Organised by

Summary of Working Group Results from the GreenEcoNet Workshop

Role and challengers of SMEs in a green(er) economy

Transnational networking as an opportunity for SMEs

Date: Wednesday, 26. November 2014

Event location

KANZAN Spezialpapiere GmbH, Nippesstraße 5, 52349 Düren

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List of participants

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Working groups on transnational exchange, the paper industry and a GreenEcoNet web platform

Working Group 1) transnational exchange between SMEs – What is useful? What is necessary for this?

In a small group of six people, a focused discussion took place on the possibilities of increasing networking in the “Three Country Region” (Netherlands, Belgium and Germany). Some simple and comprehensible arguments were mentioned. For example, the language barrier must not be overlooked, and it is important to address thematically attractive and business-relevant themes. When sending invitations to an industry exchange in the border region, it is important to have the text not only in German but also in English. This is very important for the network to make a good first impression in Belgium and the Netherlands.

During the exchange, it became clear that it could make sense to find one network partner per region. These partners should have good connections to enterprises (in particular SMEs) from their respective regions. Furthermore, it is important to monitor which events, meetings and activities take place in the border region and, if applicable, are already well established. Here, based on the interests and motivation of SMEs exchange events can be offered, e.g. on cross-cutting themes or relevant specific issues.

The GreenEcoNet project should first inform SME representatives and their networks from both sides of the German border, before the representatives can decide whether they want to promote GreenEcoNet activities in their networks. Therefore, GreenEcoNet should first build relationships between multipliers.

Finally, the definition of “network” was discussed, as there seem to be many different views of what a network is and what a network does. This was also analyzed in the context of the needs and wishes of the industry.

The diversity of generated information can be seen in the photographs of the billboard and tablecloth.

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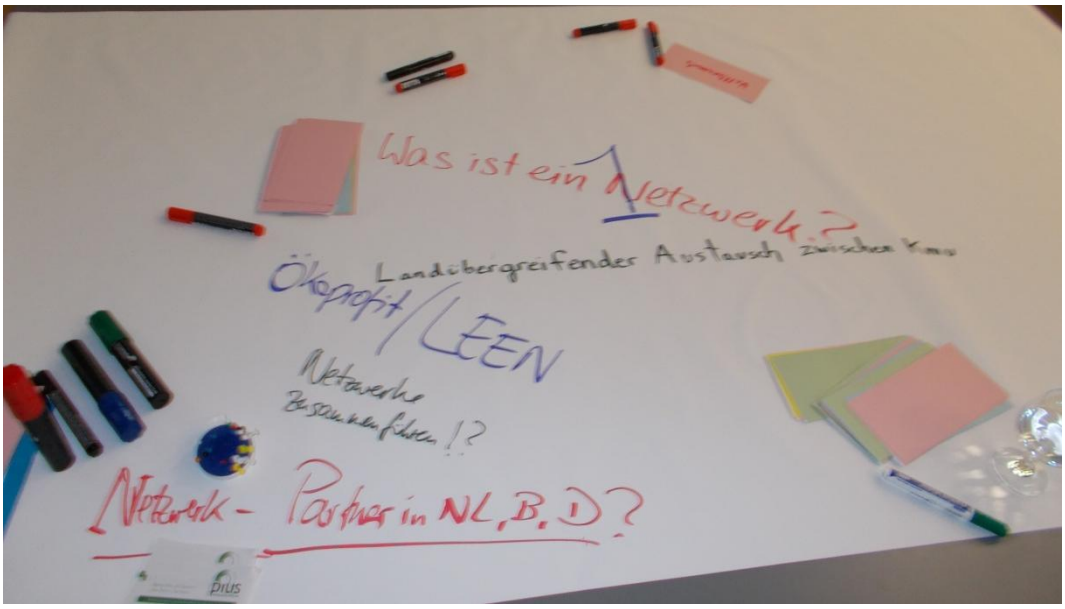

