



EUROPEAN CLUSTER
COLLABORATION PLATFORM

Sustainability requirements and reporting: Cluster support for SMEs

Summary



EU Clusters Talks
19 February 2025, 8:30 – 9:45 CET

An initiative of the European Union





Sustainability requirements and reporting: Cluster support for SMEs

The European Cluster Collaboration Platform, on behalf of the European Commission, organised the EU Clusters Talk " **Sustainability requirements and reporting: Cluster support for SMEs**" on **19 February, 8:30 – 9:45 CET**, to explore how clusters and other business support organisations can assist SMEs in meeting sustainability requirements, sharing best practices, and showcasing collaborative initiatives that foster a more sustainable and resilient business ecosystem.

Agenda of the meeting

Moderator: Zivile Kropaite

1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform
2. Input from the European Commission
Georg Raab, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission
3. Panel debate
Anaïs Le Corvec, CEO, Cliclab Transformative Agency
Cécile Fontaine, Coordinator B-Resilient Eurocluster, Wagralim
Roman Kravchenko, CEO, 482.solutions, ESG Cluster HUB
4. Funding opportunities
Nina Hoppmann, team member of the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Key messages

- Clusters are critical in bridging the ESG knowledge gap for SMEs.
- ESG reporting is evolving from a burden to a business opportunity; clusters can lead the mindset change.
- Voluntary ESG reporting standards for SMEs are on the way, and clusters must start preparing.
- SMEs face growing ESG demands without direct obligations; clusters can help simplify the response.
- Clusters can enhance SME resilience through tailored sustainability support and practical tools.
- The main barrier is not resources but ESG literacy - clusters must take the lead in education.
- Clusters act as last-mile enablers of sustainability by linking policy, tools and SME action.



1. News from the European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

After the introduction by moderator Chris Burns, the following news items were presented:

1. [Public consultations open](#) for the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF).
2. Save the date for the [EU-Ukraine Business Summit](#).
3. Register for the [C2Lab in Zaragoza](#), 19-20 March 2025.
4. Register for [CmR Eindhoven, Netherlands](#), 26-27 March.
5. Register for [CmR Heilbronn, Germany](#), 9-10 April.

2. Input from the European Commission

Georg Raab, Policy Officer, DG GROW, European Commission

Georg Raab began by outlining the EU's overarching goal of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and reducing emissions by 55% by 2030. To reach this target, over €500 billion of investment will be needed annually. Within this context, the EU has introduced the “*taxonomy for sustainable finance*”, a classification system designed to guide investors and businesses on which activities can be considered sustainable. He clarified that the **taxonomy is not a mandatory investment list**, nor does it measure a company's environmental sustainability.

Although SMEs are not currently subject to direct reporting obligations under EU law, they are facing growing demands for environmental, social and governance (ESG) data from large corporations and financial institutions, a phenomenon referred to as the “*trickle-down effect*”. These demands often take the form of disparate and unstandardised questionnaires, resulting in a significant administrative burden for smaller businesses.

To address this, the European Commission has developed the **European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS)**, which are mandatory for large companies and voluntary for SMEs. Simplified versions have also been created for listed SMEs. These standards are intended to help SMEs respond consistently and efficiently to ESG data requests. The voluntary standards are expected to be officially adopted by mid-2025.

Georg Raab also highlighted the wider challenges faced by SMEs: the sheer variety of information sources, the lack of tools in local languages, the cost of access, and limited guidance. Cluster organisations can play a vital role in navigating these complexities by identifying the most suitable databases and tools for their sectors and regions. He cited several national initiatives, co-financed by EU recovery funds, that already offer free, local-language support tools.

He went on to announce the forthcoming “*Omnibus Package*” – a simplification package currently being prepared by the Commission, which may include measures to ease the reporting burden on SMEs. While no concrete details were shared, the package is expected to be unveiled shortly.

Regarding access to finance, the speaker introduced the “[Access to Finance](#)” portal, an interactive website that enables companies to identify financial intermediaries offering loans and equity support



for sustainable projects, co-financed through EU programmes such as **InvestEU** and **the Recovery and Resilience Facility**.

