing completely new tools.

Possible tools, services and instruments are:

- **Tools for trans-national exchange of experience (e.g. workshop, seminars, training):**

Workshops, seminars and trainings have to be more focused on cross border cooperation. Intercultural competences and interesting cooperation possibility should be put more into consideration.

- **Data Warehouse/Information and collaboration platforms**

Especially for web tools a critical mass of users is absolutely relevant. Meta-clusters offer a big opportunity to reach this. Web-based data warehouses, information and collaboration platforms can be used more intensively. Thus, they can offer a more interesting portfolio of partners, research topics or global trends.

- **Partner Search and match-making tools**

The survey among the cluster managers shows that partner search could be a very important activity of a meta-cluster. One possibility is to adapt existing tools like company missions and brokerage events on the cluster level. Normally, these events have a strong sectorial focus, in cluster context it could be more focused on technological or global trends.

Furthermore, also in the field of partner searching modern web based tools can be used. The advantage of a meta-cluster is again a bigger mass of actors which can use such tools. This is essential for interactive web platforms.

6 Conclusion

The different and diverse activities within the Alps4EU project showed clearly that meta-clustering activities are perceived as important and useful among the cluster managers. They provide clear advantages both for the cluster managers and the cluster initiatives themselves as, of course, for the cluster members. Most of the activities proposed within a meta-cluster are perceived similarly and with a similar importance all over the Alpine Space. In order to function well, the political will and support should also be existent for initiating the inter cluster cross-border activities. Finally, the common activities can lead to a stronger and more competitive economy in the Alpine Space and to improved chances on the European level, be it regarding cooperations or access to funding possibilities.

As one first step, the Alps4EU consortium started with building up a web based Alpine Space Knowledge Atlas¹⁰, presenting the competencies of the Alpine Space companies, research institutions and cluster initiatives. This activity has been rated as most useful by the participating cluster initiatives and can be regarded as a first step towards the active establishment of Alpine Space meta-clusters.

The need and usefulness of many more meta-clustering activities and support measures that have been presented above has been named by the different actors involved in the project – it can be a basis for further steps to be taken in order to support the meta-cluster activities and thereby strengthen the Alpine Space.

¹⁰ <http://alps4eu-ka.si/doku.php>

