
Executive Summary

**Evaluation of „go-cluster“ –
A programme of the Federal Ministry for
Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi)**

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A study for

The Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy (BMWi)
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1 Introduction and assignment

“Go-cluster” is a cluster excellence programme in Germany. It supports Germany’s most capable innovation clusters and their transformation into international clusters of excellence. The initiative helps cluster managements to professionalise and to raise the profile of German innovation clusters.

With its focus on cluster management the “go-cluster” programme relates to its predecessor “Kompetenznetze Deutschland”, an initiative that supported Germany’s best innovation networks from 2007 to 2012. With the launch of “go-cluster” on July 1st 2012, the support has been modified with a stronger focus on the **professionalisation of cluster management organisations**. These changes included

- the application of uniform assessment criteria that comply with **European quality standards** and the absorption of costs to obtain the Silver Label of the European Cluster Excellence Initiative (ECEI),
- the implementation of the **Clusterplattform Deutschland**, a comprehensive approach of the BMWi and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) to increase the international visibility of participating innovation clusters,
- Proportionate financial support for the cluster management organisations for the development and implementation of **innovative services** as well as **cross clustering projects**.

In addition, “go-cluster” provides **support and consultancy for the BMWi** that is carried out by the service provider for the programme. These services comprise the analysis of national and international cluster policy as well as the coordination of the exchange with the federal states and programme stakeholders in other European countries.

To **verify the further development of the framework for support** the BMWi has commissioned an evaluation of the “go-cluster” programme for the period July 1st 2012 until June 30th 2015. The evaluation has been carried out by the INTERVAL GmbH in cooperation with CONABO UG.

This executive summary explains the study’s methodical approach and presents the central findings of the evaluation. It also contains recommendations for the further development of the programme.

2 Methodical approach

The evaluation was carried out from August 1st until November 30th 2015. Given the short period of time, research questions on programme success have been analysed in an integrated way **combining quantitative with qualitative research methods**.

The investigation started with the development of a **logical model** for the “go-cluster” interventions. The model displays the objectives of the programme as well as the suspected treatment effects (output, outcome, impact). It has guided the further steps of the evaluation. The identified programme objectives are (1) increased **reputation** of the participating innovation clusters, (2) **professionalisation** of the cluster management organisations, (3) enhanced **visibility** of participating innovation clusters, (4) more **transparency** of German innovation clusters toward third parties as well as (5) closer **relations** of innovation clusters with other clusters.

Further analytical steps in the evaluation design were

- The **analysis of programme documents and process data**. This has set the ground for the characterisation of the participating cluster management organisations (size, age, location etc.) and helped to trace the range and scope of the service provision within the course of the programme.
- An **online survey** among all 100 cluster management organisations. The results of the survey have provided insights into the assessment of the programme services / service provision by the participating cluster managements. Furthermore it revealed (subjectively) perceived beneficial effects of these services.
- **Qualitative interviews** with 13 cluster management organisations and 8 member firms. The interviews helped to deepen and verify the statements of the cluster management organisations in the online survey.
- 11 **qualitative interviews** with national stakeholders and international experts. An important aspect of these interviews was the suitability of the framework of the “go-cluster” programme in the context of cluster policy in Germany and Europe.

The results of these steps have been synthesised and evaluated in an integrated manner. The data gathered from the online survey were evaluated descriptively including bivariate analysis. For the impact assessment, identified correlations were carefully checked against the results of the qualitative interviews.

3 Results and recommendations for action

The evaluation concludes that the **“go-cluster” programme makes an important contribution to innovation promotion** in Germany by raising cluster excellence. Therefore, it should **be continued**.

The overall approach of the programme (promotion of cluster excellence through the professionalisation of cluster managements) has been scientifically acknowledged as being highly relevant. It also meets the state of the art of cluster policy in Europe. **The approach should therefore be maintained** – not least of all considering the relatively low amount of total public funding of less than 80 Euros per cluster member.¹

As a federal programme “go-cluster” can functionally supplement existing initiatives of regional cluster promotion by meeting the requirements of excellent innovation clusters that operate across the borders of federal states. The “Clusterplattform” is generally suited to **enhance the visibility** of the presented excellence initiatives also at an international level. However, this potential has not been fully exploited so far (see below).

The further development of the approach from the initiative “Kompetenznetze Deutschland” towards “go-cluster” also receives a very positive assessment. A comparison of the results of both evaluations reveals substantial **increases in the beneficial effects of the programme**.² The highest increases relate to the programme goals of **professionalisation, visibility** and closer **relations** of innovation clusters. Approval rates relating to these effects were from three to four times higher as compared to the last evaluation. These increases show the effective implementation of the new approach and underline the **high degree of attainment of goals** within the “go-cluster” programme.

