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ON SME NEWS, EVENTS, & PROGRAMS

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AZERBAIJAN

The digitalization program of small and medium-sized businesses has been launched in Azerbaijan

Digitalization will qualitatively raise the activity of SMEs to a new stage and increase their competitiveness. An event dedicated to the opening of the SME Digitization Program was held within the framework of the cooperation of the Innovation and Digital Development Agency and the Small and Medium Business Development Agency. Representatives of state institutions, small and medium business entities participated in the event.

Deputy Minister of Digital Development and Transport Samir Mammadov opened the event with an introduction and informed about the measures implemented in the digital government, society and business areas within the framework of the digitalization policy in the country. Touching on the importance of the SME Digitization Program, Samir Mammadov said: *"The main goal of the program is to support small and medium-sized businesses by promoting digitalization, expanding their efficiency, competitiveness and market coverage. Seminars and training programs will be organized in order to educate SMEs about digital tools, strategies and best practices, and at the same time, their skills will be supported with initiatives such as "CTO-as-a-Service" vouchers. emphasized that it serves the purpose of promoting the development of small and medium entrepreneurship with new and more efficient incentives included in the "Strategy of Socio-Economic Development"*.

In his speech, the Chairman of the Management Board of KOBIA, Orkhan Mammadov, spoke about the importance of digitalization in terms of SMEs' access to new markets, the efficiency of the operating environment, and the development of methods of contact with staff: *"Digital solutions help SMEs to integrate into the global value chain more easily, increase their innovative activity. and can help to increase the productivity"*, said the head of the Agency.

Elturan Ahmedbeyli, head of the Digitalization of SMEs Program, made a presentation about the four stages of the program. It was noted that the third stage of the program is currently being implemented. The program consists of market research, analysis of world experience and local SMEs, meetings with suppliers and implementation of projects included in the program. Detailed information was also given about the projects of the Digitization Program of SMEs such as "digiMATE" and "DIGI30".

Fariz Jafarov, executive director of the Center for Analysis and Coordination of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, spoke about the initiatives implemented in support of the development of the digital economy: *"The program created today plays an important role in conducting an initial assessment of SMEs, determining their need for future digital tools and, as a result, supporting them in a more systematic way is playing."*

It should be noted that the Digitalization Program of SMEs was developed in order to increase their competitiveness and expand their market opportunities by benefiting from digital tools and advanced technologies.

Within the framework of the program, educational seminars and trainings for small and medium-sized businesses are planned, as well as providing support for increasing skills through initiatives such as "CTO-as-a-Service". Within the framework of the project, the digital maturity of SMEs will be assessed and individual road maps will be prepared according to their needs. It is also envisaged to support digitization initiatives with grants and other financial mechanisms. The "digiMATE" platform, created in order to accelerate the digital development of SMEs, has already been put into use since August 2024.

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CANADA

[New £11m Cluster Acceleration Programme to support businesses to work together to achieve shared goals](#)

Economy Minister Conor Murphy today launched a new £11m Cluster Acceleration Programme. The programme has been designed by Invest Northern Ireland to support businesses, in particular SMEs, to work together to achieve shared goals or address common problems.

Minister Murphy said: "Businesses that participate in clusters have higher levels of innovation, productivity and resilience. *"The aim of the new programme is to develop priority clusters across the north. It will provide financial support to groups of SMEs and stakeholders to carry out projects that could not be achieved by individual companies on their own. "In particular we want to develop clusters in areas where we have existing expertise – like Advanced Manufacturing, Life and Health Sciences and ICT which includes software and cyber. We must also prepare for future economic growth in new industries, not least green technology."* The Minister continued: *"I am committed to creating economic prosperity that is felt across the region. Today's announcement provides strategic, tailored support for industry, academia and investors that will create good, highly skilled jobs and increase productivity across the north."*

The Cluster Acceleration Programme is based on the 'Super Cluster' model which is defined as combining industry, government and academia, capital investors, venture capitalists and entrepreneurs. These groups come together to collaborate on new products or processes, address challenges such as skills and employment gaps, or increase export capabilities and improve productivity.

Steve Harper, Executive Director, International and Skills, Invest NI said: "Our previous Collaborative Growth Programme operated for six years and supported 70 collaborative projects and over 600 businesses from across NI. It helped them to tackle challenges, embrace enabling technologies and exploit new market opportunities.

