



FOR SMES AND CLUSTERS

# LESSONS LEARNED & RECOMMENDATIONS

## EXCELIVING - EXCELLENT LIVING ENVIRONMENTS

The EXCELIVING project is focused on the habitat value chain with a cross-sectorial approach to its different sectors and dimensions: construction building materials, furniture and lighting, home automation, welfare technology, etc.

## EXCELIVING - Partnership

The consortium is an alliance between 5 specialized clusters and innovation hubs with distinct focuses: construction building materials, furniture and lighting, home automation, welfare technology. Each partner in this consortium contributes unique expertise and resources, collectively striving for innovation, sustainability, and progress in their respective industries, thus fostering a collaborative environment for ongoing advancements.

## CHAPTERS



### Tested Mechanisms and Services

The EXCELIVING consortium implemented various mechanisms aimed at fostering exchange, capacity building and growth within the represented industries. We will highlight what we did, how we did it and what worked.



### Recommendations - Clusters and SMEs

Lessons we have learned during the implementation of the project, applicable both for clusters and SMEs.



### Expert insights - Secrets for long-term relationships with SMEs

Interview-like section of cluster managers providing valuable insights both for clusters and SMEs.



### DID YOU KNOW?

Lessons we have learned during the implementation of the project, applicable both for clusters and SMEs.





# INTRODUCTION

A guideline of lessons learned and recommendations for clusters and SMEs to address the current sector crisis due to the COVID-19 facilitating innovation, networking, and new business opportunities from a cross-sectional dimension.

In today's evolving world, the imperative to address climate change and foster digital transformation has become more pressing than ever. To achieve a greener, more digital future, various strategies, programs, and initiatives have been put in place at both national and international levels. Among these, the European Union has taken a proactive stance with funding programs like Horizon Europe and the Innovation Investment Initiative (I3). These programs seek to drive research, innovation, and investments that are not only environmentally sustainable but also digitally transformative.

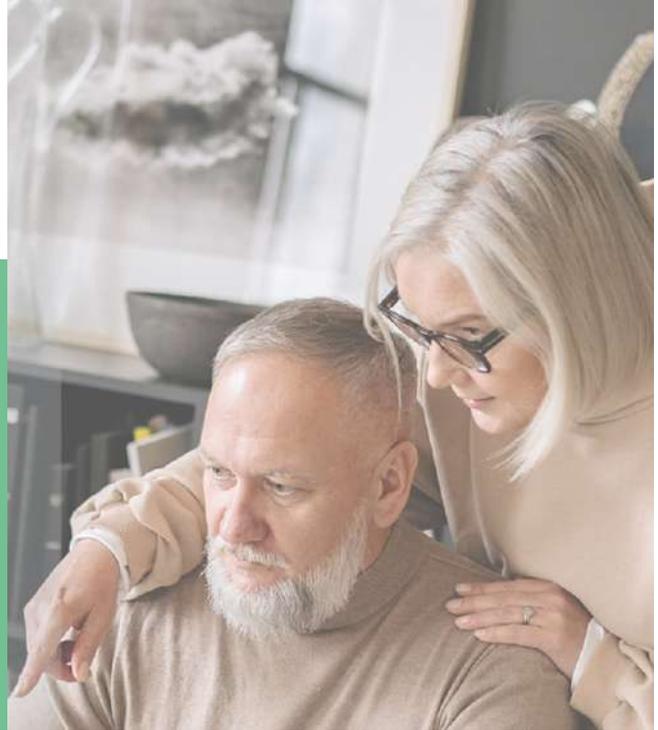
Moreover, extensive studies have shed light on the pressing need for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to adopt green practices in their operations. This shift is further underscored by the EU's stringent requirements for carbon emissions reduction, demonstrating the paramount importance of transitioning to a more sustainable and digitally driven economy.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has become the landmark for one of the greatest recessions ever experienced. As such, many Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) were exposed to financial and employment-related losses. However, not all industry sectors suffered the same negative rates of income or job disruptions and there is still limited evidence on the matter. In addition, the invasion of Ukraine from Russia has become the trigger for a new wave of economic crisis for all business sectors and sizes.

