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ESG Management for Rural SMEs

Validation Report &

Handbook publication optimisation (final version)

ESG4SMEs Sustainability in Action

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Overview

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ESG4SMEs project overview

ESG4SMEs proposes the development of the ESG Manager job profile for rural SMEs to help rural SMEs transition to a sustainable economy. The job profile was based on a needs analysis and key competencies framework, leading to the development of a specialized curriculum. The project aims to support professional development for rural SMEs, contribute to skills development for VET learners, and establish the certification process of the ESGM for rural SMEs, ultimately recognized at an EU level.

The ESG4SMEs project aims to focus primarily on the needs of the SMEs in the food and agricultural sector, while in parallel promoting an interdisciplinary approach, which is characterized by high transferability and replication potential to SMEs and businesses of wider economic sectors and/or operational fields. By providing high-quality and innovative training opportunities, the project aims to successfully address the upskilling and/or reskilling needs of managers of SMEs. The emphasis was not only on the needs of individuals and SMEs, but also on the needs of VET institutions in order to promote the innovation, attractiveness, and impact of VET educational opportunities in sectors of great international, European, and national interest. The labour market also benefits from the project, due to the offering of a better-equipped workforce with high adaptability and readiness skills, thus a workforce which is properly prepared to address the current labour market needs.

The pilot implementation across Germany, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Slovenia confirms the relevance of this approach. Findings show that most SMEs already engage in practices aligned with environmental, social and governance principles, often driven by regulation, cost-efficiency or internal values. However, these practices remain largely informal, unstructured and not explicitly recognised as ESG. This gap between practice and formal implementation highlights the need for training approaches that do not start from compliance, but from SMEs' existing realities, supporting gradual progression, practical understanding and operational integration.

The project's cross-sectoral approach is further validated by testing results by involving VET professionals. Findings show that **95% of respondents consider the ESG training modules easily adaptable or very easily adaptable to other SME-dominated sectors**, including technology, construction and hospitality. This confirms the strong transferability of the ESG Manager profile and training framework beyond the agri-food sector. In addition, **79% of respondents indicated that only minor adjustments are required for national adaptation**, reinforcing the project's potential for EU-wide implementation within diverse economic and regulatory contexts.

Brief overview of the handbook

The development of the Handbook is strongly informed by pilot testing results, which provide detailed insights into SMEs' needs, behaviours and constraints in relation to ESG

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adoption. The findings show that SMEs typically have limited familiarity with structured ESG frameworks and often struggle with terminology, regulatory expectations and implementation pathways. At the same time, they demonstrate a positive attitude towards ESG and recognise its business value, particularly when linked to competitiveness, cost savings and market access.

A consistent finding across all pilot countries is the need for practical, actionable and easy-to-apply guidance. SMEs expressed a clear preference for sector-specific case studies, step-by-step approaches, real-life examples and ready-to-use tools. Purely theoretical or text-heavy content was perceived as difficult to navigate, particularly given SMEs' limited time and operational pressures.

The pilot also highlights the critical role of facilitation. While digital modules provide a useful knowledge base, learning outcomes significantly improve when combined with facilitated sessions that support interpretation, reflection and application to real business contexts. This confirms the importance of blended learning approaches and guided sense-making processes.

These insights directly inform the methodological guidelines and policy recommendations included in this Handbook, ensuring that they are closely aligned with SMEs' operational realities and support the transition from awareness to practical ESG implementation.

The development of the Handbook is also informed by pilot testing and evaluation activities carried out with VET professionals and project partners. The results highlight that the training methodology is **well-structured, relevant and highly transferable**, while also identifying specific areas for improvement. In particular, respondents emphasised the need for **sector-specific case studies, practical exercises, simplified learning materials, and stronger integration of national regulatory frameworks**. These findings directly informed the recommendations and methodological guidelines included in the Handbook.

To ensure the relevance and applicability of the Handbook, all project partners carried out a structured **piloting and validation process** of the ESG Policy Handbook, which includes the ESG Training Adaptation and Implementation Guidelines, Policy Recommendations, the European Policy Reform Strategy, and the associated National Action Plans.

The piloting process consisted of two main steps:

1. **Pilot sessions with public authorities**

   Each partner organised one pilot session with a public authority in their respective country. The sessions were implemented based on common guidelines and documentation templates developed within the project, allowing partners to

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systematically collect and analyse stakeholder feedback regarding the usefulness, clarity and applicability of the Handbook's content and recommendations.

2. **Feedback collection from SMEs**

   Each partner also collected feedback from three SMEs through a dedicated online questionnaire. This process enabled the consortium to gather practical insights directly from companies representing different sectors and operational realities.

The feedback gathered through the piloting sessions with public authorities and SMEs, as well as the results of the accompanying survey, provides a consistent and comprehensive validation of the ESG Policy Handbook and its associated National Action Plans. Overall, participants across all partner countries expressed a high level of satisfaction, indicating that the materials are clear, well-structured and highly relevant for supporting ESG awareness and implementation in SMEs. Public authorities particularly valued the strategic orientation of the Handbook and its alignment with policy priorities, while SMEs highlighted its practical usefulness in improving understanding of ESG concepts and their application in day-to-day business operations. At the same time, both the piloting sessions and survey responses pointed to several areas for further refinement, notably the need for more sector-specific guidance, simplified language, and stronger emphasis on practical implementation tools tailored to different SME contexts. Some respondents also suggested enhancing the connection between ESG principles and national regulatory frameworks, as well as providing more concrete examples to facilitate real-world application. These insights, gathered through structured piloting activities and validated through survey feedback, were systematically analysed and fully integrated into the final version of the Handbook, ensuring that it responds effectively to the operational realities, expectations and diverse needs of SMEs and stakeholders across Europe. All feedback collected during the piloting and validation phase was carefully reviewed and incorporated into the final version of the Handbook. As a result, the Handbook now includes the recommendations, comments and practical suggestions provided by SMEs, public authorities, VET professionals and project partners, ensuring that its content is closely aligned with the operational realities and learning needs of SMEs across Europe.

The Handbook consists of two main parts, each contributing to specific project objectives. Firstly, it provides concrete guidelines and methodology on how to adapt the developed training course not only in various sectors but also to the VET learning process and training integration. This will enable European SMEs, a target group of the project, to develop specialist ESG competences among one or more members of their workforce , regardless of their field of operation.

Secondly, the Handbook aims to develop policy recommendations to support the recognition and certification of the ESG Manager profile on a European level through a European Policy Reform Strategy, which will be adapted to the national plans of the involved partners.

The Policy Handbook and associated activities, such as the five multiplier events, ensure that the project's outcomes will continue to positively influence European SMEs over time. The Policy Handbook serves as a vital resource for the adoption of ESG strategies by SMEs, providing comprehensive guidelines and scalable solutions that cater specifically to their unique needs. By offering clear, actionable steps and best practices, SMEs can confidently embrace and implement ESG strategies, leading to positive and sustainable change across various sectors and industries. Moreover, the Policy Handbook plays a significant role in enhancing SME competitiveness. As businesses align their practices with ESG principles, they can attract investors, customers, and other stakeholders, fostering growth and resilience within the European economy.

The EU Commission stands to benefit greatly from the Policy Handbook, as it can help develop a more robust and comprehensive policy framework for ESG implementation across SMEs. This, in turn, enables the EU to create targeted policies and initiatives that support the widespread adoption of ESG strategies, encouraging sustainable economic growth within the region.

The ESG4SMEs experience

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Needs analysis

The desk research shows that ESG education and training programs vary across Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Italy, and Slovenia, reflecting different stages of development and adoption of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) practices. In general, there are some programs or platforms offering ESG education, however there is no alignment among the countries participating in the project.

For instance, in Cyprus the Corporate Governance Institute is offering diplomas specifically focused on ESG. In contrast, in Germany, vocational training programs predominantly cover environmental aspects, but lack a focus on social and governances aspects. Similarly, in Greece the programs are mainly introductory and are conducted by academic institutes and certification bodies; while in Italy dedicated academic courses for ESG expertise are challenging to find.

In terms of job profiles, essential skills for implementing ESG practices across all countries include market knowledge of reporting frameworks, industry-specific expertise, communication skills, organizational abilities, and attention to detail were identified in as relevant skills to put in practices ESG practices across all the countries. The main responsibilities of those overseeing ESG initiatives include developing and implementing ESG strategies, conducting risk analyses, engaging stakeholders, ensuring compliance with regulations such as CSRD (Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive) and EU taxonomy, and promoting sustainability within the organization.

On the other hand, from the field research there are four main insights from all the reports about SMEs' perceptions, challenges, and needs to implement ESG practices:

Challenges: across the countries, SMEs are facing common challenges in understanding and integrating ESG practices. These challenges include limited resources such as time, personnel, and financial resources, complexity surrounding the ESG concept, and resistance to change. Additionally, there's a lack of clarity regarding reporting obligations and strategies for business development and legal compliance.

Training focus on practical guidance: The findings indicate that SMEs benefit from practical training including guidance, case studies, and tools tailored to the specific needs of SMEs. Moreover, support systems, including access to funding, technical assistance, and training on reporting frameworks, are identified as essential for successful implementation.

Stakeholder engagement: Effective stakeholder engagement and communication are emphasized across the reports as crucial for building trust and collaboration around sustainable initiatives. Engaging employees in the decision-making process and highlighting the benefits of ESG initiatives are recommended to foster a culture of sustainability within SMEs.

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Potential benefits: Despite the challenges, there's recognition of the potential benefits and opportunities associated with adopting ESG practices. These include improved competitiveness, attractiveness to investors, minimization of risks, building stakeholder loyalty , and attracting new customers through sustainability and social responsibility.

ESG training modules and game

The VET pilot testing phase confirms the strong relevance, usability and transferability of the ESG training modules and game.

