

Recommendation Regarding the Austrian Cluster Initiative

Background

Since the launch of the Lisbon process, the EU has implemented an array of long-term measures to strengthen innovative capabilities and the knowledge base in Europe.

In the process, clusters have received increasing recognition as a key innovation policy tool.

As a consequence, the main EU programmes (Structural Funds, FP6/FP7, CIP etc.) have given increasing consideration in their programme definitions to clusters or corporate networks with a predominance of SMEs. In Austria – as in other European countries – a host of further networks and clusters have been created in recent years that have generated considerable value added for their members. While activities and structures exist for clusters in Austria at both the regional and international levels, this is not the case at the national level.

Austria was an early mover in terms of cluster policy, both in Europe and globally. There are currently approximately 40 cluster and network initiatives in Austria, numerous partnerships between the provinces and the first visible federal-provincial partnerships (e.g. LISA). Clusters have positioned themselves as important actors and instruments of innovation policy and of a strength-orientated economic and regional policy. Developments within the European Union must be carefully observed in order to respond to them appropriately. In this context, it is an advantage that the regions (provinces) already have excellent structures in place that must not and should not be changed. Despite the differing approaches adopted by the provinces, common topics can be identified that can be worked on with federal support. For this, it is necessary to adopt a longer-term approach to the topics and develop a culture of cooperation. In early 2008, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, Family and Youth (BMWFJ), therefore launched a coordination process for the cluster initiatives under the name Cluster Platform Austria.

Recommendation

For the reasons stated above, the Austrian Council supports the Austrian cluster initiatives in general and the cluster process (Cluster Platform) of the BMWFJ in particular. To ensure that the cluster process receives the proper support from Austrian innovation policymakers at both the regional, but especially the national level, the Austrian Council recommends:

- The role played by clusters in the Austrian national innovation system is still insufficiently clear. A sound expert report should therefore be used to ascertain this role and how it can form the basis for further activities. The question of clusters covers a number of fields – innovation, SMEs, special technologies etc. – and is currently the subject of intense discussion, but is not essentially a new issue.
- Clusters are currently a largely region-/province-specific topic. While there are appropriate structures and activities at the regional and international levels, they are lacking at the national level. These should therefore be created, building upon existing and tried-and-tested structures.
- Austria must adopt a corresponding focus at the EU level, for example by positioning Austria within the framework of the EU initiative Towards World Class Clusters or by coordinating national measures with the EU Cluster Policy.
- Some of the most important aspects of the cluster platform of the BMWFJ are the focus on federal-provincial cooperation, the involvement of the funding agencies (FFG, aws and FWF) as well as active participation in shaping European programmes.
- The potential of clusters in Austria has not yet been fully leveraged, but at the same time, it should be remembered that it is also possible to have too many clusters. The scale of cluster activities in Austria's national innovation system can only be optimised within the framework of a comprehensive strategy.
- Joint, supra-provincial topics must be identified that can be tackled with the support of the federal level. For this purpose, it is necessary to adopt a longer-term approach to the topics and develop a culture of cooperation. A concept or a strategy must be drawn up that includes a definition of those framework conditions that are essential for this collaboration. The Austrian Council is willing to play a key role in formulating and implementing the strategy.
- The BMWFJ's initiative can contribute to increasing the efficiency of cluster activities by providing a national focus and through cooperation. Prompted by this common interest, the Austrian Council will also accompany the BMWFJ's cluster process.