

Decentralised hubs for improving the innovation capacity of SMEs**Matchmaking session****FOLLOW-UP NOTE**

DATE: MONDAY 3 APRIL 2023 – 14:00-16:30 CET

BENEFICIARY: Managing Authority Operational Programme Western Greece; Region Western Greece

TOPIC: Decentralised hubs for improving the innovation capacity of SMEs

PARTICIPANTS**Hosts and further regional stakeholders**

- Aris Mamasioulas, MOU Western Greece
- Spyros Papaspyrou, Region of Western Greece
- Christos Tzomakas, Regional Development Fund
- Sofia Karveli, Directorate of Development Planning
- Nancy Trifonopoulou, Technology transfer office, University of Patras
- Anastasia Pyrgaki, Directorate of Development Planning
- Vera Fabinyi, Coral Marie Curie project

Peers and Experts

- Alain Demarez, Wallonie emploi formation SPW (4.0Ready)
- Frédéric Cambier, Technifutur Competence Centre, (4.0Ready)
- Bernhard Koelmel, Pforzheim University, Digital hub Northern Black Forest
- Jolanta Zubkauskienė, Manufacturing Innovation Valley (Future Ecom)
- Pedro Saraiva, Marco Alves, Tagus Valley (Agri Renaissance)
- Barbara Ślęk-Wojtowska, Anna Piorun, Podkarpackie Center for Innovation, Protolab (Foundation)

Interreg Europe

- Ilaria Ramaglioni, Policy Officer, Joint Secretariat
- Laurentiu David, Policy Officer, Joint Secretariat
- Luc Schmerber, Policy Learning Platform Thematic Expert
- Soroush Brandenburg, Policy Learning Platform Thematic Assistant

OBJECTIVES OF MEETING

The Managing Authority Operational Programme Western Greece (MOU Western Greece) and the Region of Western Greece are working together on implementing the Operational Programme for the programming period 2021-2027. In this context, they are especially looking at ways to **foster the development of the innovation capacities of regional businesses, in rural areas**. While the capital city Patras hosts 3 universities, the remaining parts of the region are widely rural with a predominance of the agricultural sector. There are no facilities for the promotion of the innovation capacity of SMEs in those areas.

The MOU Western Greece and the Region of Western Greece are therefore considering launching a specific call dedicated to the setup and roll out of decentralised innovation hubs in the region, outside of the capital city. Such 'Innovation Hubs' should be physical spaces, possibly also with a strong digital component and activities clearly targeting the local SMEs. Examples for such spaces are fablabs / maker spaces, test beds, digital hubs, technology demonstrators, etc. The MOU Western Greece and the Region of Western Greece have formulated the following questions with respect to the challenges above:

- **How to foster the uptake of digital technologies in businesses in rural areas of the Region?**
- **How to foster the development of innovation capacities in general of rural SMEs, especially in the manufacturing and food sectors?**

The objective of the matchmaking session was to identify and learn from practices from similar regions addressing those questions, with a strong potential for transfer and uptake in Western Greece.

INSIGHTS AND TAKEAWAY MESSAGES

Development of a strong local/regional ecosystem and its value chains: The practices presented clearly demonstrated the importance to involve closely local and regional triple-helix stakeholders, both on the strategic and operational level.

Access to funding: most initiatives have to rely on multiple funding sources. A strategic involvement of stakeholders is beneficial in terms of overall policy alignment and the related allocation of funding. This can only be realised on the long-term when the strategic priorities are aligned. This includes businesses, whose commitment is key.

Examples:

- In **Manufacturing Innovation Valley**, businesses contribute to a significant part of the funding for the initiative as it gives them an attractive place to promote their competences and access different technologies.
- The **Technifutur Wallonia** (Belgium) develops training offers for unemployed people, which correspond to a need of the regional employment agency, which in return pays for those pieces of training.

Access to expertise: digital and innovation hubs are mostly run by small teams, which rely on external expertise to develop and deliver high quality service offers. This expertise can easily be found in the local or regional ecosystem. This is more likely to happen when a win-win situation is created for both the hub and the experts.

Examples:

- Digital Hub Northern Black Forest: the **University Pforzheim provides scientific/technical input for free** as taking part in the activities of the hub enables the University to have access to the regional companies, understand better their need for better education programmes, find opportunities for master thesis, collaboration partners for technology transfer, etc. In parallel, **municipalities contribute with the provision of spaces** for hosting decentralised hubs as they can use them for leveraging their own economic development activities and offer attractive environments for both established and new companies. Finally, some solution providers offer demonstration equipment as a way of promoting their products.
- Technifutur Wallonia: regional companies host I4.0 trainings in their own premises and act a role models, because they are part of a strong business community and are eager to reinforce the ties among businesses.
- Food Fab Lab: the offer of the Food Fab Lab brings together all the relevant actors for technical, legal and business issues along the food value chain

Offer targeted services to different target groups: digital and innovation hubs in rural regions with low density of academia and research organisations might have different target groups to serve and involve, e.g. traditional companies. In this case, technology demonstrators play a central role, and setting up additional national or European innovation projects enables to develop new specialised offers in this sense.

Examples:

- Tagus Valley / Food Fab Lab: the activities of Tagus Valley include product design and development, support to market entry consultancy, Food Fab Lab shared productive pilot unit. The Lab offers access to both conventional and emerging technologies, as well as applied research activities. It enables to support start-up projects, both also the production of small series (which might not be possible on full size industrial units) and experimental lots.
- Digital Hub Northern Black Forest offerings include face-to-face events or web seminars on the topic of digitization: lectures, workshops, networking Individual consulting for companies on site or virtually; "Digitalization toolbox": a tool kit for strategy development and implementation; co-working spaces (Nagold & Horb), demonstration and experience spaces for trying out new technologies and innovative digital solutions.

Sustainability / circular economy should be a transversal offer of DIHs:

The hubs presented have mostly integrated sustainability aspects / the transition towards a more circular economy as a transversal priority, which comes in addition to the original focus, be it digital or manufacturing technologies. One can see the emergence of a triangle combining: manufacturing technologies (sector specific) – digital technologies for manufacturing and business process in general – sustainability.

KEY PRACTICES IDENTIFIED

Interreg Europe projects and their good practices:

- 4.0 Ready: **Demonstrators 4.0**
- **Digital hub Northern Black Forest**
- Future Ecom: **Manufacturing Innovation Valley**
- Agri Renaissance: **Food FABLAB - A Shared Productive Unit for AgriFood Sector**
- Foundation: **Protolab**

Policy Learning Platform resources

Policy briefs on

- **Industry 4.0**
- **Fostering the digital transformation of SMEs**
- **Spaces for innovation**

Stories and articles on

- **Fostering market uptake for innovative digital products and services**
- **Smart societies: how interregional cooperation boosts the digitalisation of a rural area**
- **Improving access to digital skills for SMEs**
- **Digital ecosystems and digital transformation**
- **Industry 5.0**

Event learnings

- **Workshop learnings – Innovation capacities of SMEs**
- **E-workshop recording SMEs digitalisation**
- **E-workshop recording: Industry 4.0**
- **Workshop learning - Mastering the digital transformation of business support**
- **Webinar recording: Digital Innovation Ecosystems**

Note circulation: All attendees.