



An initiative of the European Union

CLUSTERS MEET REGIONS

CHARLEROI
BELGIUM

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DRIVING THE REGIONAL ECONOMIC REVIVAL IN EUROPE:
AGORADA+ DISCUSSES INNOVATION ECOSYSTEMS IN LIFE SCIENCES,
CLEANTECH AND ADVANCED MANUFACTURING FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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AGORADA+ 2024
EURADA event



DRIVING THE REGIONAL ECONOMIC REVIVAL IN EUROPE

AGORADA+ discusses innovation ecosystems in life sciences, cleantech and advanced manufacturing for regional development

IGRETEC premises
Boulevard Mayence 1
6000 Charleroi, Belgium

27 & 28 November 2024

Wednesday 27 November

9.00 – 9.35 Opening Session – Welcoming Address

The opening session of Clusters Meet Regions Charleroi 2024/AGORADA+ featured a series of keynote speeches by:

- **Renaud Moens**, General Director of IGRETEC, welcomed everyone and thanked the attendees for their presence. He presented IGRETEC, an intermunicipal company in Wallonia and Brussels that counts 194 associates and covers a territory of 2.1 million inhabitants. IGRETEC operates in various areas of activity, such as design office, management of treatment and flood water evacuation structures and energy. Moreover, it acts as the economic, territorial and strategic development agency of Charleroi Métropole. He stressed the importance of cooperating with EURADA – the European Association of Development Agencies – to connect with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) from all over Europe.
- **Jakub Boratnyski**, Director of Network & Governance of DG GROW at the European Commission, provided a comprehensive overview of how clusters and industrial policy place themselves in today's EU landscape. More specifically, he stressed the **importance of clusters to foster growth, innovation and competitiveness** and as a tool for future European enlargement. Mr Boratnyski also recalled the concepts of prosperity and competitiveness that will be at the forefront of the priorities and work of the new Commission, as outlined in the Letta and Draghi's reports on the European Single Market and the future of European competitiveness.
- **Cristina Oyon**, Vice-President of EURADA, opened her speech by bringing a concrete example from her region in Spain, the Basque Country, looking back at the beginning of the **implementation of the cluster policy based on technology and innovation**. She underlined the role that regional development agencies played in contributing to the successful

implementation of the cluster policy by driving economic and social development.

- **Teodora Jilkova**, representative of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP), showcased the European Cluster Collaboration Platform, an **online hub for cluster stakeholders** (cluster organisations, policymakers, and other related stakeholders from the cluster ecosystems), also acting as a one-stop-shop for stakeholders in third countries aiming to set up partnerships with the European counterparts. The ECCP counts 1600+ profiled cluster organisations worldwide, 35 successful events (including EU Cluster talks, Clusters meet Regions and Matchmaking events) and +1000 bilateral meetings.

9.35 – 10.05 Setting the Scene: From regional to local priorities for economic development. The key role of clusters and European funds

Presentation of the EURADA-OECD Survey of Regional Development Agencies

- **Roberta Dall'Olio - Director, EURADA**

Roberta Dall'Olio presented the preliminary results of a survey on Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) conducted in collaboration with **OECD Paris** and launched earlier this year. During her speech, she highlighted the main challenges faced by these agencies in implementing effective regional policies at the local level. She also shared insightful reflections on the different types of stakeholders regularly involved in the development of such policies.

The survey gathered 83 responses from 19 countries, with the majority representing the regional level (85%) and 13% representing the local level. Based on these responses, key challenges were identified, such as the need to adapt to the green and digital transitions, which are currently the most pressing issues. Specific challenges related to geographic features, such as islands, were also discussed.

A crucial part of the presentation focused on the role of **stakeholders** in the work of RDAs. Roberta explained that these actors, including regional governments, clusters, associations, and public administrations, are essential in both the implementation and monitoring of cohesion policies. Clusters, in particular, play a dual role: they are both strategic allies and development targets for RDAs, thanks to their ability to act quickly and adapt to local needs. This collaboration is vital for fostering policies and developing projects that encourage cooperation among different actors.

Roberta also emphasised that the survey was designed to better understand RDAs and adapt the services offered to meet their needs. Although the process has faced challenges, such as time and resource constraints, the ultimate goal remains to strengthen the role of these agencies in regional development.

The presentation also referenced the celebration of the **30th anniversary of Agorada**, a key event that highlights the ongoing commitment to regional development and inter-agency collaboration. This context provided an opportunity to clarify the differences between RDAs and clusters, noting that while RDAs lead the implementation of cohesion policies and support local governments, clusters act as essential collaborative networks in their territories.

Presentation of the ECCP input paper on the Walloon Region and its clusters

- **Dr. Jan-Philipp Kramer - Partner at Prognos AG and Team Leader Data &**

Policy at the ECCP

Dr **Jan-Philipp Kramer**, from Prognos AG and a partner of the **European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP)**, presented a report on Wallonia and its cluster dynamics. Wallonia's economy is characterised by a robust public sector that significantly contributes to employment and gross value added, surpassing both national and EU averages. While the services sector plays a smaller role compared to other regions, key industrial ecosystems include health, retail, construction, and an important food sector.