SMEs constitute the core of both the European and the global economy as the most numerous business population. On the other hand, SMEs present a so-called "liability of smallness" which makes them even more sensitive to economic and market disruptions. Furthermore, the COVID-19 crisis (and its continuation) has had a double knock-out effect on the global economy. It has conditioned both a crisis of supply and demand. Thus, several recent studies have acknowledged the presence of correlation and causation links generating both new costs and opportunities for SMEs.

## OBJECTIVE

This guideline of lessons learned and recommendations is designed to provide clusters and SMEs a strategic overview on how to navigate the present uncertainties, to support innovation and growth within the habitat industry, following the efforts of 24 months of implementing the [EXCELIVING - Excellent living environments project](#).



## CHALLENGES

- Climate changes
- Digital transformation
- The COVID-19 pandemic
- Ageing population

## OBJECTIVES

- Provide a strategic overview on how to overcome the challenges
- Provide solutions on how to support innovation and growth within the habitat industry

Cluster organizations, as defined by the European Commission, are formal associations or networks that bring together companies, research organizations, and other stakeholders within a specific industry or sector, typically within a geographical region. These clusters aim to promote collaboration, innovation, and competitiveness among the participating entities. These organizations often focus on particular industries or technologies and work to enhance the growth and development of the members involved. By fostering cooperation, sharing knowledge, and facilitating partnerships, cluster organizations aim to increase the overall competitiveness of the companies within the cluster.

|   |   |
|---|---|
|    | <p><b>AMBIT - Living spaces cluster</b><br/> <a href="https://ambitcluster.org/en/">https://ambitcluster.org/en/</a></p> <p>Founded in 2015 as a non-profit association, AMBIT - Living Spaces Cluster aims to enhance habitat sector's entire value chain in Catalonia and Spain. AMBIT's mission is to promote the strategic transformation of its 200 member entities through innovation in the fields of circular economy, product digitalization and Industry 4.0.</p>   |
|   | <p><b>SMARTECH - Digital cluster</b><br/> <a href="https://smartechcluster.org/es/">https://smartechcluster.org/es/</a></p> <p>Established in 2009, SMARTECH is a non-profit Spanish organization uniting companies and entities across the smart technology value chain for buildings, cities, and industry. Recognized for innovation and excellence, with 147 members including SMEs, knowledge agents, associations, and public entities, SMARTECH is a leading reference in Spain and Europe for smart technologies.</p>   |
|  | <p><b>Cluster Habitat Sustentavel - Habitat value chain cluster</b><br/> <a href="http://www.centrohabitat.net/pt">http://www.centrohabitat.net/pt</a></p> <p>Recognized by the Portuguese government in 2009, this cluster encompasses the entire habitat value chain, aiming to foster innovation and sustainability across raw materials, building materials, construction, and related suppliers. With a focus on sustainability and competitiveness, it's managed by a private non-profit association, currently comprising 159 members from various sectors.</p>  |
|  | <p><b>Transylvanian Furniture Cluster (TFC) - Furnishing cluster</b><br/> <a href="https://transylvanianfurniture.com/">https://transylvanianfurniture.com/</a></p> <p>Established in 2012, TFC, represented by Hygia Consult, focuses on furniture manufacturing and aims to drive economic development through strategic collaboration. With a vision for industrial transformation and support for excellence, entrepreneurship, and mutual trust, the cluster unites 86 members, facilitating cooperation among furniture manufacturers, educational institutions, research centers, and public administration.</p> |
|  | <p><b>Danish Life Science Cluster (DLSC) - Healthcare cluster</b><br/> <a href="https://www.danishlifesciencecluster.dk/en/">https://www.danishlifesciencecluster.dk/en/</a></p> <p>DLSC is an association driving innovation in healthcare, homecare, and social services, primarily focusing on digital solutions for assisted living, communication, patient journals, and various sensor applications, with 238 members, including companies, knowledge institutions, public organizations, and other entities.</p>   |



# TESTED MECHANISMS & SERVICES

## OUR VISION

The implementation of the project envisaged various activities and mechanisms aimed at fostering knowledge exchange, capacity building and growth within the represented industries. At best, the EXCELIVING consortium developed together a series of methods of improving not only the management of cluster organizations in the habitat sector, but also the competitiveness of SMEs.