Adaptability and Transferability

- 95% of VET professionals indicated that the modules are easily adaptable across SME sectors
- Applicable to multiple industries (technology, construction, hospitality, etc.)
- Core framework is sector-neutral and flexible

Replication Requirements

- Successful implementation requires a mix of:
  - Case studies (most requested resource)
  - Multimedia materials (videos, visuals)
  - Structured presentations
  - Digital tools and platforms
  - Worksheets and practical templates

Contextual Adaptation

- 79% require only minor national adjustments
- Key needs:
  - Local ESG regulations integration
  - Language adaptation
  - Local SME examples
  - More visual content

User Experience & Quality

- Innovativeness: 89%
- Usefulness: 84%
- Overall quality: 83%

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- User experience: 85%

Key Strengths Identified

- Strong applicability to SMEs
- Flexible modular structure
- High relevance for VET systems
- Supports practical ESG implementation

Areas for Improvement

- More sector-specific case studies
- Additional practical exercises and simulations
- Simplification of content (less text, more visuals)
- Increased use of multimedia
- Inclusion of national regulatory references

In addition, qualitative findings from the pilot highlight several critical aspects of SME engagement. Many participants reported difficulties in translating theoretical ESG concepts into concrete actions without additional guidance. This underlines the importance of integrating step-by-step implementation support and sector-specific examples into the training design.

A key methodological insight concerns the role of facilitation. Purely self-paced learning was often perceived as insufficient, particularly when participants encountered complex or unfamiliar topics. Facilitated sessions—either face-to-face or online—proved essential in supporting understanding, enabling discussion and building confidence in applying ESG concepts.

Furthermore, differences in participants' prior knowledge and experience revealed the need for more flexible and differentiated learning pathways. While beginners benefited from structured and introductory content, more experienced participants expressed the need for deeper, more strategic and decision-oriented material.

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ESG training Adaptation and Implementation Guidelines

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ESGM Professional Profile

The ESG Manager profile as part of the project ESG4SMEs has been designed as a transversal professional role capable of operating across sectors and organizational sizes.

The ESGM is responsible for:

- *Assessing ESG risks and opportunities*
- *Designing and implementing ESG strategies*
- *Monitoring ESG performance and compliance*
- *Supporting ESG reporting and stakeholder engagement*

This profile is particularly relevant for all types of SMEs, not only rural, as in most SMEs in Europe ESG responsibilities are often integrated into existing managerial roles.

Learning Objectives and Competences

The ESGM training framework focuses on developing:

- *Technical ESG knowledge (environmental impact, social responsibility, governance structures)*
- *Strategic planning and implementation skills*
- *Regulatory awareness at national and EU levels*
- *Data collection, monitoring, and reporting competences*
- *Change management and stakeholder communication skills*

Guidelines for Adapting the ESGM for Rural SMEs Training Course Across Sectors

1. Purpose and Scope

These guidelines provide a structured methodological framework for adapting the ESG Manager for Rural SMEs (ESGMR) training course across different economic sectors. The objective is to enable European SMEs to develop and strengthen ESG-related competences in a way that is relevant to their sector, organisational context and level of readiness, while preserving a shared competence framework and comparable learning outcomes.

The guidelines are intended for Vocational Education and Training (VET) providers, training organisations and facilitators involved in the delivery, adaptation and future scaling of the ESGMR training course within and beyond the Erasmus+ project lifecycle.

2. Design Logic of the ESGM for Rural SMEs Training Course

2.1 Transversal Nature of ESG Competences

Environmental, Social and Governance principles apply across all sectors of economic activity. While ESG-related risks, opportunities and regulatory pressures may differ between industries, the underlying competences required to understand, implement and govern ESG practices are largely transversal.

For this reason, the ESGMR training course can be implemented as a cross-sectoral programme. Adaptation focuses on contextualisation rather than differentiation of learning objectives. Core ESG concepts, roles and competence areas remain consistent, ensuring transferability and comparability across sectors.

This transversal design is supported by pilot evaluation findings, where the vast majority of VET professionals confirmed that the training modules can be transferred across sectors with only minor adaptations.

2.2 Role-Based Learning Framework

The training course is structured around three ESG roles, which function as pedagogical reference points rather than formal job titles:

- **ESG Analyst**, focusing on understanding, assessment and information management;
- **ESG Optimizer**, focusing on implementation, process improvement and operational action;
- **ESG Leader**, focusing on decision-making, coordination and strategic integration.

These roles describe ways of engaging with ESG topics and form a developmental progression. They are applicable across all sectors and organisational structures and support differentiated learning pathways based on SME readiness and internal responsibilities.

3. Modular Structure as an Adaptation Mechanism

3.1 Modular Design Principles

The ESGM for rural SMEs training course follows a modular design that allows flexibility in sequencing and emphasis while maintaining coherence. Each module addresses a specific competence area and can be combined with others to form tailored learning pathways.

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A shared core module on ESG strategy implementation ensures a common baseline for all participants. Additional modules support the development of analytical, operational or leadership capacities as needed.

3.2 Sector-Neutral Learning Outcomes

All modules are defined through sector-neutral learning outcomes. Adaptation therefore does not require modification of learning objectives or assessment criteria, but rather the contextualisation of content and activities during delivery.

This approach ensures that learners across sectors achieve comparable competence levels while engaging with material that reflects their specific working environment.

Validation findings further highlighted that while sector-neutral learning outcomes are appropriate, training delivery should explicitly consider the heterogeneity of SMEs, including differences in company size, sector of activity, organisational structure and ESG maturity levels. Participants emphasised that SMEs require differentiated learning approaches, practical examples and adaptable learning pathways that correspond to their operational realities and existing levels of ESG knowledge.

3.3 Implementation Pathways for SMEs

To support effective ESG uptake across different organisational contexts, the ESGM for Rural SMEs framework should be implemented through flexible and progressive implementation pathways adapted to SMEs' levels of readiness, available resources and operational priorities.

Pilot findings and validation activities demonstrated that SMEs often face difficulties in independently determining how ESG-related resources, tools and training materials should be applied within their organisations. Many SMEs lack dedicated ESG expertise, methodological capacity and sufficient internal resources to design structured implementation processes without additional guidance. For this reason, the ESGM framework should not be approached as a fixed training sequence but as a flexible implementation support system that enables gradual progression according to organisational needs and maturity levels.

The implementation pathways proposed below are indicative rather than prescriptive. They are intended to support SMEs, VET providers and intermediary organisations in selecting appropriate learning activities, tools and support mechanisms according to the specific characteristics of each enterprise.

Level 1 – Awareness and Initial Orientation

This pathway is intended for SMEs with limited previous exposure to ESG concepts or without formal sustainability practices. At this stage, the objective is to support understanding, awareness and initial reflection rather than formal implementation.

The focus should include:

- understanding basic ESG concepts and terminology;
- recognising existing informal ESG-related practices;
- identifying sector-relevant ESG risks and opportunities;
- increasing awareness of regulatory developments and market expectations.
- Recommended support tools and activities may include:
- introductory workshops and awareness sessions;
- simplified ESG self-assessment tools;
- facilitated group discussions;
- practical examples and introductory case studies;
- basic ESG checklists and reflection exercises.

At this stage, facilitation and external guidance are particularly important, as SMEs often require support in interpreting ESG concepts and understanding their relevance to daily business operations.

Level 2 – Structured ESG Integration

This pathway is intended for SMEs that are ready to move beyond awareness and begin integrating ESG practices into organisational processes and decision-making.

The focus should include:

- identifying ESG priorities and organisational objectives;
- assigning ESG-related responsibilities;
- introducing basic ESG monitoring and data collection practices;
- implementing practical operational improvements;
- strengthening internal coordination and employee engagement.

Recommended support tools and activities may include:

- ESG action planning templates;
- implementation roadmaps and step-by-step guidance;
- practical sector-specific case studies;
- monitoring and tracking templates;
- facilitated workshops and mentoring sessions;
- peer-learning and networking activities.

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At this level, SMEs benefit from practical implementation support and simplified methodologies that reduce complexity and support gradual integration into existing business processes.

Level 3 – Strategic ESG Development and Leadership

This pathway is intended for SMEs with higher levels of ESG maturity seeking to strengthen strategic integration, governance and long-term sustainability performance.

The focus should include:

- integrating ESG into organisational strategy and decision-making;
- strengthening stakeholder engagement and communication;
- improving ESG monitoring, reporting and accountability processes;
- aligning ESG practices with supply chain and market requirements;
- supporting continuous improvement and long-term ESG planning.
- Recommended support tools and activities may include:
- advanced ESG strategy planning tools;
- stakeholder engagement frameworks;
- ESG reporting guidance;
- leadership and governance workshops;
- advanced monitoring and evaluation tools;
- collaborative regional or sectoral initiatives.

At this stage, SMEs may also contribute to peer-learning activities, dissemination of good practices and mentoring of less mature organisations within regional or sectoral ecosystems.

- **Flexible and Non-Linear Progression**

The implementation pathways are not intended as rigid stages or mandatory progression routes. SMEs may move between pathways according to their sector, organisational structure, operational priorities and available resources. Some enterprises may require support primarily in operational implementation, while others may focus on compliance, governance or stakeholder communication.

The purpose of the pathways is therefore to:

- reduce complexity for SMEs;
- support differentiated and realistic implementation approaches;
- facilitate adaptation according to organisational readiness;
- provide clearer orientation regarding the use of ESGM resources and tools;

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- strengthen the practical applicability and scalability of the ESGM framework across sectors and national contexts.

Validation findings confirmed that SMEs engage more effectively with ESG-related learning when implementation guidance is practical, structured and closely connected to their own organisational realities.

4. Sectoral Adaptation Through Contextualisation

4.1 Contextualising ESG Topics

Sectoral adaptation is achieved by linking ESG topics to sector-relevant processes, risks and decision-making contexts. For example:

- Environmental topics may be contextualised through resource use, emissions or land management practices relevant to the sector;
- Social topics may be linked to workforce conditions, community relations or customer interaction;
- Governance topics may be framed around decision-making structures, compliance processes and accountability mechanisms.

This contextualisation enhances relevance without introducing sector-specific curricula.

4.2 Use of Sector-Relevant Examples and Scenarios

Facilitators are encouraged to replace generic examples with sector-relevant scenarios while maintaining the same pedagogical function. Examples should be illustrative rather than exhaustive and should reflect typical SME realities within the sector.

