



THEMATIC CLUSTERS | OPERATIONAL FRAMEWORK

** This framework has been approved by the ECHN Board of Directors in April 2026. **

1 | Definition and purpose of an ECHN Thematic Cluster

A Thematic Cluster (TC) within the ECHN brings together regular ECHN members, based on their complementary profiles, sizes of operations, contexts in which they are operating, program focuses or another taxonomy that thematically, strategically and practically makes the most sense for them, within the scope of ECHN program and mission.

The purpose of the TCs is to connect like minded and complementary members even stronger and direct, and facilitate common actions, projects, advocacy initiatives, peer exchanges and other interactions that will benefit all of the members involved. It is also a vehicle to expand the activities and advocacy efforts on particular topics of interest, or sub-sectors within the CCSI and the related ecosystems.

ECHN is here a catalyst for new connections and initiatives to emerge, with the idea to advance the operations and programs of individual members, their specific areas of activity, but also the entire network, and the ecosystem at large.

The TCs are set up, supported and operated with the framework of ECHN. They are made up of ECHN full time members, and as such remain part of the operating structure of ECHN.

2 | Value proposition and desired outcomes for a Thematic Cluster

Taking part in a TC allows members to:

- Connect more directly to their most relevant peers;
- Explore the specific fields of activity in a deeper way;
- Share experiences that truly matter for the hubs involved;
- Have prompt access to solutions or support with pressing matters;

- Initiate new projects, relevant to the specific field, with other fellow members;
- Advocate for initiatives within the ECHN, and externally - together with ECHN;
- Increase the relevance and visibility of the sub-sector in question;
- Nurture an imminent and intensified sense of belonging to a wider community.

The TCs bring to life relevant initiatives, spark project ideas, develop thematic content for ECHN events or advocacy activities, and much more.

For the ECHN as a network, the benefits are numerous. TCs are considered to be one of the main community building and nurturing tools with the organization. They also intensify the year-long engagement of the members, and increase the overall value proposition of the network towards its members, as well as the external stakeholders.

3 | How to initiate and set up a Thematic Cluster within the ECHN

A Thematic Cluster needs to be initiated by a minimum of 5 (five) hubs who have held an introductory meeting (self-initiated), and made a decision to initiate the formation of a TC. All of the participating hubs within a TC need to be regular members of the ECHN.

The members who wish to propose the formation of a new TC need to send the official initiative by email to ECHN's Community Manager (CM). The submission should clarify the motivation, and identify the hubs/members who are initiating the TC (up to 1.000 words in total). The Community Manager will forward it to the Director of Operations (DOO) to put it on the agenda of the next Board of Directors (BOD) meeting for assessment.

The BOD needs to approve the formation of the TC for it to be officially set up and operational. This will depend on a few formal criteria mentioned above, the relevance of the proposed sub-sector covered by the TC, and the alignment and potential of the TC within the broader strategic roadmap and the network's scope of activities.

Upon approval, the DOO will allocate an ECHN staff member who will act as the Facilitator for the TC. ECHN members are then notified about the new TC in the next monthly ECHN newsletter, and invited to join. They also may be directly invited to join by the CM or the Lead or Facilitator of the TC, if their profile fits the TC's. An intro meeting of the TC members is then scheduled within 2-4 weeks after the announcement in the newsletter.

Another way of setting up a TC is for the ECHN's BOD to initiate it, in line with the overall development strategy of the network. The BOD then delegates the mandate to facilitate the establishment of a particular TC to the CM and DOO.

4 | Structure & leadership of a Thematic Cluster

There is not a fixed formal structure within the Thematic Cluster. All participating members are equal in the decision making process, and are free to self-organize, based on the usual democratic decision-making processes, as long as they act in a transparent way and keep the TC Facilitator involved in all relevant matters.

Thematic Cluster Facilitator

The **Thematic Cluster Facilitator** is the one taking on the responsibility for the operations and regular meetings, as well as reporting towards the DOO and ECHN at large.

The obligations of the TC Facilitator are to:

- Schedule the meetings, minimum one per quarter;
- Collect input, prepare agendas and facilitate the meetings;
- Take notes during the meetings and use them for reporting;
- Follow-up on initiatives and decisions made within the TC;
- If necessary, delegate particular tasks between the TC members;
- Setup and regularly update the TC members' contact list;
- Moderate internal communication channels;
- Collaborate with the ECHN's CM on all the related processes;
- Edit and maintain the dedicated web page of the TC;
- Gather and share relevant information and ensure that it is up to date;
- Produce one annual report for the BOD per year bringing together the findings and activities of the TC;
- Disseminate an annual standardised evaluation survey (together with CM), and present the results to the BOD;
- Take part in one end- of-year meeting, with the other TC Facilitators and Leads, DOO, CM and the BOD.

One ECHN team member will not be facilitating more than one TC in a given period. The TC Facilitator takes that position for an open-end period.