The success of this programme clearly demonstrates the value of cluster working and has seen a number of successful cluster groups set up, including Manufacturing Engineering Growth Advancement (MEGA), Generating Engineering & Manufacturing Excellence (GEMX), Northern Ireland Maritime & Offshore (NIMO) and Advanced Food

Drink Network (AFDN). *“These groups have worked together to share best practice, develop new ways of working, address skill pressures and access new markets. “This new programme is specifically to fund SMEs that can demonstrate a willingness to work together to scope and exploit opportunities which will enhance both their individual competitiveness and that of the region.”*

The new Cluster Acceleration Programme aims to identify and support up to five super clusters (and 50 Cluster Feasibility Studies), to be administered over a 10-year period.

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DENMARK

Offshore renewable energy SMEs to benefit as new DMEC-led project launches, targeting sector support

The Dutch Marine Energy Centre (DMEC)-led Offshore Accelerator for System Integration and Storage (OASIS) project has launched, aiming to accelerate system integration and storage solutions for offshore renewable energy (ORE). Targeting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), the program will offer tools, training, market research, and a strong network to support the sector.

According to DMEC, the ORE industry continues to drive the green transition in the North Sea region, growing into one of its largest industries. In 2021, the sector was valued at €16 billion, with projections to expand by a factor of seven over the next five years. As the blue economy grows, challenges like intermittency in ORE production are becoming more frequent, leading to price drops and grid congestion during peak production. Therefore, developers and SMEs face high entry barriers, with large-scale projects demanding tight risk management.

The project focuses on training SMEs in three areas: technology development, commercial development, and sustainable design. The project will help SMEs identify gaps in these areas, implement solutions, analyze market potential, and connect with market players. According to the Dutch knowledge center for ORE solutions, the OASIS partnership combines expertise and insights into the challenges of the ORE sector, tools for sector analysis, networks, and cross-border collaboration. By exchanging tools and knowledge cross-borders, the overall aim is to enable SMEs to take opportunities and implement ideas for driving the green energy transition.

The OASIS consortium includes DMEC from the Netherlands as the project lead, along with Uppsala University (Sweden), the German Aerospace Center (DLR), Blue Cluster, Flux 50 and BOVA ENVIRO+ from Belgium, ÅKP from Norway, Energy Cluster Denmark, and BUILDERS School of Civil Engineering as well as the OPEN-C Foundation from France.

“The development and integration of storage assets is the cornerstone of a future renewable energy system. They will form the utilities that enable the energy system as a whole to hold to the challenge of power flexibility, without relying on fossil fuels,” said Vincent Bonnin, Project Manager at OASIS. “In years ahead, most renewable energy growth will occur offshore, and a very diverse range of storage solutions are currently being developed by SMEs in the North Sea Region. OASIS aims to build an ecosystem around these SMEs and support their growth towards independent utility providers within the ORE sector.”

In March 2024, the consortium behind the Nautical SUNRISE project, whose member DMEC is, among others, began work on developing the world’s largest offshore floating solar power installation. With €8.4 million in funding, including €6.8 million from the Horizon Europe program, the project aims to design and deploy a 5 MW floating solar system, integrated within RWE’s offshore wind farm in the Netherlands. DMEC will oversee research to ensure the system’s reliability, stability, and scalability for future commercialization.

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FIJI

[businessNOW Fiji e-Service platform launched](#)

Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Trade, Cooperatives, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises and Communications Manoa Kamikamica has officially launched the businessNOW FIJI e-Services platform. This initiative is set to redefine Fiji’s role as a pioneer in the Pacific showcasing its innovative approach to developing the nation into a vibrant economic hub.

The businessNOW Fiji is an initiative of the Ministry of trade aims to improve the ease of doing business in Fiji by streamlining key government services for economic growth into one efficient and user-friendly digital platform. Deputy Prime Minister, Manoa Kamikamica emphasizes the importance of fostering innovation and sustainable practices to drive economic growth and enhance the quality of life for all Fijians.

He highlights the eight integrated Starting a Business e-Services on the platform as an example of the Fiji Government’s ongoing efforts to promote investment opportunities and create an enabling environment for doing business. This initiative serves as a platform to foster collaboration between diverse audiences and explore new avenues for growth and development in Fiji.

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MOROCCO

The African Development Bank approves a trade finance facility of EUR 70 million for Bank of Africa Morocco to promote trade in Africa

The Board of Directors of the African Development Bank Group has approved a trade finance facility of EUR 70 million for Bank of Africa Morocco (BOA).