According to the **2023 Regional Innovation Scoreboard**, Wallonia is classified as a "Strong Innovator," showing consistent improvement since 2016. Notable achievements include advancements in SME collaboration, public-private partnerships, and substantial business R&D investments.

In terms of cluster activity, Wallonia hosts **15 ECCP-registered cluster organisations** out of Belgium's total of 45. These include all 14 clusters from its two main programs: **competitive clusters** and **business clusters**. The clusters span 10 of the EU's 14 industrial ecosystems, with **Energy and Renewables** being the most represented. Business clusters focus on local enterprise-driven initiatives, while competitive clusters bring together research and innovation (R&I) actors across six strategic sectors. Recent evaluations confirm that these programs effectively enhance the economic performance of cluster companies.

Wallonia boasts a competitive economic profile, with annual exports valued at **€53 billion**, primarily directed toward 27 countries. Its public sector is particularly strong, complemented by key industrial ecosystems such as health, retail, construction, and the food sector. These industries play a crucial role in the region's economic transformation, positioning Wallonia as a region with high competitiveness and innovation.

The region has also made significant strides in the **digital and green transitions**, which greatly influence cluster activities. Moreover, its cluster programs have shown positive growth in network size and membership, strengthening both regional and international collaboration.

Wallonia's clusters are actively engaged in international activities, providing market access and fostering collaboration beyond its borders.

10.05 – 10.50 Panel discussion 1: Connecting regional and local economic development strategies with clusters.

The structure of this session foresaw an introduction from Lionel Bonjean - Director General - Economy, Employment and Research, Public Service of Wallonia - SPW EER - in Belgium.

Lionel Bonjean detailed the role of the Public Service of Wallonia (SPW EER) in **fostering economic growth, industrial investment, and sustainable development in the region**. Working in partnership with regional development agencies such as IGRETEC, SPW EER plays a pivotal role in implementing Wallonia's regional recovery plan. This includes managing over 100 investment and restructuring projects aimed at driving growth and resilience.

The main mission of SPW EER focuses on Supporting industrial investments, advancing research and innovation (R&I) and facilitating green and industrial transitions.

To achieve these objectives, SPW EER employs two primary strategies:

1. Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3): Targeting strategic areas for economic growth.
2. Circular Wallonia Initiative: Advancing the transition to a circular economy.

Wallonia's clustering policy is supported by two distinct structures:

1. Business Clusters which have the primary goal of fostering economic activities and promoting innovative partnerships and are focused on industrial, commercial, or technological initiatives.
2. Competitive Clusters. Their primary role is to support the execution of investment, R&D, and workforce training projects. Their activities are aligned with competitive positioning strategies defined by the clusters themselves.

Key Objectives of Walloon Clusters:

- Stimulating innovation and fostering public-private collaboration
- Structuring sectoral ecosystems to create synergies
- Enhancing international visibility and competitiveness

Bonjean also mentioned which are the Strategic Focus Areas of the Smart Specialisation Strategy (S3) of the Wallonia region. Wallonia's S3 framework concentrates on five strategic domains: Circular Materials, Design and Production Methods, Energy, Agri-Food and Environment. The strategy aims to encourage cross-sectoral technological collaboration and to build innovative and sustainable value chains.

Another key point mentioned by Lionel was the Circular Wallonia initiative. It is focused on key industrial value chains, targeting the transition to a circular economy. It adopts a partnership approach involving key stakeholders to promote collaborations critical for accelerating circular practices and achieving sustainable growth and resilience in Wallonia's industrial sectors.

Bonjean identified two key challenges shaping Wallonia's development agenda:

1. Geopolitical Shifts: Adapting to changing global dynamics.

2. Twin Transition: Integrating green and digital transformation into industrial and economic strategies.

Towards the end of his speech, Bonjean also mentioned current challenges that are affecting the daily activities of SPW EER, such as accelerating the market adoption of innovative solutions, promoting the internationalisation of businesses and driving cross-sectoral innovation to enhance competitiveness.

Bonjean also set up some long-term ambitions, such as strengthening interregional and European collaborations and Establishing Wallonia as a leader in circular and sustainable innovation.

To sum up, Lionel Bonjean underscored the critical role of clusters and strategic frameworks like S3 and Circular Wallonia in achieving sustainable growth, fostering innovation, and ensuring Wallonia's position as a competitive and resilient region in Europe.

The presentation of Bonjean was followed by a panel discussion moderated by **Marc Pattinson**, Innovation and Research Policy Expert for the Interreg Europe Policy Learning Platform and Director of GAC Group.

The panel was composed of Sophie Bourez – Co-Director of Wagralim & Coordinator of the Walloon Competitive Clusters Network – Sébastien Durieux - Board of Direction, Wallonie Entreprendre (WE) - Philippe Lachapelle – Director of Innovation Networks and Technological Partnerships, AWEX - and Vicky Wildemeersch – Project Adviser, Flanders Innovation & Entrepreneurship Agency (VLAIO).