Figure 1: Results of the discussion in working group 1 (Tablecloth)

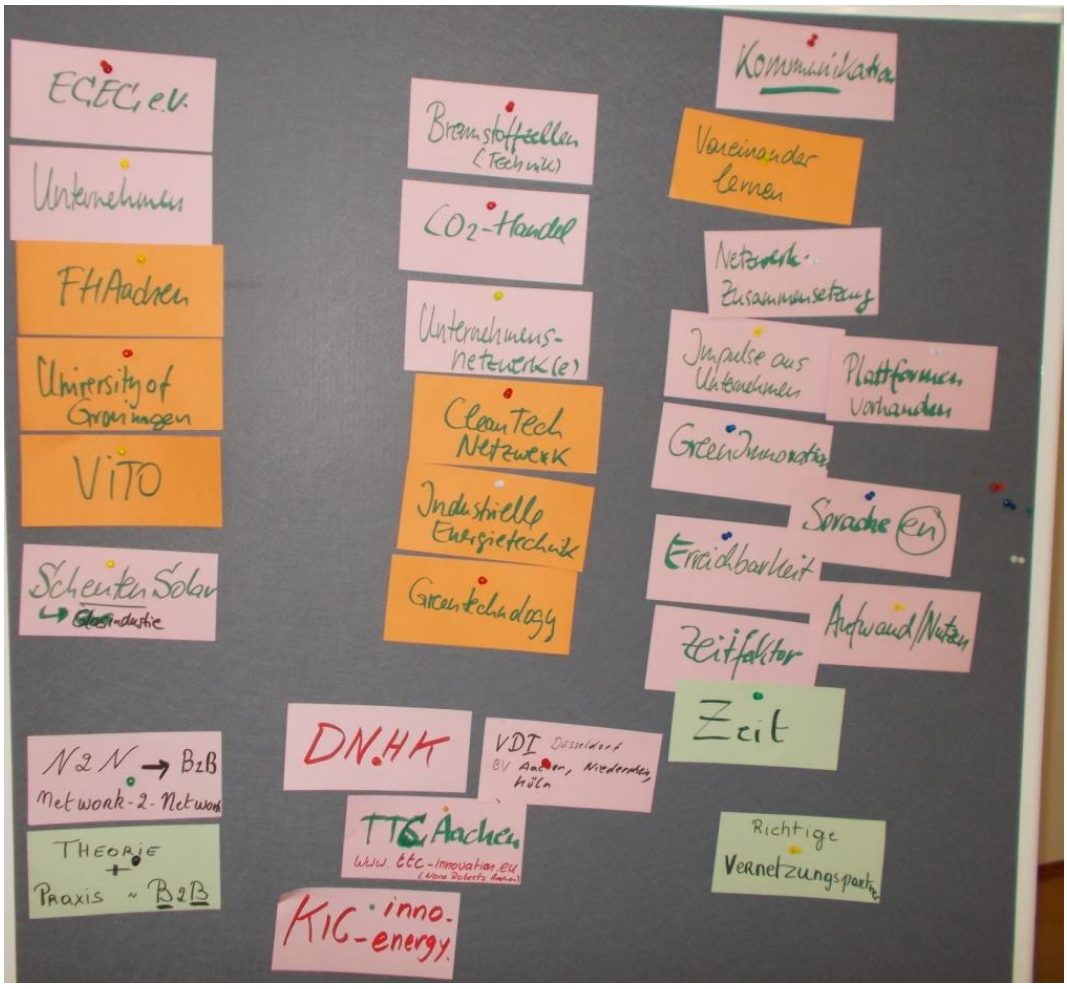

Figure 2: Results of the discussion in working group 1 (Billboard)

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Figure 3: Discussion in working group 1

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Working group 2) Resource efficiency in the paper industry – current status and developments

This group included representatives from five enterprises, two consultancies and two research institutes, which was an ideal mix and led to an interesting discussion.

