

# 1. Introducing the ACENET Thematic Network

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## 1.1 Purpose

The overall intention of the ACENET thematic network is to accelerate cluster building processes and the development of company network initiatives by the sharing of good and best practice methodologies between a number of European regions with experience in this field of innovation policy. Complementary to this primary intention, the Thematic Network will also facilitate contacts between companies belonging to clusters of the member regions and thereby foster business opportunities and encourage the involvement organisations and companies in trans-European collaboration activities.

## 1.2 Approach

The efforts within the Thematic Network to achieve these two intentions follow a main line of activities designed to enable the member regions with common interest in cluster building methodology and in the fostering of clusters relationships to meet and jointly develop:

1. *Effective processes and methodologies for the set up and management of company clusters.*

This includes the sharing of experiences and know-how, between innovation supporting players, on how to initiate, mentor and manage cluster building processes. Within the Thematic Network the know-how of the participating regions will provide a unique source of leading edge knowledge which all regions can profit from. The combined knowledge of the member regions will enable the design of trans-regionally validated recommendations on how to manage cluster- and network processes.

2. *Business opportunities for SMEs within and between the clusters.*

In addition to helping support actors to increase their knowledge, the Thematic Network provides a forum for facilitating contacts between companies belonging to the clusters of the participating regions. In particular, business contacts will be facilitated by the trans-regional collaborative establishment of cluster communication systems. The new and deepened contacts between the regions are used to examine and exploit business opportunities for the industry of the regions.

At the heart of learning of the Thematic Network are the events and study visits that are arranged by the members of ACENET. The study visits provide a platform for the members to present successful approaches to clusters and company networks in their respective region. Each study visit is planned to last for approximately two and a half day. The detailed design and content of the study visits is up to the member hosting the event. In order to enable a comprehensive and efficient transfer of successful methodologies the set up of the study visit will give all relevant regional players the opportunity to present their views on the past and present developments of the initiative. This approach would mean that the study visits involve:

- Regional (or national) decision makers giving their view on the rationales of the initiative.
- The co-ordinators of the initiative which are deeply involved with day-to-day management but not belonging to the target group.

- Companies of the main target group of the initiative giving their opinions on the appropriateness, methodology and management of the approach. Such companies could also be large enterprises being part of the steering system of the initiative.

The study visits are carried out in all regions which can show successful cluster initiatives involving public players as well as private companies. Except for providing the members with a unique source of first hand know-how enabling them to profit from the experiences made in successful regions, the study visits will have several important secondary effects. Such secondary effects are e.g.:

- The possibility for participants to establish/deepen contacts with colleagues from other European regions.
- The possibility for region representatives to meet and discuss possible projects on bi- or trilateral basis.
- The members are enabled to market their regions' industry within a network of successful regions which might provide potential markets.
- The image gain received by belonging to a network of regions with high reputation.

ACENET's main tool for learning is the study visits and the discussions during these events. The ambition is that the events will focus on different aspects of cluster development in which the arranging member has specific experience. A number of such aspects – so called hot topics - have been defined by the members. A hot topic is an issue commonly deemed to be of high importance when trying to develop clusters. The hot topics defined are:

- Communication
- Company-to-company interaction
- Public-to-company interaction
- Financing

In between meetings two main tools are used to keep up intensity of network activities, the case study reports covering the events and the homepage. All in all, the study visits, the case studies and the homepage provide the foundation for further contacts between the members. ACENET promotes such bi- or trilateral contacts.

### **1.3 Members**

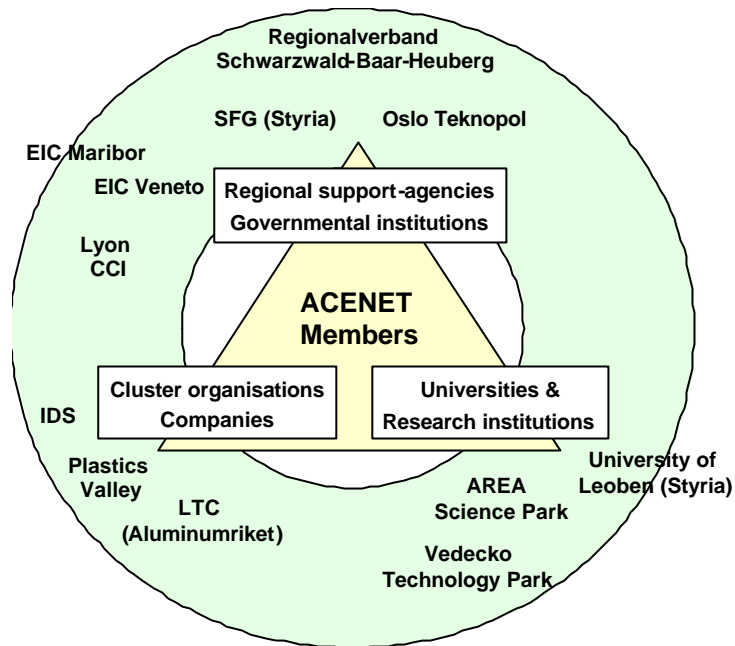
Having a network on cluster support implies the involvement of different kind of actors. To get a holistic support system, a cluster needs to involve three different kinds of actors, namely:

- Companies and cluster organisations (the private sphere)
- Representatives from the research landscape, e.g. universities and research institutes (the competence resources).
- Regional support agencies and governmental institutions (the financiers and policy makers).

