

Innovation corridors without borders: How clusters are reshaping Europe's competitive edge

From funding friction to ecosystem orchestration, the Clusters Meet Regions event in Eindhoven revealed a new European playbook: collaborate with purpose, connect across boundaries, and turn clusters into corridors of innovation.

"It's nice to meet and collaborate," said Sander Groenen of Agrifood Capital in his closing words at the *Clusters Meet Regions* event in Eindhoven. "But it's necessary to take action." That was the heartbeat of the two-day gathering, where European cluster leaders, policymakers, and innovation experts came together, not just to share strategies, but to build momentum. "In a world of global tensions," Groenen added, "it's not only about collaborating, but about meeting each other—and doing something. Ask yourself: what will I do tomorrow, and with whom?"

The [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#) (ECCP) organized the event with the motto 'Collaboration for Tomorrow – The Brabant Way'. Paul van Nunen, Managing Director of Brainport Development and one of the hosts of the program, took the opportunity to explain what this *Brabant way* really means: "On the one hand, it's all about knowledge institutions, businesses and government diving into the essential topics together, but on the other hand, it's organizing informal contacts. Getting together around the kitchen table, as we say." In that setting, Brainport Development is the ecosystem orchestrator. Van Nunen: "In our ecosystem, no one is the boss, but all the bosses should chip in. We are here to make that happen. By deploying collaborative programs, doing data analyses, or simply offering them coffee. That's our role."

It was heard throughout the two-day event: "Collaborate for a reason." It sounds simple, almost obvious. Europe's innovation future doesn't lie in working harder within national silos—but in reaching beyond them, through strategic, purposeful collaboration. Clusters, it turns out, are no longer just regional groupings; they are becoming the backbone of a borderless innovation strategy.

Kristina Karanikolova of TNO set the tone early with her call for "Building European Corridors." Not partnerships for partnership's sake, but innovation corridors—living, breathing connections between regions that turn complementary strengths into new value chains. "It's not between two partners," one speaker noted, "it's between two ecosystems."

"Clusters are part of our economic policy"

Jakub Boratyński, Director for Networks & Governance at the European Commission's Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, emphasized the critical role clusters play in strengthening regional economies and future competitiveness. His core message was that clusters are not just local success stories—they are essential tools for embedding regional economies into the broader European and global context, especially during geopolitical and economic uncertainty. He urged policymakers to treat clusters not as side actors but as partners in shaping industrial policy.

Boratyński pointed to Europe's current "geopolitical turbulence" and economic challenges, stressing the urgency for action. Referencing economist Mario Draghi, he noted: "If you don't act, there's a slow agony. Well, this agony might become faster due to the recent developments." He highlighted how clusters are already driving innovation and anticipating

major transitions —such as energy transformation and the green transition—and are particularly active in tackling issues like energy efficiency. He called for more European regions to formally adopt cluster policies, saying: “Let’s make it really part of our economic policy across the board.”

Boratyński underlined the need for Europe to build new, resilient value chains with like-minded countries, and stressed that clusters can serve as key promoters of this shift.

Clusters as catalysts, not clubs

The first panel laid the groundwork: regional ecosystems are necessary but insufficient. To drive real competitiveness, clusters must evolve into gateways —trusted brokers of cross-border collaboration. Sophie Bourez of Wagralim clarified: “Agri -food value chains don’t stop at borders. Interregional collaboration is not an option, it’s a necessity.”

Clusters, in this sense, are not defined by geography but by purpose. As Kristina Šermukšnytė -Alešiūnienė from AgriFood Lithuania put it, platforms like ECCP and the European Cluster Alliance are essential tools to “scale innovation and turn policy into impact.” But that only works if regional and national authorities empower clusters as drivers of transformation—not passive participants in Brussels-based programs.

From funding to functioning ecosystems

Day two of the event brought a shift in focus—from why clusters matter, to how they can sustain themselves. As Steven Berens from ERAC warned, project-based funding is only one piece of the puzzle. “What happens before and after the funding matters even more.”

Several speakers, including Felipe Carasco of Valencia and Veerle de Graef of Flanders’ FOOD, called for smarter, more flexible funding tools. Stephan Rink from AM-Flow said traditional grant cycles are out of sync with startup realities: “Calls once or twice a year don’t fit a startup’s life cycle. Make them monthly—that would help.” He expressed another wish: “Visit the companies applying for R&D grants. See the problems they are solving on the shop floor and how the technology is being developed. This will give rich insights in addition to the formal application forms, helping to spend EU money as wisely as possible, and propelling the EU technology.”

Funding is not just about money. It’s about building trust, aligning cultures, and organizing around shared missions. As panelists agreed, this requires a shift from transactional grants to transformational support—a corridor collaboration model with building blocks that include finance, trust, organization, and mission.

The role of universities and neutral actors

If funding is the engine, universities may be the steering wheel. TU/e’s René Westenbrink reminded the audience that universities are uniquely positioned as conveners of ecosystems. They offer talent, global knowledge, and neutral ground for innovation. But to truly fulfill this role, they must adapt their strategies to focus more on regional impact, not just academic excellence.

Neutrality came up again in panel 3, where Frank Bösenberg of Silicon Saxony emphasized that cluster development is a “marathon, not a sprint.” Consistent, mission-driven management—often independent from direct commercial interests—is key to long-term success.

Start with the mission

One of the most thought-provoking contributions came from Hugo Leyte of the Dutch Ministry of Defense, who brought a candid warning against the all-too-familiar trap of finding common ground *too early*. “We always do this: we find common ground, we start hugging and loving each other, and four weeks later the first cracks appear.” In Leyte’s view, effective collaboration doesn’t begin with consensus but with honesty. “We need to be more honest about our interests —especially when they conflict.” His advice? Don’t waste time chasing premature agreement or writing exhaustive plans just to get stakeholder buy-in. Instead, define a shared vision of future success —“who you want to be in a few years” —and move quickly from intent to action. That mindset, he noted, accelerated progress in recent Defense innovation programs. “Content should always be leading. People want to talk about governance from day one. That’s going to slow you down.”

Not uniform, but unified

The final panel made one thing crystal clear: there is no one-size-fits-all cluster model. Each ecosystem must find its “centre of gravity,” whether university-led, industry-led, or orchestrated by government. What unites these diverse approaches is a shared commitment to systemic challenges: sustainability, digitalisation, and talent. Clusters that succeed don’t just reflect their region’s strengths; they connect them to others. They act as gatekeepers, curators, and accelerators. Or, in the words of one speaker, “Take your role as a gatekeeper seriously.”

A community that acts

Sander Groenen’s closing message was more than a send-off; it was a call to responsibility. “Most of all, we learned international collaboration between clusters is not just about funding or governance. It’s about meeting and understanding each other. It’s about community. And it’s about action.”

As participants returned to their regions, the challenge was clear: don’t just celebrate the insights; turn them into action. In a world of change and global tension, Europe’s future won’t be written by those who meet; it will be shaped by those who move.