**SUCCESSFUL OR NOT, THE INITIATIVES CREATED THE CONTEXT TO FURTHER DEEPEN THE CONNECTION AMONG THE CLUSTERS AND THEIR COMPANIES**



### CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMME

The Capacity Building Programme's objective was to enhance cluster management skills through a comprehensive training program for managers and members, as well as develop service programs focusing on excellence for SMEs and cluster members and foster collaboration among clusters for joint activities, leveraging shared synergies and resources



### TRAINING PROGRAMME ADDRESSED TO SMES

The training programme was a mechanism implemented as a way to enhance the capabilities of SMEs and cluster members in comprehending and addressing prevalent trends and challenges within the evolving business landscape



### ADDED-VALUE SERVICES

Improve the pack of services offered by clusters to SMEs to move the European Habitat value chains towards a smarter and greener and resilient sector contributing to create healthy and sustainable spaces and to boost their growth, internationalization and competitiveness in a context of worldwide crisis.



### TWINNING AGREEMENTS

The EXCELIVING Twinning Programme has been defined to strengthen the cooperation among clusters and among SMES from different European regions with similar challenges and needs to share information and know-how, encouraging the participation of actors from regions less developed.



### EXCELIVING HELPDESK

The creation of the EXCELIVING helpdesk aimed to support clusters and SMEs for knowledge sharing to advance towards a smarter, greener, more competitive, and international sector in an involving European and international business ecosystem to give the European Habitat value chains a competitive lead in the promotion of healthy and sustainable spaces.



### CLUSTERXCHANGE

For a period from 3 to 5 days, SMEs, organisations and other entities were able to participate at a series of activities focused on knowledge exchange and networking. The participation of the visiting organisations was linked to a voucher, in order to accommodate the costs for travel and hotel.



# 1. THE CAPACITY BUILDING & TRAINING PROGRAMME ADDRESSED TO CLUSTERS AND SMES

The mechanism was implemented to 2 target groups:

- **Cluster management team**
- **SMEs**

**For clusters.** a 4-layered training sessions were implemented, with focus on: **BUSINESS MANAGEMENT, TECHNICAL TRAINING, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, BRANDING:**

- **People before digitalisation: the key to success:** analyzing the effects of technological change on personal performance: communication, increased information, decision making, speed of processes, roles and responsibilities;
- **Blockchain as the tool to certify data:** thanks to this technology, companies will be able to improve their production and processes, allowing them to: implement product traceability, certify their quality, comply with regulations, prove efficiency, open new markets, increase competitive advantages;
- **An introduction to Smart Homes:** different aspects necessary for the participant to know the different technologies applicable to homes and buildings: these technologies will update and improve substantially the traditional installations with new functionalities of higher added value;
- **Disruption and innovation:** how to incorporate the concept of disruption and innovation in your SME.

**For SMEs,** the training programme was a mechanism implemented as a way to enhance the capabilities of SMEs in comprehending and addressing prevalent trends and challenges within the evolving business landscape. This included **sessions on adaptation to digitalization, implementation of advanced technologies, prioritizing sustainability and circular economy, and fostering healthy environments.** The following webinars took place:

The following webinars took place:

- **INTRODUCTION TO SUSTAINABLE VALUE CHAIN MANAGEMENT**

Susanne Krogh Petersen, Senior Business Consultant at ErhvervsHuset Hovedstaden, shared insights on due diligence for sustainability at the webinar. Participants gained knowledge on fostering constructive partnerships for improved business practices benefiting the planet, people, and the economy.

- **FUNDING FOR SMES IN THE EU**

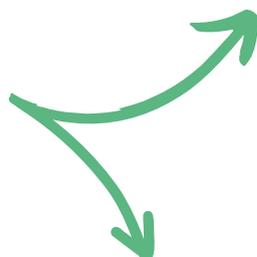
Siri Raahede Bentzen, an EU Consultant at Southern Denmark European Office and associated with Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), shared insights during the webinar. With 8 years of experience in business, innovation, and EU funding, Siri highlighted the EU's emphasis on green, healthy, inclusive buildings, and urban spaces. The session covered EU funds targeting companies, along with criteria for funding focusing on innovation, market impact, and key programs such as EIC Accelerator, Eurostars, and Cascade calls.