“The African Development Bank, which is rated AAA by the largest rating agencies, is joining forces with the Bank of Africa Morocco to promote access to trade finance on the continent, in particular providing support for SMEs operating in transition States” said Ahmed Attout, director of the Bank’s Financial Sector Development Department.

The facility comprises a Risk Participation Agreement (RPA) of EUR 50 million and a Trade Finance Line of Credit (TFLOC) of EUR 20 million. “We are delighted with this first partnership with BOA, a leading player in Africa. Together, in Morocco and across the continent, we are strengthening financial inclusion for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved in foreign trade, to help them to operate more widely,” added Achraf Hassan Tarsim, head of the African Development Bank’s Country Office in Morocco.

The RPA will offer Bank of Africa Morocco the opportunity to provide more support to local banks on the continent in their international operations, as they increasingly face a decline in financing and confirmation lines with their foreign counterparts. In addition, the TFLOC will facilitate access to finance for Moroccan SMEs working in the key sectors of health, agriculture, the pharmaceutical and automotive industries, and transport. The facility should catalyse almost EUR 300 million in trade over a 3.5-year period.

More broadly, the aim of the cooperation is to strengthen countries’ diversification of production and competitiveness, raise additional tax revenues and create new job opportunities.

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NIGER

NDDC Chamber of Commerce takes off in 9 states

The Niger Delta Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Trade, Mines, and Agriculture (NDCCITMA) have commenced operations across nine states in the Niger Delta. Established by the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC), NDCCITMA aims to drive entrepreneurship in the region. Dr. Samuel Ogbuku, Managing Director of NDDC, disclosed this at the flag-off ceremony and sensitization programme in Port Harcourt.

He highlighted the chamber’s role in creating new jobs and stimulating economic activities in the Niger Delta region. “This initiative will also train youths and aspiring entrepreneurs while supporting small and medium-scale enterprises,” he said.

Ogbuku further explained that the commission was collaborating with the Bank of Industry (BOI) to ensure the success of NDDC's youth development programmes. "We are providing N30 billion to fund projects and support businesses to ensure the sustainability of our youth development initiatives. *"Our partnership with BOI will enable youths in rural areas to receive support through our Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) programme. "Youths in urban centres will be assisted under the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) category,"* Ogbuku elaborated.

The managing director expressed confidence that the chamber would attract new businesses and technology to the region. He noted that the opening of businesses would bolster the local economy and accelerate development across the nine NDDC states. *"We encourage entrepreneurs to register with the chamber and urge International Oil Companies operating in the region to engage with NDCCITMA to access data on entrepreneurs,"* he advised.

Mr Victor Antai, NDDC's Executive Director of Projects, called on startups and individuals with business ideas to take advantage on the opportunity to seek valuable business counsel from the chamber. Antai explained that NDCCITMA's members of Board of Directors had been meticulously selected from across Abia, Akwa Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Imo, Ondo and Rivers states.

Earlier, the Chairman of NDCCITMA, Mr Idaere Ogan, remarked that the people of the Niger Delta had long desired a regional body to coordinate businesses in the area. He stated that the chamber would provide essential guidance to entrepreneurs and investors looking to establish businesses in the Niger Delta. According to him, the chamber would work closely with NDDC to enhance food sufficiency, manufacturing, skills development, and capacity building in the area. *"NDCCITMA will collaborate with NDDC to fulfil its vision and mandate of supporting the people of the Niger Delta.*

"The chamber has already begun engaging various groups, including the National Association of Small and Medium Enterprises, Technical Incubation Centres (TICs), and trade groups, among others. "Our extensive networking is focussed on fostering rapid growth in the regional economy and ultimately bringing prosperity to the people," Ogan said.

Dr Emi Membere-Otaji, NDCCITMA's Second National Deputy President, commended the NDDC Governing Board for its promotion of numerous innovations in the Niger Delta.

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ASIA

Qarbotech Gains \$1.5M to Expand Photosynthesis Enhancing Tech Across Southeast Asia

Malaysian climate tech startup Qarbotech has secured \$1.5M in a seed extension round to help plants absorb carbon dioxide and increase yields by 60%. What if farmers could add something to their crops that would capture more sunlight, reduce emissions by absorbing more carbon, increase yields, and ensure stable incomes and food security – all while cutting back on fertiliser use?