The picture below maps all ACENET member organisations according to their belonging to the different spheres.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A member list can be found in Appendix 1



The ACENET network has members from all three spheres, which on one hand gives an opportunity to practice the essence of cluster communication hands on, on the other hand presents some challenges of understanding the motivation and function of the involved actors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> To overcome this possible communication barrier, a large part of the second TN-meeting was dedicated to a “hot topic” discussion on problems and solutions to trans-national communication and culture barriers. This has led to a greater understanding of how different actors act and react in certain situation and has made it easier for the network members to communicate effectively.



### **1.1.2 Objectives**

The vision of Aluminiumriket is to become a regional marketplace and growth environment for the aluminium business with products and services in world-class. Aluminiumriket should be an attractive and stimulating environment for innovative companies as well as residents with high demands on quality of life.

The goal is that companies within Aluminiumriket shall cooperate with each other and with their customers and suppliers, and in doing so increasingly developing the competence in production, quality and customer responsiveness.

Developing close relationships between companies and potential knowledge resources is also a core objective. The goal is to offer technical support from industrial research institutes universities and regional technology centres to individual companies or groups of companies.

### **1.1.3 Members – companies & support organisation**

Aluminiumriket has 85 members - 72 companies, 9 municipalities and 4 counties. The members of Aluminiumriket participate in a Partnership where they cooperate to realise the purpose and goals of Aluminiumriket. The Partnership includes not only companies, but also representatives from the county and municipalities as well as from universities and technical centres. Partnership meetings are held four to five times a year, where current issues are discussed as well as company presentations are held. These meetings are free of charge for members.

The fee for a full membership is 500 SEK (approximately 55 Euro) per year. In addition to this, there is a service fee for full access to the different services and activities offered by Aluminiumriket, such as business contacts, participation in conferences and study trips at self cost. The service fee is set determined to the number of employees:

### **1.1.4 The Aluminiumriket development process**

Aluminiumriket started with a core network of companies and organisations, that later formed into a cluster when the members gradually realised that they could benefit from taking it a step further. Vinnova, the Swedish Agency for Innovation Systems, sponsored Aluminiumriket with a total of about € 880 000 in the initial phase. Additionally, municipalities and other authorities also pay for being members, and Aluminiumriket also gets some EU-grants.

The management group has personal contacts with more than 200 companies on a regular basis. To attract new members, the first five participant meetings, where interesting speakers talk, are for free. Aluminiumriket also arrange seminars, where non-members pay reduced fees, just to make them see the greater potential of joining the cluster as full members.

The activity during the first financial year in Aluminiumriket was rather intensive. The number of members exceeded target and reached over 70 member companies and 9 municipalities along with the 4 participating counties. During the first year, the Profile centre (profilcentrum) in Vetlanda and the Sheet metal centre (plåtcentrum) in Olofström were established. As a result, there are now competence centres within foundry and castings, extruded profile technique and sheet metal technique within Aluminiumriket.

About thirty of the companies in Aluminiumriket have in six different groups established different kind of alliances and business developing. In contacts with some of the industry research institutes about 10 of the companies have achieved help with development efforts and technical problem solving in relation to production interruptions.

Within the area of competence development, the activity has also been intense. For example seminars have been held within Eurocode 9, hydro forming of aluminium products,

aluminium in vehicle components and a number of shorter seminars in relation to the partnership meetings that have been held during the year.

To further strengthen activities within Aluminiumriket, the newsletter Alu-info has been established and is distributed to all members. By focusing on short news articles, Alu-info informs about e.g. current events/activities within research and development, training courses, competence support, marketing, new products/companies and other developments within Aluminiumriket.

For 2002 the management is working with creating a financial plan that will strengthen the establishment of networks within Aluminiumriket and to give the companies even better support in their development.

## **2.2 The region of Veneto**

Veneto is one of the twenty regions making up the Italian territory. The region has its own political and administrative structure although enjoying a margin of autonomy somewhat limited by the state administration. Within the Veneto territory there are seven provinces: Belluno, Padua, Rovigo, Treviso, Venice, Verona, Vicenza - and a good 581 municipalities.