The use of participants' own organisational examples is strongly encouraged, as it supports reflection, ownership and feasibility.

Validation participants strongly emphasised the importance of practical learning methodologies, recommending that ESG training should become less theoretical and more application-oriented. In particular, SMEs responded positively to case studies, step-by-step exercises and real-life scenarios directly linked to their operational environment. Practical contextualisation was considered essential for increasing relevance, engagement and applicability.

4.3 Local and Territorial Contextualisation of ESG Implementation

In addition to sectoral adaptation, ESG implementation should also be contextualised at territorial and local level, particularly in rural and small-municipality environments. Validation findings from Slovenia highlighted that SMEs often operate within strong local development ecosystems where ESG priorities are closely linked to community-level challenges and opportunities.

In rural and semi-rural areas, ESG implementation is frequently connected to broader territorial issues such as sustainable mobility, energy efficiency, waste management, local food systems, tourism development and community wellbeing. As a result, ESG learning and implementation should reflect not only sectoral realities but also local development priorities and municipal strategies.

Municipalities and local/regional authorities can play an important enabling role by acting as intermediaries between SMEs, VET providers, chambers of commerce, funding programmes and regional development initiatives. Their involvement can significantly improve the accessibility and relevance of ESG support for small enterprises.

To increase usability, training content should therefore include short, place-based examples drawn from municipalities, rural areas and local development environments, illustrating how ESG principles are applied in real community and territorial contexts.

5. Adaptation of Learning Activities and Practical Tasks

5.1 Activity-Based Adaptation

Learning activities and practical tasks are the primary instruments for adaptation across sectors. Rather than altering content, facilitators adapt activities by:

- allowing participants to work with their own data, processes or organisational structures;
- framing tasks around sector-specific workflows;
- focusing on realistic scope and constraints.

Activities are designed to support reflection and readiness, not full implementation.

5.2 Role, Task and Competence Mapping

The ESG Role, Task and Competence Mapping exercise is a central adaptation tool. It enables participants to:

- identify which ESG-related tasks are relevant to their sector;
- understand how responsibilities are currently distributed;
- recognise gaps and areas for development.

The mapping exercise remains identical across sectors in structure but varies in content based on participants’ context.

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Pilot findings highlight that SMEs benefit most from activities that are directly linked to their own organisational context. In particular, step-by-step tasks, real-life scenarios and the use of participants' own data significantly improve engagement and applicability.

6. Facilitation Methodology for Cross-Sector Delivery

6.1 Facilitation as a Core Methodological Element

Facilitation is a central methodological component of the ESGMR training course. Educators act as facilitators of learning rather than content experts, consultants or evaluators.

Across sectors, facilitation aims to:

- support interpretation of ESG concepts;
- encourage reflection on existing practices;
- enable participants to identify feasible next steps.

This approach ensures consistency of methodology while allowing contextual adaptation.

Pilot validation findings further demonstrate that SMEs often require continuous facilitation and external support throughout the implementation process. In practice, ESG learning is most effective when combined with mentoring, peer-learning opportunities and intermediary support mechanisms involving Chambers of Commerce, VET providers, consultants, sectoral organisations and regional support structures.

6.2 Adaptive Facilitation Styles

Different facilitation styles are applied depending on participants' readiness and learning stage. These include exploratory, structuring and action-oriented facilitation.

The ability to shift between these styles is essential to ensure that discussions remain relevant and aligned with learning objectives across heterogeneous sectoral groups.

Evidence from the pilot confirms that facilitation is a critical success factor. SMEs often require guidance to interpret ESG concepts and relate them to their business operations. Facilitated sessions support sense-making, encourage discussion and help participants move from abstract understanding to practical application. Without this support, self-paced learning alone is often insufficient.

Validation findings also highlighted the importance of intermediary and support organisations in facilitating ESG learning and implementation. Skills centres, lifelong learning centres, university lifelong learning structures, chambers of commerce and SME support networks can play an important role in disseminating ESG knowledge, supporting participation and facilitating peer learning and knowledge transfer across sectors.

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6.3 Recommended Governance and Support Ecosystem

Long-term sustainability of the ESG Manager profile depends on the establishment of coordinated support ecosystems involving:

- VET providers and lifelong learning centres;
- Chambers of Commerce and SME associations;
- Regional development agencies;
- Public authorities;
- Sectoral networks and intermediary organisations;
- Universities and specialised educational hubs.

Public-private partnerships and specialised ESG competence centres may support long-term implementation, advisory services, applied training and knowledge transfer for SMEs.

7. Assessment as a Driver for Adaptive Learning

7.1 Sector-Neutral Assessment Framework

The assessment methodology is designed to be applicable across sectors and focuses on three dimensions:

- ESG knowledge;
- behavioural orientation;
- commitment and agency.

Assessment tools are not used to evaluate performance or compliance but to support learning orientation and progression.

7.2 Using Assessment Results to Guide Adaptation

Assessment results inform the adaptation of learning pathways by identifying:

- dominant and secondary ESG roles;
- knowledge gaps;
- levels of readiness for action or leadership.

These insights support personalised learning recommendations without imposing fixed progression paths.

The pilot confirms that assessment is most effective when used as a learning and orientation tool rather than a performance measurement mechanism. SMEs responded positively to approaches that support reflection, identify gaps and guide next steps without introducing complexity or evaluation pressure.

8. Supporting SME Specialisation in ESG Implementation

Specialisation within the ESGM for rural SMEs framework refers to the strengthening of specific ESG capacities according to sectoral relevance and organisational needs, rather than narrow functional roles.

Depending on assessment outcomes and context, SMEs of all sectors may focus on:

- analytical competences related to understanding and compliance;
- operational competences related to implementation and improvement;
- leadership competences related to coordination and strategic integration.

Over time, SMEs are supported in developing a balanced ESG Manager profile that integrates all three dimensions.

9. Transferability, Scalability and Sustainability

The adaptation approach described in these guidelines ensures that the ESGM for rural SMEs training course is transferable across sectors and national contexts, scalable beyond pilot activities, and compatible with VET systems and lifelong learning strategies.

Stakeholders additionally stressed the importance of embedding ESG-related training within lifelong learning ecosystems and national qualification structures to ensure sustainability beyond project implementation. Stronger integration with existing VET systems, lifelong learning institutions and national certification mechanisms was considered essential for long-term scalability and institutional uptake.

By maintaining a shared competence framework while enabling contextual delivery, the course supports consistent quality, recognition and long-term sustainability.

10. Conclusions

These guidelines provide a coherent and flexible framework for adapting the ESGM for rural SMEs training course to different industries while preserving its pedagogical integrity. Through modular design, role-based learning and facilitation-driven contextualisation, the course enables European SMEs to engage with ESG practices in a manner that is relevant, realistic and scalable.

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The approach supports the Erasmus+ objectives of skills development, SME competitiveness and sustainable growth, while ensuring that ESG competences remain comparable and transferable across sectors.

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Policy Recommendations and European Policy Reform Strategy

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Overview of the Current Situation and Assessment of the Need for a Recognised ESG Manager Credential

The integration of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) principles into European economic and regulatory frameworks has intensified in recent years, driven by key EU policy instruments such as the European Green Deal, the EU Sustainable Finance framework, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and the EU Taxonomy Regulation. These initiatives increasingly affect not only large enterprises but also Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), particularly through value chains, reporting obligations and access to finance.

At the same time, EU-level strategies such as the European Skills Agenda, the Pact for Skills, and the Council Recommendation on Vocational Education and Training (2020) emphasise the need to equip the workforce with skills supporting the green and digital transitions. Despite this policy momentum, the recognition of ESG-related competences within education, training and labour market systems remains uneven.

Currently, the European landscape of ESG-related professional profiles is characterised by fragmentation and limited standardisation. ESG-related responsibilities are frequently assigned informally or integrated into existing managerial, compliance or sustainability functions without a clearly defined competence framework. Where ESG-related training or certification schemes exist, they are often:

- sector-specific or organisation-driven;
- not referenced to national qualification frameworks;
- not mutually recognisable across EU Member States.

This situation creates several structural challenges:

- Limited formal recognition of ESG competences within VET and lifelong learning systems;
- Low transparency and comparability of ESG-related qualifications across national labour markets;
- Restricted labour mobility for professionals with ESG competences;
- Difficulties for SMEs in accessing, developing and retaining ESG expertise aligned with EU sustainability requirements.

In this context, policy intervention is required to support the development of a certified and recognisable ESG Manager (ESGM) credential, grounded in a competence-based and transversal approach. Such a credential would respond directly to EU policy priorities by strengthening skills for sustainability, supporting SME competitiveness and facilitating the effective implementation of ESG-related regulations.

Pilot findings indicate that while SMEs are increasingly affected by ESG-related requirements, their response is shaped by operational constraints and limited resources.

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Most SMEs already engage in ESG-related practices informally, but these are not structured, measured or strategically managed. ESG is typically not prioritised unless it is directly linked to financial or operational benefits or regulatory obligations.

Recommendations for a European Policy Reform Strategy and National Adaptation

1. Recommendations for a European Policy Reform Strategy

1.1 Strategic Alignment with EU Policy Frameworks

The European Policy Reform Strategy proposed in WP5 is designed to align with existing EU-level frameworks rather than creating parallel structures. In particular, it builds upon:

- the **European Green Deal**, by supporting skills development for sustainable business practices;
- the **European Skills Agenda**, by promoting upskilling and reskilling for the green transition;
- the **Pact for Skills**, by encouraging cooperation between education providers, enterprises and public authorities;
- the **Council Recommendation on VET**, by supporting flexible, modular and competence-based training pathways;
- the **Council Recommendation on Micro-credentials**, by enabling recognition of ESG-related learning outcomes.

