

**Interreg**  
North Sea Region  
Northern Connections



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# Northern Connections report

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**WP3: "KNOWLEDGE EVALUATION –  
TRANSFER AND RECOMMENDATIONS":  
WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED**

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## Introduction

This report is **based on a survey conducted among the cluster organizations that were partners** in the Northern Connections project. **In total 11 cluster organizations in seven countries** participated in the survey, some of the cluster organizations answered the questionnaire in cooperation with their city respectively region. The report reflects the learning process among the cluster organizations during the project to keep the accumulated knowledge systematically available for partners and other cluster organizations (also for cross cluster learning). The learning process is subdivided in the following fields referring to the project's structure:

- Learning from using tools and methods
- Learning from involving and cooperating with companies especially SMEs
- Learning from cooperation between cluster organizations
- Learning from cooperation of clusters with cities, regions and knowledge institutions

## Learning from using tools and methods

In the frame of the Northern Connections the cluster organizations who were partners in the project had various opportunities to learn how to use new tools and methods. Several cluster trainings were conducted, a tool box was created and the living labs, besides being the project's central method, were used as a platform to try out many different tools.

### **Innovation support measures to be used by clusters in the future**

The innovation support measures from the project that the clusters were using most often and mentioned to be using in the future are the living lab method and the business to business match. Especially the living lab is planned to be used by several cluster organizations.

### **Toolbox optimized the clusters portfolios**

The project activities and the toolboxes optimized the clusters' portfolios and thereby improved their capacity to deliver innovation support measures. The living labs of other partners were regarded as a great opportunity to get to know a variety of new tools and methods that then could be tested by the cluster organizations themselves.

### **Cluster management trainings used for self-reflection and benchmarking**

The cluster management trainings that were conducted in the project offered an opportunity to all cluster partners to reflect on their own work. Most of the clusters regarded it as a kind of benchmarking, because the individual clusters could observe differences between their ways of working with enterprises.

Some of the clusters used the cluster management training to reflect about restructuring their work, their organisation or their business model. But only few of the clusters did actually restructure themselves influenced by the cluster management trainings and the cooperation between clusters.

Conclusion and possible transfer: The tool box includes a variety of methods that can be useful also for other cluster organizations. Especially the living lab method has proven to be useful to support SMEs by connecting them with potential clients. The living lab approach could be an interesting method in other economic sectors to support SMEs and connect them with clients and / or larger enterprises in an early stage of development of projects or products.

## **Learning from involving and cooperating with companies especially SMEs**

**The toolbox and the living labs have given the cluster organizations diverse opportunities to more intensively involve enterprises in innovation activities across borders.**

Especially the living labs are generally regarded as a good tool to involve SMEs and as a suitable vehicle to bring SMEs into another market. The living labs are considered as attractive, because they offer a concrete reason for the SMEs to participate and to provide new business contacts. Also, the meet-the-buyer approach was regarded as a very suitable tool to involve enterprises.

On the negative side, not all clusters reached as many SMEs as they had targeted. As main reason for this the lack of preparation time was stated, especially the necessary time to convince SMEs to participate in the living labs.

### **Meeting the needs of SMEs and offering opportunities**

The activities that aimed at involving enterprises were meeting the companies' needs during several of the living labs. Some of the SMEs that were participating got into direct contact with the challenge owners (cities, regions, developers) of the living labs. If these contacts will lead to further business relations, commissions or contracts was not yet clear in most of the cases by the end of the project. For some SMEs the living labs were an opportunity to discover new markets, new regions, but also the public sector (cities, regions) as possible clients.

### **Supporting SMEs in innovation partnerships**

The cluster organizations encouraged and supported their SMEs to enter into new innovation partnerships mainly in the frame of the living labs. Although most cluster organizations already offered support for SMEs to enter innovations partnerships, the living labs were regarded as a good tool to reach out to SMEs and to connect them to new partners like larger companies as well as SMEs in other regions.

