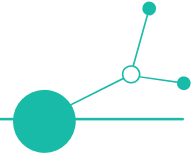




SMERF

SMERF Handbook



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1. Introduction

This deliverable provides an overview of the SMERF Handbook, a practical manual designed to support organisations that work with Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in their transformation towards becoming SMEs Ready for the Future. The Handbook compiles the knowledge, tools and methodologies developed within the SMERF project, offering a coherent, ready-to-use framework for any organisation that wishes to support SMEs, such as intermediaries or regional authorities wishing to replicate or adapt the SMERF approach in their regional context.

The document acts as a concise, operational guide, summarising the main project outcomes - such as the Inspiration Knowledge Base, the SMERF Diagnosis Tool, the Individual Support Programme, the Training Programme, the InnoGreen Market and the Study Visits - and explains how these instruments can be combined into an integrated support model.



2. Content of the SMERF Handbook

The Handbook (Annex 1 - SMERF_Handbook) is organised into modules, each corresponding to one of the core activities implemented in SMERF. Each chapter describes objectives, target groups, involved actors and expected outputs, complemented by operational notes derived from the consortium's experience.

The main chapters cover:

- **Inspiration Knowledge Base (IKB):** A structured collection of good practices, services, webinars and training resources supporting SMEs on innovation, digitalisation and sustainability.
- **SMERF Self-Assessment & Expert System:** A twostep diagnostic tool enabling SMEs to assess their maturity across the four SMERF pillars and receive tailored recommendations.
- **Individual Support Programme (ISP):** A structured mentoring and expert-guided process that translates diagnostic results into actionable transformation plans.
- **SMERF Training Programme:** A set of introductory training sessions designed to build foundational knowledge and stimulate early transformation steps.
- **InnoGreen Market:** A networking event format connecting SMEs with large companies and innovation actors across Central Europe.
- **Study Visits:** Short, experience-based visits allowing SMEs to observe best practices and technological applications in real operational settings.

3. Purpose of the SMERF Handbook

The SMERF Handbook aims to provide a practical, ready-to-use guide for organisations supporting SMEs in their transformation towards becoming SMEs Ready for the Future. It compiles the tools, methodologies and operational insights developed within the SMERF project - such as the IKB, the SMERF Diagnosis Tool (SDT), the ISP, the Training Programme, the InnoGreen Market and the Study Visits - into a coherent, easy-to-apply framework.

Its purpose is twofold:

1. **Transferability** - to enable regional authorities and support organisations to replicate or adapt the SMERF model to their own innovation ecosystems, regardless of their maturity or available resources.
2. **Operational Guidance** - to offer concrete instructions, structured methodologies, examples and roadmaps that guide intermediaries through each step of the SME support process.

4. Target audience

The primary target of the Handbook is innovation intermediaries (“Innomediaries”), such as Higher Education Institutions, Business Support Organisations and regional/local authorities involved in SME development.

The Handbook is also relevant to:

- Organisations supporting SMEs in innovation, digitalisation, sustainability and open collaboration;
- Regional actors wishing to replicate SMERF methodologies;
- Any entity that seeks a structured approach to guide SMEs through early transformation steps.



5. Document structure

The SMERF Handbook is organised as a practical manual, structured into clearly defined chapters that reflect the main activities and tools developed within the project. The chapters are structured as follows:

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

The introduction provides Innomediaries with an overview of the context in which SMEs operate and explains why structured support is essential for their transformation. It presents the SMERF project, its four transformation pillars, and the Handbook's overall purpose and scope. The chapter also briefly introduces the SMERF support pathway (*Inspire - Assess - Support - Enable - Connect - Insight*) and clarifies how this model can be replicated or adapted by organisations in different regional ecosystems.

CHAPTER 2 - THE SMERF INSPIRATION KNOWLEDGE BASE

This chapter introduces the IKB as a resource for Innomediaries to access and share good practices, services, webinars and training materials. It explains how the IKB can be used to **inspire SMEs**, provide them with accessible knowledge, and integrate external content into local support activities.