- **ENHANCE COMPETITIVENESS AND ATTRACT THE RIGHT TALENTS**

Xevi Agulló, the founder of Ètia – Smart Management & CSR, led the webinar. With expertise in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) since 2003, Xevi has worked on diverse CSR projects for public and private sectors. The session covered deploying CSR strategically in alignment with business, progressing through CSR guidelines, and highlighted FurnCSR ([www.furncsr.eu](http://www.furncsr.eu)) as a successful initiative in the furniture-habitat sector.

- **CIRCULAR BUSINESS MODELS**

Cristina Sousa Rocha, a senior researcher at LNEG (National Laboratory of Energy and Geology), led the webinar. With over 30 years of experience in sustainability, circular economy, and design, Cristina shared insights on circular business models from a sustainability perspective. The session explored the potential for improved sustainable competitiveness, offering concrete examples and guidance on initiating a circular business model.



- **HOW TO GET YOUR COMPANY READY FOR PRIVATE FUNDING**

Hugo Ramos, an Entrepreneur, Lecturer, and Investor, presented at the webinar. He covered identifying projects suitable for private financing, the readiness criteria for companies seeking private investment, making companies attractive to private investors, and the crucial steps in the financing process.

- **BEST PRACTICE IN USING AI FOR ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION MAKING**

The webinar was led by Aitor Izquierdo Fernández, Business Development Manager at Future Space, a tech company with over 25 years of experience. Aitor, with a background in Artificial Intelligence since 2017, shared insights on AI basics, its role in decision-making across various industries, starting with AI, and discussions on the ethical and legal aspects of AI.



All webinars can be viewed on Danish Life Science Cluster's youtube channel:



- **LIVING ENVIRONMENTS SUPPORTING HEALTH AND INDEPENDENCY**

Featuring three experienced healthcare speakers, the webinar provided diverse perspectives and insights on navigating the cross-sectorial field. Participants gained valuable inspiration on leveraging cross-sectoral projects for organizational benefits and exploring the concept of healthy and adaptable living environments.

- **DIVERSITY & INCLUSION – WHY D&I IS ESSENTIAL FOR SMES**

Helene Aagaard, a leader with 15 years of diverse experience in strategy, communication, organizational development, and sustainability from Ørsted and A.P. Møller – Maersk, conducted the webinar. She shared insights on the basics of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), discussing its implementation within organizations and offering actionable steps to start the journey immediately.

- **VIRTUAL FACT-FINDING TRIP TO BARCELONA**
- **VIRTUAL FACT-FINDING TRIP TO DENMARK**

The last two webinars were meant to prepare the participants to the ClusterXchanges in Barcelona, Spain and Odense, Denmark regarding opportunities when doing business in these countries.

## 2. ADDED-VALUE SERVICES

The objective was to improve the pack of services offered by clusters to SMEs to move the European Habitat value chains towards a smarter and greener and resilient sector contributing to create healthy and sustainable spaces and to boost their growth, internationalization and competitiveness in a context of worldwide crisis.

Services work if they are complementary, however, special attention is needed for the differences among business cultures. For instance, it is difficult to attract interest from Romanian SMEs to services provided by the companies from Spain, without context or without special requirements.

SMEs work with familiarity in the cluster sphere - meaning that replicating some services works best if done by their "parent" organization, whom they can fully trust.

### The most successful & tested services were: ✓

**1. Booster Boards:** Digital events "Booster Boards", where the focus could be on either market entry to a specific country or focusing on a specific topic e.g., AI, products for home care, intelligent furniture, sustainability etc. A few companies will be selected and get the opportunity to virtually pitch their product and afterwards get feedback from experts and essentially get the 'boost' they need.

**2. Best Practice Events:** In this service we will arrange brief online meeting (1.5 hours) with a limited number of participants (around 10) and with an external guest to talk about best practice or a technical topic. The participants will not only be listening but also sharing their experiences, information, good practices, contacts, etc. in relation to the topic discussed.

