

TTC “Top Technology Cluster” and GCS “Crossborder Cluster Stimulation”

BORDER	Belgium / Netherlands / Germany
TERRITORY	Euregio Meuse-Rhine / TTR-ELAt
EUROPEAN PROGRAMME	INTERREG IV A Euregio Meuse-Rhine
DURATION	2011 – 2014
PARTNERS	Lead partner: Aachener Gesellschaft für Innovation und Technologietransfer mbH (AGIT) 19 partners representing universities, development agencies and business networks
OBJECTIVE	Creation of cross-border consortia of innovative SMEs
MAIN ACTIVITY	Support for the innovation life cycle through the provision of financial assistance for SMEs' innovative projects tailored to their stage of development





WHAT IS THE CONTEXT OF THE PROJECT?

The Euregio Meuse-Rhine programme is one of the longest-running forms of cross-border cooperation in Europe.

Set up in 1976, it brings together the Province of Limburg, the Province of Liège and the German-Speaking Community in Belgium, the southern part of the Province of Limburg in the Netherlands and the Regio Aachen in Germany, an association composed of the local governments in the Aachen conurbation.

Benefiting from significant multi-thematic institutional cooperation, this region of medium-sized, densely populated towns in the middle of Western Europe is also rich in informal cooperation initiatives which are more sector-specific.

TTR-ELAt (Top Technology Region/Eindhoven-Leuven-Aachen Triangle), which covers a different geographical area from the Euregio programme, was created in 2009 out of the merger of the TTR and ELAt projects, both with an economic dimension, in a region regarded by the OECD as an “innovation leader” (the headquarters of Philips is in Eindhoven) and which benefits from a dense network of SMEs, innovative start-ups and university R&D centres.

The first initiative corresponded to the strategic realisation by the Dutch government of the predominant role and potential of the Province of Limburg in the area of innovation and new technologies in the national economy.

The second dates back to a project in 2004 by the municipalities of Eindhoven, Leuven and Aachen aimed at reinforcing economic cooperation and cross-border innovation projects between the three cities, an initiative which increasingly benefited from the support of local and regional actors, in particular universities. TTR-ELAt therefore made it possible to concretely develop regional complementarities in the main areas of common expertise: chemistry, innovative materials, high-tech systems and the life sciences.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁶ Source: OECD study of regional innovation

WHAT DO THE PROJECTS CONSIST OF?

TTC “TOP TECHNOLOGY CLUSTER”

It was within the framework of this informal cross-border economic cooperation body that the “Towards Top Technology Cluster” TTC project was implemented (2011-2014), co-financed by the INTERREG IV A Euregio Meuse-Rhine programme.

Aimed at the setting-up of cross-border consortia of SMEs and the development of innovative projects in the life sciences, healthcare, innovative materials, ICT and energy sectors, the TTC brings together professional networks, regional development agencies and universities to create a platform for contact and cooperation.

Networking and stimulation of activity are brought about through a combination of three pillars of action:

» Networking events

The networking events, which can be single-sector or interdisciplinary, provide an opportunity for both business leaders and university and research centre staff to meet their counterparts from the partner regions with the aim of establishing professional contacts. These networking tools take different forms: public forums (socialising events), meetings between businesses (B2B matchmaking) or workshops designed to seek out partnerships (brokerage workshops). Around fifty events have taken place, with about 3,500 participants.

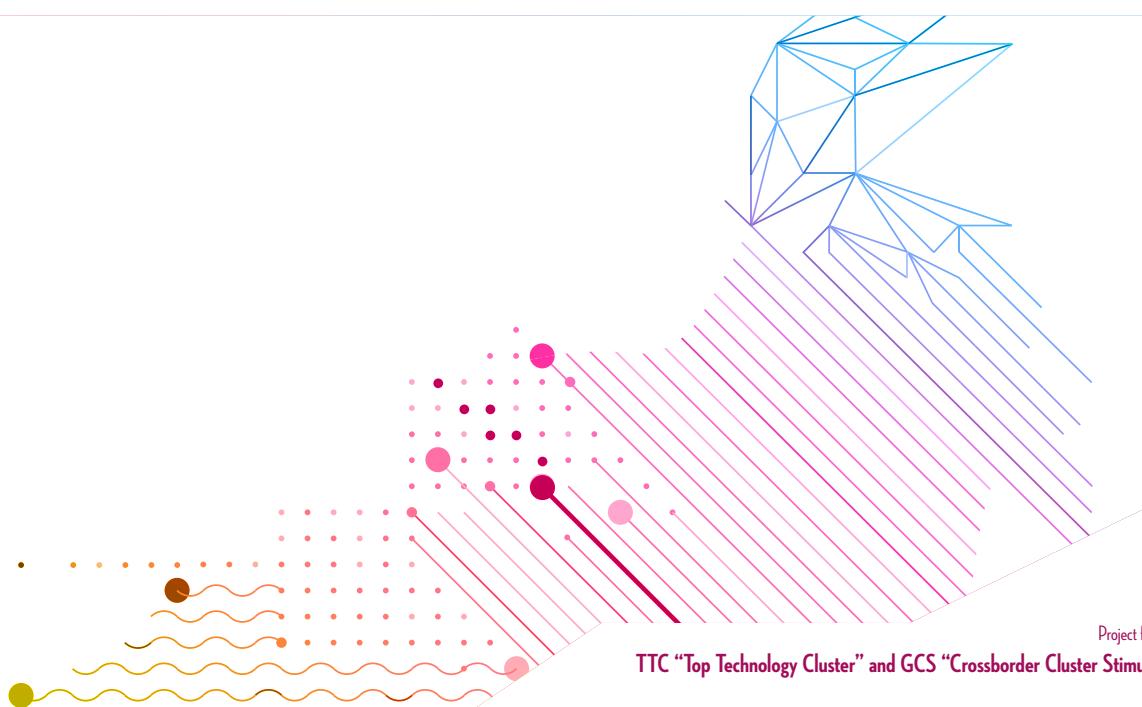
» Business development support (BDS)