That's the premise of Malaysia's Qarbotech, which has developed a photosynthesis enhancement technology using advanced carbon quantum dots material. The startup has just closed a \$1.5M extension to its seed funding round to drive its expansion across Southeast Asia and help safeguard its 100 million smallholder farmers.

"Can you imagine the same farmer with the same land, labour and workflow, being able to produce up to 60% more food? Qarbotech's photosynthesis multiplier does exactly that," says Khailee Ng, managing partner at 500 Global, which participated in the round alongside Better Bite Ventures, ID Capital, EQT Foundation, and Epic Angels Limited.

Armed with the fresh capital, Qarbotech is now setting its sights on markets such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam – in addition to its home country – with a new manufacturing facility that will help it scale up operations. It will kickstart another fundraising drive next year to further its expansion goals, with South Africa part of the plan too. Qarbotech was co-founded by CEO Chor Chee Hoe, CSO Suraya Abdul Rashid, and COO Amirul Merican in 2018, who developed a way to promote sustainable agriculture while sequestering carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and ensuring better outcomes for the people who grow our food.

The company's innovation is rooted in nanotechnology and a sector that is expected to expand aggressively over the next decade – one estimate suggests that the market carbon quantum dots will reach \$25B by 2032.

Qarbotech's flagship product – launched in 2022 – is called QarboGrow, and uses organic, biocompatible carbon quantum dots to dramatically boost light absorption and enhance crop yields by up to 60%. Doing so optimises fertiliser use too, reducing dependency on synthetic fertilisers that can harm the soil and pollute the planet. *"Photosynthesis rate is akin to the metabolism rate of humans. We can exercise and maintain a healthy diet and lifestyle to increase our metabolism rate,"* explains Chor.

"With a higher metabolism rate, we can be healthier and able to absorb nutrients efficiently from what we consume. Plants, however, can't increase their photosynthesis rate with existing agricultural inputs. "By having our product sprayed onto plant leaves, they can now capture more light to increase their photosynthesis rate," he says. *"With a higher photosynthesis rate, the plant's immunity is increased, and they can grow faster with higher yield."*

Nitrogen-based fertilisers emit 700 million tonnes of CO₂e each year, with Asia alone responsible for 400 million tonnes – but the nitrous oxide released after the gas's exposure to soil is 300 times more potent at heating the planet than carbon. Based on user feedback, QarboGrow can help farmers cut fertiliser use by 10-30%. "When the plant can photosynthesise more efficiently, the nutrient uptake is also more efficient therefore over-fertilisation issue can be reduced," Chor outlines.

Qarbotech has tested its product commercially on farms in numerous states and regions across Malaysia and Indonesia. In the latter, it conducted a pilot with PT Iceh Agro Indonesia covering 400 hectares of rice fields, and found that applying QarboGrow increased yields by up to one tonne per hectare, and resulted in a substantial boost to farmer incomes.

The technology "can be applied across the globe as all food crops photosynthesis", says Chor. The photosynthesis enhancer even benefits microalgae. The company sells the product to farmers both directly and via distributors (which include seed producers, agri-input wholesalers, and digital agri-solution providers).

"We do work with some local farming associations to introduce our novel technology to farmers," says Chor. "We also work a lot with individual farmers, because different farmers would have very different SOPs in their farming. We work closely with them to ensure that they are controlling the other growing factors optimally. Our photosynthesis enhancer would work optimally if the farmers are controlling other growing factors (like humidity, temperature, soil condition, pest control, etc.) well," he adds.

Qarbotech doesn't have any direct competitors, and possesses a crucial advantage over others producing quantum dots. While the latter companies use chemical synthesis processes, QarboGrow is 100% bio-compatible. *"Our patented technology uniquely solves the inefficiencies of photosynthesis using a scalable and sustainable approach, bypassing the need for genetic modifications," says Rashid, whose work formed the base of the company's technology. "This allows us to directly address challenges in crop yield and climate resilience, offering a game-changing solution for global agriculture."*

To take its product global, it is opening a facility in Puchong, Malaysia that can produce 100,000 litres of QarboGrow every month. "This investment will allow us to ramp up production and bring our patented solutions to more farmers across the region, empowering them to produce more with less environmental impact," says Merican.

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AFRICA

UK-Kenya Tech Hub Unveils Digital Toolkit to Boost African Entrepreneurship

UK-Kenya Tech Hub, in collaboration with PwC, has introduced a comprehensive digital toolkit designed to assist entrepreneurs in accessing markets across Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa. This initiative addresses the growing challenges faced by entrepreneurs seeking to expand their operations within the African continent.

