“Doing business in the new Adriatic and Ionian Region: new development policies for SMEs and contextual elements”, this was the theme chosen for the 15th Edition of the AIC Forum which took place from 11th to 13th May in Durres, Albania. It aims to tackle issues common to SMEs in the Area but above all to make the most of the opportunities offered by the new and exciting context of the Adriatic Ionian Region.

This direction was followed during both the plenary session and in the thematic Workgroups which examined in depth and focused the attention on the importance of cluster policies, defined by the European Commission as “powerful engines of economic development and drivers of innovation in the European Union”.

Groups of connected economic operators, geographically close institutions and businesses that have reached a sufficient level of excellence to promote experience, services, resources, and specialised expertise.

These are the groupings of excellence that Europe aims to foster, not just at local level but also at a wider transnational level where clusters could incentive competition, entrepreneurship and the SMEs international activities.

The acknowledgement of the Adriatic Ionian Area as a Macrregion is the testimony of an existing integrated development model and of its operative potential. It makes the development of the innovative clusters across the board to all four reference pillars of the EU Strategy for the Adriatic and Ionian Region (EUSAIR) - Blue Growth, Connecting the Region, Environmental Quality and Sustainable Tourism - a plausible possibility. According to the EUSAIR strategy Action Plan, common efforts should be mainly directed towards cooperation between research centres, public administrations and private sector in order to make the best use of the advantages originated from the clustering process of specific production spheres that can ensure greater territory and businesses development.

In the course of the work, attempts were made to define and gather together concrete actions to be developed over the coming months including with the intervention of the Group of EU project management, specially established in 2010 in order to direct project ideas and partnerships arising within the network of Chambers of commerce in the schemes of project proposals able to be submitted for European calls.

Also this year more than two hundred delegates attended the event including representatives of European institutions, national bodies, local authorities, and networks from the Adriatic-Ionian Area.
the general overview of the Country’s situation, making special mention of all the reference sectors for the individual thematic Workgroups, which would then meet up in the afternoon. The Ambassador of the permanent secretariat of the Adriatic-Ionian initiative, Fabio Pigliapoco, not physically present in Brussels - where the Brussels Declaration was signed on 13 May 2015 – sent a video greeting to the delegates in which also included a brief overview of the essential need for a union between the Ministries and stakeholders of the Macrolongue. The same view was also partly shared in the following speech of Mr. Fabio Birluzza as a representative of the Union of Italian Chambers of Commerce, who spoke on behalf of the President Ferruccio Dardanello.

Al Region and SMEs territories: new strategies and tools for development

The first part of the plenary session saw the intervention of Mr. Bastian Sylla, representative of Ministry of Economic Development, Trade, Tourism and Entrepreneurship who emphasized the necessity to strengthen the economic and social cohesion factors of the Adriatic-Ionian Area through policies for SMEs which take into consid- eration the innovative and competitive supply chains and globalisation, on the bases of the EMFF. In its presentation he illustrated the so-called typically industrial districts, to technological clusters in the Hi-tech sector which not only tie the involve- ment of businesses but also universities and organisations specialising in technol- ogy research and transfer. It explained the creative clusters representing a union between creativity and innovation technology and the cultural clusters right up to the Living lab type. The Living Lab is an „open innovation environment, in real life situations, in which the active involvement of the end users makes it possible to create pathways for the co-creation of new services, products and social infrastructures“. Open inno- vation above all helps SMEs to adapt, especially with countries where they are not physically present.

Michele De Vita, started with the con- sideration the innovative and competitive supply chains and globalisation, on the bases of the  European Commission’s bases of the Adriatic Ionian Area through the economic and social cohesion factors of the Area’s Countries, which are involved in several sports activities. The Youth Games are an example of a concrete project achieved thanks to the networks’ efforts. This pion- eering initiative has been successful to consider young people the target on which to direct future activities, also by the European funds requested under the Erasmus+ programme. If the Sylla proposal will be approved the second Youth Games Edition will be organi- zed, with the further involvement of youngsters from the other two existing Macrolongues from the Baltic Sea and of the Danube.

Cluster policies in support of the Al Region’s SMEs

The second part of the plenary session focused entirely on the cluster policies. The first speaker, Flavio Burzini, of the Brussels headquarters of the Union of Italian Chambers of Commerce, in view of the ongoing relationship with the European Commission, presented the report of Croia De Marco of GIS Grow due to her delay for reasons of force ma- jor. The speech introduced the defini- tion of the cluster and the necessity of ad- justing to their presence and development in Europe. Then an examination of the new procedures of the European Union on the specific theme was illustrated and lastly the European reference programmes (i.e. Horizon 2020). Luca Penna, the Director of the Portonole Chamber of Commerce Special Agency, subse- quently illustrated the different types of cluster. In its presentation he illustrated the high growth potential, government and privately-backed organisations, experts, universities and research institutes working in the sector of business cluster. The aim is to support the companies in the cluster through the provision of a variety of services such as business-oriented platform, where members can share knowledge and good practices; the creation of opportunities to promot- e the cluster in international rankings, in which the members can at the same time find concrete answers to their business needs as well as to the techno- logical challenges. Besides these services, there are many advantages for the enterprises that are part of the cluster, such as: sharing information on policies and funding for their sector, visibility, the ease of net- working and generating business. The plenary session concluded with the input to continue along the development path towards the creation of new clusters in the Adriatic-Ionian Area and the reinforcement of clusters of those that already exist, following the examples of more advanced existing models.