Sophie Bourez introduced **Wagralim**, a Walloon competitive cluster with 300 members, of which 80% are SMEs. The cluster fosters collaboration between companies and the research sector in Wallonia to drive innovation. Key activities include research projects, training initiatives, and investment programmes, all supported by strong backing from regional authorities. Bourez emphasised that clusters act as the “extended arm” of the Walloon authorities to implement regional strategies effectively.

She stressed the importance of clusters adopting a long-term policy framework and positioning themselves internationally. Wagralim focuses on European-level engagement by:

- Leading initiatives in circular ingredients
- Building value chains at the European level
- Aligning with goals set by the European Commission

Bourez concluded by highlighting the role of regional clusters in reconnecting economic strategies with regional development and ensuring robust support over the long term.

Sébastien Durieux presented the role of **Wallonie Entreprendre (WE)** as an economic and financial tool for Wallonia, tailored to the unique development and financing needs of businesses. WE offers equity-based solutions and participates in initiatives that support regional economic growth.

He outlined three key lessons for small regions:

1. **Study your ecosystem:** Conduct a detailed analysis to identify strengths.

2. **Focus on select ecosystems:** Avoid spreading resources thin by attempting to build multiple ecosystems simultaneously.
3. **Connect stakeholders:** Bring together diverse actors to foster innovation.

Durieux emphasised the importance of leveraging existing knowledge within a region rather than creating ecosystems from scratch, offering practical insights on replicating successful practices across regions.

Philippe Lachapelle shared insights on how entrepreneurs in Wallonia face two primary challenges:

1. **Globalised markets:** Leveraging opportunities in international trade and innovation.
2. **Scaling SMEs:** Wallonia's SME-dominated economic fabric requires robust networks to transition to larger, technology-driven enterprises.

He highlighted the need to build ecosystems strategically, particularly in locations with significant growth potential. AWEX plays a key role in fostering such ecosystems, attracting innovative companies to the region, and driving job creation. Lachapelle emphasised the value of being proactive in creating supportive environments for startups and other innovative enterprises.

Vicky Wildemeersch provided an overview of the **Flanders innovation ecosystem**, which aims to stimulate and support innovation and entrepreneurship. VLAIO offers a variety of services designed to strengthen the regional business climate, promoting sustainable economic growth and job creation in collaboration with an extensive partner network.

The ecosystem includes:

- **Innovative business networks:** Platforms fostering collaboration across industries.
- **Clusters:** Supported to promote innovative partnerships in industrial, commercial, and technological domains.

VLAIO focuses on delivering a cohesive framework that empowers businesses to innovate and thrive in a competitive environment.

Key Insights from the Panel

The Walloon Region employs a dual-approach clustering framework:

1. **Business Clusters:** Funded to drive economic activities and encourage innovative partnerships across industrial and technological domains.
2. **Competitive Clusters:** Focused on projects involving R&D, workforce training, and investment, aligning with independently defined strategic goals.

This model ensures that both types of clusters contribute effectively to Wallonia's economic development and innovation ecosystem, strengthening regional and local synergies for sustainable growth.

11.10 – 11.35 The transition of industrial zones into an integrated renewed territorial ecosystem

Presentation of Charleroi Metropole Catch Turbo Plan

- **Thomas Dermine - State Secretary for Economic Recovery and Strategic Investments in the Belgian Federal Government**

Thomas Dermine, newly elected Mayor of Charleroi, discussed Charleroi's

transformation following the closure of the Caterpillar plant in 2016, which resulted in the loss of 8,000 jobs. Historically an industrial city, Charleroi's economic foundation was rooted in coal and steel production, making the plant's closure a severe shock. To address this crisis, three task forces were established at the European, federal, and regional levels. At the European level, the EU Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) was mobilised, while the federal government introduced measures such as early retirement schemes and the tax treatment of severance payments. The regional task force focused on on-site management, support for subcontractors, and reconversion initiatives. This challenging period became an opportunity to redefine the city's economic strategy, drawing inspiration from Limburg's recovery model and aligning with Wallonia's Marshall Plan. By 2016, Charleroi had created over 10,000 new jobs, though these roles, predominantly non-blue-collar positions often filled by people outside the city, were markedly different from the blue-collar jobs lost. Central to the recovery was the **Catch Plan Framework**, which prioritised four sectors - **advanced manufacturing, airport and logistics, health and bio, and creative and digital** - along with a transversal focus on human capital. This framework, supported by fifteen targeted projects and extensive stakeholder engagement, strategically concentrated activities geographically in collaboration with local authorities. The process was guided by a Delivery Unit operating under strict principles, including a three-year non-renewable mandate, operational autonomy, multi-partner collaboration, rigorous project management, and transparent reporting. Reflecting on the experience, Dermine highlighted the **importance of defining a long-term vision**, fostering collective action, prioritising concrete projects with transversal implementation mechanisms, and investing heavily in human capital to meet the demands of evolving technologies and labour market dynamics. **The Charleroi experience demonstrates how a region can leverage a crisis to drive economic renewal and structural transformation.**