A coordinated policy approach should ensure that ESG competence development for SMEs is fully embedded within existing education, training, advisory and funding structures, rather than creating parallel systems. Policy measures should clearly distinguish between direct target groups (SMEs, particularly micro and small enterprises with limited internal ESG capacity) and indirect target groups, including continuing education providers, business consultancies, chambers of commerce and other intermediary organisations responsible for delivering training, advisory services and dissemination. A structured train-the-trainer approach should be promoted to support scalability, with continuing education providers positioned as key actors for delivering ESG qualification programmes and business consultancies enabled to translate ESG competences into practical SME advisory services. To ensure effective implementation, policy recommendations should be systematically linked to existing European, national and regional funding programmes, and each measure should be associated with relevant financial instruments supporting training, advisory and capacity-building activities. In addition, recommendations should be directly connected to concrete implementation steps, responsible actors and delivery mechanisms in order to ensure operational feasibility, strengthen uptake by SMEs and improve overall policy impact.

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The strategy positions the ESG Manager profile as a transversal competence framework that can be embedded within these instruments at both European and national levels.

1.2 Core Policy Recommendations

Based on the project results, the Policy Handbook formulates the following policy recommendations:

- **Integration into National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs)**

Member States are encouraged to reference ESG Manager competences within their National Qualification Frameworks, occupational standards or related classification systems, in line with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This integration supports formal recognition while allowing flexibility in implementation.

- **Recognition of the ESG Manager as a Transversal Profile**

The ESG Manager should be recognised as a transversal professional profile applicable across sectors and organisational sizes, rather than as a stand-alone regulated occupation. This reflects SME realities and supports gradual integration of ESG responsibilities into existing roles.

- **Support for ESG-Related VET and Lifelong Learning Provision**

Public authorities should support the development, accreditation and scaling of ESG-related VET and continuing professional development programmes, ensuring coherence with labour market needs and sustainability policies.

Pilot results further demonstrate high satisfaction levels (above 80% across key indicators), confirming the effectiveness and scalability of ESG-focused VET methodologies.

Pilot evidence highlights that ESG training must prioritise practical application, simplified content and blended learning approaches combining digital modules with facilitated sessions. This is essential to ensure usability and relevance for SMEs.

- **Incentivisation of SME Participation**

Policy measures should provide incentives for SME participation in ESG training through financial support schemes, integration into innovation and competitiveness programmes, or linkage with sustainability-related funding mechanisms.

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Together, these recommendations aim to create an enabling policy environment for the structured uptake and recognition of ESG competences across Europe.

The pilot confirms that financial constraints and time limitations are among the most significant barriers to ESG adoption. Incentive schemes such as grants, subsidies and tax benefits are therefore critical to enable SMEs to invest in sustainability-related improvements.

- **Strengthening the Role of Municipalities in ESG Implementation for SMEs**

Strengthen the role of municipalities and local/regional authorities as key intermediaries in ESG implementation by connecting SMEs with training providers, funding opportunities, advisory services and regional development strategies, in recognition of the fact that SMEs often operate within close-knit local development ecosystems where ESG priorities are closely linked to community-level challenges such as sustainable mobility, energy efficiency, waste management, local food systems, tourism development and overall community wellbeing. In this context, municipalities can act as essential bridging actors between SMEs, VET providers, chambers of commerce and regional development initiatives, helping to improve access to ESG training, simplify implementation pathways and increase the relevance of support services, particularly for very small enterprises without dedicated ESG expertise.

- **Flexible and Context-Sensitive Implementation Mechanisms**

Policy frameworks and national action plans should incorporate mechanisms of flexibility and contextual adaptation to ensure effective implementation across diverse SME environments. ESG-related measures should account for differences in sectoral conditions, organisational capacities and levels of ESG maturity, avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches. Flexible implementation pathways are particularly important for SMEs with limited financial, technical or administrative capacity.

- **Operational Enablers for SME ESG Uptake**

Based on pilot findings, effective ESG adoption among SMEs requires a combination of:

- simplified and accessible ESG frameworks
- continuous advisory and support services
- practical tools for implementation and monitoring
- sector-specific guidance and examples

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- flexible and differentiated training pathways

These elements are essential to bridge the gap between awareness and implementation and to ensure that SMEs can integrate ESG into their daily operations in a realistic and sustainable way.

- **Development of ESG Support Ecosystems for SMEs**

Public policy should support the creation of coordinated ESG support ecosystems combining training, advisory services, mentoring, intermediary support and practical implementation assistance for SMEs.

- **Support for VET Providers and Trainer Capacity Building**

National and regional authorities should support the development of dedicated ESG teaching and facilitation resources for VET providers and trainers to ensure quality, consistency and transferability of ESG-related training provision. It is important to use simple, locally grounded and highly practical examples in training delivery. Trainers should be encouraged to include short case examples from municipalities, rural SMEs and local development initiatives to make ESG concepts more understandable and relevant for very small enterprises without dedicated ESG staff or advanced technical expertise.

- **Strengthening Intermediary Support Structures**

Effective ESG implementation among SMEs also depends on the active involvement of intermediary bodies and support organisations. Chambers of commerce, business associations, lifelong learning centres, skills centres, universities and sectoral networks can play a central role in:

- disseminating ESG-related good practices;
- facilitating knowledge transfer and peer learning;
- supporting SME participation in training activities;
- providing advisory and mentoring services;
- strengthening cooperation between education providers, enterprises and public authorities.

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Pilot validation findings highlighted that SMEs often require continuous external guidance and accessible support ecosystems to move from awareness to structured ESG implementation.

Pilot results further confirm that even when training content is perceived as clear, relevant and easy to navigate, SMEs continue to face structural constraints in implementation, particularly related to limited time, financial capacity and difficulties in accessing or managing ESG-related data. At the same time, SMEs demonstrate consistently high engagement with practical and user-friendly learning materials, reinforcing the importance of applied, step-by-step approaches supported by digital tools and hands-on guidance.

These findings also highlight that SMEs rarely operate with formal ESG systems or reporting structures, meaning that operational support mechanisms and targeted incentives are critical to enable the transition from informal practices to structured ESG integration.

2. Adaptation of the European Policy Reform Strategy at National Level

In line with the principle of subsidiarity, the European Policy Reform Strategy is intended to be adapted to national contexts by the partner countries through National Adaptation and Action Plans.

These plans should:

- align the ESG Manager profile with existing national skills, sustainability and SME strategies;
- involve relevant ministries and public authorities (education, labour, economy, environment);
- engage VET providers, social partners and business associations;
- integrate ESG training into existing education and training pathways rather than creating parallel systems.

National adaptation should also ensure that ESG-related methodologies, examples and implementation approaches are carefully contextualised to national economic realities and institutional environments. Validation findings highlighted the importance of adapting ESG practices to the local business culture, SME structures and administrative context to ensure feasibility and policy uptake.

This approach ensures coherence at European level while respecting national institutional structures and policy priorities.

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3. Contribution to Sustainability and Long-Term Impact

The recognition of the ESG Manager credential through a coordinated policy approach supports the long-term sustainability of European economic and social systems. By embedding ESG competences within existing EU and national policy instruments, it strengthens the capacity of SMEs to integrate sustainable practices, comply with evolving regulatory requirements and enhance their competitiveness. This approach contributes to the consistent implementation of sustainability objectives across sectors and Member States, ensuring that ESG-related skills remain relevant, transferable and aligned with Europe's green and social transition.

The Policy Handbook supports long-term impact by:

- providing open-access methodologies and policy guidance;
- enabling continuous adaptation to evolving EU sustainability requirements;
- strengthening the link between education, labour markets and sustainability strategies.

4. Conclusions

The strengthened policy framework outlined in this Handbook highlights the relevance and feasibility of a recognised ESG Manager credential within the European context. By aligning ESG-related competences with existing EU policy instruments and national implementation mechanisms, it supports their structured integration into education and training systems, labour markets and sustainability strategies. This coordinated approach contributes to skills development for the green transition, enhances SME competitiveness and resilience, and supports the consistent advancement of Europe's environmental, social and governance objectives across Member States.

The pilot findings clearly demonstrate that training alone is not sufficient to drive ESG implementation in SMEs. While awareness and engagement can be effectively supported through targeted learning interventions, sustained change requires a broader support ecosystem, including advisory services, financial incentives and simplified regulatory guidance.

Validation findings further demonstrate that successful ESG implementation requires not only competence development but also institutional support, flexible policy design and strong collaboration among public authorities, VET providers, intermediary organisations and SME networks. The integration of ESG-related competences into national qualification and lifelong learning systems is therefore essential to ensure long-term sustainability, recognition and effective uptake across diverse European business environments. Additionally they demonstrate that ESG implementation requires coordinated support ecosystems combining

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training, facilitation, mentoring, advisory services and intermediary support structures. Long-term sustainability therefore depends not only on competence development but also on institutional embedding, operational support mechanisms and public-private cooperation frameworks. Validation findings further highlight the importance of territorial and municipal-level dimensions in ESG implementation. Particularly in rural areas, ESG adoption is strongly influenced by local development priorities and requires close cooperation between SMEs, municipalities and regional support organisations. Strengthening this local implementation layer increases the accessibility, relevance and practical impact of ESG training and support measures.

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National Action Plans

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Greece – Regions of Crete, Thessaly and Central Greece

1. Basic Information	
Country	Greece
Partner organisation	ETAM SA & AITCG
Contact person	Maroulla Schiza, Eleni Skrimpa
Date / version	22/5/2026

2. National Starting Point: Main Policy Needs in the Country

In Greece, ESG implementation among SMEs is still at an early stage, particularly within micro and small enterprises operating in agrifood, tourism, and hospitality-related sectors. While awareness of sustainability is increasing, SMEs require practical guidance, simplified tools, sector-specific support, and flexible learning pathways to move from awareness to implementation. Existing national initiatives mainly target large companies and formal reporting obligations, while smaller businesses often lack access to tailored training, consultancy, financial support and continuous advisory services.

Greek validation findings further highlighted that SMEs are highly heterogeneous in terms of size, sector, organisational capacity and ESG maturity levels. As a result, one-size-fits-all approaches are often ineffective, and ESG support measures should be adapted to different business realities and levels of readiness.

