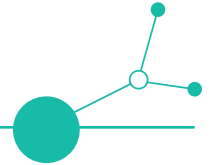


# Report on the meetings with policymakers /regional authorities

D 3.5.2



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## 1. Introduction

This report presents the strategy and results of the meetings held with policymakers and regional authorities for the presentation of:

- The SMERF project results
- The SMERF Handbook

The objective of these meetings was twofold:

1. Disseminate the cross-regional knowledge generated by the SMERF consortium and transfer it to the regional context of each Project Partner (PP);
2. Collect first impressions and targeted feedback on the Handbook, conceived as a ready-to-implement methodology for organisations supporting SMEs in their transition towards the future.

This activity allowed the consortium to validate the knowledge acquired not only at the SME level, but also at the level of supporting entities (policy makers and regional authorities). Valuable remarks were collected, reflecting the perceived added value of the SMERF methodology and its potential for regional implementation.



## 2. Target

This activity aimed to involve policymakers and regional authorities from the **participating regions**.

Targeting such entities meant establishing **direct exchanges with the** organisations responsible for designing and delivering SME-oriented support measures.

The objective was to gather their impressions and feedback on the overall impact of the SMERF project, discuss the consortium-developed tools, and assess how these tools are perceived by institutions operating at the regional level.

## 3. Implementation strategy

Each PP arranged a meeting with local authorities for presenting SMERF results and the Handbook. The meeting calendar is reported in the following table.

PP	Date
TUKE	13.03.26
KIT	20.03.26
STEP RI	16.03.26
CRIT	18.03.26
UNIGE	30.03.26
BIZ-UP	23.03.26
WUST	31.03.26
PBN	31.03.36

The consortium was provided with a baseline presentation to be translated into the local language if needed and a subreport for remarks, best practices, and lessons learned. In parallel with the Handbook development, other WP3 activities were also carried out, and a consolidated draft (Annex 1 - D.3.5.1\_SMERF\_Handbook\_v3.pdf) was provided to the PPs for feedback and remarks.

### 3.1. Presentation of SMERF results and Handbook

The shared baseline PowerPoint presentation (Annex 2 - A\_3\_5\_SMERF\_Results\_Handbook\_baseline\_v1.pptx) is structured as follows:

#### 3.1.1. Introductory slides

A brief introduction to SMERF, its four thematic pillars and the participating countries.

#### 3.1.2. SMERF Results

**The SMERF results section:** a sequence of slides in which the main outputs of the project are outlined:

- **The Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB)** - the online platform that makes all the knowledge acquired by the consortium accessible to SMEs and to entities supporting SMEs, offering immediately usable inspirational content.



- **The SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT)** - the assessment tool developed by the consortium, capable of providing policymakers and regional authorities with a clear and data-driven insight into SME readiness levels across the four SMERF pillars.
- **The Trainings** - a source of specialised knowledge on the four pillars, and at the same time an inspirational and replicable format for policymakers and regional authorities interested in strengthening local innovation capacities.
- **The Individual Support Programme (ISP)** - a demonstration of how the consortium translated the acquired knowledge into direct SME support, promoting concrete progress in the most lacking features of the four pillars.
- **The InnoGreen Market** - an event designed to demonstrate the value of exposing SMEs to the capabilities, needs and growth opportunities of large companies through direct interaction.
- **The Study Visits** - occasions in which SMEs could directly observe the internal organisation, technological capabilities and emerging needs of large companies and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), gaining a first-hand understanding of industrial expectations.
- **The Behind the Scenes Workshop** - an activity that brought together policymakers and business support organisations from across the SMERF regions, providing an inside view of how innovation policies are implemented and enabling cross-regional exchange.

Each slide was enriched with key metrics for the corresponding activity, providing a concrete overview of the scale and impact achieved (e.g., the number of SMEs involved in the ISP, the number of training sessions available, the number of workshop participants, etc.).