Critical remarks have to be made regarding the programme goal **reputation**. Although more than a half of all cluster managements have stated reputational gains vis-à-vis political stakeholders, data analysis has revealed that these are **partially overlaid by the effects of the European Labels of Cluster Excellence**, particularly the Gold Label. At the level of business partners the perceived reputational gains are considerably lower (around 25 %) and have dropped as compared to the previous programme.

These results support other findings of this evaluation. The study showed that the **trademark of the programme “go-cluster – exzellent vernetzt” is not as established** as its predecessor “Kompetenznetze Deutschland”. It was also not possible to build upon the

¹ The 100 participating innovation clusters have together around 14.500 cluster members (companies and research facilities). The number is a projection of the survey results. It is based on the answers of 72 cluster managements.

² INTERVAL GmbH has also carried out the evaluation of the initiative “Kompetenznetze Deutschland” in 2008 / 2009. The basis for this is the perceptions of the surveyed cluster management organisations.

hitherto achieved international reputation. This comes as no surprise as brand development has not been a focus of the programme so far.

In some instances, interviewed stakeholders and experts also expressed doubts regarding the enforcement of the excellence requirements. This further hampers the establishment of the programme and its reputation.

On the basis of these conclusions, the evaluators have derived a set of **recommendations for action** that can contribute to the successful continuation of the programme. The recommendations relate to the following aspects:

- (1) **Process of selection and benchmarking:** The “go-cluster” programme is strongly oriented towards a set of criteria for assessing the excellence status of a cluster management organisation. The set is agreed by European cluster experts and its use is widely spread and accepted. Yet there are doubts as to whether all criteria are suited to have a positive effect for the cluster members. Therefore it is recommended to check the applicability and significance of these criteria on a regular basis and, if necessary, to adjust them to the overall objectives of the “go-cluster” programme.
- (2) **Quality assurance:** During the course of the programme, the member base has been revised and validated from time to time. This underscores the quality demand of the programme. Evaluation results indicate that some of the participating innovation clusters do not fully comply with the applicable requirements for membership.³ To maintain the programme’s claim of excellence, the evaluators recommend to clarify the expectations towards membership (including criteria for exclusion) and to verify the compliance with the requirements on a continuous basis.
- (3) **Raise the profile of the programme:** In order to strengthen the reputation and visibility of the “go-cluster” programme in Germany and abroad, the profile of the programme should be fine-tuned. For this end it is recommended to establish the provided “go-cluster” services for management professionalisation as a *unique selling point* of the programme and to clearly communicate this.
- (4) **Promotion of the programme:** In order to further strengthen the programme’s reputation and visibility, measures of promotion should also be intensified. The already adopted approach to interlink and synchronise the programme with the activities of other institutions should be expanded. Special attention should be paid to the stakeholders of foreign trade and investment promotion as they have the potential to market the innovation clusters as a spearhead of Germany’s innovation capacity. In addition, the range of information offered by the programme (including specialised publications) should be extended and advertised in a more prominent way (preferably via the “Clusterplattform Deutschland”).

³ The observation refers especially to the validity of the cluster label and the financial base of the cluster management organisation.

- (5) Strengthen exchange with the outside:** A further possibility to reinforce the external perception of the programme could lie in the partial opening of the services to clusters from outside the programme. So far, the numbers of participants at the events with international attendance were relatively low and cross clustering has been primarily used to reinforce the exchange with other programme members. The evaluators recommend the BMWi to promote cross clustering with third parties (esp. on international level) by offering appropriate financial incentives.
- (6) Expansion of programme services:** The various courses and seminars offered by the “go-cluster” programme are considered very favourable by almost all surveyed cluster management organisations. The evaluation also shows that they make an important contribution to the professionalisation of cluster management. However, according to several cluster management organisations, the effort for participating is relatively high (esp. time expenses). Therefore it is recommended to spread the events more evenly across Germany or to bundle several courses to one greater event (e.g. congress, summer school) to reduce the costs for attendance.
- (7) Strengthen links with other programmes and cluster policies:** The “go-cluster” programme is located at the interface of regional, economic and innovation policy. Consequently, the programme cannot be viewed separately from other initiatives. In order to achieve the desired stimulus for innovation and technology development, the “go-cluster” programme should intensify links with other state subsidy programmes and support work towards a national cluster strategy. Other European countries have already established a national cluster strategy and according to several experts, such a strategy can prevent inefficiencies in state promotion. The establishment of the Bund-Länder-Committee is an important step in this direction.