

Final chord of the EU-project Smart SMEs

Building a sustainable network for natural fibre-based SMEs in the Alpine Space

The European project Smart SMEs came successfully to its end in May 2021 with the final conference, which attracted participants from different parts of Europe.

The project involved partners from Baden-Württemberg, Trento (Italy), Lower Austria, Slovenia and Switzerland and aimed to improve the use of digital solutions to increase the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises in value chains based on natural fibres (e.g. maize, hemp or wood) in the Alpine macro-region. There were considered both the fibres from cultivated biomass and recycled feedstock, including organic waste.

There is already a wide range of providers for digital services - also for SMEs. However, especially small companies may have difficulties in recognizing and using the potentials that digitalization offers them.

The project included a survey for SMEs from the agriculture and wood sectors in the partner regions. The majority of the interviewed companies answered that they either rarely or never use digitalization tools and approaches. One third of the respondents apply such technologies in about 50 % of their activities. Only four out of 30 SMEs are "digitized in all business areas". Only four respondents mentioned to have an IT-department. Therefore, the digitalization strategy of the majority of the interviewees is in the hands of their management. Thus, the main challenges and obstacles that prevent the SMEs from exploiting the full potential of digital solutions are lack of financial resources and qualified personnel, as well as difficulties in organizing the workflow and in general lack of knowledge about digitalization technologies. When asked about the goals that the companies associate with advancing their digitalization level, they mentioned attracting new customers or getting to new markets, increasing productivity and level of innovation, and also saving of costs.

The Smart SMEs project also investigated the 'ecosystem' of the digitalization knowledge in the partner regions – research institutions, clusters, digital innovation hubs and other service providers. A collection of the identified tools for SMEs digitalization is available via <https://smartsmes.um.si/>. In addition to that, the partnership developed the Action Plan to boost the digitalization of biobased value chains, which is intended to be a starting point for future projects dealing with this topic.

Since Smart SMEs tackled the idea of a sustainable transformation in the Alpine Space through the bioeconomy concept, the related policy issues could not be left aside. Based on the findings of the Alpine Policy Forum, there were elaborated policy action fields and recommendations. They are aimed at improving the use of digital solutions and increasing the competitiveness of SMEs, especially taking into account that many value chains were broken due to the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. These action fields are the following: promotion of tools for digitalization, adaptation of public funding schemes, and setting up a practitioners' network.

A concept of a sustainable network for interregional exchange of experience and collaboration was elaborated and is planned to be developed further beyond the project lifetime. The concept considers the interest and needs of bioeconomy and digital transformation experts in the Alpine Space. Interested stakeholders are welcome to contact Mrs. Simone Hagenauer (S.Hagenauer(at)ecoplus.at, ecoplus. The Business Agency of Lower Austria).

Background

The Smart SMEs project was run from August 2019 until May 2021 (22 months) with a total budget of 309.833,33 euros, co-funded by the European Parliament through the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund (ARPAF).

The consortium included 7 partners from 5 Alpine countries/regions:

- Swiss Center for Mountain Regions (SAB, lead partner);
- Autonomous Province of Trento (Italy);
- Hub Innovazione Trentino - Fondazione (Italy);
- ecoplus, the Business Agency of Lower Austria;
- Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at the University of Maribor (Slovenia);
- Poly4Eml - Anteja ECG (Slovenia);
- BIOPRO Baden-Württemberg GmbH (Germany).

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