- **Morena Vulpi – Project Management Officer at Charleroi Entreprendre**

Morena Vulpi presented Catch Turbo, implemented by Charleroi Entreprendre, which has the objective to perpetuate and amplify the dynamic and the practices of the Catch Plan at the sectoral and geographical level, with the specific mission of monitoring ecosystems globally, with a focus on projects, and measures related to socio-economic development at sub-regional level. At the core of Catch Turbo, there is business development support, with aims to support entrepreneurs (students, workers, SMEs) in the launch and growth of their businesses. Key numbers from 2023 include the creation of +200 jobs, +450 projects supported, +50 activities created and 4.5/5 client satisfaction. Additionally, since January 2024, Charleroi Entreprendre has taken over a new mission, namely, to monitor ecosystems, with a focus on projects and measure related socio-economic development at the sub-regional level. Other missions include the development and update of a 5-year roadmap for ecosystems, the definition of processes and methods for project management and the analysis of project performance standardised reporting. These missions are aligned with a prioritised scope according to the **territorial strategy** and the five ecosystems of the city of Charleroi: **health & bio, advanced manufacturing, cleantech, agri-food, culture and social economy.**

11.35 – 12.15 Panel Discussion 2: International Practices, Experiences, and Success Stories – From Adversity to Clustering

The main focus of this panel discussion was the strategic role of clusters in transforming challenges into opportunities for economic development, innovation, and competitiveness across regions. The session, moderated by Valeria Bandini – Head of Europe and Internationalisation Aread at ART-ER, foresaw the participation of four panellists: Valeria Tudisco – Head of Brussels Office, Sviluppumbria - Silviu Botez, Head of Office for External Relations and Development of Entrepreneurial Environment, Bacau County Council - Jorge González, Director of TICBIOMED - Daniel Janeiro, Coordinator of External Relations, ADRAL and Vice-President of EURADA.

Valeria Tudisco introduced Sviluppumbria, the regional economic development agency of Umbria, Italy. Despite being a small, landlocked, and sparsely populated region, **Umbria demonstrates significant economic dynamism and entrepreneurship density**. Tudisco emphasised the **importance of clusters for SMEs as they serve as competitive aggregators**. She highlighted three key clusters in Umbria:

1. **Umbria Aerospace Cluster:** Comprising 42 members, this cluster focuses on promoting internationalisation, innovation, and training for its members.
2. **E-Mobility Cluster:** This young network includes 19 members and has a turnover of €490 million. It is dedicated to advancing sustainable mobility.
3. **Umbria Nautical Cluster:** With 13 members and a turnover of €120 million, this cluster consolidates technology, skills, and know-how to strengthen its market position.

A best practice cited was the **Umbria Aerospace Cluster Strategic Plan**, which outlines a roadmap for the aerospace ecosystem in the next decade. Key actions include:

- Mapping companies within the cluster
- Exploring synergies with other clusters
- Analysing market and technology trends
- Aligning regional policies with cluster development strategies
- Leveraging the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP)

Tudisco concluded by emphasising that **collaboration between industry, local institutions, and training organisations underpins the strength and economic growth of Umbria's clusters**.

Silviu Botez shared the experience of Bacau County, Romania, where a specific necessity led to the creation of an innovative cluster project. The highlight was the **first innovative athletic park in Central and Southeast Europe**, which combines sports, innovation, and community development. This project exemplifies the transformative potential of clustering for regional advancement.

Jorge González presented the **INDEMAND project**, which employs a **demand-driven innovation approach**, ensuring that products and services are shaped directly by client needs. The model involves:

1. Identifying needs through challenges posed by demanders.

2. Selecting suitable suppliers, typically through regional development agencies.
3. Evaluating solutions and adopting final decisions.

These projects are cost-efficient, typically ranging from €15,000, and have short implementation periods (9–12 months). Successful applications of this model include **INDEMAND, InnoBuyer, and Cherries**. Benefits of demand-driven innovation include:

- Improved public services for demanders
- Business growth for solvers
- Enhanced business support for clusters
- Indirect or direct benefits for citizens

González also highlighted TICBIOMED's work on the **GUIA approach** and **PREPARE project**.

Representing Alentejo, Portugal, **Daniel Janeiro** described the region's clustering efforts, with a focus on the **Alentejo Aerospace Cluster**. Alentejo, Portugal's largest and sparsely populated region, leveraged its strategic location and infrastructure to foster this cluster. Key milestones include:

- **2008:** Inauguration of Beja International Airport.
- **2010:** Initiation of Évora Aeronautical Industrial Park, attracting major players like Embraer and Mecachrome.
- **2016:** Establishment of AED Cluster Portugal, uniting companies, research institutions, and academia.
- **2017:** Signing of a cooperation protocol to develop the aeronautical sector.

Achievements:

- Over 2,000 skilled professionals are employed.
- More than 50 companies are operating within the cluster.
- Alignment with Portugal's Smart Specialization Strategy (EREI), emphasising innovation and sustainability.