### **Gaining experience on how to involve SMEs**

In order to involve and support SMEs in entering the living labs the cluster organizations were using their existing contacts and channels like mailing and directly calling them. Some clusters also were offering pitch trainings for SMEs.

An important lesson learned for the cluster organizations was to screen systematically the members of the cluster respectively other enterprises in order to focus on the SMEs relevant and fitting for the living lab. Furthermore, it became evident that it is necessary to give good and specific reasons to convince SMEs of taking part in a living lab, as they are mostly very busy. The

most frequently cited reasons for SMEs to participate were offered possibilities to enter new markets or maintaining existing markets or finding new business partners.

Therefore, another lesson learnt was that there is a challenge to reach out to and attract SMEs to convince them of participating in activities outside of their own region. There is a necessity to understand and have respect for the limited resources of SMEs and their need to see business opportunities relatively quick.

Conclusion and possible transfer: The involvement of SMEs in international cooperation with the aim of supporting them enter new markets and innovation partnerships is also of interest to other economic fields. It is necessary to analyze precisely the challenges and opportunities for SMEs of participating in international cooperation and to communicate them. The selection of SMEs that fit well to the challenges of the international living labs is crucial for the success of the process.

## **Learning from cooperation between cluster organizations**

### **New partnerships between clusters**

Some of the clusters knew about each other especially the clusters in Norway, Denmark and Sweden. Furthermore, there were some common projects or other forms of cooperation between two or three cluster organizations. But there were also clusters that were not known to other clusters before. Also, before Northern Connections, there has not been a cooperation involving so many cluster organizations in the North Sea Region.

It is therefore not given that cluster organizations in the same economic field know each other. The project gave the clusters an opportunity to get to know each other and to cooperate.

### **Changes in collaboration between clusters during the project**

The cooperation between the cluster organizations has changed significantly during the lifetime of the project. During an initial phase of trust building the clusters could understand their differences and similarities and learned to work together.

During the project's main working phase, the day to day cooperation between the clusters intensified their work relationship. While in the past clusters had worked with other international clusters rather on an incidental basis, they cooperated more regular and structural in the frame of Northern Connections. Also, during the project the focus was on exchanging and learning from each other whilst in the past clusters would mostly reach out to other clusters for new collaborations between themselves or on behalf of companies and other organisations in their network.

This intensive and structured project teamwork supported the clusters to achieve a high degree of trust to one another and to develop routines of cooperation. Both factors were creating a foundation for future collaboration. There is a constructive and on-going dialogue between many of the partners and moreover new projects are being developed.

Most clusters stated that there is a lot of potential for further collaboration post-Northern Connections. But in order to maintain cooperation the necessity to develop a new, more independent platform was highlighted.

#### **Likelihood to continue cooperation with the other clusters**

Some of the clusters already started working together in new projects others are planning new projects with several other clusters. The clusters from neighbouring countries are planning to cooperate intensively in the future, this is for example the case between Belgium and the Netherlands and between Denmark, Norway and Sweden or the STRING region.

Especially the idea to keep on organizing international living lab activities is favoured by several clusters. But this is regarded as rather difficult to implement without project financing as the living labs are very labour intensive. Therefore, there are first ideas to find funding for future living lab processes.

A lot of potential is seen in the collaboration in other European projects, but also in organizing common activities like events, green visits and connecting companies. An important factor to build on future projects is seen in the trusting collaboration. While the cooperation is cluster-based in theory, in practice the people who work together are regarded as decisive for the collaboration. The personal relations are rated as crucial to facilitate a continuant cooperation.

#### **Challenge based inter-regional and international collaboration**

Many clusters argued that working together with other clusters on very similar challenges – in the case of Northern Connections the energy transition - is always better than trying to solve these challenges individually. Transnational collaboration was regarded as key to overcome barriers that all cluster have in common when facing their challenges. The international teamwork has proven to be essential to co-create adequate solutions for major challenges.

Conclusion and possible transfer: The project showed that cooperation between clusters from different regions and countries was very successful. Trust building and concrete cooperative work led to the creation of a network of clusters that could be supportive for future cooperation. It also became evident that the clusters respectively the enterprises from their regions complement each other in terms of overcoming challenges.

