1. **GRO/SME/20/C/04-EUROPEAN CLUSTER EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME WITH CLUSTERXCHANGE SCHEME CONNECTING ECOSYSTEMS AND CITIES**

***Type of applicants targeted***

The type of applicants targeted are cluster organisations or business network organisations that manage joint activities, facilitate networking and provide or channel specialised and customised business support services to specialised groups of SMEs. The ClusterXchange scheme will indirectly benefit SMEs, scaling-up support organisations (including technology centres, research institutes, fab labs, (digital) innovation hubs, creative hubs, resource-efficiency service providers, incubators and accelerators) and staff from public authorities at both regional and city/administration levels and innovation agencies.

***Description of the activities***

***Total amount of the action: EUR 6,000,000***

***Rate of co-financing:***

- 75% for costs of the cluster partnerships and management costs of the ClusterXchange scheme.

- 100% for the financial support to third parties (i.e. visiting cluster managers, representatives of scaling-up support organisations and SMEs active in clusters) participating in the ClusterXchange scheme.

***Description of activities:***

The action will support the development of inter-regional sectoral and cross-sectoral cluster cooperation projects and partnerships across Europe. It will foster cluster excellence capacity-building, the professionalisation of specialised and customised SME support and strengthen ties between European ecosystems and cities. It will allow cluster organisations to undertake, amongst others, the following tasks:

**1.** Enhancing cluster manager’s skills towards added-value SME support services;

**2.** Supporting the development of a comprehensive cluster strategy for the individual clusters, including activities to strengthen interregional collaboration and partnership development across Union value-chains;

**3.** Organising twinning, collaboration, networking and learning activities and cooperation projects. The activities can cover, amongst others, efforts to boost internationalisation, market research, foresight and trends analyses, mapping of joint activities, technology/knowledge transfer, to make a better use of industrial data and Artificial Intelligence and promote SME’s uptake of innovation, digitalisation, creativity and resource-efficient and carbon neutral solutions. It can thus include, for instance workshops, study trips and training and education activities for cluster organisations teaming up in European cluster partnerships and for scaling-up support organisations, SMEs and public authorities and innovation agencies of their cluster;

**4.** supporting the implementing of the ClusterXchange mobility scheme (mandatory). This shall cover promotion, recruitment, matching and follow-up of short-term visits or exchanges as well as payment of the lump sum contribution to participants.

The participation in the ClusterXchange mobility scheme will be open to all Union cluster organisations, SMEs, scaling-up support organisations and public authorities and innovation agencies that are active in an Union cluster – beyond the direct beneficiaries and their members. This scheme will offer the possibility for participants to spend a minimum of three working days and up to a maximum of a month in a cluster. It will cover the stays with a lump sum contribution, defined by the European Commission and in continuation of the financial grid and rules of the pilot phase. Priority will go to SMEs that should benefit in half of the matches. Some aspects of the ClusterXchange scheme may be adjusted following feedback.

Cluster managers skills and cluster development, notably in innovation, digitisation and decarbonisation will have a particular emphasis for their relevance for regional smart specialisation strategies. ClusterXchange builds upon the European Cluster Excellence Initiative launched in 2009 to create more world-class clusters across the Union. It is also linked to the efforts to encourage more strategic partnering and SME internationalisation between regions and cities across Europe’s ecosystems, such as under the Smart Specialisation Platform for Industrial Modernisation and Interreg Europe within the Union and the European Cluster Collaboration Platform.

***Expected results of the action:***

The expected results of this action are to set-up of around 12-14 European Strategic Cluster Partnerships for cluster excellence (ESCP-4x) to raise the competitiveness of European clusters and to contribute to the implementation of smart specialisation strategies. The action also aims to help improve the quality, durability and impact of the around 2.3 billion investments planned for cluster support and business networks under the current European Regional Development Fund.

The support to cluster excellence management shall deliver strategic analysis and follow-up actions to unlock the potential for cluster innovation and growth in the framework of the European value chains and emerging trends in industry such as digitisation, circular economy, talent development, upskilling, and the identified priorities of SMEs within the cluster (through surveys and workshops and other means). Moreover, the introduction of the ClusterXchange scheme is expected to make an important contribution to the linking of cluster stakeholders across Europe’s ecosystems and cities by expecting to support over 1000 short-term mobility exchange of SMEs, cluster managers, staff from scaling-up support organisations like technology centres active, public organisations and innovation agencies active in clusters.

This action responds to the high interest in the previous call for proposal of the European Cluster Excellence Programme that implemented for the first time the ClusterXchange scheme. The European Cluster Collaboration Platform (GRO/SME/18/C/03) will act as the support office and will provide the IT tool and promotional activities to facilitate the work of cluster partnerships.

***Implementation***

Implemented by EASME.

***Additional information***

***Specific objective:***

This action aims to strengthen cluster management excellence and to facilitate exchanges and strategic partnering between clusters and specialised eco-systems and cities across Europe through the ClusterXchange mobility scheme. Clusters can associate SMEs to exploit innovation and growth potential. As high quality cluster management and strategic connections between clusters are key element of successful world-class clusters, the programme aims to foster SME competitiveness and assist companies to access global markets successfully.

The measure shall enhance collaboration, networking and learning. It shall improve the quality of specialised and customised business support services provided or channelled to SMEs by helping cluster organisations and their members to learn from each other, explore and take up new solutions and develop strategic plans for a better cooperation at European and international level. Moreover, it shall address training and business needs along the value-chain, that requires SME and cluster managers’ skills to adapt to trends, challenges and opportunities that come along with industrial change.

***Amount allocated to each action:***

The maximum amount is EUR 500,000 per grant action. The expected number of grants would be around 12-14. The total budget for this measure is EUR 6,000,000.

***Indicative implementation timetable:***

- Publication of the call for proposal: Q4 2020.

- Award: Q1 2021.

- Signature of the grant agreements: Q2 2021.

***Qualitative and quantitative indicators for the action:***

**1.** Number of activities undertaken to improve support services by cluster organisations for supporting the growth and competitiveness of their SME members (e.g. training, benchmarking, etc.).

**2.** Number of cluster development plans, strategies, implementation roadmaps and new or enhanced mission statements and vision statements for the cluster.

**3.** Number of analyses, mappings, trends and foresight studies, surveys and workshops undertaken.

**4.** Number of cooperation agreements, joint projects, business agreements, memoranda of understanding and inter-regional partnerships resulting from interactions with other businesses, investors, SME intermediaries, scaling-up support organisations and regional authorities.

**5.** Number of SMEs cluster organisations, staff from scaling-up support organisations, public authorities and innovation agencies registered and participating (i.e. relationships achieved) in the ClusterXchange scheme, number of countries covered and quality of exchanges measured by feedback questionnaires to participants.