Key framework conditions include the establishment of a clear national ESG guidance framework for SMEs and stronger integration of ESG skills into vocational education, lifelong learning systems and national qualification structures. Existing institutions such as Chambers of Commerce, regional business support structures, VET providers, lifelong learning centres, university K.E.DI.VI.M.s, and tourism and agrifood associations could support the promotion and implementation of the ESG Manager profile.

However, significant gaps remain in terms of recognition of ESG-related qualifications, visibility of ESG benefits for SMEs, sector-specific implementation support, integration of ESG competences into practical SME-oriented training pathways, and the availability of coordinated support ecosystems combining training, mentoring and advisory services.

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Priority Need 1	Practical, sector-specific and adaptable ESG training and implementation support for SMEs reflecting different levels of ESG maturity and organisational readiness.
Priority Need 2	Financial incentives, simplified procedures, advisory services and intermediary support mechanisms to facilitate ESG adoption among micro and small enterprises.
Priority Need 3	Recognition and integration of ESG skills and qualifications within VET and lifelong learning systems.

3. Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Type of organization (policy, public authority, VET, business, network, civil society, certification)	Why is this stakeholder relevant?
Ministry of Development	Public authority / policy	Responsible for SME competitiveness, entrepreneurship policies, and business support schemes.
Ministry of Environment and Energy	Public authority / policy	Oversees sustainability and ESG-related national strategies and environmental frameworks.
Chambers of Commerce (e.g. Heraklion Chamber, Magnesia Chamber, Larissa Chamber)	Business / network	Direct access to SMEs and capacity to promote ESG training and awareness activities.
VET Providers and Lifelong Learning Centres	VET / training	Key actors for integrating ESG Manager competences into vocational and adult education.
Regional Authorities of	Public authority / regional	Support regional sustainability strategies, SME development initiatives and training at regional level

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Sectoral Associations (Tourism & Agrifood)	Business / network	Can facilitate sector-specific ESG dissemination and uptake among SMEs.

4. National Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Recommendation	Develop a flexible national ESG support framework tailored to SMEs, including simplified guidance, sector-specific tools, practical implementation roadmaps, differentiated support pathways and real-life case examples adapted to varying levels of ESG maturity.
Problem addressed	SMEs lack practical and accessible ESG implementation guidance adapted to their operational realities.
Target institution / actor	Ministry of Development in collaboration with Chambers of Commerce and SME support organizations.
Expected benefit for SMEs	Improved understanding and easier adoption of ESG practices with reduced complexity and implementation barriers.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation	Integrate ESG competences and the ESG Manager profile into VET, adult and lifelong learning, and professional upskilling programmes.
Problem addressed	Limited availability and recognition of ESG-related qualifications and practical training opportunities.
Target institution / actor	Ministry of Education and Greek Public Employment Service (DYPA), VET providers, and certification bodies.

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Expected benefit for SMEs	Enhanced workforce skills and increased availability of qualified professionals supporting ESG implementation.

Recommendation 3

Recommendation	Introduce targeted financial incentives and subsidized consultancy schemes for SMEs implementing ESG practices.
Problem addressed	High implementation costs and lack of specialized expertise discourage SMEs from adopting ESG measures.
Target institution / actor	Ministry of Economy and Finance, regional authorities, and national funding bodies.
Expected benefit for SMEs	Reduced financial burden and increased capacity to implement sustainable business practices.

Recommendation 4

Recommendation	Launch national and regional awareness campaigns promoting the business value of ESG for SMEs.
Problem addressed	Low awareness and limited recognition of ESG benefits among SMEs and consumers.
Target institution / actor	Regional authorities, Chambers of Commerce, and sectoral associations.
Expected benefit for SMEs	Greater market visibility, improved competitiveness, and stronger motivation for ESG adoption.

Recommendation 5

Recommendation	Strengthen the role of intermediary organisations, lifelong learning centres, university K.E.DI.VI.M.s, Chambers of Commerce and SME networks in ESG dissemination, advisory support, networking and knowledge transfer.

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Problem addressed	SMEs often lack continuous guidance, peer-learning opportunities and access to coordinated support ecosystems facilitating ESG implementation..
Target institution / actor	Regional authorities, Chambers of Commerce, and sectoral associations.
Expected benefit for SMEs	Greater market visibility, improved competitiveness, and stronger motivation for ESG adoption.

5. National Action Plan

Time horizon	Action / next step	Responsible organisation(s) / supporting partner(s)	Expected outcome
Short-term	Organize regional ESG awareness workshops, peer-learning events and sector-specific networking activities for SMEs, involving intermediary organisations, Chambers of Commerce, lifelong learning centres and sectoral associations.	ESG4SMEs partners, Chambers of Commerce, Regional Authorities	Increased awareness and engagement of SMEs with ESG principles
Short-term	Adapt training materials into simplified, sector-specific and practice-oriented formats using visual content, real-life case studies and step-by-step implementation examples adapted to different SME profiles and ESG maturity levels.	ESG4SMEs partners, VET providers	Improved accessibility and usability of ESG training for SMEs
Short-term	Establish regional ESG support networks bringing together SMEs, VET providers, consultants,	VET providers, consultants, Chambers	Creation of local ESG support ecosystems and

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	Chambers and sectoral organisations to facilitate knowledge transfer and continuous advisory support.	and sectoral organisations t	stronger SME engagement.
Medium-term	Pilot hybrid ESG training programmes combining online learning, facilitated workshops, mentoring and differentiated learning pathways adapted to SME size, sector and ESG readiness levels.	VET providers, SME networks, sectoral associations and/or regional authorities	Increased participation and practical implementation capacity among SMEs
Medium-term	Develop downloadable ESG toolkits, monitoring templates and simplified reporting tools in Greek tailored to tourism and agrifood SMEs.	ESG4SMEs partners, sectoral associations, consultants	Easier ESG implementation and monitoring for SMEs
Medium-term	Develop cooperation mechanisms between VET providers, K.E.DI.VI.M.s, Chambers and regional authorities for coordinated ESG lifelong learning delivery.	VET providers, K.E.DI.VI.M.s, Chambers and regional authorities	Stronger integration of ESG competences into regional lifelong learning ecosystems.
Long-term	Integrate ESG Manager competences into national VET curricula, lifelong learning systems and National Qualification Framework structures, including micro-credential and certification pathways.	Ministry of Education, certification bodies, VET providers	Formal recognition and sustainability of ESG skills development
Long-term	Establish dedicated national and regional ESG transition support schemes combining financial incentives, advisory services, mentoring and simplified compliance guidance for SMEs.	Ministry of Development, Ministry of Finance, regional authorities	Increased ESG adoption and long-term sustainability among SMEs

6. Evidence Base

This Action Plan is based on feedback collected during the Greek pilot sessions of the ESG4SMEs project involving SMEs from the agrifood, tourism accommodation, and hospitality supply sectors. Additional input was gathered through stakeholder discussions during the dissemination events held in Larissa on 28 April and in Heraklion on 6 May 2026, where representatives from industry, tourism, agrifood, and sustainability sectors highlighted the need for practical ESG guidance, financial support, simplified methodologies, and stronger collaboration between primary production and hospitality-related sectors. The Action Plan also reflects internal partner discussions, panel discussions and analysis of recurring barriers and support needs identified throughout the pilot implementation process.

Validation findings additionally highlighted the importance of practical and less theoretical ESG training approaches, differentiated support according to SME size and ESG maturity, stronger integration into lifelong learning systems, and the active involvement of intermediary organisations and business networks in facilitating ESG uptake and knowledge transfer.

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Italy

1. Basic Information	
Country	Italy
Partner organisation	Confartigianato Imprese Salerno
Contact person	Maria Ceraolo
Date / version	27.04.2026, version 1.0

2. National Starting Point: Main Policy Needs in the Country

In Italy, SMEs are increasingly exposed to ESG requirements through supply chains, market expectations, access to finance, and EU sustainability policies. National frameworks such as the Italian National Sustainable Development Strategy and support measures linked to green/digital transition provide a relevant policy background. However, rural SMEs often remain at an early stage: they comply with sector regulations but lack structured ESG knowledge, time, internal expertise, and practical tools.

The main need is to move from general awareness to concrete implementation through simplified guidance, examples, templates, and advisory support. The ESG Manager Credential could be linked to VET, SME support schemes, sustainability reporting tools, and business association services. What is currently missing is formal recognition, visibility among SMEs, integration into training pathways, and clear institutional support for uptake.

Priority Need 1	Practical ESG guidance for SMEs, including templates, checklists, sector-specific examples, and simple monitoring tools.
Priority Need 2	Recognition of the ESG Manager Credential within VET, SME advisory services, and business support structures.
Priority Need 3	Financial and institutional incentives to help SMEs invest in ESG training, internal skills, and implementation support.

3. Key Stakeholders

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Stakeholder	Type of organization (policy, public authority, VET, business, network, civil society, certification)	Why is this stakeholder relevant?
Italian Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy	Policy / public authority	Responsible for SME policies and key for integrating ESG requirements and incentives at national level
Regional Authorities (e.g. Campania Region)	Public authority	Manage regional funding, training programmes, and local SME support initiatives
Confartigianato Imprese (incl. Confartigianato Salerno and ConfESG)	Business Support Organisation	Direct access to SMEs and key role in providing advisory services, training,

		and promoting the ESG Manager profile
VET providers and training centres (e. g. Technical Institute Galilei -Di Palo" or "ProfAgri Salerno" Vocational School for Agricultural Services and Rural Development)	VET	Essential for developing and delivering the ESG Manager Credential and integrating it into training systems
Cluster Agrifood Campania	SME network	Facilitates outreach, knowledge exchange, and ESG uptake among agrifood SMEs at local level
Chambers of Commerce	Public authority / business support	Support SMEs through services, training, and local promotion of ESG practices

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4. National Policy Recommendations

Please formulate 2–4 concrete and realistic policy recommendations for your country.
Focus on what should change, who should act, and how this would help SMEs.