**3. Virtual 1-1 meetings:** This service functions as a second step after the previous service. After the online event, the clusters will facilitate 1-1 meetings by following up with all participants and offering them to be put in contact with other participants. This service will ensure that despite many events being online, there will still be organizers facilitating 1-1 talks.

**4. Virtual fact-finding trip:** Virtual webinars open for everybody, with info about a specific country, how to enter the country, specific sectorial info, regulations and so on. All things that help the companies decide whether to go into a certain market or not.

**5. Macro-trend talks:** the clusters will support the companies in digesting the macro-trends. The difference is that we will not only be sending out info on new trends but also helping the companies digest the new trends. It can be through workshops where more people are attending or through 1-1 talk between the representative from a company and the cluster managers. The objective is to help the managers of our companies to acquire market intelligence, analyse competitive business models and their applicability to the business trip model.



**6. Flexible training pathways:** Offering personalized training to the specific needs of each person/company by re-organizing the training materials in small doses (pills), so that it is not necessary to take the entire course, only the needed parts, which can be very different depending on the previous knowledge of each person. Some clusters have their own training material where this method can be applied, and other clusters can implement this by offering members access to partners' training programmes.

**7. Intercluster sustainability working groups:** intercluster working groups to foster multidisciplinary replies to the Green Deal (circular economy and decarbonization) and Digital transformation challenges. The aim is to foster companies to search for more sustainable products and processes that will assure their competitiveness and survival in the future market susceptible to those trends and challenges. All clusters already have similar working groups, but in this service we are integrating the working groups to ensure knowledge sharing between different sectors.

### 3. HELPDESK

The creation of the EXCELIVING helpdesk aimed to support clusters and SMEs for knowledge sharing to advance towards a smarter, greener, more competitive, and international sector in an involving European and international business ecosystem to give the European Habitat value chains a competitive lead in the promotion of healthy and sustainable spaces.

The platform is not used at its full capacity. More promotional work is needed to generate traffic. The platform strengths is the database of registered profiles of companies and organizations, which can be used for important messages and partner identification.

The screenshot displays the EXCELIVING platform interface. At the top, there is a 'Training' section with a green background and a smartphone icon showing a clock at 10:00. Below this, two training program cards are visible:

- Virtual fact-finding trip DENMARK | ODENSE:** Scheduled for 21/09/2023 - 12:30 to 13:30. It includes a 'Join webinar' button and tags for 'WEBINAR FOR SMES / Doing business in Denmark', 'Lore Krogsbøll', and 'Invest in Odense'. There are buttons for 'DETAILS', 'VIDEO', and 'PRESENTATION'.
- Virtual fact-finding trip to Barcelona:** Scheduled for 13/09/2023 - 12:30 to 13:30. It includes a 'Join webinar' button and tags for 'WEBINAR FOR SMES / Habitat value chain in Spain', 'Alexis Theve', and 'Kintsugi Consulting'. There are buttons for 'DETAILS', 'VIDEO', and 'PRESENTATION'.

Below the training section is a 'Networking' section with a green background and a smartphone icon showing a clock at 10:00. It contains the text: 'Search and contact entities of the habitat value chain with common challenges, needs and complementarities. Complete and update your data in your "Profile".' and a prominent black button labeled 'COMPLETE YOUR PROFILE'.



# 4. CLUSTERXCHANGE - EXCHANGE AMONG CLUSTERS

The project has envisaged the organisation of the clusterxchange activities, during which for a period from 3 to 5 days, SMEs, organisations and other entities were able to participate at a series of activities focused on knowledge exchange and networking. The participation of the visiting organisations was linked to a voucher, in order to accommodate the costs for travel and hotel.

## During the implementation, the following CXC activities were organised with the following results:

### Portugal - October 2022

- 71 of participants, out of which 41% are companies, 21% R&D centers and 28% are clusters
- Companies directly participating at the Programme with the involvement of the voucher: 3 from Denmark, 2 from Romania and 1 from Spain.