Future objectives for the cluster include:

- A projected 10% employment growth by 2025.
- Increased investment in R&D and advanced manufacturing.
- Establishing Alentejo as a leader in sustainable aviation technologies.

In synthesis, the panel underscored the importance of **clustering as a tool to overcome regional challenges, foster innovation, and drive economic growth**. By sharing diverse international experiences, the discussion highlighted how **strategic cooperation among stakeholders can lead to transformative regional development**.

13.45 – 14.15 Insights from Multidisciplinary actors on urban regeneration planning

Cluster Cleantech: cutting-edge sector from the industrial past

- ***Stéphanie Toussaint – Project Manager, Charleroi Métropole***

Stéphanie Toussaint delivered a presentation providing an overview and highlighting the key projects of the **Porte Ouest Master Plan** in Charleroi. Located in the heart of the Wallonia region, the metropolitan area of Charleroi encompasses 30 municipalities, 600,000 inhabitants, and 2,000 km² of diverse landscapes. It serves as a social, economic, and cultural hub, harmonising rural and urban dynamics. The **multi-scale approach of the Porte Ouest project** operates on **three levels - metropolitan, municipal, and neighbourhood** - while respecting local specificities and adapting to the unique needs of each scale. Charleroi Métropole aims to position the territory as a leader in resilience, competitiveness, and quality of life by developing major projects that promote sustainability, economic growth, innovation, mobility, and tourism. These initiatives align with a strategic framework focused on integrating Charleroi into the Northern European gigametropolis while **enhancing the region's quality of life and resilience**. The projects also reflect the territorial projects 2.0 strategy, emphasising the **continuation of the Catch Turbo approach to foster sectoral ecosystems that integrate industry, research, education, and infrastructure**. Cleantech stands out as a clear example of embedding sustainable infrastructure while driving economic regeneration. Commissioned by the Walloon Government in 2020, the **Porte Ouest Master Plan** spans over 100 hectares. It embodies the region's industrial legacy and its challenges while presenting an innovative vision that merges economic, cultural, and ecological dimensions to transform an industrial area into a dynamic urban district. **The plan centres on five main projects:** a network of public spaces, cultural sites, and landscapes; the Cleantech Campus; the “Quartier Futur” project, blending civilian and military innovation; the development of an urban port; and Le Phare Ouest. Stéphanie explored the “**Quartier Futur**” project in depth, describing it as a paradigm shift in the use of military barracks and associated infrastructure. The project emphasises collaborative civilian and military use, introduces accessible green spaces, fosters public engagement, and promotes innovative synergies. This approach exemplifies the ambition of Charleroi Métropole to transform challenges into opportunities, paving the way for sustainable and inclusive development.

- ***Marc Van Den Neste – Project Manager, District Cleantech***

Marc Van Den Neste briefly presented a general overview of the Cleantech ecosystem and the work done by **District Cleantech** to **foster innovation** and trigger enthusiasm for the ecosystem. His presentation highlighted the transformative journey of the District Cleantech ecosystem, rooted in the redevelopment of a former Cockerill steelworks site, approved by the Walloon government in 2022. This ambitious initiative aims to **repurpose brownfield lands into a dynamic hub for cleantech innovation, sustainability, and industrial growth**. The project integrates key elements such as **hydrogen energy, carbon capture, and circular economy practices** structured across satellite ecosystems and upscaling labs. District Cleantech focuses on **fostering collaboration among**

diverse stakeholders, creating a resilient economic model, and building capacity in cleantech careers. Through its roadmap of over 25 strategic projects, including land remediation and public engagement initiatives, it aims to accelerate innovation, create thousands of jobs, and attract significant investment. **By 2035, the ecosystem envisions hosting more than 100 cleantech companies,** leveraging international partnerships to establish itself as a leader in sustainable industrial practices.

The presentation was followed by

Panel discussion 3: “Insights from multidisciplinary actors on urban regeneration planning”

The session, moderated by Andreea-Raluca Leru, Expert on EU funding and innovation at ADR North East and Vice-President of EURADA, saw the involvement of five panellists: Cécile Nouet - Waste2Bio Coordinator at the University of Liegi – Sylvie Russel – Chief Operating Officer at Cambridge Cleantech – Nadia Jokobs – R&D Coordinator at AGC Glass – Dominique Pierard – head of Development at A.I. Greenwin – and Irena Lobotcka – CEO of Sustainable Infrastructure Cluster in Krakow.

The moderator introduced the panel with a round of presentations of the speakers, who subsequently had the chance to introduce their organisation and the work they deliver daily.

Cécile Nouet, from the University of Liege, represented the WASTE2Bio initiative, which is a multi-actor ecosystem supported by the Walloon region as part of the Smart Specialisation Strategy in the environmental field that counts more than 130 partners.

Sylvie Russell, Chief Operating Officer at Cambridge Cleantech, presented the UK's leading cleantech innovation network based in Cambridge that brings together innovators, investors, corporates, academics and the public sector to create a sustainable future.

