



WP 6 Building a Sustainable Network for Smart SMEs in the Alpine Region CONCEPT

1.1. Background and rationale:

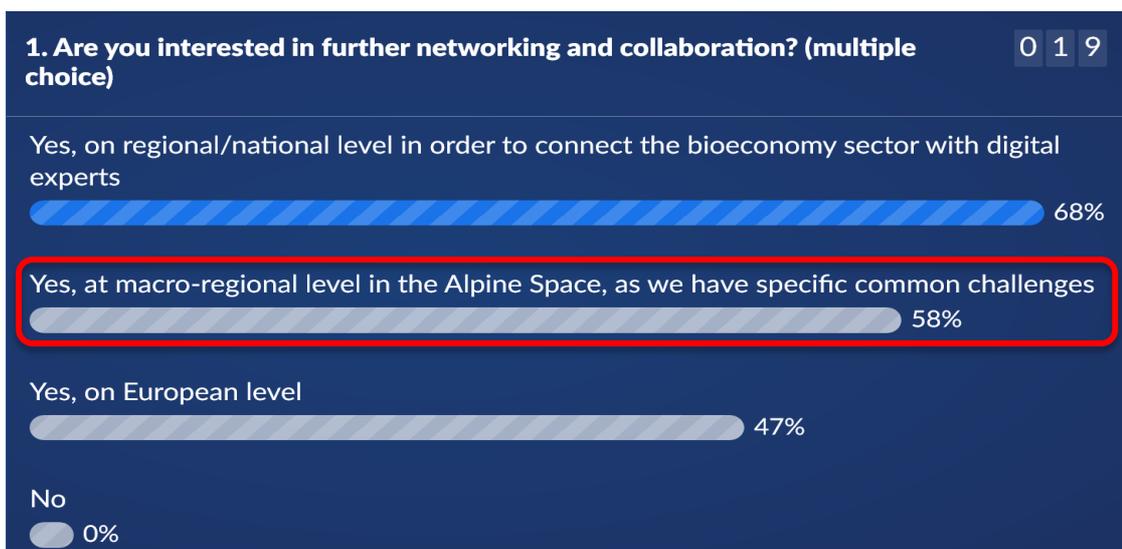
The project [Smart SMEs](#) aims to improve the use of **digital solutions** to increase the **competitiveness of SMEs in natural fibre value chains in the Alpine region** (e.g. wood, hemp, organic waste etc). One of the objectives of the project is to assess the potential for the development of a **nucleus of a network for interregional exchange of experience and collaboration** on this topic, beyond the project lifetime.

A network creates value through the intensity, quality and impact of the interactions between its members. The common interest has to be clear and enabling and nurturing such useful interactions takes time. The golden rule of a network is that you first have to invest in the network (knowledge, time, connections) in order to be able to harvest the results of the effort made.

This concept summarizes the interest and needs of bioeconomy and digital transformation experts in the Alpine Region in such a network and outlines some directions for implementation.

In order to identify the interest and needs the partners in the SMART SME project Work Package 6 carried out the following activities:

1. In an online **workshop “Building a Sustainable Network for Smart SMEs in the Alpine Region” on 3 November 2020** with 29 participants, intermediaries from the area of digital transformation and bioeconomy in the Smart SME partner regions, an interest for such an action was confirmed.



2. As a next step, several open **online interviews** were held in March 2021 with key stakeholders in the SMART SME partner regions and the EUSALP Action Group 2 (*To increase the economic potential of strategic sectors*), such as the Smart SME lead partner, the coordinators of the EUSALP AG2 subgroups for bio-economy and for digital industry and the EUSALP AG2 coordinators in order to exchange on the idea of a network, its feasibility and possible embedding into the planned EUSALP actions.
3. Based on the input received and suggested options a questionnaire was set up and embedded in an **online survey**, using the EUSurvey tool. The link to the survey was sent out on 31 March 2021 with the support of the project partners to relevant stakeholders in their regions or country for feedback collection. The persons targeted were “facilitators”, working at the interface between companies in natural fibre value chains (wood, maize, hemp etc.) and digital technology providers, i.e., experts supporting companies in innovation, technology transfer and digital transformation, such as cluster managers, Digital Innovation Hub managers, managers of Strategic Research and Innovation Partnerships etc. who are in direct contact with companies. The survey stayed open until the 16 April. There were 44 contributions received.



