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## Meta-clustering : an accelerator of growth for SMEs at EU level

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The development of clusters though Europe has been an important trend for the economic ecosystems in which SMEs are working and growing. The clusters, generally based on a sector, a technology and a geographical area, provide a large range of services to SMEs in fields like internationalization, innovation, links with public research and education, links between supply and demand, links between large companies and SMEs, lobbying, etc...

As the European cohesion is developing more and more, there is now a need to link different clusters, either working on the same geographical area (Baltic sea, Central Europe), or in the same sector (aeronautics, medical devices), or along the same value chain (materials, design, conception, recycling, etc..). This meta-clustering aims at reinforcing the competitiveness of SMEs facing the global market and providing more services with a better quality.

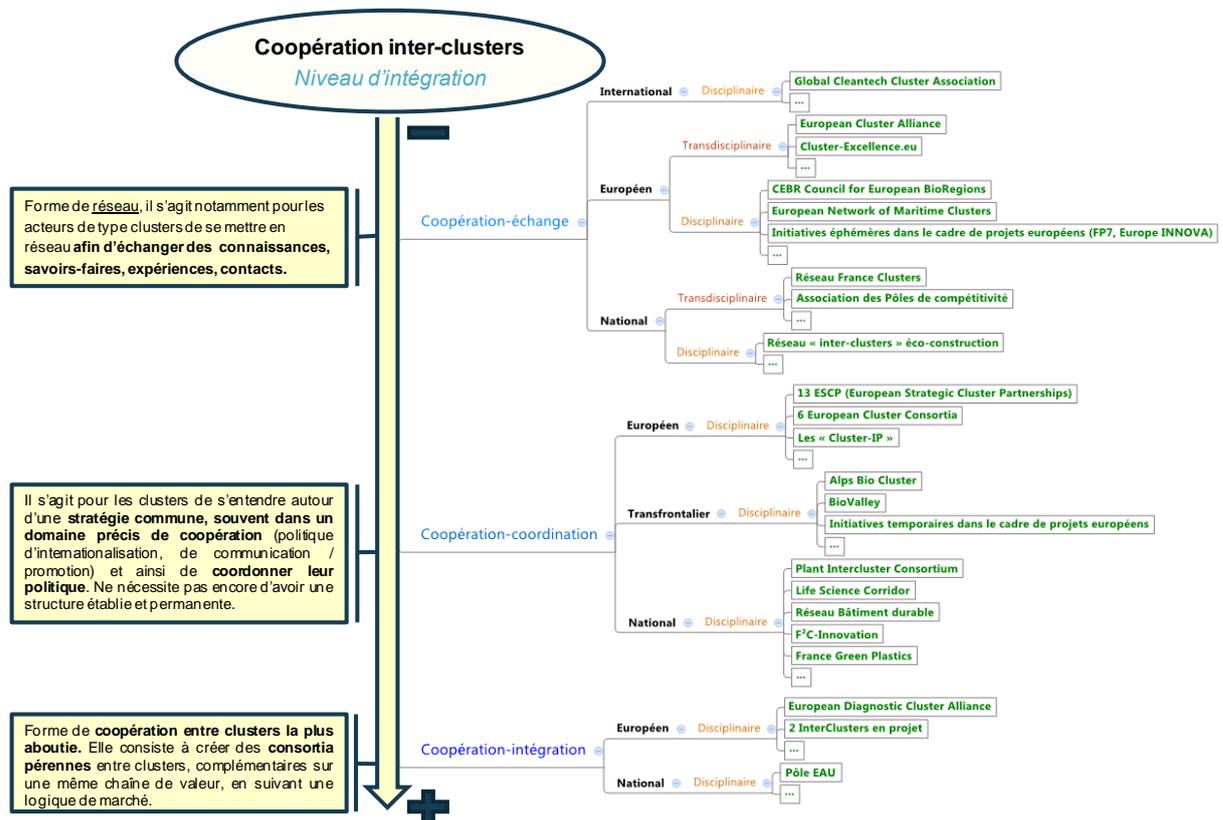
This article is based on the analysis of 25 initiatives of clusters collaborations with a zoom on some of them.