Nadia Jacobs represented AGC Glass Europe, a company that provides glass for two main segments: architectural glass (nearly 1 out of 4 buildings glazed with AGC coated glass) and automotive (1 out of 4 cars glazed by AGC). AGC counts 15,000 workers around Europe, located in more than 100 sites, and 2.8 billion euros of net sales in 2023.

Dominique Pierard presented GreenWin, a Walloon Innovation Cluster working on Cleantech boosting collaborative cleantech innovation in the chemistry, construction & building and environmental sectors for a prosperous and sustainable society. Greenwin gathers +220 members, of which 170+ corporates, 17 research centres, etc. and partners with European countries such as Luxembourg, the Netherlands, France, the UK, Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

Irena Łobocka introduced the Sustainable Infrastructure Cluster in Kraków, of which she is CEO. This national key cluster operates in Krakow, in the Malopolska region in Poland, in the fields of sustainable construction, smart buildings, energy efficiency, and renewable energy sources, counting 145 cluster members, 115 SMEs, 9 R&D institutions, 3 municipalities and 18,168 employees.

The panel discussion underscored the **critical role of collaboration, innovation, and sustainable practices in addressing urban regeneration challenges.** Cécile

Nouet emphasised the **importance of designing urban regeneration projects** that integrate nature and housing, fostering communities resilient to climate change while also prioritising social innovation. She highlighted the challenge of overcoming the perception that nature-based solutions are non-innovative and the difficulty in convincing stakeholders of their effectiveness. Similarly, Sylvie Russell stressed the **transformative potential of cleantech to drive social impact** by making sustainable technologies more accessible on a global scale. However, she also pointed out that **implementing cleantech solutions often requires considerable time and investment**, which can hinder progress. Both Nadia Jacobs and Dominique Pierard highlighted the importance of **collaboration and active engagement within ecosystems and clusters to achieve meaningful objectives**. Irena Łobocka, representing the construction sector, addressed the **critical need for greater energy efficiency and a reduction in emissions**, emphasising that construction is responsible for 40% of global energy emissions.

Together, the speakers reflected a shared commitment to innovation, partnerships, and sustainable approaches as essential pillars for advancing urban regeneration.

15.15 – 16.30 Fostering collaborative ecosystems as a major partner for industry

This fourth session focused on the **vital role of collaborative ecosystems in advancing the twin transitions of digitalisation, innovation and sustainability within the European industrial landscape**. Sophie Schmitz, International Project Manager at Pole MecaTech, presented the advanced manufacturing sector in Wallonia, highlighting how the **cluster leads efforts in adopting automation, robotics, and eco-friendly technologies to achieve smarter and greener industrial processes**. Abd-Samad Habbachi, Director of A6K, presented the success story of **A6K**, an umbrella infrastructure fostering collaboration among startups, universities, trainers, and research centres to **drive technological growth in energy, communication, and Industry 4.0 transformation**.

Following the presentations, a lively panel discussion, “**The Twin Transition of the European Industry: initiatives and challenges in advanced manufacturing**”, took place under the moderation of **Antonio Novo**, President of the European Clusters Alliance. Experts from across Europe examined the challenges and solutions related to **implementing the twin transitions in advanced manufacturing**. They shared practical examples and scalable solutions and explored how clusters can support companies, especially SMEs, in embracing sustainable innovation.

Simona Moraglia, R&D Manager at Officine Meccaniche Aeronautiche (OMA) in Umbria, highlighted the region’s aerospace cluster and its focus on internationalisation, training, and innovation. She addressed the twin transitions in aerospace, detailing advancements such as AI for flight efficiency, additive manufacturing for resource-efficient components, and innovations like electric aircraft and sustainable fuels. These technologies promise improved efficiency, safety, and decarbonisation, though challenges remain in overcoming economic, technological, and regulatory barriers.

Carlo Morettin, Global Head of Environment and Decarbonisation at Aperam Group, brought insights from his extensive experience in the steel industry. Representing Aperam, a global leader in stainless and speciality steel and recycling, he reflected on the company's strategies across its divisions, including Stainless & Electrical Steel, Services & Solutions, Alloys & Specialties, and Recycling & Renewables.

Cristina Oyon, Director of Technology and Innovation at the Basque Business Development Agency, discussed the Smart Industry Strategy in the Basque region, emphasising the role of industrial R&I funding. Drawing on European Commission priorities, she proposed long-term strategies and collaborative frameworks to advance industrial decarbonisation while ensuring regional equity and inclusivity. Finally, Loic Marin, European Project Manager at CIMES, shared his expertise in supporting manufacturing SMEs through EU projects. He addressed the common challenges faced by SMEs in sustainable projects and outlined key actions for clusters to enhance their effectiveness in fostering sustainable innovation.

16.30 – 16.50 Tools for clustering “How to accelerate economic and scientific ecosystems for regions and territories?” - JRC ACTIONbook

The last session of the day was about seeing the involvement of our friends from the Joint Research Center. **Carlos Torrecilla Salinas**, Head of Unit on Innovation Policies and Economic Impact, presented the recently released ACTIONbook: Innovation for place-based transformations.