### 3.1.3. SMERF: the Handbook

In the related slides:

- the content of the Handbook is outlined, presenting it as a ready-to-implement guide for HEIs, BSOs and regional authorities interested in supporting SMEs in enhancing their readiness;
- an indication on how to use the Handbook is provided, with each element presented separately, together with its specific purpose;
- an overview of the Handbook content is given, summarising its main sections, all derived from concrete project activities.

### 3.1.4. Remark on the Handbook

This section of the PPT was designed to guide the audience in a constructive way in collecting remarks on the Handbook. Since the draft version already exceeded 40 pages, the intention was not to rely on a full reading of the document, but instead to drive a rapid yet meaningful assessment through a set of targeted questions.

This ensured a focused and productive discussion with policymakers and regional authorities.

The related slides collected two types of remarks:

- **Quality & Clarity**, with questions aimed at gathering impressions on the readability and usability of the Handbook as a ready-to-implement set of procedures, covering its different elements;
- **Strategic Value**, with three questions aimed at understanding the perceived strategic potential of the Handbook within the regional context of the participating authorities.



## 3.2. Remark collection and subreporting

Project Partners were provided by UNIGE with a dedicated subreport template (Annex 3 - A3.5\_PP\_meeting\_Subreport\_template\_v1), which included:

- a section for collecting the audience's remarks on the SMERF project results;
- a section for collecting the audience's remarks on the SMERF Handbook, presenting the same questions included in the PPT;
- a section for collecting best practices and lessons learned, which, for this activity, covered the approach and engagement with the audience during the meeting, the quality of the material provided from UNIGE, and how the PP explained the importance of the project, its results, and the usefulness of the tools.

An additional document (Annex 4 - A3.5\_Handbook\_remarks\_collection\_v0), with the section for collecting the audience's remarks on the SMERF Handbook, in case any PP preferred to fill it with the impressions and then re-elaborate the info in the sub-report.

Each PP was asked to compile the template after the meeting, summarising the comments received from policymakers and regional authorities in a harmonised and comparable format.

## 4. Results

This section summarises the outcomes of the meetings each PP held with policymakers and regional authorities, achieving the KPI of 1 meeting per PP. The results reported below reflect the direct stakeholder inputs and highlight recurring patterns, regional differences, and indications of future uptake. This information is extracted from the subreport provided by each PP, which is collected in the Annex 5 - PPs\_subreports.

### 4.1. Overview of engaged stakeholders

All PPs successfully organised meetings with relevant regional authorities, development agencies, innovation centres, ministries or cluster organisations. Stakeholders were selected to ensure institutional relevance and proximity to SME support ecosystems.

Table 1: List of engaged stakeholders

Nr.	PP	STAKEHOLDER
1	CRIT	Scientific Association for Mechanical Engineering (GTE)
2	STEP RI	Rijeka Development Agency PORIN
3	PBN	Scientific Association for Mechanical Engineering (GTE)
4	BIZ-UP	Business Upper Austria
5	TUKE	EDIH Cassovium + USP Technicom
6	TUKE	Enterprise Europe Network Slovakia
7	TUKE	Innovation Center of the Košice Region (ICKK)



8	TUKE	TerraWise
9	UNIGE	Regione Liguria - Department of Economic Development
10	KIT	Department for Economic Development, City of Baden-Baden
11	KIT	Economic Development Heilbronn Region
12	KIT	Ministry of Economic Affairs, Labour and Tourism Baden-Württemberg
13	KIT	Department for Economic Development City of Bühl
14	KIT	Bavarian State Ministry of Economic Affairs, Regional Development, and Energy
15	WUST	Marshal Office of the Lower Silesian Voivodeship

The table above demonstrates the broad range of institutions involved, from regional development agencies to national-level ministries and innovation and cluster organisations, for a total of 15 involved stakeholders. This diversity ensured a wide validation spectrum across different regional innovation systems.

## 4.2. Overall perception of the SMERF project

Across all meetings, stakeholders expressed a consistently positive perception of the SMERF project and its outcomes. The feedback collected emphasised the **methodology's concreteness, practical relevance, and transferability**. Many participants highlighted that the initiative responds to **real and pressing needs** faced by SMEs in navigating digitalisation, innovation challenges, and the green transition.

