



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
 EXECUTIVE AGENCY FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (EASME)
 Department A – COSME, H2020 SME and EMFF
Unit A1 - COSME

Brussels,
 EASME.A.1/NMP/ZS

**NOTE FOR THE ATTENTION OF
 EUROPEAN CLUSTER EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME PROJECTS**

**Subject: ClusterXchange virtual exchanges during COVID-19 for
 COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02 call for proposals**

The coronavirus outbreak has a significant impact on our daily lives as well as on the activities of your projects. The past months have clearly shown that, due to several restrictions in many European countries, the usual project activities, especially the implementation of ClusterXchange pilot programme was seriously hampered. Many of your activities could not be carried out as planned, had to be postponed or even cancelled.

We are fully aware of how this unprecedented situation has impacted your project implementation. We would like to reassure you that we fully understand the situation and will continue doing our best to support you as much as we can to get through this together. Your input that you provided by replying to our survey, by attending the meeting with all the coordinators and input that you provide individually to your Project Officer is very valuable to us.

By this note, the EASME intends to wrap up the exceptional measures that have been set in order to facilitate the implementation of ClusterXchange pilot programme by allowing for virtual exchanges.

These exceptional measures will apply until the 31st of December 2020. Please note that this end-date is indicative and could be modified in the next months, depending on how the situation will evolve. The situation will be constantly reassessed.

In that respect, we invite you to apply the following rules for virtual exchanges:

- Virtual exchanges are possible but participants of a virtual exchange are not eligible to receive the financial assistance.
- If a participant takes part in a virtual exchange, he/she can still take part later in a physical exchange and receive financial assistance for this physical exchange (provided the minimum duration/ requirements are met) as set out in the call for proposals COS-CLUSTER-2018-03-02 and respective grant agreements.

- Virtual exchanges can be counted towards the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) however, the rules as regards the minimum duration (three working days) and maximum duration (one month) of an exchange must be respected. A virtual exchange does not have to take place in consecutive days but it must be done within a certain period of time, depending on the length of the exchange. Formula to calculate this period is the following - the exchange must be implemented within X weeks equal to the X of planned working days of an exchange. For example, if a 4 working day exchange is planned, it must be implemented within 4 weeks – e.g. 8 half days sessions within a 4-week period.
- Virtual exchanges shorter than 3 working days can take place as preparatory exchanges for a physical exchange but cannot be counted towards the KPIs.
- Working days spent in a virtual exchange and a physical exchange cannot be cumulated in order to receive the financial assistance. For example, 1 day of a virtual exchange and 2 days of a physical exchange does not meet the minimum duration of 3 working days and therefore a participant would not be entitled to the financial assistance.
- If a virtual exchange takes place (minimum 3 working days and therefore counted towards the KPI), the consortium **could** propose to EASME to shift the amount in € that was earmarked for the financial assistance for the respective exchange from cost category “Costs of financial support to third parties” to other cost categories to implement other cluster capacity building activities. Such change(s) first need to be discussed with EASME and are conditional to the approval of EASME. On the other hand, the amount that was earmarked for an exchange could still be used for a physical exchange as initially planned.
- Maximum number of virtual exchanges is limited to 25% of the target. For example, if your target is to have 50 exchanges, the maximum number of virtual exchanges would be 13.
- All other rules remain the same.

In view of the above, we would also like to give you some contractual explanations regarding the possible use of the force majeure clause – Article 35 of your grant agreements.

‘Force majeure’ means any situation or event that (1) prevents either party from fulfilling their obligations under the Agreement, (2) was unforeseeable, exceptional situation and beyond the parties’ control, (3) was not due to error or negligence on their part (or on the part of third parties involved in the action), and (4) proves to be inevitable in spite of exercising all due diligence.

If the coronavirus outbreak affects any of your activities, the rules on force majeure apply. Please make sure that you continue to keep your Project Officer informed about the pandemic’s impact on your activities. The EASME is committed to continue the dialogue with all beneficiaries, especially with the consortium leaders.

Moreover, you should also take all the necessary steps to limit any damage due to force majeure (for example claim a refund for cancelled flights from the airline (where possible), make a claim under any cancellation insurance that might have been taken out, etc.).

Cost incurred for cancelled activities or trips that cannot be reimbursed or covered by another source such as travel insurance can be eligible under your grant agreement if they fulfil the general eligibility conditions, as any other costs incurred under the action.

Therefore, you may still charge travel and accommodation costs to the action if they fulfil the usual eligibility conditions, even if you did not travel and did not take part in planned meetings or events. The same applies to unrecoverable cost incurred for the organisation of events cancelled or postponed due to the coronavirus situation.

If force majeure entails extra costs for the implementation of the action, these costs may also be eligible if necessary for the implementation for the action (for example if a cancelled conference is reorganised at a later stage).

However, the maximum grant amount cannot be increased under any circumstances.

EASME will take into consideration the specific COVID-19 situation when monitoring and assessing the projects. The analysis will be done on a case by case basis as the situation differs from project to project. At this moment, it is too early to assess the final impact. The relaxation of ClusterXchange rules and our continuous support to you seem to be the most appropriate measures we can take at the moment. EASME will continue doing all efforts to help you steering your projects to a successful end.

For any question or doubt please address questions to your Project Officer.

Please share the above information with your consortium partners.

(E-signed)
Natalia Martínez Páramo
Head of Unit