4. Finally, those survey respondents, who indicated to be willing to take a (thematic) lead role in the network were invited to an online workshop on 7 May 2021, in order to discuss their specific ideas and concrete next steps.

On the basis of the feedback provided in all these activities, the following interest and need for a network in the Alpine region dedicated to supporting smart SMEs in the bio-based economy crystallises out:

1.2. Whom should be the network serving?

In order to reach out to as many triple-helix (business, science, policy) actors, the network should address mainly **intermediaries in the bioeconomy and digital fields**. As intermediaries we understand actors working at the **interface of companies in natural fibre value chains (wood, maize, hemp etc.) and digital technology providers**, i.e. experts supporting companies in innovation, technology transfer and digital transformation; such as representatives of business support organisations and innovation agencies, cluster managers, Digital Innovation Hub managers, managers of Strategic Research and Innovation Partnerships etc. who are in direct contact to companies, know the sector, competencies and needs. They can act as hubs for interregional collaboration connecting companies and

researches across regions – matching the main interest in connecting with companies, experts in the bioeconomy field and business support organisations/cluster managers, as indicated in the online survey.

Last but not least these actors usually also work in close collaboration with public authorities and can facilitate dialogue between the business and science community and regional or national policy makers.

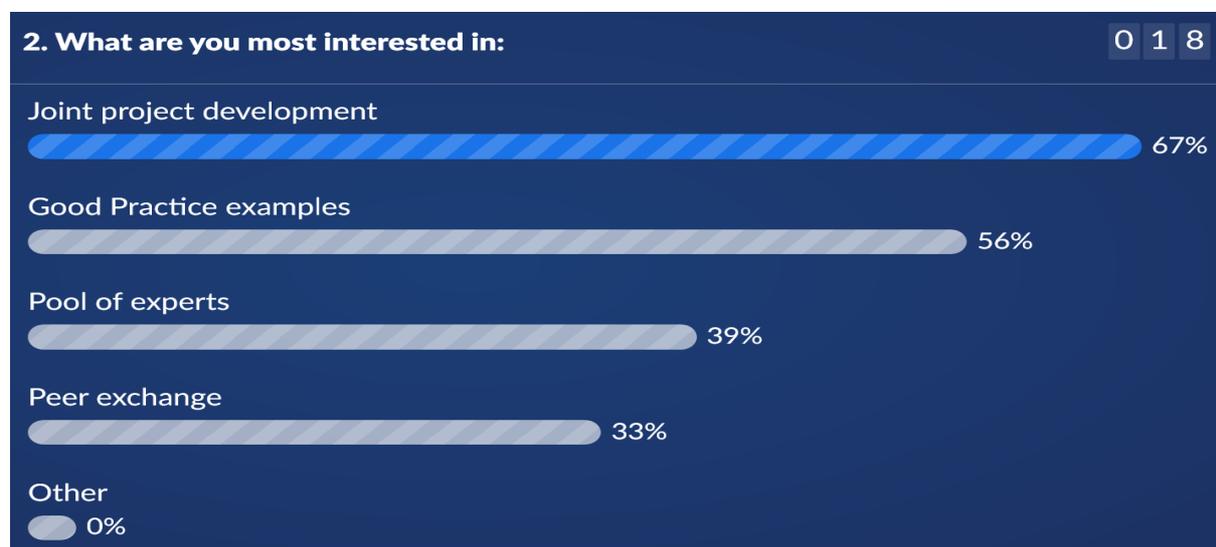
Building on the main target group of intermediaries the network should also be open and useful to triple-helix actors i.e., interested companies, policy makers and research & education institutions.