Several stakeholders remarked that the project delivers “**concrete and applicable results**”, noting that the methods and tools developed within SMERF can be used well beyond the project’s timeframe and readily integrated into existing support practices. Others acknowledged “**the amount of work accomplished**” and underlined the **robustness** of the SMERF approach, recognising its potential for adoption by organisations involved in SME development and innovation support.

A recurring theme across the feedback was appreciation for SMERF’s ability to provide practical, ready-to-use **solutions** rather than abstract frameworks. Stakeholders described the project as offering a **structured, realistic, and operational methodology**, capable of guiding SMEs through concrete transformation processes and supporting organisations in delivering tailored services. Some participants noted that the project’s tools reflect the diversity of SME needs, offering a “**tailored and realistic approach instead of one standard solution for all**”, and emphasised the value of methodologies that recognise different starting points and capacities among companies.

Another theme that emerged was the recognition of SMERF as a **timely and relevant initiative**, well aligned with current policy priorities and with the challenges encountered in everyday interaction with SMEs. Stakeholders observed that many small firms face significant barriers when approaching innovation actors, and welcomed SMERF’s role in simplifying this first step and helping bridge longstanding gaps between support organisations and businesses. In this sense, the project was repeatedly described as providing a **much-needed framework** to guide SMEs through innovation-related transitions and to enhance collaboration within regional ecosystems.



Overall, the perception of SMERF was that of a **solid, credible, and actionable project**, with a methodology that is both comprehensive and sufficiently flexible to be adapted to different institutional contexts. The positive feedback collected validates the project's approach and reinforces its potential for long-term integration into support schemes aimed at strengthening SMEs' readiness for future challenges.

### 4.3. Relevance of the mission: SME readiness for the future

Across all meetings, stakeholders consistently confirmed that SMERF's mission is highly relevant to the challenges currently faced by SMEs. Many highlighted that companies, especially microenterprises and smaller firms, are increasingly confronted with complex transformation pressures linked to digitalisation, sustainability requirements, and innovation-driven competition. In several cases, participants explicitly noted that SMEs often struggle with **limited time availability, scarce internal competencies, and a lack of strategic clarity, which makes** it difficult for them to initiate or sustain transformation processes.

Stakeholders also stressed that SMEs tend to perceive innovation and the green transition not as opportunities but as obligations or burdens, particularly when benefits are not communicated clearly and tangibly. Several actors emphasised that SMEs respond more effectively when tools are **simple, actionable, and demonstrate immediate value**, rather than when confronted with abstract frameworks or complex procedures. This was especially evident in contexts where organisations reported the "first-step barrier": SMEs need accessible entry points and clear guidance to overcome hesitations and engage with support institutions.

Within this landscape, the SMERF mission was widely recognised as timely and well aligned with the real needs of support ecosystems. Stakeholders described the project's approach as one that **reduces complexity**, offering practical methodologies that help SMEs understand where they stand, what they need, and how to move forward. Some participants also appreciated that SMERF does not propose a single, one-size-fits-all pathway, but instead promotes a **tailored and realistic approach**, acknowledging that SMEs have different starting points, capacities, and transformation trajectories.

In summary, the mission of preparing SMEs for the future was not only perceived as relevant but also often described as a **necessary intervention** to address persistent structural barriers within regional economies. The combination of accessibility, practicality, and strategic focus was consistently viewed as a strength of SMERF, making its mission both credible and well aligned with current policy priorities.

### 4.4. Project elements that attracted the most interest

#### 4.4.1. The SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT)

Among all project outputs, the SDT consistently emerged as the most appreciated component. Stakeholders valued its intuitive structure and its ability to offer an immediate, data-driven picture of SME readiness across the four SMERF pillars. In several regions, the SDT was even regarded as a potential entry point for institutional support pathways, thanks to its ability to simplify the initial engagement between support organisations and SMEs. Many actors also noted that the tool's clarity and its two-stage approach make it suitable for integration into permanent regional programmes.