Developed following an extensive study, the toolkit focuses on practical requirements for startups entering these three key African markets. It covers crucial sectors including agriculture, education, financial services, health, and manufacturing. The digital resource provides entrepreneurs with essential outputs, tools, and guides tailored to each country's specific market conditions. To ensure its effectiveness, the toolkit underwent rigorous validation through a series of feedback sessions. This refinement process aims to make the resource as practical and user-friendly as possible. Beyond its immediate application, the toolkit serves as a model for future initiatives targeting other African countries, potentially catalyzing the development of a vibrant, continent-wide startup ecosystem.

Jordan Kyongo, Head of East Africa Research and Innovation Hub at the British High Commission Nairobi, emphasized the toolkit's significance. He expressed confidence in its potential to foster growth within Africa's entrepreneurial landscape, highlighting its role in consolidating market entry requirements and simplifying the expansion process for businesses.

The creation of this digital toolkit stems from the recognition of significant barriers to market access faced by entrepreneurs across Africa. Currently, the diversity of regulatory requirements, certifications, and tariffs across different African countries poses a substantial challenge. An entrepreneur successful in one country might need to obtain up to 55 different licenses to operate across the continent. This complexity is further compounded by the lack of clear information on expansion procedures. By providing a centralized, comprehensive guide, the toolkit aims to demystify the process of entering new markets. It addresses not only the direct costs associated with licensing but also the often-overlooked challenge of information scarcity regarding expansion requirements.

The launch event for the digital toolkit saw participation from various stakeholders, including representatives from the Kenya Innovation Agency and the UK-Kenya Tech Hub. This broad involvement underscores the collaborative nature of the initiative and its potential impact on the regional entrepreneurial ecosystem.

An important aspect of the toolkit is its focus on social inclusion and equity issues within the entrepreneurial space. It specifically addresses concerns such as gender equality across different sectors and countries, reflecting a commitment to inclusive economic growth.

As African economies continue to evolve and integrate, tools like this digital toolkit become increasingly valuable. They not only facilitate business expansion but also contribute to the broader goals of economic development and regional cooperation. By simplifying market entry processes, the initiative has the potential to unlock new opportunities for entrepreneurs, fostering innovation and economic growth across the continent.

The toolkit's development represents a significant step towards creating a more interconnected and accessible African market. It exemplifies how international collaboration and digital solutions can address complex economic challenges, paving the way for a more robust and diverse entrepreneurial landscape in Africa.

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EUROPE

EU launches €65m scheme to boost quantum semiconductor research

A massive battery recycling plant is being built in Germany by Cylib, a startup looking The European Commission has launched a €65 million scheme to invest in research projects investigating quantum semiconductors. The EU's Chips Joint Undertaking (Chips JU) has opened calls for research proposals focused on developing and manufacturing quantum technologies, with the project aimed at establishing a supply chain for quantum chips in Europe.

Quantum semiconductors provide the processing power for quantum computers. Unlike classical semiconductors, which rely on bits (0s and 1s) to process information, quantum chips use qubits that can exist in multiple states simultaneously, thanks to principles like superposition and entanglement, enabling unprecedented computational speeds.

Quantum chips leverage quantum gates to manipulate qubits, allowing faster and more efficient problem-solving than traditional computing hardware. However, designing and manufacturing quantum semiconductors is far more challenging due to the intricate control of quantum states and the extreme precision needed at atomic scales.

To ensure it is at the forefront of the quantum semiconductor supply chain, the EU is looking to fund research efforts to improve the development and manufacturing of quantum chips.

The bloc has already provided financial support to Ephos, a startup designing glass-based photonic chips for quantum workloads which plans to launch a new research and manufacturing facility in Milan, Italy. The Chips JU project is in particular looking for proposals for using quantum chips for computing and sensing. The closing date for proposals for the Chips JU project is January 21 2025.

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WASME has members in different countries across the world. Member constituents represent industrial promotional organizations of various types and come from highly industrialized, developing and transition economies, as well as least developed countries. WASME has a broad membership spectrum that includes:

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WASME was founded in 1980 with the goal of supporting MSMEs in member countries. We have achieved this through our strong association with local government bodies, regional authorities, international linkages, civil societies, SMEs, etc. We are continuously working to improve our innovative and sustainable framework so that we can better serve MSMEs around the world.

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