

A working partnership

prisme² stands for Promoting Responsibility in SMEs, where the squared symbol implies redoubled effort through the involvement of employers and workforce. The project is led by Cefic and falls under European Commission objectives to promote and fund corporate social responsibility programmes for SMEs in specific industry sectors.

In total, around 30 partners were involved in the pilot scheme. Founding consortium members included the European Chemical Employers' Group (ECEG); the European Mine, Chemical and Energy Workers' Federation (EMCEF); Tomorrow's Company, a UK-based think tank that focuses on SMEs and the issue of sustainability; and consultancy IFOK, which helped Cefic manage the programme. Joining from the producer side were leading companies plus the national chemical associations of the six countries that piloted the scheme: the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Germany, Greece, Spain and the UK. Additional partners include EU-OSHA, and several national institutes as well as the European Solvents Industry Group (ESIG).

In the UK, the Chemical Industries Association continued to organize its traditional Responsible Care "Cell Meetings" involving large and small companies as well as local authorities – the well established format of the cells serving as a model for workshops in the prisme² approach. CIA provided several instruments to the prisme² toolbox; and through their Responsible Care partnership, CIA is also cooperating on prisme² with the UK chemical distributors association, CBA, which represents many smaller businesses.

In Spain, meanwhile, a major focus of Feique's pilot was the safe management of chemicals through the value chain.

The association decided to implement prisme² in a two-pronged approach including on-site visits to SME production sites as well as a central workshop. These activities focused on introducing the Safety and Quality Assessment System for distributors, ESAD (European Single Assessment Document) to SMEs in the chemical distribution sector. Feique also built on its work with Spanish corporate social responsibility (CSR) organisation Forética, with which it has developed a CSR Guideline and Indicators for the chemical sector in Spain.

Opportunities for SMEs

With Responsible Care as the umbrella, the prisme² pilot project has been able to introduce a range of important issues that fit well within the European Commission's objectives to promote and fund CSR programmes for smaller companies in specific industry sectors. An objective of prisme² is to clearly demonstrate to companies that the concrete actions encouraged under industry's Responsible Care programme are a valid contribution to CSR.

Indeed, some 80% of participants at the second workshop in Greece said they would use their participation in their external CSR communication activities.

Says European Commission Vice-President Antonio Tajani, in charge of Industry and Entrepreneurship: "Corporate social responsibility has never been more important than in the context of economic crisis.

We welcome the efforts of the chemical industry and its stakeholders to support CSR amongst smaller businesses. CSR helps gain customer confidence and hence opens up opportunities for SMEs to grow and create new jobs."