After a short introduction round, the discussion started around the theme of desired action in the paper industry.

Working group participants formulated their wishes and expectations from the event:

- The need for regional networks was stressed. The goal is to remove the need to get an advisor from far away when competent advisors are available in the region. The term “region” also includes regions close to the border.
- All participants positively responded to the possibility of being connected with good, competent contacts from the paper industry after the event. They all felt that the time invested would be worth it.
- The connectedness between research and the industry was perceived as deficient. There would be room for new actions (including transnational initiatives).
- The presentations received positive feedback and the event was perceived as being very practical. The exchange with experts was also positively rated.
- For every improvement in resource efficiency, quality and safety of production should not be neglected.
- Change needs courage to think out of the box and to try to overcome organizational blindness.
- One key point for long-term change is the involvement of employees. Without this, technical innovations cannot be implemented.

At the end of the discussion, the different levels of credibility from leading employees were discussed. For instance, a technical innovation presented by a salesman can be seen as a crazy idea that should not be financed. However, in the eyes of the technical leader, the short payback period is often seen as an obstacle. The goal should therefore be an improvement of internal communication. A positive example of this is the hybrid or tandem system of the technical and marketing departments.

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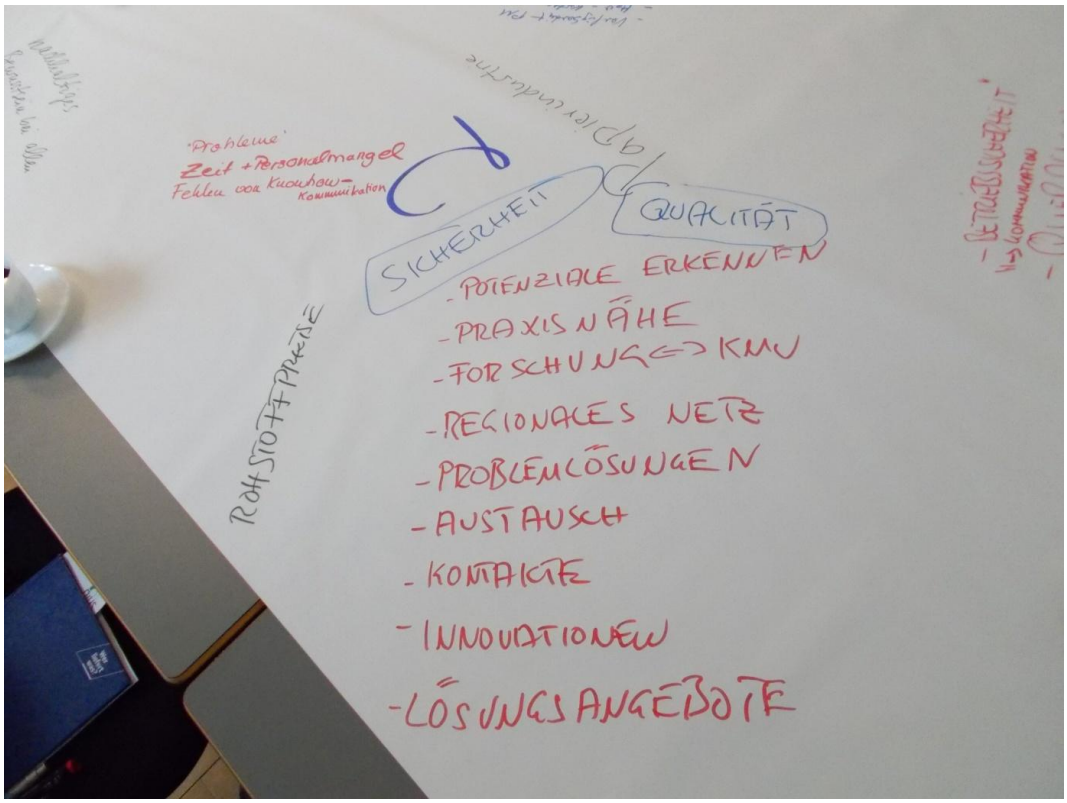

