A meeting with 50 managers of gold-label clusters from 17 European countries was organised by Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs on 4 December in Brussels. It gathered about half of all gold-label cluster organisations across in Europe. Together they represent more than 6500 SMEs, covering sectors such as energy, health, automotive and agro-food. About 20 additional representatives from national cluster associations and organisations involved in the cluster labelling also joined the discussions. Participants had the opportunity to discuss, exchange their experiences and express their needs in three different sessions that all followed a participatory approach. This event was part of the Directorate-General’s aim to promote the cooperation of clusters throughout Europe and to support excellence in cluster management for the benefit of SMEs.

Ulla Engelmann welcomed the participants and gave an update on EU cluster initiatives. Antonio Novo Guerrero presented the new European Cluster Alliance that gathered 12 national cluster associations from 11 European countries.

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Session 1:
The way forward for the European Cluster Excellence Initiative

The first session covered the way forward for the European Cluster Excellence labelling. The following inspirational speeches provided input for the discussion:

- Aurélie Lechien (Advanced Technologies, Clusters and Social Economy unit, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs) presented the European Commission’s future support for European cluster excellence labelling. The possibility to link future learning and capacity building events of the ECCP with the labelling of cluster organisations as well as the possibility of ClusterXchange to facilitate the knowledge sharing and the mobility between clusters were highlighted.

- Carmen Schmidt (Cluster manager of Logistics-Initiative Hamburg Cluster, Germany) flagged out the added value of the labelling and the possibility for joint labelling to reduce cost.

- Oliver Ziegler (European Secretariat for Cluster Analysis - ESCA) gave an update on the development of the labelling process.

- Hervé Floch (Chairman of AFPC “Europe” committee and CEO of the ALPHA-RLH Cluster, France) gave an outlook to the creation of the new legal entity “European Cluster Excellence Association” that will take over the responsibility for the Cluster Labelling Scheme.

Participants then discussed in world café format practical aspects of the labelling process (1), indicators (2) and how to better use the cluster excellence labelling in cluster policy and programmes (3).
The rapporteurs of the discussion groups clustered the main points of the discussions in the following three posters.

The participants emphasized the importance of the following:

- Added value, but need for more recognition of the cluster excellence labels as a tool for regional, national and EU policy making
- Indicators capturing impact with better recognition of (new) staff and social media
- Knowledge sharing between cluster managers on the labelling process

Below are copies of the individual group discussions:

1. Practical aspects
2. Indicators
3. What's next?
Session 2: Needs for cluster policy actions at regional, national and EU level

In the second session, the following input to the discussions was provided:

- Annalisa Tessarolo (Advanced Technologies, Clusters and Social Economy unit; Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs) presented the analyses and reflections on the needs for cluster policy actions at regional, national and EU level gathered by the European Observatory for Clusters and Industrial Change (EOCIC) so far.
- Glenda Napier (CEO of the Energy Innovation Cluster, Denmark) shared reflections from her perspective as a Gold-Label cluster manager and emphasized the importance of engaging with actors of the ecosystem through “strategic coffees”.
- Daniel Cosnita (President of Clustero President of CLUSTERO – The Romanian Cluster Association) presented the perspective of the European Cluster Alliance. On his slides, he highlighted in yellow the areas where strategic use of clusters needs to be fostered (see picture below).
Afterwards, the participants set the agenda for the group discussions in this session. They proposed nine topics:

1. Benefits for industrial policy through clusters
2. European Market Accelerator
3. Cluster definitions
4. Follow-up of internationalisation activities
5. Implementation of Smart specialisation (strategies) through clusters
6. Sustainability of cluster funding
7. Cluster Services for sustainability and added values for members
8. Linkages between clusters and Digital Innovation Hubs
9. International and national recognition of clusters

The three topics that gathered the greatest interest were the relation between clusters and digital innovation hubs, the definition of clusters and international and national recognition of clusters.

Below are the detailed discussion templates by topic.

1. **Benefits for industrial policy through clusters**

2. **European Market Accelerator**

   Due to the lack of interested participants, a discussion on this topic didn’t take place. Nevertheless, the topic host argued for the need to better address the European market together.
3. Cluster definitions

4. Follow-up of internationalisation activities

5. Smart specialisation implementation through clusters

6. Sustainability of cluster funding
7. Cluster Services for sustainability and added values for members

8. Clusters and vs. Digital Innovation Hubs

9. International and national recognition of clusters
Session 3:
The next generation of EU cluster initiatives

The final, third session gathered valuable insights and feedback for the development of the next generation of EU cluster initiatives, notably the **Joint Cluster Initiatives** proposed under the Single Market Program.

Inspirational speeches preceded the discussion:

- Bianca Muntean (Cluster Manager of the gold-labeled Transilvania IT Cluster, CEO of ARIES Transilvania, Romania; 2019 EU Cluster Manager of the Year) highlighted the need for capacity building, policy change, synergies, and the societal component that is imperative for citizen wellbeing, the circular economy and sustainable strategies.

- Krzysztof Krystowski (President of the Management Board of the Silesian Aviation Cluster; President of the Polish Clusters Association, Poland) shared the perspective of the European Cluster Alliance. He emphasized the need to make the importance of clusters visible for all policy levels and the need to connect to other EU industrial and technological initiatives. He also flagged out the role of cluster in re- and upskilling.

- Carsten Schierenbeck (Advanced Technologies, Clusters and Social Economy unit; Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs) presented the proposal of text on Joint Cluster Initiatives that features in the next Single Market Programme. He also explained the different questions on which the European Commission needed the participants’ feedback, especially on key activities, focus areas, actors to involve, partnership reach out and synergies.
Below are the individual discussion templates of the groups.
**Analysis of the harvesting posters**

1. Overall, one can deduct that participants seek to support the following two **objectives**:
   - Increase industry competitiveness/ support business development/ strengthening SMEs/ enhancing the EU innovation ecosystem
   - Tackle societal challenges/ support green transition

2. Amongst key terms, the following were outlined as “**must do areas**” by the majority of participants:
   - Value chain collaboration
   - Innovation uptake
   - Green/circular economy
   - Connecting EU ecosystems
   - SME internationalisation.

   Capacity building, digitalisation and skills upgrading were also flagged out by some, while scaling-up support, mobility and shared value/ social economy were less prioritised.

3. The prioritisation of **key activities** reflected the previous discussions. The participants mentioned:
   - Strategy information/ intelligence form market leaders
   - Internationalisation support
   - Cascade funding
   - Digitalisation and skills
   - Knowledge transfer
   - Creating partnering opportunities for joint development projects
4. As the discussing cluster managers all represent different areas, no clear **value chain focus** was defined. The participants proposed additional areas to be taken into account:
   - AI
   - Habitat
   - Furniture
   - Smart Cities
   - Textiles

5. **Actors** that must be involved are
   - Clusters
   - SMEs
   - Investors

The following other actors were mentioned
   - Large organisations
   - Technology centres
   - Incubators
   - Regional authorities

6. Concerning the **partnership reach-out**, not surprisingly, the present representatives of gold-labelled clusters wanted a strong participation of gold- or silver-labelled clusters. Many supported a minimum of regional reach-out.

7. According to the participants, synergies could be build up through linkages to other EU initiatives (e.g. through participation) and different industry associations.