A first result has demonstrated that three levels of integration can be examined to describe a network of clusters:

- The cooperation/exchange or network. In this case, the main goal for the clusters is to network in order to exchange experience, know-how, contacts. This type of cooperation has been encouraged by the EU commission, especially in the 2000's with the initiative Europe-Innova. This kind of networks can be generalist or thematic oriented. Generally they are structured as a not-for profit associations and share a common web platform of exchange.
- The cooperation-coordination where the goal is to develop a common strategy among the clusters members. This strategy generally is focused on a specific domain like internationalisation, communication, promotion, etc...In such case, it is not necessary to have a strong legal form.
- The cooperation-integration is the strongest type of networking among clusters. Indeed the clusters intend to create sustainable team or consortia to address a value chain or to

provide a common offer to companies. The added value is linked to the complementarities among the clusters and to the mutualisation of resources.

In addition to this typology with three characteristics, geographical coverage and sectoral coverage can also be used as network description. The table<sup>1</sup> here after is an attempt to classify the different networking of clusters.



It should be noticed that this table reflects several methodological assumptions:

- About the geographical coverage, 4 levels have been used: the worldwide scale, the European one, the trans-boarder one and the national/trans-regional one.
- The integration index is a ranking of the cluster networks in terms of how deep is the cooperation. The first level is a simple exchange of knowledge and know-how while the other index refer to a deeper cooperation with strategy sharing and/or a shared offer.
- About the sector approach, when the cluster networks have such orientation, they are focused on topics linked to an industrial market or to a research topic while, when they

<sup>1</sup> In French, as extracted from a study made for the regional council PACA

are generalist, they undertake activities linked to cluster management, to regional promotion or to best practices.

- It has to be said that names of cluster networks included in the table are just examples as the goal is not to be exhaustive.

Regarding the first level of cooperation, focused on exchange and networking, the Global Cleantech Cluster Association is a good example at the worldwide scale as it is sector oriented (cleantech) and has the goal to be a meta-cluster. Its activities include exchange of best practices, benchmarking and training.

ECA, the European cluster association, is working at EU level and is a trans-sector network providing a common platform enabling policy makers to share their actions and knowledge on cluster policies. Indeed, the members of ECA are policy makers and not clusters.

Cluster-Excellence.eu is another trans-sector network working at EU level, gathering clusters which would like to progress in terms of quality and management.

CEBR (Council of European Bio Region) is also working at EU level, but is sector oriented (biotechnology). It aims at improving the competitiveness of Europe through a network of professionals and activities linked to networking, incubation, search for partners and cluster promotion.

The European network of maritime clusters is working on dissemination of good practices through a virtual platform for meeting and an annual event. In this event, each country is making a presentation of the maritime status and the actions implemented. Its goal is to promote common actions. It has strong governance and a chart to be signed by the members.

Other networks of clusters can be identified, mostly coming from European projects. The issue is that it is difficult to make those networks sustainable. We can find in its category networks like In2Wood supported by FP7 and other projects coming from Europe INNOVA (2006- 2012) which has supported 11 initiatives of cluster networking, the goal of which being to set-up platforms to identify and share good practices in the cluster management and activities (can be mentioned projects like OMNINET, Net BioCluE, mClusters, NICE, ENOC, CENCE, CASTLE, INNOTEX , TCAS, ABC-Network, etc.).