1.3. What kind of a network could it be?

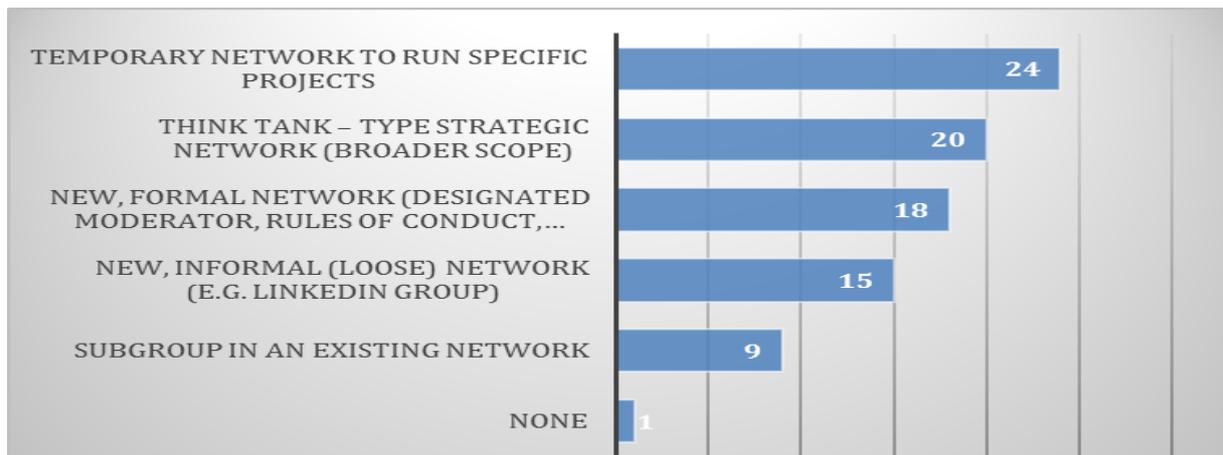
Based on desk research, interview and the workshop on 3 November 2020 we derived the following types of networks:

- **Informal (loose) network**, e.g. a LinkedIn group to share information
- **Temporary networks to run specific projects**. A “nucleus” of such a project based network could be the well-integrated Alpine Space community established over the last years in many projects (e.g. in the field of bioeconomy in [AlpLinkBioEco](#), [AlpBioEco](#), etc.)
- **Think-tank** type strategic network, without formal membership but regular meetings to discuss strategic topics also beyond individual projects
- **Formal network** with membership, rules of conduct, a designated moderator, etc.

Already in the workshop “Building a Sustainable Network for Smart SMEs in the Alpine Region” on 3 November 2020, a majority of 67 % answered an interest in **joint project development**, followed by 56% interest in sharing good practices.



Also from the responses to the survey (multiple choices allowed) we see that the preference goes for the creation of a temporary network specifically designed to enable the set-up, development and implementation of specific projects and a “think tank”-like network with a more strategic scope.



From the interviews we learned that a “nucleus” of a network of actors in the field of bioeconomy (and digital solutions) cooperating in projects on a temporary basis actually already exists in Interreg projects such as AlpLinkBioEco, etc. The core partners of these projects could take the lead in developing further project ideas and enlarge the group of participants.

We also evaluated the opportunity to **link to existing networks**:

- a. on **European level**, such as: such as [EREK](#), [ECCP](#), [The European Bioeconomy Network](#), [S3Platform on Agri-Food](#), [DIHNET.EU](#), [EIT Digital](#), [EuropaBio](#) and [European Network for Rural Development](#). However, none of these networks was chosen in the survey to offer the right framework to respond to the needs expressed by the Smart SMEs stakeholders.
- b. in the **Alpine region**, namely the [EUSALP Action Group 2 subgroups for Bioeconomy or for Digital Industry](#). We note that out of the 44 survey respondents, 4 explicitly suggested to team up with these EUSALP AG2 subgroups. In the interviews with the subgroup coordinators, we discussed the possibilities for involving a broader network of bioeconomy and digitalisation experts/intermediaries: In both cases, the coordinators suggest not to enlarge the subgroups but make use of them in terms of “momentary stations for dialogue” with practitioners when concrete project ideas/themes relevant for them are on the agenda.