Despite the fact that the Veneto region is a densely populated area with almost no raw materials, where 4,400,000 people are concentrated in an area of just 18,300 square kilometres, it has managed to become one of Italy's most important and dynamic economic areas. Bear this in mind when considering the profound transformation that took place in only 20 years (from 1971 to 1991), turning Veneto, previously a region of agriculture and traditional emigration, into a leader in industrial development. In this period, the number of production units almost doubled from 174 to 301 thousand, and the total number of employees grew from 444 to 621 thousand.

### **1.1.5 Rationale**

Today, Italy is characterised by different growth rates, which may vary from area to area. For instance, as the north-west is slowing down, and the south has become unable to catch up with international competition, the middle north-east has shown a remarkably better development rate. The secret to this development is to a large extent due to the special characteristics of the industrial districts.

In particular there are three factors that distinguish Veneto districts from other regions in the north and south, and these will be elaborated upon in this study:

1. The new law for districts in Veneto
2. The economic culture for the districts, which is characterised by many SMEs, self organisation and an overlapping of districts.
3. Internationalisation of the districts, where most products are identified with a "Made in Italy" quality brand, e.g. in textile, furniture, leather, fashion and sports.

### **1.1.6 Characteristics of the Industrial Districts in Veneto**

One of the most peculiar and successful factors of the Venetian economy are represented by the INDUSTRIAL DISTRICTS, territorial areas characterised by an elevated concentration of small enterprises, highly specialised in a productive section: a system born in a spontaneous way, without a planned strategy. The contribution of industrial districts/clusters to the regional economic performance is huge: for instance, we just remind that the sole province of Vicenza, first Italian province in the pro-capita export list for the year 2000, contributed to the regional economic performance by 50%.

The Regional Council of Veneto has recognized 19 areas as Industrial Clusters in 1999. The greater concentration of industrial clusters can be found along the Verona-Vicenza-Treviso axis, due to the traditional specialisation historically characterising these provinces. The main cluster, as to number of employers working in SMEs, is the textile-clothing district of the Pedemontana, followed by the Area Meridionale cluster. After that, we find the cluster of the wood-furniture of the Sinistra Piave, furniture of the Bassanese and the metal-mechanics of the Schio-Thiene area.

### **1.1.7 Objectives**

The regional government have pointed out some problem areas and bottlenecks for economic development in the districts. In general, there is:

- a lack of communication between support actors and SME's.
- a shortage of labour in the region.

Many districts are marked by labour intensiveness. As the economy is growing, there is also a growing labour demand; this has implied three problems for companies in the region:

- increased labour costs,
- production is relocated to low cost countries, or
- firms are closed down.

These risks points to technological development as a critical factor for the region, making it possible for companies to stay in the region and being competitive on the world market.

- A growing requirement of developed infrastructure.

Since the industrial districts are seen as a focal point in the industrial system of Veneto, and since they are facing a tough future due to harsh international competition, there is a consensus that they have to be strengthened by governmental intervention.

### **1.1.8 Support organisations**

The industrial districts are mainly constituted of SMEs. Many districts also have a district organisation taking care of lobbying and common interests of the companies in the district.

The districts are mainly supported by membership fees and funds from the Chamber of Commerce. However policy making bodies, such as Regione Veneto also plays a vital role in the economical development of the districts. Other important organisations are the research organisations (4 Universities and several Science Parks) as well as a number of other special agencies (Eurosportello Veneto etc).

Industrial districts are today seen as a fundament in the economic development of the Veneto region and the heart of the industrial system in the region. Since the regional industry is facing a tough future due to harsh international competition, there is a consensus that the economic development have to be strengthened by governmental intervention and that the industrial districts are the proper target to aim the support.

### 3. ACENET commonalities and additional effects

In addition to the common interest of learning of to develop cluster, the ACENET members also have other commonalities such as similarities of the regional industries. The table below illustrates some common characteristics of the members with respect to regional strong industries.

X = Existing Cluster

v= Other sector of interest

ACENET memeber	Industry/cluster								
	Bio-tech	Mari-time	Agro-Food	IT	Auto-motive	Plastics	Metal	Textiles	Wood
Länsteknikcentrum					v		X		
Steirische Wirtschaftsförderung					X		X		X
Lyon CCI - Industry and services division	v				X	v	v		
Vedecko-technologicky park, a.s. Ostrava					v		v	v	v
Oslo Teknopol IKS	X	X		X					
Regionalverband Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg				v	v		v		
MRA Maribor Development Agency EIC Maribor					v		v		
Industriellt Distrikt Skaraborg					X		v		
Tarnowski Klaster Przemyslowy						X			
EIC Veneto		X	X				v	X	X
AREA Science Park, Trieste		v	X	v		v	v	v	X

Such commonalities have been identified as a strong driver for bilateral activities. Consequently, a number of contacts have taken place outside of the ACENET formal events and some effects of these contacts can already be registered.