Personalised support is then offered to businesses wishing to progress their projects, find partners or establish cooperation partnerships. Interested entrepreneurs are invited in the course of interviews to set out their ideas for development and their ambitions, as well as their assessment of the technical issues and market opportunities. A network of BDS managers that covers the whole of the territory of the TTR-ETAt region and available to entrepreneurs. These meetings enable the project team to assess the cross-border potential of candidates. More than 200 companies have benefited from this type of support since the start of the project.

In this second phase, the BDS managers also developed “technology and market roadmaps” in the cross-border region for several economic sectors in order to identify trends and assess the evolution of the regional economy for the next two, five and ten years. These roadmaps were discussed in roundtable sessions with businesses. This enabled the businesses to develop new ideas and to translate these into concrete project proposals, particularly with a view to the GCS initiative.

» Financing tools

Lastly, financial assistance supports the development of projects and the implementation of the SME consortia. Innovation vouchers, with a maximum value equivalent to €5000, are designed to offer rapid assistance to SMEs/universities/research centres in the initial stage of their cross-border activities. The objective is to provide rapid and concrete assistance in accordance with the needs of the cross-border partnerships being set up. In concrete terms, a voucher gives the right to support from a BDS manager or from another structure within the Euregio Meuse-Rhine programme. It can be used to undertake feasibility studies, to search for patents, or for the use of laboratories or testing facilities for prototypes, etc. In total, out of the 31 candidates, 21 were awarded vouchers (eight for high-tech systems, seven for life sciences, five for energy and one for innovative materials), representing an investment of €105,000.



GCS “CROSSBORDER CLUSTER STIMULATION”

The second project, GCS “Cross-border Cluster Stimulation”, is a continuation of the work of the TTC, being also co-financed by the INTERREG programme.

This project consists of an innovation fund, amounting to €4.7 million, which is aimed at cross-border innovation projects between technology sector SMEs.

Grants range from €100,000 to €250,000 per project and are likewise not repayable, provided the beneficiaries have own funds equal to the amount of the grant. Three calls for proposals have been issued and 22 cross-border R&D projects selected, with a total of €13.2 million invested. Selection of the consortia has been made by a group of experts, based on a number of criteria: sector (cutting edge technologies), the innovative nature of the proposal, the market outlook, the international dimension of the businesses’ activities and the proportion of self-financing of the project. Some 80% of the projects co-financed by the GCS innovation fund had been initiated by the TTC project. In addition, many more ideas for innovative cooperation have been generated and launched without European financing.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THIS GOOD PRACTICE BE ADOPTED IN OTHER CROSS-BORDER TERRITORIES?

Financial support to SMEs is a highly problematic issue for cross-border cooperation programmes, with the extremely strict regulation of state aid (*de minimis*) greatly reducing the scope for businesses to receive European funds. The TTC and GCS projects nevertheless make it possible to comply with the rules concerning state aid.

These two initiatives also make it possible to better coordinate the sometimes divergent life cycles of businesses and European programmes. Initially intended as a sole project, the partners in the end opted for two projects in order to adapt to the timeframe of innovative projects. The TTC gets involved at the initial research stage, while the GCS supports the realisation and development of new products.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

<http://www.ttc-innovation.eu/>
<http://www.gcs-innovation.eu/fr-be/gcs-homepage-2.aspx>

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WHAT PLANS FOR THE FUTURE?

For the 2014-2020 programme period, the partners are working on drawing up a Sustainable Innovation Programme. This programme will focus both on making links between players from research and business (S2B – Science to Business) and on relationships between economic players themselves (B2B – Business to Business). The S2B component aims to develop the transfer of technologies to businesses through a voucher system, a fund inspired by the Sciences Offensive project (Offensive Sciences, financed by the 2007-2013 Upper Rhine programme) and capitalisation activities. The B2B component, for its part, is focused solely on the pre-competitive phase, in order to comply with the regime governing state aid. It will include the creation of an Open Innovation Cluster similar to the TTC project, an Open Innovation Fund similar to the GCS project, and an Open Innovation Loan.