As the planet warms, many dangerous extreme events have become more frequent and intense. 2024 has reached high-temperature records, and recent crises and disruptions have widened the socio-economic gap and have evidenced the EU's vulnerabilities (e.g., the recent DANA in Valencia).

When we look at those challenges and wonder how to address them, we must acknowledge that every territory faces different problems and has different capital and ways of tackling them. This is what we refer to when we talk about the importance of a place-based approach. In facing current challenges, (industrial) innovation also has an important role, but this one should also be place-based and tailored to each specific context. **Transformative innovation has the intention to transform our societies to meet the goals of the Green Deal.**

JRC's role in this context is to anticipate, integrate, and impact. It **provides evidence-based knowledge and science, supporting EU policies to positively impact society**. In practice, one of the latest works performed by the JRC has been the launch of the “Innovation for place-based transformation” toolbox (updating the previous “playbook”), which was briefly presented. Regarding the tool:

- It's directed at policymakers (local, regional, and national level)
- Objective: to define innovation policies using public funding, to make policies as transformative as possible
- It's a user-friendly book that compiles 27 activities, 32 practices and 74 tools

- It was created in partnership with 74 territories (emphasis on the co-creation process)
- Activities are divided into six chapters (engaging, envisioning, orchestrating, designing, implementing, and learning). This collection of activities should **not** be taken as a **sequential and linear** process to follow. It's not a recipe that should be followed. It's rather a "collection of ingredients for you to cook the dish that might be the most suitable for your diet"
- It's meant to be a tool for action (= action book)
- Contains Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), which are regional innovation strategies established for a more effective use of Cohesion Funds, putting place-based policy at the centre.

This said, the publications of the JRC are not the goal but the means for territories to face today's challenges. The JRC is launching a new project ("The Preparatory Action: Innovation for place-based transformations") sponsored by the EP, which aims to put the Action Book into practice with the territories. This way, the action book will be tested and will inform future actions, policies and programmes.

Within the project, they have launched a **Call for Expression of Interest** to raise awareness, build capacities and experiment with the use of innovative approaches. Applications shall be submitted before 16 December 2024, with more than 100 applicants already.

On Thursday, 28th of November, Day 2 of "Cluster Meet Regions Charleroi 2024 – Driving the regional economic revival in Europe. AGORADA+ Discusses innovation ecosystems in life sciences, cleantech and advanced manufacturing for regional development" took place in Charleroi like in the previous day.

9.30 – 10.30 Kickstart the innovation value chains towards a high-tech leading European Ecosystems

The first speaker of Day 2 was **Dominique Demonté** – CEO at Biopark Charleroi.

The **Brussels South Charleroi BioPark** is a leading hub for biotechnology and life sciences innovation. This ecosystem brings together cutting-edge research institutions, universities, and a vibrant network of biotech companies, making it a center of excellence in fields such as biopharmaceuticals, regenerative medicine, and diagnostics. Anchored by the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), the BioPark combines world-class education, research, and workforce training to foster innovation and develop highly skilled professionals in the life sciences sector.

The BioPark supports startups and established companies alike, offering specialized infrastructure such as laboratories, clean rooms, and pilot production units, alongside business incubators and mentorship programs. This nurturing environment attracts local and international firms, facilitating collaboration between academia and industry to accelerate the commercialisation of groundbreaking technologies. With its strategic location near Charleroi Airport and excellent connections to major European cities, the BioPark is an attractive base for

global biotech operations.

Beyond its scientific contributions, the Brussels South Charleroi BioPark is a **major driver of economic growth in the Wallonia region**. By creating thousands of direct and indirect jobs, it has established itself as a key player in Europe's life sciences landscape. The BioPark's dynamic ecosystem continues to advance innovations in health and medicine, strengthening its reputation as a critical node in the global biotech industry.

The presentation was followed by a Panel Discussion

Pannel discussion 5: European Challenges, Opportunities and Collaboration in the field of BIOTECH

The panel, moderated by Stamatiki Kritas – Manager Director at European Bioregions Council – saw the participation of Tineke Van hooland - Deputy Secretary General at essenscia – Cristelle Noirhomme – Head of Belgium Corporate Government at GSK – Clemence Foltz – Project Manager at PRECISEU – and Dominique Demonte.

Clémence Foltz introduced Clust-ER Health - Emilia-Romagna, a key driver of innovation in the Emilia-Romagna region of Italy, fostering health and well-being projects that maximize social and economic impact.

Tineke Van hooland highlighted the pivotal role of essenscia, Belgium's federation for the chemical and life sciences industries. Representing over 720 companies, Essenscia champions sustainability and innovation to tackle global challenges like resource efficiency, healthcare access, and environmental conservation.