### Denmark - November 2023

- 19 participants, out of which 8 are companies
- Companies directly participating at the Programme with the involvement of the voucher: 3 from Spain, 4 from Romania and 5 from Portugal.

### Romania - June 2023

- 46 of participants, representing 37 different organizations/companies
- Companies directly participating at the Programme with the voucher: 2 from Spain, 6 from Portugal.

### Spain - October 2023

- 107 participants from many different types of entities and stakeholders from the furnishings value chain sector.
- Companies directly participating at the Programme with a voucher: 1 from Denmark, 9 from Romania and 4 from Portugal.

## ACQUIRING NEW KNOWLEDGE AND COLLABORATION OPPORTUNITIES



### THE VISITING ORGANISATIONS

Gained insights into the operation and techniques used by the host organisation

### THE VISITING ORGANISATIONS

Expanded their network of contacts



### Information

Participants need guidance and relevant information in order to be prepared to attend a ClusterXchange.



### Financial assistance

Financial assistance was one of the main facilitators for the participants.

### THE VISITING ORGANISATIONS

Gained knowledge on foreign markets

### THE VISITING ORGANISATIONS

Developed new cross-border partnerships

## CLUSTERXCHANGE PROGRAMME



ClusterXchange events were an excellent opportunity for both clusters and different entities, facilitating networking, fostering new partnerships, and international collaborations. The key takeaway was the necessity of extensive event promotion and ensuring topics align with the interests of SMEs to attract and convince a broader audience of the opportunities these events offer.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## FROM CLUSTERS TO CLUSTERS & SMES



### CLUSTERS AS A CONCEPT

The concept of clusters constitutes an opportunity for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to improve their market position. Its essence is to stimulate the cooperation between these particular entities of economic life, accelerate the processes of innovation and to be a form of network organization for SMEs. But how do clusters do that? How do clusters keep their members committed and eager to cooperate with other entities and to be part of a network in order to innovate their product and increase their visibility?

### DEVELOPING SERVICES FOR MEMBERS

The first step in creating a relationship between the cluster and its members is to know the members' needs. Based on the needs identified, the cluster **can provide services** in order to help the members grow, meet new opportunities and so on. But what about when the needs change?

The second step was to identify the needs of the members and **how they changed in time**. This step is important in order to align the services offered with the new trends.

The third step in the process of creating new services was an online workshop to discuss and agree on the 10 final services and furthermore, to discuss the mechanisms to deliver excellent services.

This methodology helped the clusters to better understand what their members need and to adapt their services to the new trends in order to keep their members committed and active in the activities proposed by the cluster. Also, it helps the Clusters' managers and clusters' members to improve their technical, business and entrepreneurship knowledge as well as their management skills to fill in the knowledge gap that are limiting the capacity of SMEs to advance towards a greener, smarter, and more competitive and innovative sector.

### FOR SMES:

Collaboration between clusters and SMEs involves mutual responsibility. Both clusters and member companies must maintain close ties. Membership in a cluster carries benefits and responsibilities for SMEs. Being part of a cluster offers visibility and collaboration prospects within the same industry. The synergy of a cluster arises from shared efforts, knowledge exchange, and skill enhancement. Clusters represent a fresh approach to enhancing enterprise competitiveness, focusing on generating and sustaining a competitive edge.

### BEING PART OF A CLUSTER:

Clusters enhance the visibility of companies and foster collaboration opportunities within their respective industries. This collaboration, achieved through collective efforts, knowledge sharing, and skill development, creates a synergistic environment. Clusters play a pivotal role in innovating the competitiveness of participating enterprises by continually generating and sustaining a competitive edge.

### CLUSTERS MAINLY PROVIDE SERVICES TO SMES TO:

Facilitate the discovery of new partners and collaboration pathways, provide updated information on industry trends and access to valuable know-how, as well as training programmes tailored to employees in specific industries.