Figure 1: Results of the discussion in working group 2 (Tablecloth)

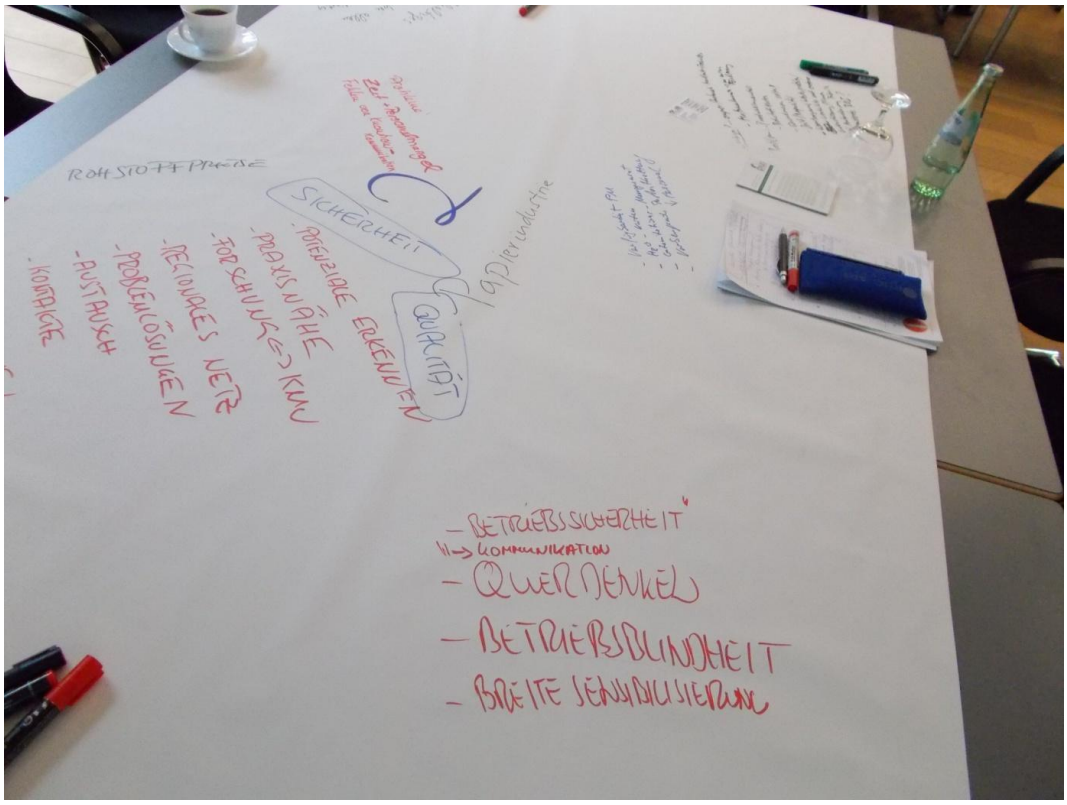

Figure 2: Results of the discussion in working group 2 (Tablecloth)