Workgroup

The meetings of the working groups were held in the morning. On 25. The final documents were presented the day after during the Assembly.

Workgroup on Fisheries and Aquaculture

Also the Workgroup on Fisheries and Aquaculture has focused on „Clusters as efficient tools for competitiveness reinforcement of the cluster sector“ along with the 1st Pillar of the EUSAIR Action Plan “Blue growth“, that is focused on fisheries and cluster deve- lopment. Given the heterogeneous regi- onal policies from country to country, it is necessary to outline a policy for optimal clustering, especially in the regional level. For this purpose, in order to understand the common interests of the enterprises, the Workgroup proposes to organize a public initiative by involving partners, who would benefit from the exchange of expert advice where there are gaps in specific skills. It is necessary therefore to improve the cluster management (where it exists) in order to provide quality services to the enterprises involved and to increase their innovative capacity. Mo- nitoring the creation of cluster activities at macroregional level to overcome the lack of specialized infrastructures in ports not suitable for the fisheries sector (in Albania and Montenegro). Dissemina- tion of specific information on European Maritime and Fisheries Funds (EAF) to non-EU countries in particular with reference to the FLAG (fisheries, local action groups) which manage the funds of the fourth pillar of the EMFF. All these issues together with specific digression on the so-called “catalytic shells in aquaculture“ will be directed to project proposals under European funds of specific Programmes.

Workgroup on Agriculture

“Rural development and sustainable agri- culture” has been the working theme of the Agriculture Workgroup; in particular it has been characterized by a joint in-depth analysis on the biological agri- culture as it is considered a trade niche in the Adriatic and Ionian Area. The Workgroup was to increase the quality of products through the organization of training courses and workshops on the production of quality products common to the countries in the Adriatic and Ionian Region. Given the complexity of the agricultural sector and its importance in the region, the Workgroup is intended to organize an international scientific conference on clusters in agri- culture, especially on biological products of the Area, and have comparative advantages in cultivation. The event “3 fora of the Area“ (AIC Forum, Forum of the City and Uniaidron) is to promote agriculture in the Region through the exchange of know-how and transfer of knowledge and ideas. Concre- te results and project ideas related to the clusters on agricultural products as well as the networking opportunity with the operators within the sector are expected for this initiative.

Workgroup on Transports

The Workgroup on Transports this year was formed by numerous presentations mainly from Albania, Italy and Greece, and it was focused on the theme “Maritime Transport along the ports of the Adriatic and Ionian Region”. Following the analysis based on the participants’ reports concern- ing the current situation of passengers, goods and road users maritime traffic, as well as the cruise sector in the economic crisis context, several facts were discussed and some conclusive considerations were drawn. In 2014 a decrease of goods traffic trend has been registered. Despite the fact that passengers and cargo are the segments with the highest increase, cruise users represent an important oppor- tunity of growth for ports and for their tourism attractiveness and it is necessary develop the “Maritime” as an intermodality is always a primary element for the growth of ports and its relative region. In particular it is in the course of the Workgroup that the participants has focused on the role of the Ports Authority in their strategic position referring to the ferry traffic with the Balkans and Greece thanks especially to its modality for both
Numerous participants in the joint Workgroup on Tourism and Environment have this year focused on the topic “Networking for a cultural and sustainable tourism”. Based on a careful analysis of the priority actions identified for the operational phase of the specific Thematic Steering Group (TSG) on each pillar, the Workgroup intends to act in synergy with the regional and county authorities in order to allow a governance system in the strategic sector of tourism. This in order to identify coordinated project proposals and to achieve the maximum programmatic integration between regional funds and the EU instruments. In the 2014/2020, the macroregional perspective and priorities of each pillar of the EUSAIR TSG. As a consequence of this, it is necessary to act in synergy with the Secretariat of the Forum so that the brand Adrion is known at every territorial level. The Group on EU project management recommends a review of the activities and functions of the AIC thematic Workgroups. The hope, therefore, is that the Presidents and the Secretariat of the Workgroups will make further efforts in order to suggest project proposals to the Group. A template will be prepared and sent to the Secretariat representatives in order to simplify the collection of the operational and sustainable project ideas. Moreover, the Group is agreed to start a joint action of lobbying through the Chamber of Commerce System in the next context of the macroregional governance. The preparation of the document entitled “EUSAIR - Moving from consultation to actions: A selection of project proposals for the Adriatic and Ionian social and economic development and competitiveness - The AIC Forum contribution to the EUSAIR Stakeholders Platform” has been positively assessed. It is meant to be a summary document of coordination regarding the European project planing of the AIC Forum to be used in all relevant contexts where the presence of the Chamber of Commerce System will be required as part of the Stakeholders Platform of the EUSAIR Governance. For this purpose a questionnaire will be sent to the members of the Group so that they will be able to identify their own priority topics and project proposals to be included in the document. More specifically these proposal should be elaborated and implemented according to the upcoming European Programmes. Hence the Group on the EU Project management considered worthwhile to coordinate the financial efforts in a few but significant project proposals to be implemented by the Chamber of Commerce System. This joint operational commitment is additional to the actions of coordination and planning which every associated Chamber of the AIC Forum may carry out autonomously over the years by optimizing the established relationships within the Group.