At the national level, networks of clusters like “Réseau France Clusters” (180 members) or the association of “pole de compétitivité” in France (more than 30 clusters out of 71) are working on sharing some tools (training, job search, exchange of practice, organisation of annual event lobbying )

At EU level, the meta-cluster topic has been dealt through the CIP Programme and has led to 13 European Strategic Cluster Partnerships. The aim of such strategic partnership is to develop and share common strategies, especially to address the international market. The initiatives have been developed through collaborative projects and have for most of them difficulties to find their own path towards sustainability. All those strategic partnerships are sector oriented. Among them, can be found:

- The European Aerospace Cluster Partnerships (EACP) ;
- ICT4Future ; European Lighting Cluster Alliance (ELCA) ;
- European Sports Clusters Partnership ;
- European Semiconductor Cluster Consortium (ESCC) ;
- Food, Health & Wellbeing ; Textile 2020 ; Energy in Water ;
- Mind the Gap – Health and Wellbeing for the Elderly ;
- International Cleantech Network (ICN) ;
- Photonics & Packaging for Innovation (3P4I) ;
- Personalized Healthcare ;
- Natural Resource Efficient Europe (Natureef).

In addition to that, 6 European Cluster Consortia (pilot projects) have been launched in 2012 to gathers clusters and SMEs to test actions to create synergies as many as possible. The list of such consortia includes Wiintech, BioXclusters, REINA, EU4Sports, Textile2020, Feeding the Planet.

Other initiatives have developed through a boarder like Biovalley which gathers clusters from France, Germany and Switzerland. Focused on life science, the meta-cluster works on internationalisation and promotion of the regional competences. Biovalley has a legal status of association but the team is composed of personal from the clusters.

**Alps Bio Cluster** has been created in the framework of the INTERREG IVB programme and aims at promoting biotechnologies and medical devices developed in the Alpine area. The goal is to communicate on the assets on the regions, to provide potentials investors with data. The partners have signed a Memorandum of Understanding. Having no legal status, the meta-cluster is coordinated through a platform with a chairman renewed every year.

The **European Diagnostic Cluster Alliance** is part of the typology cooperation-integration, having a legal status of association with a general assembly and a board. Its aim is to promote the European know-how on medical devices, to facilitate the growth of SMEs and to achieve R&D collaborative projects.

Another example of cooperation-integration is MediconValley, a binational European cluster (Denmark-Sweden) in the field of life sciences. Its members are universities, hospitals and companies of the cross-border region Oresund. Benefitting from the support of two different countries, it is among the most powerful cluster in life sciences. Two public agencies are in charge of its animation Copenhagen Capacity (DK) and Invest in Skåne(SW). Its aim is to facilitate exchange among the research, development, innovation stakeholders, to promote the competences of the region and to attract inward investments.

Finally the analysis of the 25 inter-clustering, including all types of networking, and a focus on some of them to especially examine their models of sustainability have led to the following conclusions in terms of good practices for cooperation.

1. From the point of view of the members (the clusters), the network initiatives focusing on exchange of good practices have given an opportunity to gather a large number of organisations (ex : Construction 21), while the network initiatives, dealing with coordination, cooperation and integration, have gathered less members as it is necessary to take into account the added value provided and the role along a value chain of each cluster potentially interested ((ex : BioXClusters)). It has to be noticed that the success of the action depends a lot from the experience of the organisations in terms of inter-cluster and European cooperation.