CHAPTER 3 - SMERF SELF-ASSESSMENT & EXPERT SYSTEM

This chapter presents the SDT as a structured **analysis tool for SMEs**, explaining how Innomediaries can use it to guide companies through a two-step self-assessment process. It describes how to interpret results, how the expert system generates tailored recommendations, and how Innomediaries can leverage these outputs to design targeted support pathways.

CHAPTER 4 - THE INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT PROGRAMME

This chapter focuses on the ISP as a key instrument for Innomediaries to **support SMEs in moving from diagnosis to action**. It explains the role of the ISP within the SMERF methodology and illustrates how it helps Innomediaries provide tailored, capacity-aware support that translates analytical insights into concrete transformation processes for SMEs.

CHAPTER 5 - THE SMERF TRAINING PROGRAMME

This chapter presents the SMERF Training Programme as a **practical enabling tool** that Innomediaries can use to strengthen SMEs' basic knowledge and awareness across the four transformation pillars. It highlights the training programme's role in supporting early transformation steps and in creating a shared understanding among SMEs and other ecosystem actors.

CHAPTER 6 - INNOGREEN MARKET

This chapter introduces the InnoGreen Market as a **replicable networking format** that Innomediaries can adopt to connect SMEs with large companies, research organisations and other innovation stakeholders. It emphasises the event's value in fostering collaboration, market insight and cross-regional exchange within innovation ecosystems.

CHAPTER 7 - STUDY VISITS

The final chapter presents Study Visits as an **experience-based support instrument** that Innomediaries can use to expose SMEs to real-world examples of innovation, digitalisation, and sustainability. It highlights how study visits support learning, inspiration, and relationship-building by allowing SMEs to directly observe practices, technologies, and market expectations.



5.1. Structure of the Operational Chapters

The chapter of the Handbook on operational activities presents the **structure of the corresponding SMERF activity** in a clear, manual-oriented format. The description follows a practical and operational approach, outlining:

- the **objectives** of the activity,
- the **actors involved**,
- the **step-by-step process**,
- and the **expected outputs**.

This consistent structure allows readers to quickly understand how each activity was designed and implemented within the project, and it offers a functional overview that can be easily referenced during replication.

5.2. Roadmap for similar activities

For all the most operational components of the SMERF methodology, the Handbook provides **detailed roadmaps** that guide organisations through the implementation of similar activities in their own regional context.

These roadmaps act as **true operational guides**, offering:

- sequenced phases,
- practical instructions,
- and recommendations on preparation and execution,

The inclusion of these roadmaps ensures that the Handbook is not only descriptive but also highly actionable, enabling intermediaries to use it immediately to replicate SMERF practices.

5.3. Common challenges and mitigation actions

These chapters are enriched with **insights derived from the consortium's hands-on experience** during the implementation of the SMERF activities across seven countries.

For each activity, the Handbook reports:

- the **most common challenges** encountered in real operational settings,
- and the **mitigation actions** that proved effective in addressing them.

These reflections provide valuable learning for future adopters, helping them anticipate potential obstacles and benefit from the practical knowledge accumulated by the SMERF partners throughout the project.



6. Conclusion

The SMERF Handbook provides Innomediaries with a structured and coherent framework to support SMEs in their transformation towards becoming SMEs Ready for the Future. By bringing together analytical tools, enabling activities and experience-based support instruments, the Handbook illustrates how different forms of intervention can be combined into an integrated support pathway rather than applied in isolation.

Rather than proposing a single solution, the Handbook offers a modular and adaptable approach, allowing organisations to select, sequence, and tailor activities to their regional context, institutional capacity, and the specific needs of the SMEs they support. The methodology and examples presented throughout the chapters reflect real implementation experience and are designed to be transferable across different innovation ecosystems.

Overall, the SMERF Handbook serves as a practical reference tool for Innomediaries seeking to design, implement or refine structured SME support schemes, capitalising on the knowledge and lessons learned within the SMERF project.

List of Annexes

Annex 1 - SMERF_Handbook