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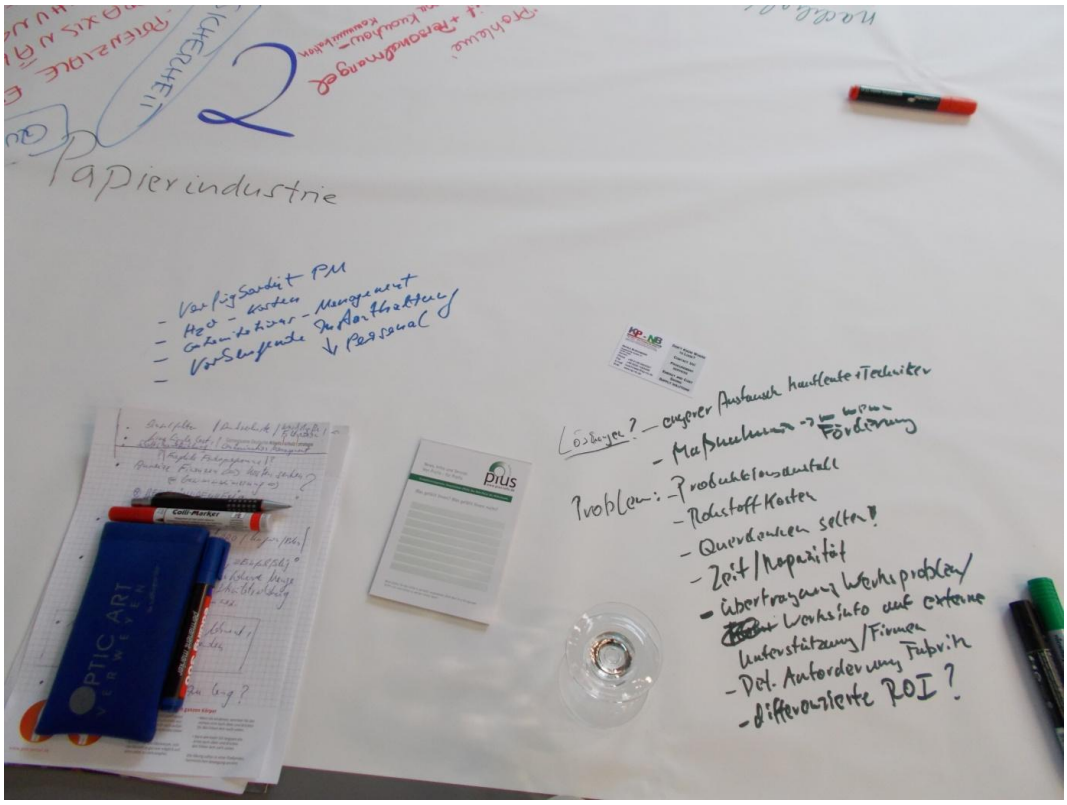

Figure 3: Results of the discussion in working group 2 (Tablecloth)

