

Network aims to knit disparate European initiatives

Biotech venture development is high on the agenda of a new pan-European initiative, which is a consortium of regional authorities, cities and universities in Spain, France, Switzerland and Germany. Eurobiocluster South is the latest of several European biotech networks attempting to exploit synergies, pool expertise and avoid duplication of research efforts at the national level. To achieve these goals, Eurobiocluster will have to overcome entrenched parochial attitudes, poor cross-border communication and internal competition among regions.

Regional stakeholders signed the Eurobiocluster agreement at the 2005 BioVision conference held in April in Lyons. The aim of the initiative is to foster competitive biotech collaborations in the public and private sector across national boundaries. Participating regions in the initiative include Catalonia (Barcelona) in Spain, Piemont-Lombardy (Turin-Milan) in Italy, Rhône-Alps (Lyons-Grenoble) in France, the Swiss cities of Zürich, Geneva and Basel and Baden-Württemberg (Heidelberg) in Germany.

The main impetus for the initiative is the ineffectiveness of previous efforts at the city, regional or even national level to stimulate biotech growth. The hope is that by providing a coherent and coordinated pan-European initiative, Eurobiocluster can allocate funds more effectively and increase the competitiveness of local biotech projects at the international level (*Nat. Biotechnol.* 22, 1483, 2004). For example, it aims to build on existing collaborations in viral immunology among research centers in Heidelberg, Geneva and Lyon.

The network is planning on using the existing regional development budgets of the participating areas. Like other similar initiatives, however, it will also try to tap into the €1.6 billion fund-



The Eurobiocluster South initiative aims to harness the resources of five European regions.

ing on offer for enterprises from the EU's 7th Framework Program. The latter supports small and medium enterprises and technology platforms, among other initiatives.

According to consultant Van Tang of Alcimed, a strategy and marketing firm in Lyons that carried out one of the initial feasibility studies for the project, a key factor in encouraging biotech venture growth is the exchange of experience among players in neighboring regions. The sharing of expertise in technology transfer, startup financing and technology platforms (e.g., structural biology) will be especially important.

Not all are as convinced as Tang of the benefits of Eurobiocluster and other cross-border metaclusters (metaclusters). Christian Ketels, principal associate at the Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness at Harvard Business School in Cambridge, Massachusetts—who is currently based in Sweden—recognizes the need for increased communication among players. But he does not see the necessity of an umbrella initiative to spread good practice in areas like technology transfer. “You can get advice from [any clusters in] the USA, Canada or Singapore.”

In fact, the term metacluster may even be a misnomer. The cluster effect only kicks in when players are in close proximity, he says. “Geographical proximity matters and it matters a lot.”

The challenges in making disparate European partners pull together in a metacluster should also not be underestimated. Eurobiocluster's administrators will need to reconcile different and sometimes conflicting political interests of the different regions. According to Mark Reinhardt, principal consultant life science at Capgemini Deutschland in Stuttgart, these conflicts often mirror those of the EU, albeit on a smaller scale; decision-making for common

goals is often hampered by national interests, Eurobiocluster has several previous metacluster initiatives in Europe to learn from (Table 1). For example, BioValley, a tri-national initiative among France, Switzerland and Germany, has foundered, largely because it failed to establish a strong joint decision-making process, according to industry insiders.

Scanbalt, another metacluster of states in northern Europe, has had more success (*BioEntrepreneur*, 15 January 2004, doi:10.1038/bioent791). Its secret has been to keep a constant flow of information among its participants. “Communication is extremely important,” explains Peter Frank, general secretary of Scanbalt. “You need to have a strong network with personal level contacts,” he adds. The Scanbalt model may not, however, be applicable elsewhere in Europe because of Scandinavia's unique cultural and historical background.

Others believe Eurobiocluster's top-down approach, in which administrators attempt to coordinate biotech innovation from behind their desks, is the wrong strategy. For example, BioRegions, a network of dynamic biotech hubs focuses on exchanging information at the grass roots, among companies. One key part of the initiative is a steering group that identifies “what is it that can be done to help [biotech] companies,” explains Eastern Region Biotechnology Industry head Jeff Solomon. “It is something that national bioindustry associations have trouble achieving because it is impossible for them to be in touch with all companies on the ground,” he adds.

Ketels remains downbeat, however, about the chances of success of so many biotech hubs in Europe, let alone of the metaclusters. He concludes, “Everybody is trying to do it and we know it is not going to happen.”

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Table 1 Some pan-European initiatives for biotech clusters.

Initiative	Established	Description
BioValley	1997	A nonprofit organization with the goal of promoting biotech involving three regional governments: Strasbourg, France; Basel; and Freiburg, Germany. BioValley provides seed capital to attract new spin-offs.
Scanbalt	2003	A network of biotech networks that encompasses Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Sweden, northern Germany and north-western Russia. The Scandinavian Council of Ministers' Nordic Innovation Center provide transnational funding for startups.
BioRegions	2004	The brainchild of the UK's Eastern Region Biotechnology Industry (ERBI) BioRegions aims to combine the expertise and strengths of Europe's most dynamic biotech clusters including Oxford, Cambridge, Medicon Valley, Munich, Heidelberg, Berlin, Lyons, Latvia and Barcelona. It also provides grassroots solutions and expertise to companies in participating biotech hubs.

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