#### 4.4.2. The Individual Support Programme (ISP)

The ISP was perceived as a natural and highly relevant continuation of the diagnostic phase. Stakeholders appreciated its ability to translate SDT results into tailored, actionable support measures for SMEs. Across regions, the programme was recognised as an example of how SMERF moves beyond assessment, providing a structured method that could be adapted and incorporated into existing regional service portfolios. Its



value lies in demonstrating that guidance can be promptly operationalised and aligned with specific SME needs.

#### 4.4.3. InnoGreen Market and Study Visits

The experiential components of the project, such as the InnoGreen Market and the study visits, were repeatedly highlighted as effective instruments for fostering cross-regional exchange and enabling SMEs to observe technologies and practices firsthand. Stakeholders observed that practical exposure can significantly improve SMEs' understanding of innovation and sustainability opportunities, particularly in regions where hands-on learning and peer examples are crucial to motivating change.

#### 4.4.4. The Training

The training activities also attracted significant interest from stakeholders, particularly for their practical orientation and ability to complement both the SDT and the ISP. Participants appreciated that the training offered concrete, applicable content aligned with the four SMERF pillars, and that they could serve as replicable formats within existing support services. In several cases, stakeholders highlighted that the training enabled SMEs to deepen their understanding of specific transformation areas and to translate the insights from the diagnosis into actionable knowledge. While some noted that time availability may limit SME participation, the overall perception was that the trainings represent a valuable component of the SMERF methodology, especially when integrated into a broader, personalised support pathway.

### 4.5. Stakeholders' interest in metrics and evidence

Across the meetings, stakeholders showed limited interest in the specific quantitative indicators presented, and in several cases, no comments were made on the metrics. Some figures, however, received clear appreciation, most notably the overall number of SMEs that had engaged with the project and tested the Diagnosis Tool, which was interpreted as a sign of the tool's credibility and practical relevance.

At the same time, a few stakeholders expressed interest in *additional* metrics that were not originally presented. These included the number of regional experts available to support SMEs in the follow-up phase, the success rate of companies moving from diagnosis to the implementation of green measures, and simple cost-benefit indicators demonstrating the economic impact of recommended sustainability actions. These requests reflected forward-looking needs rather than feedback on the metrics already provided.

### 4.6. Feedback on the SMERF Handbook

#### 4.6.1. Clarity and usability

Stakeholders widely agreed that the Handbook is well structured and easy to follow. Its modular layout, step-by-step organisation, and clear explanations of each activity were viewed as major strengths. For many participants, the document stands out as a practical reference rather than a theoretical guideline, offering enough detail to support independent implementation of the proposed activities. This positive perception was reinforced by the coherence between the Handbook's structure and the tools developed during the project.

#### 4.6.2. Suggestions for improvement

Across the different regional meetings, stakeholders proposed several recurring enhancements to improve the usability and applicability of the Handbook:



- **Addition of a concise “Quick-Start Guide”** aimed at CEOs or decision-makers with limited time, providing an immediate understanding of the value and practical use of the methodology.
- **Inclusion of anonymised examples of completed SDT reports**, allowing users to better understand the structure, format, and interpretation of the diagnostic results.
- **More concrete examples and case studies**, particularly illustrations of training sessions, Individual Support Programme activities, or instances where SMEs benefited from SMERF tools.

#### 4.6.3. Strategic value and potential for integration

The SMERF methodology was widely recognised for its strong strategic value. Stakeholders emphasised its alignment with regional needs in areas such as innovation culture, digitalisation, open innovation, and the green transition. In some regions, actors even noted that the methodology closely resembles existing support practices and could therefore be integrated with minimal adaptation. Across all contexts, the project was seen as offering a coherent and actionable approach that could meaningfully enrich regional service portfolios, particularly if supported by coordinated follow-up efforts after the project’s conclusion.