In other economic sectors the examination of possible complementarities between clusters and their enterprises in different regions could be a baseline. Then collaboration in concrete projects to address common challenges could support a trust building process and set the base for more intensive long-term cooperation.

# **Learning from cooperation of clusters with cities, regions and knowledge institutions**

## **Involvement of research institutions during the project**

Northern Connections had the aim to strengthen the cooperation not only between cities and regions on the one side and cluster organizations on the other side, but additionally to involve the research sector as a third pillar of collaboration in the sense of the triple helix approach. Especially the living labs offered a good platform to involve research institutions either as experts giving input on the challenges that were presented or sometimes also as solution providers pitching their ideas. Nevertheless, the involvement of research institutes in some living labs was hindered, because the rationale for participating and the mode of cooperation between living lab owners and research institutes were not always clear enough. Overall the clusters expressed the necessity and the interest to involve research institutions even more in future living labs.

## **Development of cooperation between clusters and cities and regions during the project**

Most cluster organizations could intensify existing relations with the region or city where they are located. The collaboration within a city or region during the project, especially the preparation and implementation of the living labs intensified and solidified partnerships and supported the exchange of knowledge. Furthermore, clusters and cities respectively regions could gain a deeper understanding of each other and detect problems that they potentially could solve together. Clusters have gained more contacts to cities and regions regarding challenges and opportunities for further potential living labs. The living lab concept is considered as a valuable communications tool that can help stakeholders understand why and how cluster organizations can create value, both for innovators as well as for challenge owners. Overall, the cooperation within the project created new and stronger networks within the regions.

## **New opportunities for collaboration between clusters and further cities**

Some of the living labs attracted a lot of interest of other cities. Consequently, these living labs as well provided a platform for some clusters to start new types of cooperation with further cities in their country. With the knowledge of identifying challenges of cities that could fit for setting up a living lab, it became easier for the clusters to replicate the concept in other cities or regions.

## **New opportunities for transnational triple helix collaboration between clusters, cities / regions and research institutions**

The cooperation process provided valuable insight into the potential of cities being the innovation drivers and to connect the clusters and the SMEs that they represent to the climate and energy challenges of the cities. Many of the partner cities and regions understand themselves as so-called arenas for future living labs as they are having the ability to identify challenges and how to support actions to develop solutions for these challenges.

Conversely, the cluster organizations proved to be able to generate value by turning challenges into opportunities for SMEs. Clusters were also key in helping challenge-owners understand how to communicate effectively with SMEs, and vice-versa. Based on the role of the clusters during the living labs and in the project as a whole, stakeholders like cities and regions learnt why clusters could and should have a key role to play in the innovation process and the sustainability transition.

Overall, the experiences of collaborating in transnational living labs and in a cross-regional partnership project as a whole, will offer opportunities to set up new cooperation processes between public, economic and scientific partners.

Conclusion and possible transfer: Cluster organizations in various economic fields are often already well connected with regional or national research institutions that are specialized in their economic or technologic field. If cluster organizations aim at cooperating with other international clusters the involvement of research institutions can support and fertilize the international collaboration. Research institutes could serve as experts in cluster training and living labs, both are a good platform for involving them.

Cooperation of cluster organizations in other economic fields with cities and regions depends on the content and orientation of the clusters. If the economic field of the cluster can be connected to cities and regions as possible challenge providers for living labs it makes sense to transfer the Northern Connection approach. This might make sense for example for fields like food, health economy, logistics and mobility or creative industries.

The project has proven that supposed competition between clusters can be overcome by concrete collaboration. The clusters complement each other and the international cooperation in Northern Connection has strengthened the overall innovation process.

The approach of interregional and international triple helix cooperation could be transferred generally to clusters in other economic fields linking them to research institutions and cities and regions. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that mutual interest and common objectives are crucial and that the trust building process between clusters and other partners requires a considerable amount of time and effort.