Confirmation of the President Gambiaper

On 13th May 2015, following the meeting of the bodies of the AIC Forum, the Board of Auditors and Ordinary Assembly, the AIC Forum confirmed today the re-election of President Rodolfo Gambiaper at the helm of the Forum of the Adriatic and Ionian Chambers of Commerce. For the next two years, with also the President of the Chamber of Economy of Montenegro, Velimir Mijušković as Vice-president of the Forum and the same membership of the Governing body also being confirmed. During the meeting an act of significant support was also shown to the Greek Chamber of Commerce system. More generally, the General Meeting of the entire Chamber of Commerce system of the Adriatic-Ionian Area because of the difficult times all countries in the whole Area are facing, called for the readiness and established support presented by the President of the Greek Agrinio Chamber of Commerce, Mr Panagiotis Tzartchis.
An initial important moment of promotion, networking and planning on the subject of cultural and creative enterprise in the macroregional area was undertaken within the international framework of the 15th AIC Forum in Durres when two representatives of the DCE office of the Ancona Chamber of Commerce were invited to present the Project “Adriatic Innovative Factory” in front of an audience coming from the 8 countries of the Adriatic Ionian Macroregion. The presentation took place in the Workgroup on Tourism and during a meeting organized among the representatives of AIC Forum Workgroup on EU project management. The first event focused the attention on the project’s Axis 1 which envisages the setting up of an incubator for cultural and creative businesses (E-Capital Culture Adriatic Start-up School) at the prestigious Mole Vanvitelliana placed in Ancona. The first call was published on 15th June and it is expected the participation of 40 students from the 8 countries of the Macroregion, selected on the basis of their entrepreneurial ideas. The announcement was greeted with great enthusiasm and attention by those who took part in the Workgroup and many of them asked for further information and leaflets. The second event organised by representatives of the Group of EU project management, led by Mr. Davide Frulla, was also a great success. It was focused especially on Axis 2 of the project in order to try to create networking and to encourage the collaboration between agencies and organisations from the Adriatic Ionian Area in view of new projects to be shared within cultural and creative context.

In the light of the success achieved last year in Corfu on the occasion of the 1st International Capitalization Meeting of the MedDiet project that took place during the 2014 Edition of the AIC Forum, this year too at the 15th Edition held in Durres (Albania), the Agriculture Workgroup once more dealt with the subject of the importance of the Mediterranean Diet in the Adriatic-Ionian Macroregion area as well. Besides the distribution of informative material, for the occasions a roll up was also produced stating the key concepts and messages of the MedDiet project including, just like last year in Corfu, an explicit appeal to sign the MedDiet Declaration (“Sign the MedDiet Declaration for the promotion and safeguarding of the Mediterranean Diet also in the Adriatic and Ionian Region!”). The project continues to enjoy great success, not only in the Marche Region, where the local Ancona Chamber of Commerce has set up an official MedDiet Info Point, but also in other territories through the efforts of the Chambers of Commerce belonging to the AIC Forum. In particular, in Durres keen interest was shown in the initiative and requests were made by the Campobasso Chamber of Commerce (Molise, Italy) and the representative of the national Chamber of Serbia for the MedDiet toolkit to be sent to schools, local authorities and also the material referring to the MedDiet Quality Label for restaurants.

The joint efforts of the AIC Forum and the Ancona Chamber of Commerce (the latter in its capacity as MedDiet Info Point) was then further reinforced with the “Tipicità In Blu” (Blue typicalities) initiative held over three days (29, 30, 31 May 2015) in Ancona. This was an event of great impact on the civil society with moments of in-depth discussion, displays, exhibitions, referring to the Blue Economy and to the Adriatic-Ionian Macroregion with considerable space dedicated to workshops on wellness and healthy living. In particular, Saturday 30 May, the presentation seminar by the MedDiet Info Point of the Ancona Chamber of Commerce was held in the widest context of the initiative promoted in conjunction with Biomedfood (a spin off of the Polytechnic University of the Marche region) entitled: “Basic principles for a healthy diet: Mediterranean Diet and fashion diets”. During the course of the morning especially, MedDiet gadgets were distributed (shoppers, caps, pencils, oven gloves and T-shirts) to pupils from junior and middle schools of the Marche Region, within the framework of the initiative “Rules for healthy eating, the importance of the food pyramid and product seasonality” which provided for teaching workshops especially for children. These workshops also made use of the teaching materials created in support of the MedDiet project, as well as the two MedDiet guidelines for local government and for schools being distributed to teachers and to local authorities. The informative material and an initial orientation will continue to be provided at the MedDiet Info Point located in the Economic Development Area of the Ancona Chamber of Commerce.