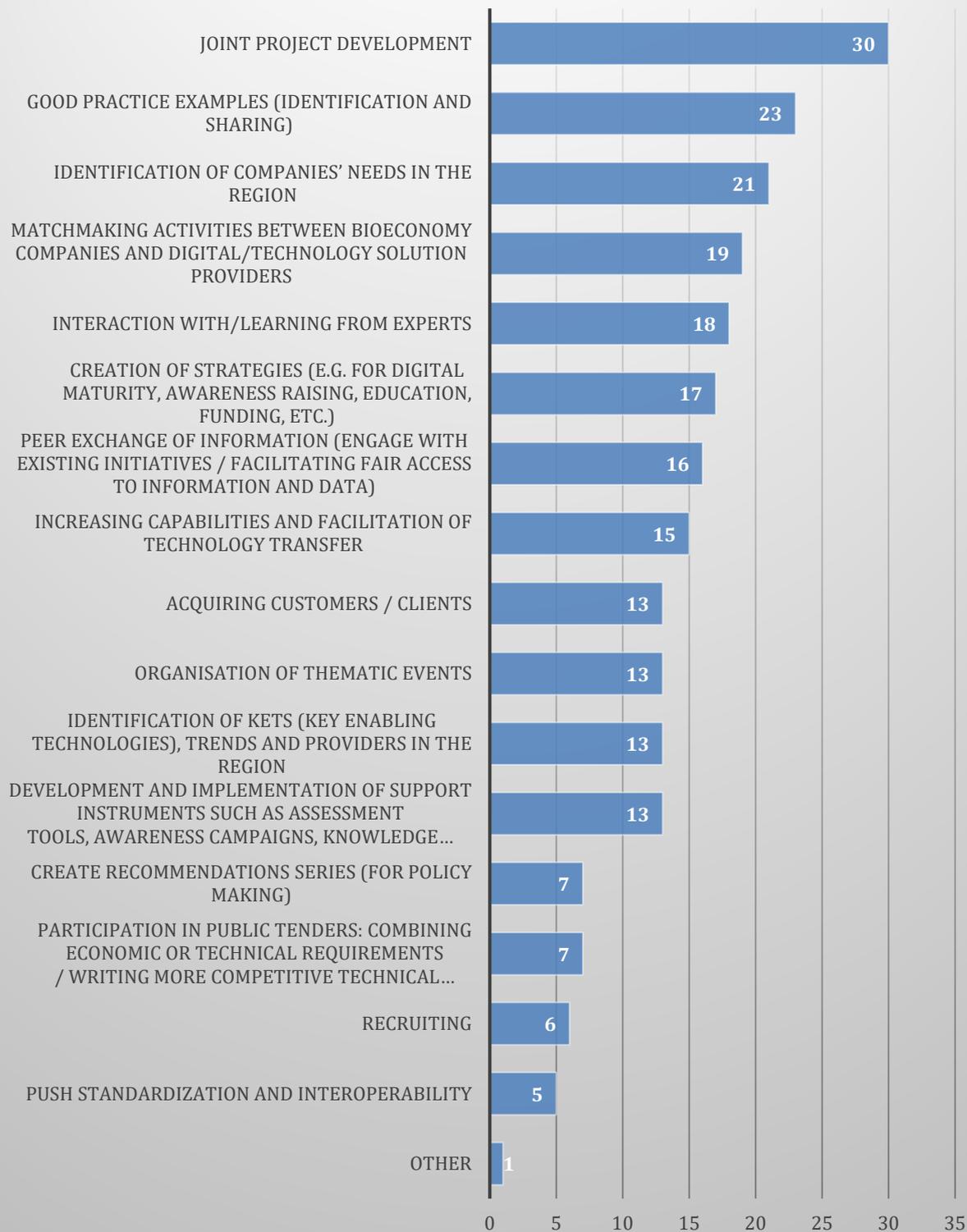
From this information we derive suggestions for the possible implementation of the envisaged network (see point 1.5.).