# EXPERT INSIGHTS - SECRETS FOR LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIPS WITH SMES



Julio Rodrigo Fuentes,  
AMBIT - Living Spaces Cluster

We keep our members active by providing them with information relevant to them, organizing activities like workshops or conferences, carrying out training activities, organizing networking sessions, involving them in projects of their interest, making differential services available to them, advising them on their strategic transition. In order to have an active and long-term relationship with members, it is important to ensure that associates perceive the value obtained by belonging to the cluster. That they consider that what is offered is of high quality and differential (and also with sufficient quantity) and that the cluster also provides them with a unique networking environment. Also, to ensure that they have reference people in the cluster for their topics of interest, with vision and updated knowledge. As a recommendation for clusters, it is important to give more importance to the quality of what is offered compared to the quantity and generate trust.



Victor Ferreira,  
Cluster Habitat Sustentável

We are trying to keep our members involved through regular meetings where their needs and challenges are addressed and transformed into initiatives (projects, events, B2B and other actions). Talking about an active and long-term relationship between a cluster and an SME, trust is fundamental as well as trying to understand and follow their business & innovation needs and promotion challenges. As a recommendation for other clusters, it is relevant to build up a personal relationship based on trust, care and friendship.



Agusti Padros,  
Smartech Cluster

In order to keep our members active, we try to focus in three main areas :(1) compelling public projects with regional organisations, the government, that position SMEs as leaders in their sector; (2) participation in R&D projects (EU-funded); (3) networking events and participation in fairs. When I am thinking of an active and long-term relationship between a cluster and an SME, i think that the secret is to have 3 main pillars:

**(1) Communication and Collaboration:** Open and effective communication is crucial. Regular interaction, the exchange of ideas, and collaboration on projects or initiatives can help build a strong partnership.

**(2) Access to Markets and Funding:** Clusters can often help SMEs access new markets and sources of funding. This support can be essential for the growth and sustainability of SMEs.

**(3) Long-Term Vision:** A shared long-term vision is essential. Both cluster and SME should have a clear understanding of where they want the relationship to go in the future, and they should be committed to working together to achieve that vision.



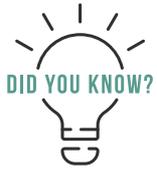
Nanna Broch Mortensen,  
Danish Life Science Cluster

We offer relevant events and network groups within current topics of relevance to our members. We include them as partners and co-hosts in our activities. We offer funding opportunities and the opportunity to meet with relevant stakeholders in public-private partnerships. For having an active and long-term relationship between a cluster and an SME, I think that the secret is to make the SME understand the benefits of being an active member. In other words, making sure to create ways for them to actually be active and for them to see the value of it. And to let the **SME know that being active in the ecosystem will benefit them in the long-term.** Regarding the management of the relationship with the members (SMEs), from our experience it is crucial that the members can see a difference in the offers that they are getting compared to non-members in the same ecosystem.



Ciprian Morcan, Transylvanian Furniture Cluster

We keep our members active by initiating new project; organization of meetings and events in different contexts; maintaining the information link through various communication channels. I think that very important is the development of human relations between the representatives of the management team and the representatives of the members; adequate response in relation to their expectations through a good knowledge of their needs and a sincere communication of the possibilities. As a recommendation for cluster managers, I believe that a segmentation of SMEs and dedicated addressability is necessary depending on interest, but also on their level of involvement and the possibilities of the cluster at a given moment.



## These are the main bottlenecks that could be of interest to you and which can be further targeted in projects and public initiatives for the habitat sector:

- There is limited availability of age-friendly housing options in many European countries, with a significant proportion of older adults living in homes that are not suitable for their needs. In the EU, only 3.3% of homes are adapted for people with reduced mobility. (European Commission);
- There is limited awareness among consumers and industry professionals about the benefits and availability of ecological and sustainable materials and components, leading to a slower uptake of these products. (European Environment Agency);
- High costs are associated with the adoption of digital health and assisted living technologies, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises. (European Commission);
- There is limited availability and accessibility of some sustainable and healthy construction materials, particularly in rural areas where there may be limited supply chains. (European Cluster Collaboration Platform);
- There is limited availability and accessibility of some sustainable and healthy construction materials, particularly in rural areas where there may be limited supply chains. (European Cluster Collaboration Platform);
- The lack of standardization and regulations in the industry is leading to inconsistencies in quality and safety of living environments;
- High costs associated with implementing sustainable and healthy design and construction practices;
- Limited level of adoption and awareness of new and innovative products and technologies in the market;
- Limited availability of qualified professionals with knowledge and skills in designing and constructing healthy living habitats;
- Lack of coordination among the different sectors that make up the healthcare industry;
- Lack of investment in infrastructure and human resources for implementing health and well-being solutions.