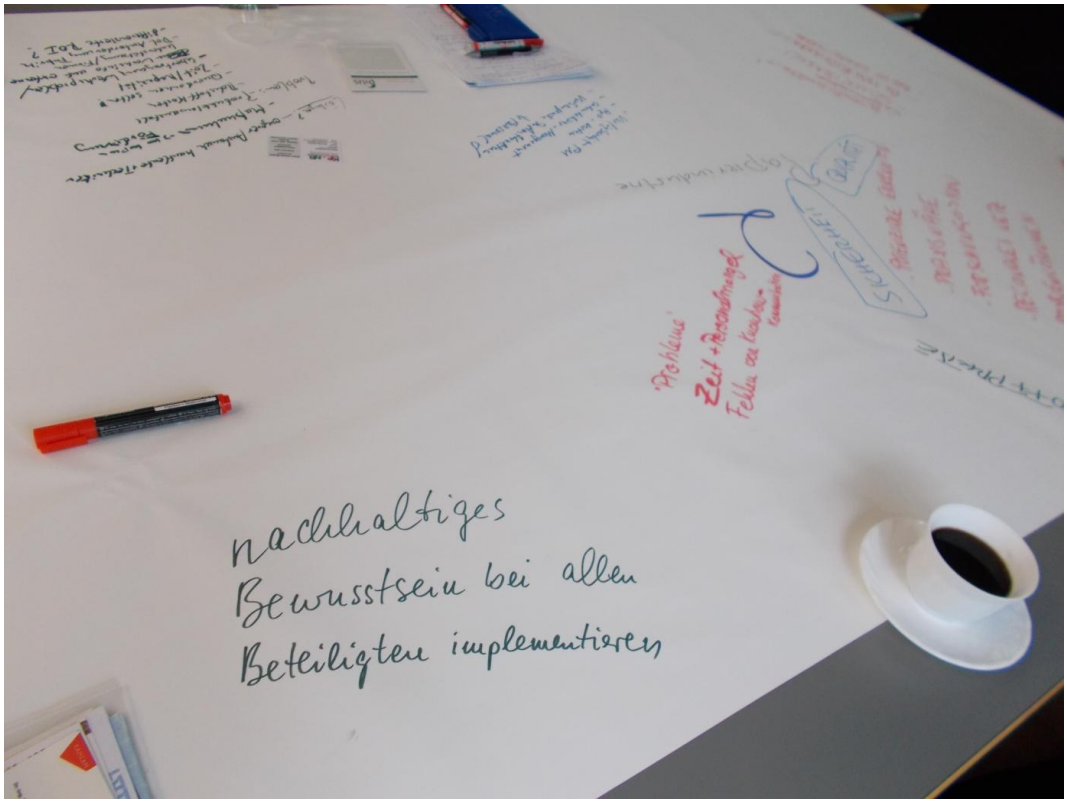

Figure 4: Results of the discussion in working group 2 (Tablecloth)

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Figure 5: Discussion in Working Group 2

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Working group 3) A Web Platform for SMEs – what do enterprises need? What is already available? What should be improved? Does it make sense to have a web platform?

The working group discussed the demand and potentially relevant offers for a web platform for SMEs in Germany and in Europe. In the first place, it was confirmed that SMEs are interested in using a web platform and are willing to invest time in the set-up of a profile and the use of the platform, as long as the platform

a) Is easy to find or becomes well known;

b) Is well structured and user friendly;

c) Offers relevant and current information;

d) Is offered in German and in English;

e) Functions properly from a technical perspective.

Ideally, the platform should be perceived in the first searches as a quick and relevant source of help. That way it will continue being used as an important source of information and networking.

The platform should therefore be seen as relevant from the user's very first visit and stir their interest. In particular, the platform should be in a position to provide relevant information in response to the search terms and thematic needs of users.

At the beginning, the platform should be completely free of cost and offer information that can be accessed for free. Relevant and interesting information should be made available through research from the institutions managing the platform.

In this context, different actors, in particular SMEs and sector associations, but also municipal institutions and political decision makers, should be involved in the development and starting phase of the platform.

The platform founders should then gradually attract an increasing number of stakeholders on the platform and motivate them to use it. This way, the platform can maintain a certain momentum and continue growing through inputs, networking and word of mouth to external stakeholders. In this manner, it would be possible in the long term to develop two distinct user entry points: 1) a free interface with access to basic functions, information and networking possibilities; 2) a charged access portal with access to industry-specific information and networks and/or to a match-making market place. The payment of access fees would finance the management, moderation and maintenance of this special interface. It should be decided whether and to which extent a quality and seriousness check should be made for information submitted by users.

In order to have a functioning platform, it is essential that users be ready to provide information on their enterprise, their products and their innovations in addition to asking honest questions – and this, without coming across problems in regard to trade secrets that give them a competitive advantage. It is only through the publication of relevant information that an open and relevant exchange can begin and create an innovating network among enterprises from a certain industry (who are therefore potentially rivals). For this, we need enterprises who wish to use the platform to guarantee that they can and want to communicate openly. An alternative could be to have a platform function enabling anonymous suggestions that do not allow conclusions to be made on the source of the information. Alternatively, the platform could offer some kind of anonymous employee

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suggestion system where employees could provide relevant information without disclosure of information source. As this is a very sensitive area, intense exchange between users and providers of the platform should be sought.