Recommendation 1

Recommendation	Increase visibility and initial uptake of the ESG Manager profile among SMEs through awareness activities, first feedback rounds, and dissemination by business support organisations.
Problem addressed	SMEs have limited awareness of the ESG Manager role and do not clearly see how it can support practical ESG implementation.
Target institution / actor	BSOs, trade associations, SMEs networks (Confartigianato Imprese, Chambers of Commerce, Cluster Agrifood Campania)
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs become more aware of the ESG Manager profile and can provide feedback on how it should be adapted to their real needs.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation	Promote pilot use of the ESG4SMEs training course and tools by chambers, business associations, VET providers, and training centres.
Problem addressed	ESG training remains fragmented and is not yet systematically used by SME support and training organisations.
Target institution / actor	VET providers, training centres, BSOs (Confartigianato Imprese, Chambers of Commerce).
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs gain access to practical training, templates, examples, and support through trusted organisations.

Recommendation 3

Recommendation	Assess the curricular compatibility of the ESG Manager profile and integrate ESG-related competences into VET and continuous training offers.

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Problem addressed	The ESG Manager profile is not yet connected to recognised education and training pathways.
Target institution / actor	VET providers, regional authorities, Ministry of Education and Merit
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs can rely on more structured and recognisable ESG skills within the labour market and training system.

Recommendation 4

Recommendation	Work towards broader recognition of the ESG Manager Credential and its inclusion in regional SME support and transformation programmes.
Problem addressed	The ESG Manager Credential lacks formal or informal recognition and is not yet embedded in public SME support measures.
Target institution / actor	Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy, regional authorities, business support organisations.
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs can train or hire staff with the ESG Manager Credential and access training, advisory services, and financial support to implement ESG practices.

5. National Action Plan

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Time horizon	**Action / next step**	**Responsible organisation(s) / supporting partner(s)**	**Expected outcome**
Short-term	Organise awareness workshops and dissemination activities on the ESG Manager Credential for SMEs and stakeholders	Confartigianato Imprese Salerno; Cluster Agrifood Campania; Chambers of Commerce	Increased awareness and initial interest among SMEs and stakeholders
Short-term	Deliver pilot training sessions using the ESG	Confartigianato Imprese; VET providers; SME networks	First use of the course and practical

	course and collect feedback from SMEs		feedback to refine tools and content
Medium-term	Integrate the ESG course and tools into training and advisory services offered by business associations and VET providers	Confartigianato Imprese; VET providers; Chambers of Commerce	Regular use of ESG training and tools within SME support structures
Medium-term	Coordinate with chambers, associations, and regional actors to develop and adapt practical ESG tools (templates, checklists, sector-specific examples) based on SME feedback and assess integration into existing programmes	Confartigianato Imprese; Cluster Agrifood Campania; VET providers	Availability of practical tools tailored to SME needs and sectors, as well as with existing SME support structures
Long-term	Integrate the ESG Manager Credential into regional SME support programmes and training schemes	Regional authorities (e.g. Campania Region); Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy	ESG Manager Credential included in public support measures for SMEs
Long-term	Promote formal or informal recognition of the ESG Manager Credential at national level through policy dialogue with national authorities	Ministry of Education and Merit; Ministry of Enterprises and Made in Italy; VET bodies	Recognition of the ESG Manager Credential and wider uptake by SMEs
Long-term	Collect formal statements of support and identify organisations that can carry forward and scale the ESG Manager Credential nationally	Confartigianato Imprese; Chambers of Commerce; VET providers; national stakeholders	Long-term sustainability, recognition, and wider uptake of the Credential

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6. Evidence Base

This Action Plan is based on pilot activities carried out in Italy with SMEs in the agrifood sector, including the testing of the ESG training course and simulation game. It reflects direct feedback collected from participating SMEs, highlighting key barriers such as limited time, lack of practical guidance, and difficulty translating ESG concepts into daily operations.

The plan also builds on stakeholder interaction with business associations and SME networks (e.g. ConfESG and Cluster Agrifood Campania), as well as public meetings with local policymakers, perspective entrepreneurs and rural SMEs.

These inputs informed the identification of priority needs, policy recommendations, and proposed actions.

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Project No: 2023-1-DE02-KA220-VET-000156776

Slovenia

1. Basic Information	
Country	Slovenia
Partner organisation	The International Institute for the Implementation of Sustainable Development, Maribor (MIITR)
Contact person	Ana Vilar
Date / version	11.05.2026

2. National Starting Point: Main Policy Needs in the Country

In Slovenia, SMEs are increasingly exposed to ESG expectations through EU sustainability policies, supply-chain requirements, access to finance, public procurement, banks, investors and growing market demand for responsible business practices. Several national support structures already exist, including SME advisory services, green transition support, circular economy initiatives, voluntary sustainability reporting training and tools for assessing sustainability orientation. However, many rural SMEs, especially micro and small enterprises in agriculture, tourism, wood-processing, construction, food production and local services, still lack practical internal capacity to translate ESG concepts into daily operations. The main gap is not general awareness, but the absence of a clearly recognised, SME-oriented ESG Manager profile that connects practical ESG implementation, VET, advisory services and business support schemes. Slovenia therefore needs a realistic pathway that links the ESG Manager credential with existing VET structures, lifelong learning, chambers, regional development agencies and SME support programmes.

Priority Need 1	Practical and locally adapted ESG implementation support for rural SMEs, including simple tools, templates, training and sector-relevant examples.
Priority Need 2	Stronger integration of ESG Manager competences into VET, adult education, lifelong learning and professional upskilling pathways.
Priority Need 3	Better connection between ESG training, SME advisory services, funding opportunities and business support structures.

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3. Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Type of organization (policy, public authority, VET, business, network, civil society, certification)	Why is this stakeholder relevant?
Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport	Policy / public authority	Responsible for entrepreneurship, SME competitiveness, tourism and business support measures; relevant for linking the ESG Manager profile with SME transformation and competitiveness programmes.
Ministry of the Environment, Climate and Energy	Policy / public authority	Relevant for national sustainability, climate, circular economy and environmental transition frameworks that influence ESG expectations for SMEs.
SPIRIT Slovenia and Slovenian Enterprise Fund	Public business support / funding and advisory structures	Important for connecting ESG training with existing support for entrepreneurship, green transition, circular economy, innovation and SME development.
Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia and Chamber of Craft and Small Business of Slovenia	Business chambers / SME networks	They have direct access to SMEs and can support dissemination, stakeholder validation, awareness raising and uptake of the ESG Manager credential through trusted business networks.
Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training / CPI	VET / education system actor	Key institution for the development and adaptation of vocational education, curricula and professional competences in Slovenia; relevant for assessing how ESG Manager competences could be linked to VET pathways.

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Adult education providers, VET schools and regional development agencies, including Podravje/Maribor structures	VET / adult education / regional SME support	Relevant for practical implementation, local training delivery, pilot use of ESG4SMEs materials and outreach to rural SMEs at regional level.
Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia and tourism-related SME networks	Sectoral business network	Relevant for reaching rural SMEs in agriculture, food production, rural tourism and local services, where ESG implementation must be adapted to sector-specific and local realities.

4. National Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Recommendation	Establish a practical ESG implementation pathway for rural SMEs in Slovenia, using the ESG Manager profile, ESG4SMEs training course, simulation game and policy handbook as modular tools for awareness, training and advisory support.
Problem addressed	ESG support for Slovenian SMEs is still fragmented, and many rural SMEs do not have the time, expertise or internal capacity to translate ESG principles into concrete daily practices.
Target institution / actor	MIITR, SPIRIT Slovenia, Slovenian Enterprise Fund, Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport, chambers, regional development agencies and SME support organisations.
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs gain access to practical, understandable and low-threshold ESG support that helps them move from general awareness to implementation, monitoring and communication of ESG actions.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation	Assess the compatibility of the ESG Manager credential with Slovenian VET, adult education and lifelong learning

	structures, including possibilities for integration into professional upskilling, short training programmes or micro-credential-type pathways.
Problem addressed	The ESG Manager role is not yet recognised as a visible professional competence profile in Slovenia, which limits its credibility, transferability and uptake by SMEs.
Target institution / actor	Ministry of Education, Institute of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training / CPI, adult education providers, VET schools and relevant certification or qualification bodies.
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs would be able to rely on a clearer and more recognisable ESG skills pathway for owners, managers, employees and external advisors supporting ESG implementation.

Recommendation 3

Recommendation	Link ESG Manager training with existing Slovenian SME support schemes, including green transition, circular economy, voluntary sustainability reporting, digitalisation and competitiveness programmes.
Problem addressed	Many SMEs need ESG knowledge and advisory support, but training is often separated from funding opportunities, business counselling and implementation support.
Target institution / actor	Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport, Ministry of the Environment, Climate and Energy, SPIRIT Slovenia, Slovenian Enterprise Fund, chambers and regional development agencies.
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs would be encouraged to participate in ESG upskilling because training would be connected to practical business benefits, such as improved access to funding, better reporting capacity, operational savings and stronger competitiveness.

Recommendation 4

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Recommendation	Promote sector-specific uptake of the ESG Manager profile through chambers, regional stakeholders and rural SME networks, especially in agriculture, tourism, food production, wood-processing, construction and craft-based local services.
Problem addressed	Generic ESG guidance is often too abstract for rural SMEs, while sector-specific examples and locally relevant tools are needed to make ESG realistic and useful.
Target institution / actor	MIITR, Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Slovenia, Chamber of Craft and Small Business of Slovenia, Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia, tourism networks, VET providers and regional development agencies.
Expected benefit for SMEs	Rural SMEs receive ESG guidance that reflects their real operating conditions, local context, sector challenges and resource limitations, increasing the likelihood of practical implementation.

5. National Action Plan

Time horizon	Action / next step	Responsible organisation(s) / supporting partner(s)	Expected outcome
Short-term	Map existing Slovenian VET, adult education, SME support and green transition programmes where the ESG Manager profile, course or tools could be introduced, referenced or piloted.	MIITR, CPI, adult education providers, SPIRIT Slovenia, Slovenian Enterprise Fund, GZS, OZS, regional development agencies.	A clear overview of relevant Slovenian structures that could host, promote or further adapt the ESG Manager credential.
Short-term	Present the ESG Manager credential and Policy Handbook to selected Slovenian stakeholders through dissemination activities, bilateral discussions or a focused roundtable with SMEs, VET actors and business support organisations.	MIITR, chambers, VET/adult education providers, regional SME support organisations.	Initial stakeholder feedback collected on the usability, recognition potential and national adaptation needs of the ESG Manager profile.