## These are the main opportunities in the market that could be of interest to you and which can be further targeted in projects and public initiatives for the habitat sector:

- Increasing demand for healthy living and age-friendly environments in Europe, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, presents opportunities for companies in the value chains to innovate and meet the growing demand. (European Commission);
- Growing interest in ecological and sustainable materials and components, providing opportunities for companies in the value chains to differentiate themselves and gain a competitive edge. (Allied Market Research);
- According to Euromonitor International, the market for accessibility and age-friendly environments is expected to grow significantly in the coming years, driven by the ageing population worldwide. Euromonitor estimates that the global market for elderly products and services is set to grow to \$29.9 billion in 2024, with a focus on mobility devices and assistive technology;
- Regarding ecological and sustainable materials, Euromonitor predicts an increase in demand for eco-friendly and sustainable products across all sectors, including construction materials and furniture. The company also forecasts growth in the use of recycled and renewable-sourced materials, as well as a greater concern for waste reduction and energy efficiency;
- In the sustainable furniture sector, Euromonitor highlights an increase in demand for furniture made from recycled and sustainable materials, as well as a growing interest in products that are manufactured responsibly and environmentally friendly;
- According to Statista, the global digital health and assistive technology market is expected to continue to grow in the coming years, driven by the adoption of mobile devices and wearables, as well as increased access to telemedicine services. The company estimates that the global digital health market is set to grow to \$408 billion in 2025;
- In the sustainable construction materials sector, Statista highlights an increase in demand for construction materials that are energy efficient and produced responsibly. The company also highlights a growing demand for smart construction technologies and solutions, such as sensors and energy monitoring systems;
- Increasing adoption of digital health and assisted living technologies in Europe, presenting opportunities for companies to develop new products and services that meet the evolving needs of consumers and healthcare professionals. (Mordor Intelligence);

# CONCLUSIONS

---

In reflection on the culmination of our efforts and the valuable experiences gained through the implementation of the various programs within the EXCELIVING consortium, several key insights emerged. These insights, encapsulated as "lessons learned," provide invaluable guidance for future endeavors and refining the strategies adopted.

From the **Capacity Building Programme**, we recognized the importance of comprehensive promotion and a more inclusive agenda to extend beyond the immediate cluster members. Ensuring broader outreach will be pivotal for its success in the future.

The **Training Programme for SMEs** highlighted the effectiveness of webinars but revealed the necessity for broader promotion beyond cluster members. Reaching a wider audience requires a more comprehensive strategy.

In terms of **Added-Value Services**, the significance of aligning services with the cultural preferences and familiarity of SMEs within the clusters became apparent. Replicating services often works best when facilitated by the SMEs' "parent" organizations, fostering trust and familiarity.

Regarding the Helpdesk, the platform's potential remains underutilized, signaling the need for enhanced promotional efforts. Leveraging existing networking spaces like private LinkedIn groups could prove cost-effective and facilitate seamless information sharing.

The **ClusterXchange events** were successful in their execution, yet the essential challenge lies in pre-event organization. Intensive promotion and structuring events based on topics relevant to the target companies are crucial to engage a larger audience and underscore the value of participation.

In summary, these experiences underscore the importance of broadening outreach, tailoring services to local preferences, intensifying promotional efforts, and aligning events with the specific interests of the participating companies. The lessons learned from these programs form a solid foundation for future endeavors, emphasizing the necessity of adaptability, inclusivity, and strategic planning to maximize impact and success.



*This project has received funding from the European Union's COSME programme under Grant Agreement no. 101037887. The content of this document represents the views of the author only and is his/her sole responsibility; it cannot be considered to reflect the views of the European Commission and/or the European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) or any other body of European Union. The European Commission and the Agency do not accept any responsibility for the use that may be made of the information it contains.*