Cristelle Noirhomme shared insights from GSK, a global leader in biopharma, focused on advanced technologies and therapeutic areas such as infectious diseases, HIV, and oncology. GSK's impactful work includes vaccine development for Africa, uniting science and talent to fight disease worldwide. 3 years ago we developed the first vaccines against malaria. Today it saves hundred of thousand of babies in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Finally, Dominique Demonte presented inspiring examples of pharmaceutical collaborations within the Brussels South Charleroi BioPark, showcasing how partnerships can drive biotech innovation and growth.

All the speakers agreed on some common challenges that are effecting their regional ecosystems. Europe faces significant **challenges in maintaining its competitiveness in the biotech sector**, particularly in comparison to faster-moving regions like China and the United States. In China, biotech clusters are expanding rapidly, while the U.S. continues to attract substantial investments and talent.

Three core challenges underlie **Europe's struggle**: the complexity of its regulatory environment, which involves numerous institutions and stakeholders; the difficulty in securing sufficient funding to scale innovations; and the shortage of skilled

professionals to meet the demands of the rapidly evolving biotech landscape. These factors, coupled with fragmented funding and market access, make it harder for Europe to compete globally.

Despite these hurdles, Europe has **unique strengths** that could turn these challenges into opportunities. Its **strong regional networks** and alignment across industries and institutions provide a foundation for collaboration. Moreover, biotech has been identified as a strategic technology for development, and initiatives such as the creation of the first **regional innovation valleys** offer a chance to drive breakthroughs. However, realizing this potential will require greater ambition, a willingness to take risks, and a more unified approach to addressing issues like fragmented funding and regulation.

To remain competitive, Europe must capitalise on its strengths while addressing its structural weaknesses.

10.45 – 11.30 Biotechnology for food: a potential towards a resilient and sustainable food system in Europe

The last session of Cluster Meet Regions Charleroi 2024 / AGORADA+ was held by Betty Milano - European Affairs Officer at Wagralim – and Aline Ferain - Project Manager Officer at FoodWal.

The transformation of Europe's agri-food sector is underway, with biotechnology at the helm of efforts to create a more resilient and sustainable food system. Key organisations like **Wagralim**, the Agri-Food Innovation Cluster of Wallonia, and **FoodWal** are spearheading initiatives to integrate cutting-edge biotechnologies into agricultural practices, fostering innovation and collaboration across the continent.

Since 2006, Wagralim has played a pivotal role in accelerating agri-food innovation through strategic partnerships and global networks. As the coordinator of the **S3 European Partnership “Ingredients for a Circular Economy,”** Wagralim leads the transformative **I3 Biotech4Food** project, enabling companies to adopt biotechnology-driven solutions. This initiative directly supports the European Commission's forthcoming policy, **“Building the Future with Nature: Boosting Biotechnology and Biomanufacturing in the EU,”** launched in March 2024.

At the same time, FoodWal is driving innovation through its **Win4Excellence 2022** program, which addresses the future of food with projects like **MICROBoost**, **PEPTIBOOST**, and **PROTEBoost**. By fostering collaboration between universities, research centers, and industry, FoodWal strengthens the Walloon economy while developing innovative, sustainable food solutions. Together, these efforts mark a critical step forward in ensuring Europe's agri-food sector is prepared to meet the challenges of tomorrow.

12.00 Closing remarks

Giovanni Emma, from DG GROW, pointed out that the European Commission has introduced several tools to support regional development, focusing on empowering clusters and fostering collaboration. The Joint Research Centre (JRC) has presented key initiatives aimed at assisting regions, while DG GROW actively supports clusters through platforms like the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP). Programs such as Clusters Meet Regions and Cluster Talks are designed to engage the cluster community on topics that are most relevant to their needs, ensuring that they have the resources and networks to thrive. These initiatives demonstrate the Commission's ongoing commitment to strengthening clusters as vital drivers of innovation and economic growth.

The importance of clusters in connecting companies and value chains has been underscored by recent developments in the Commission's agenda. During a hearing a few weeks ago, the Vice President responsible for prosperity and industrial strategy emphasized that **prosperity and competitiveness** will remain central priorities in the upcoming Commission. This clear mandate reflects a renewed focus on ensuring that Europe's industrial strategies enhance collaboration, innovation, and regional development, positioning clusters as a cornerstone of future growth.

Our President, **Theo Follings**, highlighted that after 2 intense days of discussion, diverse perspectives emerged, underscoring the importance of learning from one another to accelerate progress. In Wallonia, success hinges on the strength of its ecosystem, which integrates key elements such as RDAs, clusters, strategic investments in land, and infrastructure development. This comprehensive approach serves as a model for **fostering regional growth and innovation**.

For regions aiming to thrive, collaboration is not optional—it is essential. Cooperation across stakeholders and borders is the only path to achieving meaningful and sustainable success. Embracing this mindset will be critical as we move forward, ensuring that regions can harness their collective strengths to remain competitive and resilient.

Lastly, Theodora Jilkova, representing the European Cluster Collaboration Platform (ECCP), announced the upcoming release of new factsheets on cluster policies across 56 countries. These comprehensive resources, set to be available in 2025, will provide valuable insights into global cluster strategies, fostering knowledge sharing and collaboration on an international scale.