1.4. Possible objectives of the network

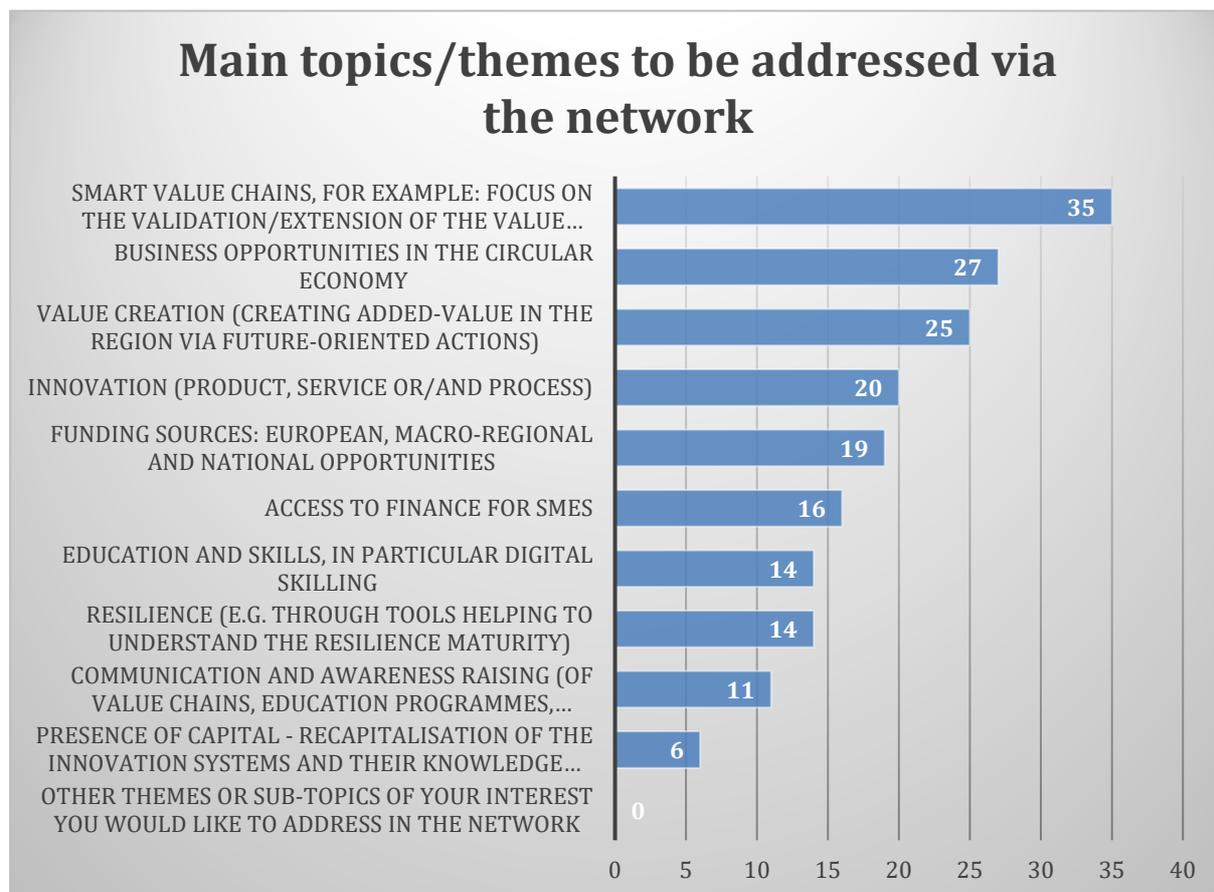
Before structuring the objectives of the new network, we look into the feedback collected in regard to the interest of the stakeholders in participating in the network.

The **main five areas of interest** indicated by the participants in the survey are joint project development, sharing good practice examples, identification of companies’ needs in the region, interaction with/learning from experts and matchmaking activities between bioeconomy companies and digital/technology solution providers:

What is your interest in taking part in such a network?



The **main topics that should be addressed** via the network have a clear focus on creating value for companies: development of smart value chains, identify and develop business opportunities in circular economy, etc.



From the feedback received in the workshop on 3 November 2020, the interviews and the survey we derive following **possible strategic objectives**:

- Securing the strategic regional development/growth in circular bioeconomy making use of digital transformation by focusing on the identification of the companies' needs, on the identification of KETS and on the strengthening of the regional smart value chains.
- Transforming the network into a recognized community, strengthening on long term the trust between the regional stakeholders and their sense of belonging by contributing to the design of a framework supporting collaboration in a fast and uncomplicated manner.
- Contribute to the development of cross-regional funding for projects for the benefit of SME, such as aligned or even joint calls (currently tested in the Alpine Space project ARDIA-Net)

and possible operational objectives focussing on developing value chains in circular bioeconomy:

- Facilitation of matchmaking and exchange of good practices
- Initiation of joint project development

1.5. First actions for implementation

Based on the learnings from the dialogue with bioeconomy and digitalisation experts in the Smart SME Work Package 6 activities, we see two main directions for further action:

1.5.1 Connect people

The project helped identifying relevant actors in the Alpine region, raised interest and enabled first contacts. Let's use this mobilisation.