## Appendix

## List of members and contact data

No.	Org	Region	E-mail
1.	Länsteknikcentrum (LTC) Elmiavägen S-554 54 Jönköping, Sweden <a href="http://www.ltc.se">www.ltc.se</a>	Aluminiumriket (Sweden)	<a href="mailto:erik@ltc.se">erik@ltc.se</a> <a href="mailto:ebba@ltc.se">ebba@ltc.se</a>
2.	Steirische Wirtschaftsförderung (SFG) Nikolaiplatz 2 A-8020 Graz, Austria <a href="http://www.sfg.at">www.sfg.at</a>	Styria (Austria)	<a href="mailto:peter.perkonigg@sfg.at">peter.perkonigg@sfg.at</a> <a href="mailto:wolfgang.schabereiter@notes.unileoben.ac.at">wolfgang.schabereiter@notes.unileoben.ac.at</a>
3.	Lyon CCI - Industry and services division Place de La Bourse 69289 Lyon Cedex 02, France <a href="http://www.lyon.cci.fr">www.lyon.cci.fr</a>	Rhone-Alpes (France)	<a href="mailto:guyon@lyon.cci.fr">guyon@lyon.cci.fr</a>
4.	Vedecko-technologicky park, a.s. Ostrava 17. listopadu 2172/15 708 00 Ostrava-Poruba, Czech Republic <a href="http://www.vtpo.cz">www.vtpo.cz</a>	North Moravia and Silesia Region (Czech Republic)	<a href="mailto:jaromir.dudek@vtpo.cz">jaromir.dudek@vtpo.cz</a> <a href="mailto:radim.mrazek@vtpo.cz">radim.mrazek@vtpo.cz</a>
5.	Oslo Teknopol IKS Akersgt 13, P.O. Box 527 Sentrum N-0105 Oslo, Norway <a href="http://www.oslo.teknopole.no">www.oslo.teknopole.no</a>	Oslo (Norway)	knut.halvorsen@oslo.teknopol.no jon-gunnar.aasen@oslo.teknopol.no
6.	Regionalverband Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg Johannesstrasse 27 78056 Villingen-Schwenningen, Germany <a href="http://www.regionalverband-sbh.de">www.regionalverband-sbh.de</a>	Schwarzwald-Baar- Heuberg (Germany)	<a href="mailto:rainer.kaufmann@regionalverband-sbh.de">rainer.kaufmann@regionalverband-sbh.de</a>
7.	MRA Maribor Development Agency Euro Info Centre Maribor Glavni trg 17, SI-2000 Maribor, Slovenia <a href="http://eic.mra.si">http://eic.mra.si</a>	City of Maribor and Podravje region (Slovenia)	<a href="mailto:vladimir.rudl@mra.si">vladimir.rudl@mra.si</a>
8.	Industriellt Distrikt Skaraborg (IDS) Box 133 541 23 Skövde, Sweden <a href="http://www.idskaraborg.nu">www.idskaraborg.nu</a>	Skaraborg (Sweden)	<a href="mailto:claes@contriva.se">claes@contriva.se</a> <a href="mailto:info@idskaraborg.nu">info@idskaraborg.nu</a>
9.	Tarnowski Klaster Przemyslowy "Plastikova Dolina" S.A. (Plastics Valley) ul. Mickiewicza 833-100 Tarnów, Poland <a href="http://www.wsz.tarnow.pl/plastvalley">www.wsz.tarnow.pl/plastvalley</a>	Plastics Valley (Poland)	<a href="mailto:lrt1967@yahoo.com">lrt1967@yahoo.com</a> <a href="mailto:tgut@wsz.tarnow.pl">tgut@wsz.tarnow.pl</a>
10.	EIC Veneto Via Sansovino, 9 30173 - Mestre (VE), Italy <a href="http://www.eicveneto.it">www.eicveneto.it</a>	Veneto (Italy)	<a href="mailto:oliva@eicveneto.it">oliva@eicveneto.it</a> <a href="mailto:mazzariol@eicveneto.it">mazzariol@eicveneto.it</a>
11.	AREA Science Park, Trieste Padriciano, 99 34012 Trieste (Italy) <a href="http://www.area.trieste.it">www.area.trieste.it</a>	Friuli-Venezia Giulia region (Trieste, Italy)	<a href="mailto:gabriele.gatti@area.trieste.it">gabriele.gatti@area.trieste.it</a>
	inno AG Karlstrasse 45b P.O Box 3366, D-76019 Karlsruhe, Germany <a href="http://www.inno-group.com">www.inno-group.com</a>	Karlsruhe (Germany)	<a href="mailto:n.gabrielsson@inno-group.com">n.gabrielsson@inno-group.com</a>