#### 4.6.4. Recurring barriers

Several structural challenges emerged consistently during the meetings. A major obstacle identified across regions was the difficulty of establishing initial contact with SMEs, which often show reluctance to engage with innovation institutions due to limited trust, unfamiliarity, or time constraints. Time availability itself was highlighted as a critical barrier: SMEs struggle to allocate resources to training or exploratory activities unless the expected return is evident. Finally, multiple stakeholders underlined the impact of unstable funding structures, noting that the absence of permanent financial instruments limits the continuity of SME support services beyond project cycles

#### 4.6.5. Lessons learned and good practices

Despite these barriers, various good practices emerged across regions. Stakeholders consistently observed that direct and personalised engagement - whether through calls, emails, or established networking channels - proved highly effective. Sending materials in advance helped participants understand the tools and provided more informed feedback during meetings. Interactive approaches, such as workshops and demonstrations of the SDT, were particularly appreciated, as they encouraged dialogue and facilitated understanding of the methodology’s practical value. Furthermore, visually representing the four SMERF pillars often helped structure discussions and made the framework more intuitive for stakeholders unfamiliar with the project.

## 5. Conclusion

The meetings held across all participating areas confirmed **strong support for the SMERF approach** from policymakers, public authorities, and innovation support organisations. Despite the diversity of institutional contexts - ranging from development agencies and digital innovation hubs to ministries, cluster organisations, and sustainability consultancies- stakeholders consistently acknowledged the practical value, clarity, and relevance of the project’s outputs.

Across different contexts, SMERF was recognised as a timely and much-needed initiative capable of addressing structural challenges faced by SMEs in innovation, digitalisation, and the green transition. Stakeholders emphasised that the project responds to real operational needs, providing **tools that go beyond theoretical frameworks** and instead offer usable, **replicable methodologies**. The concreteness and



applicability of the results beyond the project's timeframe were repeatedly highlighted, as was the robustness and transferability of the methods developed during the three years of implementation.

The SMERF Diagnosis Tool emerged as the most strategically relevant component, often described as an effective entry point for SMEs and a potential building block for permanent support frameworks. The strong interest in its two-stage approach, its usability, and its capacity to generate follow-up actions illustrates a widespread need for structured, accessible assessment tools within regional and national support systems.

**The Handbook further reinforced this positive perception.** It was widely considered clear, well-structured, and operational, with a step-by-step organisation and practical instructions that make it easily adaptable within existing services. Suggestions for improvement - such as the inclusion of hyperlinks, practical examples, or sample reports - were minor and confirm the overall maturity of the document.

Several cross-regional insights emerged, offering valuable guidance for future implementation. A recurring challenge remains the initial engagement between SMEs and innovation actors, particularly in ecosystems where trust or previous experience is limited. Time constraints for SMEs and the need for stable, non-project-based funding to ensure long-term continuity of support services were also highlighted across multiple contexts.

At the same time, the meetings demonstrated that effective communication formats - such as direct engagement, advanced sharing of materials, and clear visual representation of the four pillars - significantly enhance stakeholders' understanding and willingness to collaborate. These good practices represent important insights for the final phases of SMERF and for the sustainability of its results beyond the project lifecycle.

Overall, the feedback collected confirms that the **SMERF methodology is solid, appreciated, and ready for adoption.** Stakeholders see it as a coherent, actionable framework that helps SMEs navigate key transformation processes. The results of the meetings not only validate the tools and approaches developed but also provide clear indications for their future integration into support systems, ensuring continuity and impact beyond the project's conclusion.



## List of Annexes

Annex 1 - D.3.5.1\_SMERF\_Handbook\_v3

Annex 2 - A\_3\_5\_SMERF\_Results\_Handbook\_baseline\_v1

Annex 3 - A\_3\_5\_PP\_meeting\_Subreport\_template\_v1

Annex 4 - A\_3\_5\_Handbook\_remarks\_collection\_v0

Annex 5 - A\_3\_5\_PPs\_subreports



Quality Assurance Approval

Partner	Member of the Quality Assurance Team	Result of the quality check	Date of the quality check
BIZ-UP	Jennifer Quoc	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> accepted <input type="checkbox"/> rejected	31.03.2026
WUST	Mateusz Molasy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> accepted <input type="checkbox"/> rejected	31.03.2026

Comments (in case of rejection):