Another important aspect is the focus and the terminology of the platform. If the focus is too narrow, for example by using climate change mitigation or environmental protection as the only context of the platform, some entrepreneurs might be drawn away from the platform. It would be more appropriate to put the financial advantages of resource and energy efficiency in the spotlight and to mention the added competitivity in the context of a greener economy.

The following suggestions were developed and discussed as potentially relevant further development possibilities for the GreenEcoNet platform:

1. Industry-specific networks: the web platform should enable industry-specific networks and users should be able to filter all available information by industry. This would facilitate the initiation of specific discussions and solutions to problems, and consequently make users recognize the relevance of the platform and take it seriously. At the same time, this opens up the possibility of making the platform and the information it contains known to industry circles and circulated among them. There is a generation change at the moment in many SMEs and young people tend to be very active in industry associations.
2. Pooling of research needs: it seems to make sense to give platform users a space to post information on research needs, in addition to the already planned forum or question function. This would not only enable research needs and research results to be gathered in a more efficient way, but would also allow different enterprises to team up if they have the same or similar research needs and this way get priority in the awarding of research funds. For this to be useful, it is important for these research needs to also be seen by funding organizations (see point 3).
3. Feedback from public institutions: the platform should also involve public institutions, funding organizations and decision-makers. In particular, platform users could benefit from a function „What challenges are you facing?“ or „What is your research need?“ giving them the opportunity to express their need for solutions and research findings. Public institutions could then look at the user entries to these platform functions and use it to (i) adapt existing regulative and administrative frameworks (e.g. simpilfying the conditions for and participation in public tender procedures) as well as (ii) identify salient research needs. Though the bundling of research needs public research, funding could be better channeled to relevant research clusters and thematic areas and thus unfold increased societal relevance. Correspondingly, feedback from public institutions to the user entries in the platform functions outlined here should be given in appropriate intervals and be made available to participating companies via monthly newsletters that address the most relevant platform entries and provide responses from public institutions. In addition, based on the user entries public institutions could offer local or regional workshops responding to specific research and thematic needs entered by platform users.
4. GreenEcoNet project newsletter: if GreenEcoNet published an interesting newsletter every month, it would be an incentive for SMEs to return to the website more often.
5. Set up a special section for enterprise founders: it is easier to make a company green from the start than to steer an already established SME towards the green economy. The web platform could therefore offer tips and tricks in a special section for company founders.

In the end, it was mentioned that a European web platform could be, in a way, a “platform of platforms”, if it provides links to other existing platforms in several countries or regions and (if applicable and legally possible) gathers and features information from those websites.

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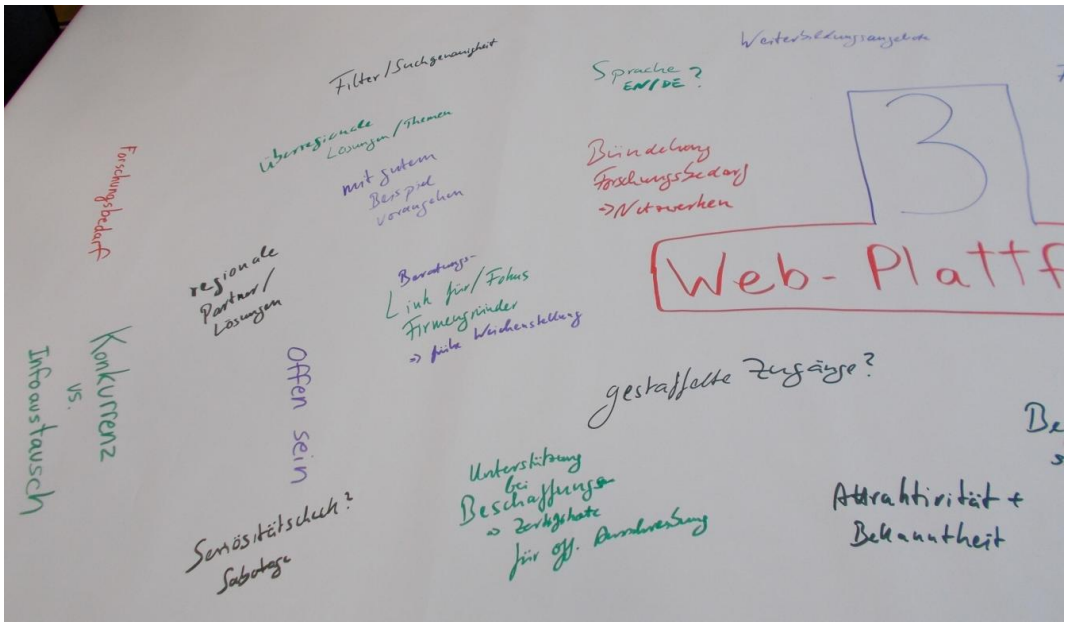