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Medium-term	Adapt the ESG4SMEs course, simulation game and practical templates into a Slovenian implementation pathway combining online self-learning, short workshops and practical ESG tools for rural SMEs.	MIITR, VET providers, adult education providers, chambers and selected SME networks.	A practical Slovenian ESG learning and support package suitable for SME owners, managers, employees and advisors.
Medium-term	Test the use of the ESG Manager approach within advisory or training activities offered through chambers, regional development agencies or local SME networks, with focus on rural and smaller enterprises.	MIITR, GZS, OZS, Chamber of Agriculture and Forestry of Slovenia, regional development agencies, selected VET/adult education providers.	Documented pilot use, practical feedback from SMEs and identification of organisations willing to further promote the ESG Manager approach.
Long-term	Promote the integration or formal/informal recognition of ESG Manager competences within Slovenian VET, lifelong learning, continuous professional development or future qualification-related pathways.	Ministry of Education, CPI, adult education sector, relevant qualification/certification bodies, VET schools and training providers.	Stronger visibility and credibility of ESG Manager competences as part of the Slovenian skills and training ecosystem.
Long-term	Advocate for the ESG Manager credential to be included in national or regional SME transformation measures, especially those related to sustainability reporting, circular economy, green transition, digitalisation and competitiveness.	Ministry of the Economy, Tourism and Sport, Ministry of the Environment, Climate and Energy, SPIRIT Slovenia, Slovenian Enterprise Fund, regional development agencies and chambers.	The ESG Manager approach becomes part of broader SME support structures, increasing long-term uptake and sustainability beyond the ESG4SMEs project.

6. Evidence Base

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This Action Plan is based on the results and practical outputs developed within the ESG4SMEs project, including the ESG Manager for Rural SMEs profile, curriculum, training course, simulation game and Policy Handbook. It also reflects MIITR's role in the project, particularly in relation to the development of the ESG Manager profile and curriculum, as well as dissemination and communication activities in Slovenia. The plan takes into account internal consortium discussions, feedback collected through project testing and dissemination activities, and the Slovenian national context, where SMEs are increasingly exposed to ESG expectations through supply chains, voluntary sustainability reporting, access to finance and green transition measures. Existing Slovenian structures such as SME support organisations, chambers, VET institutions, adult education providers, regional development agencies and public support schemes provide a realistic basis for further uptake. Since the ESG Manager credential is not yet formally recognised in Slovenia, this Action Plan focuses on gradual and practical steps: awareness raising, stakeholder validation, pilot use, curricular compatibility assessment and long-term integration into training and SME support structures.

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Cyprus

1. Basic Information	
Country	Cyprus
Partner organisation	A.B. Institute of Entrepreneurship Development
Contact person	Dimitris Tsiachtanis
Date / version	07.05.2026 Version 1.0

2. National Starting Point: Main Policy Needs in the Country

In Cyprus, SMEs are increasingly exposed to ESG requirements through EU sustainability policies, green transition priorities, supply-chain expectations and emerging sustainability reporting obligations. However, many SMEs, especially smaller and rural enterprises, still lack the internal knowledge, practical tools and trained staff needed to move from general ESG awareness to implementation. Existing national structures, such as business chambers, energy-efficiency networks and public training institutions, can support this transition, but the ESG Manager profile is not yet formally visible or recognised as a standard professional pathway. The main gap is the absence of a practical, SME-oriented ESG qualification that connects VET, business support and policy priorities. Therefore, Cyprus needs a clearer link between ESG training, SME advisory services and recognised upskilling pathways.

Priority Need 1	Practical ESG upskilling for SME owners, managers and employees, with emphasis on simple tools, sector-relevant examples and implementation steps.
Priority Need 2	Recognition of the ESG Manager profile as a credible VET-based qualification or professional upskilling pathway linked to existing training and productivity support structures.
Priority Need 3	Stronger cooperation between public authorities, VET providers, chambers and SME networks to promote ESG adoption, especially among rural SMEs and small businesses with limited internal capacity.

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3. Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Type of organization (policy, public authority, VET, business, network, civil society, certification)	Why is this stakeholder relevant?
Nicosia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NCCI / ΕΒΕ Λευκωσίας)	Business chamber / SME network	Relevant because it represents companies in commerce, industry and services and can support the dissemination, consultation and uptake of the ESG Manager credential among SMEs. It also has committees for commerce, industry, services, economy and tourism/development, which makes it useful for connecting the credential with different SME sectors.
Pancyprian Association of Energy Saving Enterprises (PASEEXE / ΠΑΣΕΕΞΕ)	Business association / energy efficiency and sustainability network	Relevant because it represents enterprises active in energy saving and energy efficiency. It can provide expert input on the environmental and energy-related dimension of ESG and support the promotion of practical ESG measures among SMEs.
Cyprus Productivity Centre (CPC / Κέντρο Παραγωγικότητας Κύπρου – ΚΕΠΑ)	Public VET / skills development institution	Relevant because it operates under the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance and is connected with productivity, skills development and training activities. It is highly relevant for linking the ESG Manager credential with VET, upskilling and lifelong learning structures in Cyprus.

4. National Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1

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Recommendation	Integrate the ESG Manager for Rural SMEs profile into national VET and upskilling programmes, using existing training structures such as the Cyprus Productivity Centre and other accredited VET providers.
Problem addressed	SMEs in Cyprus often lack staff with practical ESG knowledge and do not have access to a clear, structured and SME-oriented ESG training pathway.
Target institution / actor	Cyprus Productivity Centre, Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, VET providers, HRDA.
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs will gain easier access to practical ESG training for owners, managers and employees, helping them move from general awareness to concrete implementation of ESG practices.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation	Develop a national recognition pathway for the ESG Manager credential as a professional upskilling standard for SMEs, linked to existing training certification and lifelong learning mechanisms.
Problem addressed	The ESG Manager role is not yet formally recognised in Cyprus, which limits its visibility, credibility and uptake by SMEs.
Target institution / actor	Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, Cyprus Productivity Centre, HRDA, relevant certification bodies.
Expected benefit for SMEs	A recognised credential would make it easier for SMEs to identify qualified staff or external advisors who can support ESG planning, data collection, reporting and compliance.

Recommendation 3

Recommendation	Create a structured cooperation mechanism between business chambers, sectoral associations and public training institutions to promote ESG adoption among SMEs.

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Problem addressed	ESG support for SMEs is currently fragmented, while many small businesses need coordinated guidance, sector-specific examples and trusted intermediaries.
Target institution / actor	Nicosia Chamber of Commerce and Industry, PASEEXE, Cyprus Productivity Centre, SME networks and local business associations.
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs will receive more coordinated support, including awareness activities, practical workshops, technical guidance on energy and sustainability, and access to relevant training opportunities.

Recommendation 4

Recommendation	Link ESG training and the ESG Manager credential with national or EU-funded support schemes for green transition, energy efficiency and SME competitiveness.
Problem addressed	Many SMEs lack the financial capacity to invest in ESG training, advisory support or sustainability improvements.
Target institution / actor	Public authorities managing SME support schemes, Ministry of Energy, Commerce and Industry, HRDA, business support organisations.
Expected benefit for SMEs	SMEs will be encouraged to participate in ESG training and apply sustainability measures by combining skills development with available funding, grants or advisory support.

5. National Action Plan

Time horizon	**Action / next step**	**Responsible organisation(s) / supporting partner(s)**	**Expected outcome**
Short-term	Map existing VET, productivity and SME support schemes where the	Cyprus Productivity Centre, HRDA, A.B. Institute of	Clear overview of existing training and support structures that can host or

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	ESG Manager profile could be introduced or referenced.	Entrepreneurship Development	promote the ESG Manager credential.
Short-term	Organise an initial stakeholder consultation with NCCI, PASEEXE, CPC and selected SMEs to discuss the relevance, usability and recognition potential of the ESG Manager profile.	A.B. Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, NCCI, PASEEXE, Cyprus Productivity Centre	Practical feedback collected from business, VET and technical stakeholders on how the credential should be adapted to the Cypriot SME context.
Medium-term	Develop a national adaptation note for the ESG Manager credential, linking the profile with Cypriot SME needs, VET structures and green transition priorities.	A.B. Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, Cyprus Productivity Centre, NCCI, relevant public authorities	A concise national reference document that explains how the ESG Manager credential can be used in Cyprus by SMEs, VET providers and business support organisations.
Medium-term	Prepare a stakeholder validation note based on feedback from SMEs, chambers, VET actors and energy-efficiency experts on the relevance of the ESG Manager credential for Cyprus.	A.B. Institute of Entrepreneurship Development, NCCI, PASEEXE, Cyprus Productivity Centre	A documented validation of the ESG Manager credential is produced, supporting future discussions on recognition, integration into training structures and promotion to SMEs.
Long-term	Promote the inclusion of the ESG Manager credential in recognised upskilling, lifelong learning or SME training schemes.	Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance, Cyprus Productivity Centre, HRDA, VET providers	The ESG Manager profile gains stronger visibility and credibility as a recognised

			professional upskilling pathway for SME staff and managers.
Long-term	Establish a recurring cooperation mechanism between public authorities, chambers, sectoral associations and VET providers to support ESG adoption by SMEs.	NCCI, PASEEXE, Cyprus Productivity Centre, public authorities, SME networks	A more coordinated national support ecosystem for ESG training, advisory services and implementation among Cypriot SMEs.

6. Evidence Base

The Action Plan is based on the accumulated results and practical experience generated through the ESG4SMEs project, including the ESG Manager profile, the curriculum design, the training approach and the policy framework developed under WP5. It also reflects insights collected through discussions with relevant stakeholders, as well as feedback from SMEs and users involved in the project activities. These inputs highlighted the need for a practical and easily understandable ESG role that can support SMEs in areas such as energy efficiency, ESG data collection, sustainability reporting, strategic planning and stakeholder engagement. The Action Plan also takes into account the Cypriot context, where SMEs need clearer links between ESG requirements, available training structures and business support mechanisms. The selected stakeholders — NCCI, PASEEXE and the Cyprus Productivity Centre — further strengthen the plan by covering the business, technical and VET perspectives needed for realistic policy adaptation.

