

OCOVA and the Hautes Alpes for win-win co-operation solutions

A greater international dimension for the forum

The forum has expanded its European dimension, and for the first time a Euro-Mediterranean opening is witnessed with the participation of El Ghazala, the technological cluster of Tunisia. El Ghazala is in full expansion and has just joined a consortium pooling the techno-clusters of Sfax and Sousse, a pool which has recently signed an agreement with the SCS cluster. "This agreement, according to Pierre Vollaire, has an international dimension which allows "benchmarking" other clusters, assessing possibilities of setting up projects with others clusters and players. It is part of a strategy of opening on the technological clusters in the world, in a networking concept." Adviser David Emond is delighted with the strategy. According to him, "International development is one of the main concerns of the competitiveness clusters, right from the start... Out of the 71 clusters in our country, a good level for France, 17 clusters have international missions." He gives the example of the "Secured Communicating Solutions" cluster of the Paca region, "sharing borders with Italy, the Mediterranean sea, and which offers possibilities in the Maghreb region."

Winning dynamics which will gain importance

According to Pierre Vollaire, "the idea of the OCOVA forum, a full one-day program, is to connect people and have the clusters work from there. It is the role of the SCS cluster, the coordinating commission which it belongs to,

the international relations, to coordinate the networks, attempting to set up projects after the forum." The OCOVA forum, though it only lasts one day, maintains a dynamics which could gain importance especially... if the Hautes-Alpes drive this splendid Alps-Mediterranean Euro region. According to Pierre Vollaire, "the projects could be about increasing the value of communicating objects relating to sectors like tourism, services to individuals ... multi-applications in urban environment..." Indeed! Here are beautiful cards to play in the years to come. The Hautes Alpes are ideally placed at the centre of a Euro region pooling the Rhône-Alpes and Piémont (two engines of Europe!), PACA, which connects it more directly to Euro-Mediterranean dimension... and let us not forget our Swiss associates! They offer many advantages to companies which have settled here as also to those seeking a site where to establish their premises. This is an exceptional territory which has an active and enterprising labour force. However, and this is where the shoe pinches, they do not have SMEs of sufficient size to attack the international market. It is not an alpine characteristic, it is a French, endemic and pernicious issue.

France makes its honey from these bees

What is the first French enterprise? The craft industry, as we are all aware: It is advertised on TV! However, there is nothing to be proud of. Half the French companies do not have any paid employee! This does not mean that their managers are all craftsmen. They can be employed in

other companies, if they do not work... in the public service.

SMEs of less than 50 salaried employees represent 99% of the companies and 55% of employment; to better define this reality, the TPE category (very small companies) was created: less than 10 employees. Nearly 90% of the French companies are TPEs (2.2 million companies) and they employ 3.5 million people, which makes them first creators of employment and wealth ... France makes its honey from these bees.

SMEs account for 10 to 499 paid employees. The limit between small and large companies varies depending on the European countries; hence this classification is likely to be modified: the European Union considers a company as "large" if it employs more than 250 people, which corresponds to a more representative threshold. In France, the small structures are still the true engine of the economy. However, to take a lead in the world market, there size is the issue.

For the Hautes-Alpes, Pierre Vollaire proposes "that one approaches other players to create SMEs of respectable size, more than a hundred people... Why not with ARD - multi-application of communicating objects, he asks? A company of 36 people, 25 years old, in good health, that wishes to develop..."

Much potential... but the global level is high

He comments that in France, "The culture of clusters, projects, multi-partners, innovation is at a relatively low level. Except for the "spin-ups" of the large groups and others, SMEs still need to climb an important "step"... Admittedly, he concedes, the effort made is far from being negligible; but things go fast and strong! There are opportunities to concretise on the field. There is money ... particularly the money from Europe, even though he recognizes that these funds are not all mobilised yet. There is OSEO, there is the State, the region... but it should be known that financing by the State and communities is just inciting. It is thus necessary to mobilise private financing... and also to know that one progresses very strongly on industrial culture. There is no shortage of "venture capital" for project holders. As for private investors, there is much potential, but good projects should be presented. We are in a world com-



M. Didier, maire de Gap

petition; the threshold is very high..."

The geographical expansion of the OCOVA forum will make it possible to lay the foundations for projects, partnerships, and businesses on a European scale as well as prospects for financing innovation development. However, it is precisely the innovation, and more specifically "industrial innovation which is at the heart of government policy", as emphasised by the adviser David Emond.

Innovation is the key to success

"Vis-à-vis a world competition on the goods markets as also increasingly on the services markets, we must emphasize our assets, among which: the quality of our initial education, the technological and scientific excellence of our universities, our laboratories and our companies. Innovation is the key to success for French companies. Our products and services can be different by being ahead in the competition and thus attract talents and businesses. This innovation bet is shared by our European partners; Lisbon aims to devote 3% of the GDP to Research and Development, including two thirds for the private sector. In France, we are still far from this objective: with 2.14% devoted to R & D, our move towards progress is significant. It is not public R&D that is lacking but that of private R&D". The policy of the government is thus to help, to assist companies in research projects. It is articulated around three areas of focus: an attractive and incentive based taxation; giving priority to projects resulting from the business world and supporting networking. Our country has 71 clusters, a good level for France, says the adviser.

Les participants d'une table ronde