Thematic Cluster Lead

Alongside the Facilitator from the ECHN team, one of the members will act as the **Thematic Cluster Lead**. This person will drive the discussions and initiatives within the Thematic Cluster in a constructive direction, and in line with the needs of the sector in question.

The TC Lead needs to be accepted for this position by more than 50% of the members of the TC, at its first meeting. Any member of the TC can nominate themselves, or another member for that position.

The obligations of the TC Lead are to:

- Attend all of the meetings and take part in their preparation;
- Work together with the Facilitator and maintain communication;
- Provide sector-specific support and inputs to the Facilitator;
- Motivate hub representatives to be proactive and engaged, and new ones to join;
- Gather and share relevant information;
- Take part in one end-of-year meeting, with the other TC Facilitators, DOO, CM and the BOD.

The TC Lead needs to serve all of the members of the TC and the advancement of the topic in question within the ECHN and externally, and not to favor the potential benefits for his/her hub, or any other specific organization.

The TC Lead takes the position for up to two years (24 months). In case the members decide so, and in case the TC Lead is willing, they can extend their mandate by one more year (12 months).

The **ECHN Community Manager** will also be present at all of the meetings and support the facilitation and “shadow” the process, in order to be aware of all of the processes and initiatives emerging across different chapters.

ECHN’s CM and the TC Facilitator will informally report to ECHN DOO each quarter, with the idea to follow the initiatives and pursue opportunities for financing, program intersections etc. The regular formal annual report will be submitted to ECHN’s DOO by the TC Facilitator at the beginning of Q4.

5 | Membership and engagement

The members of the Thematic Clusters are expected to be engaged and proactive in the activities of the TC. They are expected to attend at least 2 meetings within a year. In case they would like to leave the TC, they just need to notify the TC Facilitator.

It is understood that all TC members are contributing in good faith, in a proactive way, and that the time invested into the work of the TC is for the advancement of the specific sub-sector, and with the idea of utilizing the platform that ECHN is for increasing the benefits for the involved hubs.

6 | Internal communications

The internal communication of the Thematic Cluster is maintained by the following communications channels:

- Group email thread;
- Dedicated chat channel only for the members of the TC.

The TC Facilitator facilitates the discussions, sends regular updates, invitations and reminders about the meetings and other scheduled activities or calls to action.

It is understood that, as is the usual practice, messages and comments will not be posted if they are threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, profane, obscene, or indecent.

Coordinators will make sure that hate speech or discrimination against a person based on their race, religious creed, disability, sex, gender, age, or any other protected characteristic will not be tolerated.

7 | Communication to ECHN

The TC Facilitator and Lead need to have a clear line of communication with the ECHN. The most continual communication will be with the CM, who will be involved in all of the meetings and operations around them. Furthermore, once per year, and whenever needed, the TC will have meetings and direct exchanges with ECHN's Director of Operations (DOO) and the Board of Directors (BOD).

Any initiatives for innovations or improvements within the ECHN operations that relate to the field of the TC need to be communicated in this way, as well as any initiatives for fundraising on behalf of the Network, initiating specific projects or undergoing other types of activities. Initiatives of this type are subject to the approval by the BOD, in the next meeting following the exchanges between the TC Facilitator and Lead with the ECHN CM.

8 | External Communications

The communication of ECHN TCs towards stakeholders, partners or funders, for example, are handled by the TC Facilitator and Lead, who will make sure that both the members of the TC, and the ECHN leadership are fully informed. The goal is to be fully aligned at all times, as well as to avoid losing focus or doubling communications.

When it comes to external PR and comms, all communication or announcements happen through ECHN's channels. The TCs do not have their own individual external communication channels.

9 | Activities

The Thematic Clusters are set up in good faith and with the intention to further advance the impact of the ECHN in specific areas of interest. Thus, there are no extensive mandatory activities, outside of:

- An active communication channel moderated by the TC Facilitator;
- Minimum one meeting per quarter;
- Program proposals and contributions for ECHN annual events;
- Annual physical meeting during annual Hubs Meetup/Conference;
- Annual report from the Facilitator to the BOD.

However, it is expected that many worthwhile initiatives will emerge from the regular meetings, and they may influence the tempo and scope of the activities of the TC.

10 | Expected outcomes

The activities of the ECHN thematic Thematic Clusters are expected to contribute to:

- Continual engagement of members and peer-level communication;
- Deeper insights into members' activities and initiatives;
- Inception of collaborative projects between members;
- Faster problems-solving capacity for all participating members;
- Increasing leverage in dealing with specific sectors;
- Informing ECHN's advocacy activities and priorities;
- Easier matchmaking of members with good opportunities.

11 | Taxonomy

ECHN welcomes different approaches to the Cluster's' taxonomy, in order to reflect the creative and diverse nature and structure of the network itself.

The existing Thematic Clusters (Spring 2026) are:

- Makerspace
- Textile & Fashion
- Rural

Others could be geographical, topical, related to particular services or functions etc. In the relevant section above, it is clearly stated how members can initiate the setup of new TCs.