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Germany

1. Basic Information	
Country	Germany
Partner Organization	WESt mbH / ACEEU
Date / Version	May 2026

2. National Context: Key Policy Needs in the Country

Germany has a strong vocational education and training system with dual training, higher vocational education, chambers and established continuing education structures.

Sustainability is already embedded in vocational education and training, but ESG-related competences have not yet been bundled into a clearly recognized, SME-oriented competence profile.

Existing continuing education offers such as IHK certificate courses, climate management or CSR training courses provide good points of connection, but are fragmented.

A key need for action in Germany is to link ESG competence development with existing structures of vocational education and training, SME support and continuing education funding. The policy framework is set by the German Sustainability Strategy 2025 and, at EU level, by the VSME, which serves as a protective framework for SMEs against excessive supply-chain requirements, and the EBA Guidelines, which make ESG risks a prerequisite for lending from 2025.

Despite a growing diversity of offers, there is no recognized ESG Manager profile spanning occupational fields. The term is not protected, qualifications are hardly comparable, and there is no integration into dual training or chamber structures.

The greatest bottleneck lies in the discrepancy between awareness and action: far more than half of SMEs do not prepare a sustainability report. Low-threshold formats that can be reached via multipliers such as IHKs, chambers of crafts and economic development agencies provide the points of connection for the ESG Manager profile as a connecting hinge between education structures, funding instruments and SME needs.

Need for Action 1	**Create awareness of ESG competence profiles as future competences in education, practice and policy.**

Need for Action 2	Gradual **institutional anchoring of the ESG competence profile** within the structures of vocational education and training, SME support and continuing education funding.
Need for Action 3	**Practical support for SMEs in ESG implementation**: especially in developing a viable sustainability strategy, fulfilling requirements arising from customer and supply-chain relationships, strengthening competitiveness and dealing with climate risks.

3. Key Stakeholders

Stakeholder	**Type of Organization** (policy, public authority, vocational education and training, business, network, civil society, certification)	**Why is this stakeholder relevant?**
Federal and state ministries for education, economic affairs and labour	public authorities	Relevant for vocational education and training standards, continuing education funding, SME policy, consultancy funding and existing support programmes for companies
Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) / regional chambers of industry and commerce	Chambers / business / vocational education and training	Key stakeholders for dual training, continuing education and interest representation
German Confederation of Skilled Crafts (ZDH) and chambers of crafts	Chambers / business / vocational education and training	Key stakeholders for dual training, continuing education and interest representation
Vocational education providers, continuing education providers	Vocational education and training / continuing education	Relevant for adapting, implementing and scaling the ESG Manager training as a learning offer

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G.I.B. - Gestaltung, Innovation und Beratung in der Arbeits- und Sozialpolitik GmbH	Public institution at regional level	The state-owned organization aims to support and promote labour and social policy in North Rhine-Westphalia.
Economic development agencies	Public institution at local level	Relevant for addressing local companies, pilot formats, events, multiplier work and transfer to rural SMEs.
Regional SME networks and business associations	Regional economy	Business networks act as transfer partners and interest representatives for companies that are not exclusively organized through the IHK or HWK.
Cities, municipalities and districts	Public institutions at local level	Relevant for addressing local stakeholders, events, activities, multiplier work and transfer.
Additional stakeholders:	Association of Liberal Professions, German Parity Welfare Association, German Trade Union Confederation / DGB NRW	

4. National Policy Recommendations

Recommendation 1

Recommendation	Development of a **communication and transfer strategy** to make the ESG competence profile visible as an orientation framework for future competences. To this end, key messages, consistent terminology, concise explanatory materials, practical examples for typical ESG roles in SMEs as well as presentation and information formats for education, business and policy should be developed and disseminated through existing networks. A distinction should be made between two important target groups of the strategy: multipliers in education and economic development who disseminate the profile further, and SME decision-makers who must be addressed directly.
Problem Addressed	The ESG competence profile is not yet sufficiently known as a reference framework for necessary future competences. As a result, relevant stakeholders lack a shared understanding of which competences will be needed in future for ESG-relevant tasks in SMEs and how these can be described in a way that connects education, practice and policy.

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Target Institution / Stakeholder	Chambers, economic development agencies, vocational schools, continuing education providers, industry associations, Mittelstand-Digital Centres, state ministries, regional SME and innovation networks.
Expected Benefit for SMEs	SMEs receive a clearer picture of which competences are associated with ESG and which operational roles will consequently gain importance in the future. The competence profile provides orientation, facilitates communication with education and consulting stakeholders and supports SMEs in identifying qualification needs at an early stage. ESG competence is not perceived as a regulatory obligation, but as a response to the complexity of CSRD, VSME and LkSG, and as a concrete competitive advantage in customer orders, bank financing and skilled labour recruitment.

Recommendation 2

Recommendation	Development of a modular **“ESG implementation package”** for SMEs based on the ESG Manager profile that includes various entry points. This should combine short self-checks, funding information, methodology for workshop formats and / or individual initial consultations as well as references to practical tools (for example for action planning, sustainability data collection or sustainability reporting).
Problem Addressed	Many SMEs recognize the importance of sustainability, but require individual initial consultation and support in order to classify ESG strategically, position themselves clearly and derive concrete implementation steps.
Target Institution / Stakeholder	Regional chambers, economic development agencies, SME networks, DNK, Mittelstand-Digital Centres, vocational education and continuing education providers.
Expected Benefit for SMEs	SMEs receive a low-threshold implementation pathway that links ESG knowledge with concrete measures in the company. This facilitates the transfer from theory into practice - supported by local contact points, individual guidance and appropriate funding information according to region and sector.

Recommendation 3

Recommendation	**ESG Manager training and accompanying consulting offers should be more closely linked to existing funding structures** (e.g. BAFA business consulting, INQA coaching,

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	Business Consulting Programme, NRW Education Cheque, continuing education funding from the Federal Employment Agency and relevant regional SME funding programmes)
Problem Addressed	Time and financial resources are key barriers for SMEs. Without funding and accompanying consulting, participation in ESG qualifications is likely to remain limited, especially among micro and small enterprises.
Target Institution / Stakeholder	Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Ministry of Economic Affairs, Industry, Climate Action and Energy of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia
Expected Benefit for SMEs	SMEs can use ESG competence development through existing and familiar support structures. This lowers financial barriers, and training, consulting and concrete implementation projects can be better connected with one another.

5. National Action Plan

Time Horizon	Measure / Next Step	Responsible Organization(s) / Supporting Partners	Expected Result
Short-term	Development of a compact **communication package for multipliers** from the field of vocational education and training and economic development on the ESG competence profile with clear key messages, a brief description of the profile, visualization of central competence areas as well as presentation slides for events with education, business and policy stakeholders.	Economic development agencies, chambers, vocational schools, continuing education providers, partners from the EU project ESG4SMEs	Shared understanding of the ESG competence profile and a consistent communication basis for addressing relevant multipliers.
Short-term	Planning and implementation of a **supra-regional stakeholder conference** for economic development agencies, chambers, vocational schools and	Economic development agencies, IHKs, HWKs and other interested continuing education providers	Increased supra-regional visibility of the ESG Manager profile and identification of possible

	continuing education providers to present and disseminate the ESG Manager profile.		cooperation approaches between relevant multipliers.
Short-term	Integrate the ESG Manager profile into **existing (regional) event formats**	Chambers, economic development agencies, Mittelstand-Digital	Increased supra-regional visibility of the ESG Manager profile and identification of possible cooperation approaches between relevant multipliers.
Medium-term	Preparation of a **funding and support guide** for SMEs explaining how ESG training and consulting can be combined with existing funding programmes (e.g. BAFA business consulting, INQA coaching, continuing education funding from the Federal Employment Agency).	Economic development agencies, chambers, approval bodies for public programmes	Greater transparency and orientation for SMEs and consultants regarding available support offers.
Medium-term	**Integration of the ESG competence profile into existing exchange and information formats**, e.g. regional SME networks, chamber events, university formats, continuing education fairs and political expert dialogues.	Chambers, economic development agencies, vocational schools, continuing education providers, industry associations, state ministries	Increased visibility of the ESG competence profile in education, practice and policy as well as stronger perception as an orientation framework for future ESG competence needs in SMEs.
Long-term	Development of a **train-the-trainer and multiplier model** on ESG topics, especially for chamber consultants, economic development officers and VET trainers. Further target groups could include continuing education	Chambers, continuing education providers, Mittelstand-Digital Centres, regional universities, economic development agencies	Scalable implementation structure beyond the project duration.

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	providers and business consultancies.		
Long-term	**Review of formal recognition options for the ESG Manager profile** within the German continuing education and chamber system.	DIHK, ZDH, responsible federal and state ministries	Roadmap for formal recognition or standardized chamber-based certification.
Long-term	**Establishment of a permanent communication and knowledge platform on the ESG competence profile** that bundles key information, application examples, materials for multipliers and references to connection options in education and practice. Existing platforms and offers should first be reviewed in order to avoid creating duplicate or parallel structures.	Economic development agencies, chambers, vocational schools, continuing education providers, Mittelstand-Digital Centres	The ESG competence profile remains visible, accessible and usable for SMEs, education stakeholders and political decision-makers beyond the project duration.

6. Evidence Base

This action plan is based on the results of the ESG4SMEs project and an analysis of the German context in the areas of vocational education and training and SME support. In addition, stakeholder feedback from regional multipliers and contact points was incorporated, including IHK, HWK, G.I.B. and FH Münster. The analysis also takes into account current regulatory developments at EU and federal level - in particular the VSME standard, the Omnibus Package and the German Sustainability Strategy 2025 - and evaluates existing continuing education structures and funding programmes in the German SME context.

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THANK YOU!

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