A question submitted via the Q&A feature asked whether a regional database of relevant ESG data for SMEs would be feasible. Georg Raab responded that this was indeed being discussed. The Commission is exploring ways to combine the voluntary SME standards with online guidance tools and potentially provide cross-links to free resources that support data collection and ESG compliance. He noted the existence of the European Single Access Point, a public database of sustainability reports from companies, as a related initiative.

3. Panel debate

Anaïs Le Corvec began by framing ESG and impact reporting as a significant opportunity rather than a mere obligation. She explained her company's work in evaluating societal impact using methodologies like Social Return on Investment, driven by the rise of impact-oriented private funding. According to her, while compliance can be a motivator, many companies increasingly pursue sustainability out of **genuine values and strategic intent**. The trend reflects a broader belief in business as a tool for positive societal change.

Cécile Fontaine offered a sector-specific view from the **agri-food industry**. She highlighted the structural complexity of SMEs and the multiplicity of environmental variables they must address, ranging from sourcing and packaging to energy and water consumption. Cécile Fontaine emphasised the **role of CSRD** (Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive) in helping SMEs adopt a more systemic and strategic approach. She noted that reporting frameworks, despite their administrative weight, often catalyse deeper thinking about sustainability and long-term competitiveness.

Roman Kravchenko, with a **technology and data-driven perspective**, underlined the issue of limited ESG literacy among SME owners across Europe and beyond. He argued that the true obstacle is not the lack of resources, but the absence of a clear understanding of the business value and impact of ESG practices. His organisation, together with the Ukrainian Cluster Alliance, is developing a data platform—ESG Cluster Hub—to facilitate ESG data collection, processing, and reporting for clusters and SMEs. He stressed the importance of clusters in bridging the knowledge gap and orchestrating shared resources, infrastructure, and expertise.

All panellists converged on the idea that SMEs often struggle more with the “how” than the “why” of sustainability. Anaïs Le Corvec highlighted that **motivation exists, but companies need tailored paths** and contextualised guidance. She praised clusters as vehicles for providing access to training, expert knowledge, and peer learning. Cécile Fontaine and Roman Kravchenko echoed this, stating that **clusters can act as connectors, facilitators, and providers of practical tools** for ESG implementation.

There was strong alignment among the panellists regarding the potential of clusters to enable ESG transformation at SME level. All agreed that the regulatory push is necessary but insufficient without appropriate support structures. While Anaïs and Cécile placed more emphasis on values, sectoral context, and strategic thinking, Roman Kravchenko focused on technological enablers and the systemic development of ESG data infrastructures. They all recognised that the challenge lies in building a bridge between motivation and implementation, and that this requires tailored, coordinated, and context-sensitive interventions.



There were no explicit disagreements, but their **focal points differed**: Anaïs Le Corvec advocated strongly for values-driven strategies, Cécile Fontaine brought a practical sectoral lens grounded in agri-food realities, while Roman Kravchenko presented a systemic and technological vision rooted in data governance and platform development.

The moderator relayed a comment from the audience noting that green startups in Finland are increasingly choosing to collaborate with environmentally responsible partners, reflecting a cultural shift towards sustainability. This prompted further discussion on the role of clusters in accelerating mindset change. All panellists responded positively, agreeing that peer influence and best practice sharing are critical. Anaïs Le Corvec reinforced that clusters can act as “thermometers” of SME maturity levels and provide targeted interventions accordingly.

The panel concluded with **reflections on further measures to support SMEs** in their sustainability transitions. Roman proposed the use of domain-specific simulation models and digital twins to provide SMEs with tangible evidence of the business value of ESG compliance, including long-term financial benefits and increased market valuation. Cécile Fontaine added that consumer awareness also needs to be strengthened, as informed demand can reinforce sustainable practices among SMEs. Anaïs Le Corvec called for incentives, such as tax benefits, as potential motivators to complement regulatory pressure.

4. Funding opportunities

Nina Hoppmann, team member, European Cluster Collaboration Platform

Closing the EU Clusters Talk, Nina Hoppmann shared the following examples of funding opportunities:

1. [STAGE Sustainability Transition Programme](#); deadline 31 May 2025.
2. [Call For Social Economy Enterprises: Financial Support For Purchasing Capacity Building Services To Support Green Transition](#); deadline 29 June 2025.
3. [EIC Accelerator 2025 - Short application](#); deadline 18 December 2025.
4. Opportunities for SMEs: Calls from Euroclusters; published on [European Cluster Collaboration Platform](#).