As a first step towards a network for interregional exchange of experience and collaboration of bioeconomy and digitalisation experts in the Alpine Region beyond the project lifetime, we should make use of the interest of relevant stakeholders raised and identified in the workshop, interviews and the survey with the help of the project Smart SME. In total, 44 persons participating in these activities agreed to share contact details for further networking opportunities (see annexes).

For the start, a simple database (e.g. excel file) should be created with the information of the respondents who offered their consent to be contacted.

A networking support tool could be selected from a large variety of tools available to be used as a space to structure and share information in form of links, documents, or to easily organise meetings.

For communication purposes and for enhancing the visibility of the network (also to enlarge it), the creation of a LinkedIn group could also be envisaged. However, this depends on the resources available to moderate this group and the agreed objectives among the members.

1.5.2 Synergies with existing initiatives and projects

The project showed a broad range of existing initiatives and projects. However not all actors are aware of them. Let's make use of what already exists and make use of synergies.

1.5.2.1 Value Chain Generator developed in AlpLinkBioEco

The Smart SME WP6 activities showed a clear interest in fostering cross-regional innovation projects involving companies along the bioeconomy value chain.

Something to build upon is the Value Chain Generator (VCG) Tool, which is one of the main outputs of AlpLinkBioEco, developed by the Institute of Complex Systems – School of Engineering and Architecture of Fribourg.

It is a software that allows to match actors from different sectors and Countries to create novel biobased value chains and it has been tested and successfully exploited by the Project Partners for this purpose during the Project. Both intra-regional as well as cross-regional new business opportunities can be envisaged if data is shared, as it was the case during the Project. The primary users of the VCG are the stakeholders of innovation ecosystems, companies, researchers, policymakers, but also cluster managers.

Until at least April 2023, the live version of the web-based software tool will be hosted by the Institute of Complex Systems at the School of Engineering and Architecture of Fribourg (iCoSys). Project Partners can continue to use the software and enlarge the database.

New users are invited to join, since the source code of the VCG software is available under a permissive software license.

Applying for interregional funding to further develop bioeconomy value chains, e.g. by expanding the Value Chain Generator, could be a good way to further develop the network of bioeconomy actors in the Alpine region.

1.5.2.2 Towards cross-regional funding for company projects: [ARDIA-Net](#)

In order to support collaborative SME projects, the actors emphasised the need for joint or at least aligned regional or national calls in the macro region.

This is what the Alpine Space project ARDIA-Net is about. The project partners aim to develop a multi-level, multi-national, coherent Research, Development & Innovation area for cross-regional and interdisciplinary cooperation and to implement a joint funding framework for projects addressing circular bioeconomy and health economy. A joint pilot call (“Innovation Express 2021”) open from 17th May to 16th July 2021 involves Baden-Württemberg, Salzburg, Canton Fribourg and Brandenburg. The Innovation Express 2021 Initiative is coordinated by Anteja ECG, also partner in the Smart SME project. In parallel, the Austrian regions Salzburg, Upper Austria and Lower Austria work on the simplification and process alignment for cross-regional projects benefitting from separate regional calls. The experience gained will be shared in a Policy Forum in November 2021.

In order to make use of synergies, we suggest reaching out to policy makers in all Smart SME regions, inviting them to the ARDIA-Net Policy Forum, thus enlarging the discussions on designing coordinated / synchronized calls in the macro region.

1.5.2.3 Technical Support from EUSALP AG2 subgroups on bioeconomy and digital industry

The EUSALP AG2 subgroups for bioeconomy and for digital industry could support the network in two ways:

- **Facilitating dialogue between policy makers and practitioners across Alpine regions to discuss project ideas/themes when possible.**
- **Initiate technical support, e.g. to set-up an online match-making tool and event connecting bioeconomy players in the Alpine region. The subgroups could help using the ARPAF instrument to finance such basic networking infrastructure.**

ANNEXES:

List of participants in workshop 3 November 2020 willing to share contact details

List of interviewees: key stakeholders in the SMART SME partner regions and the EUSALP Action Group 2 (March 2021)

List of survey participants willing to share contact details (April 2021)