2. Regarding the legal form, most of meta-clusters are based on the legal form of an “association”, very often not for profit association. This legal form has the advantage to be flexible and simple in terms of set-up and management.
3. Regarding the governance, few meta-clusters have chosen a sophisticated participative model, but all of them have the goal to achieve such model (EDCA is a good example).
4. In terms of financing, the meta-clusters very often made their first progress in the framework of an European project (for instance the Interreg projects, ESCP, other EU programmes like FP7 through Regions of Knowledge, etc..). To make them sustainable, several actions have been undertaken to diversify the sources of funding, based on members fees, participation in EU projects, common actions on internationalisation, etc..
5. The success is widely depending on the people acting on a regular basis for the meta-cluster, enabling the actions and initiatives to be implemented. Generally two full time equivalents are considered as an optimum but still it needs sufficient funding to finance them. Another possibility is to have a member taking the leadership role and animating the network. What is important is to have in each cluster a person in charge of the meta-clusters activities.
6. In terms of cooperation, it is easier to start from some dedicated clusters with a limited scope of actions to start the collaboration, to grow the trust among the members and to increase step by step the size and the coverage of the actions undertaken. However the cooperation model which is the most meaningful includes several topics:
  - Exchange of information, best practices and networking;
  - Research and development collaborative projects;
  - Sharing of costs for internationalisation, training, events, etc..
  - Shared strategy to reach international market and to increase business opportunities;
  - List of services to be provided to the members (i.e. the companies) (training, technical assistance to build EU project, databases, ...)
  - International branding and common promotion;

## Lobbying and economic survey.

In conclusion, there is a large number of meta-clusters and networks of clusters in different fields such as research, development, innovation, with a large variety of goals. The main issue for those networks is to find a sustainable model to develop after a funding coming from EU projects or national programmes. Nevertheless it is necessary to consider the goal of the meta-cluster before selecting its form and its business model. Indeed there is a strong dependence of the structure upon the objectives.

1. The initiatives, aiming at developing exchange of practice and knowledge, need a large number of members to enrich the discussion, as many as possible and often are organized around a web platform. The financing is first devoted to support and maintain the platform. Those projects can be launched with the contribution on an EU programme (for instance the platform construction 21 International) and after are supporting by public money and, a little bit, through member fees. It appears difficult to develop a business model without public money as the exchanges are upstream with no direct and immediate impacts on companies' behaviour.
2. The initiatives aiming at designing a common strategy among the partners and to carry out common actions often are developed through European projects. In some cases, it could be financed by the clusters themselves, but with a lower commitment in terms of actions. They do not need, neither a legal structure, neither a permanent staff, but more a counterpart in charge in each cluster. A Memorandum of Understanding can be signed to reinforce the sustainability of such meta-cluster. To have at early stage a fund to finance the common actions helps the start of such cooperation.
3. More rarely, some initiatives have a strong integration level and can group themselves to offer a common platform of services to the market (for instance to answer some procurement or call for tenders) with the creation of a permanent team to manage the common offer. Such networks are generally limited in terms of number of clusters as they need trust and commitment to work successfully. For instance, VINF, association for nanofilms, is coming from the exit strategy of the network of excellence EXCEL and has more or less this type of organization (legal status and permanent staff), although it is a network of research centre and not of clusters.

Other tools at EU level are providing an approach to facilitate cooperation for the benefit of the companies, especially the SMEs, Can be mentioned the EGTC, the ETP and the RIS3.

- Euro-region or EGCT (European Group of territorial cooperation) is an administrative structure of cross-border cooperation, set-up by several territories, part of different member states. This association of local authorities can serve as a backbone to structure in common several value chains, especially through calls for projects or calls for expression of interest which enable to share the funding of the projects.
- European technology platforms (ETP) are public-private partnership supported by the European Commission. Their goal is to gather all stakeholders (academics, companies, financing, regulation, etc..) working on the same field to develop a research agenda. They are working on along term basis.
- The RIS3 (regional strategy of smart specialization) will also be a booster to increase exchange among clusters as the idea is to make several regions working on the same value chain or on the same fields in order to increase synergies and to avoid redundancies.

As a final conclusion, it should be noticed that it is important for companies to have support for innovation and internationalization and for all the matters where they have difficulties because of their rather small size. SMEs need also to exchange with companies sharing the same issues they are facing in order to share experience and to find solution individually or collectively.

The cluster aims at providing this support and opportunity of exchange. The meta-cluster will emphasize that phenomenon at European level and with bigger scale, which will obviously benefit to SMEs. The main issue is to make sustainable those activities as they have to find their own resources, besides the public funds.