Figure 6: Results of the discussion in working group 3 (Tablecloth)

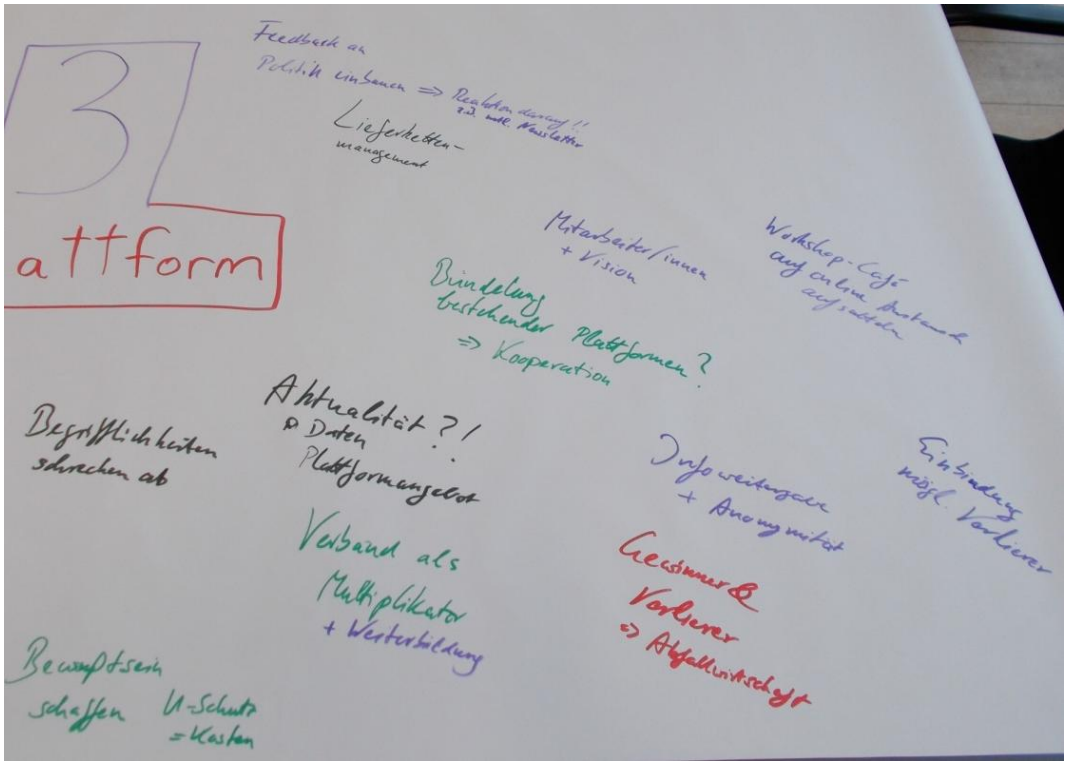

Figure 7: Results of the discussion in working group 3 (Tablecloth)

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Figure 8: Discussion in working group 3

Figure 9: Discussion in working group 3

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