FitforREACH in Brief – Project Overview

1 Aim of the project

"LIFE Fit for REACH" aimed at supporting SMEs in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for better implementation of their obligations under REACH. The project focused on enhancing substitution of Substances of Very High Concern (SVHC), intiating use reduction of such substances, improving chemicals risk management, and fostering legal compliance in Baltic companies. These would then contribute to preventing damage to the environment and human health. As humans are part of the enviornemnt, health is considered a subject of protection and was, therefore, included in all activities and considerations in the project.

The following objectives defined the project's overall risk reduction aim:

- Substitute hazardous substances, in particular SVHCs, by less hazardous alternatives, including chemicals, technologies or organisational measures.
- Reduce the use of hazardous substances in products and processes by resource efficiency measures and eliminating the need of using these substances.
- Increase awareness and competences on chemical risks in companies in order to improve their overall chemicals risk management performance. This would enable staff to perform the necessary tasks and to communicate achievements to their customers and the general public.
- Influence markets to increase supply of and demand for products that are free from or contain comparably low amounts of hazardous substances.

2 What was done and how?

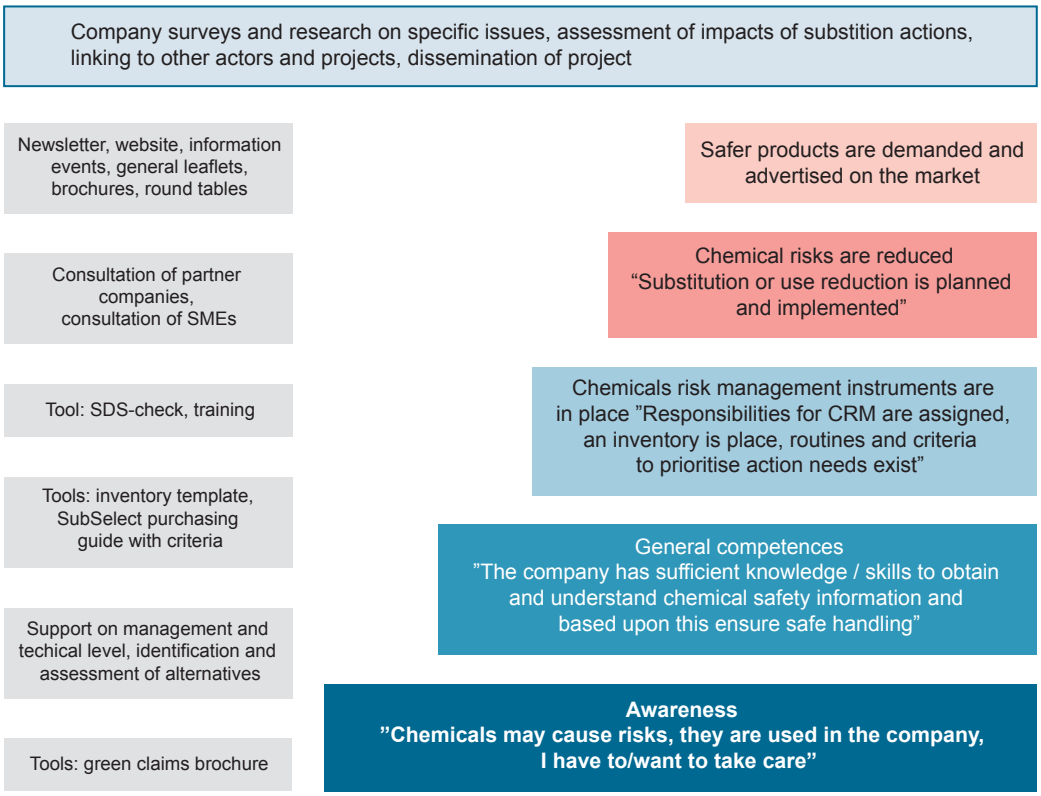
The main target group of the project were companies using chemicals in their production processes – downstream users. These could be formulators of mixtures, users of substances and mixtures, and producers of articles who incorporate substances into these articles. The companies were direct beneficiaries of the project measures. They received advice, training, technical and financial support when participating in the activities.

The focus of all project activities was to assist and support companies in improving their chemicals risk management, including substitution. A core team of experts from seven partner organisations elaborated the detailed action plans with the companies, supported their implementation, while monitoring and assessing the outcomes. The main activities of the core expert team consisted of:

- **Awareness raising** via direct consultation or in the frame of information events organised at national level as well as in international seminars.
- **Capacity building, ameliorating competences** and facilitating certain actions mainly through trainings and consultation.
- **Advice in decision-making,** including priortising action needs in chemicals risk management and/or researching information to evaluate (alternative) substances and mixtures.
- **Development of guidance and tools,** which were used in the consulations and trainings of the project but can also be applied by companies as such.
- **Research for the development of reports** on specific issues, including literature reviews, on-site visits, product inspections, surveys, and interviews.

The project also intended to widen the perspective on opportunities and benefits of chemicals risk management. By providing good practice examples, companies would be motivated to improve their chemicals risk management systems and develop respective competences after the conclusion of the project.

Figure 1: The complexity of LIFE Fit for REACH – addressing all aspects of Chemicals Risk Management:



3 A few findings...

Work with the companies showed a spectrum of awareness – from very low to very high. Nevertheless, it was surprising how many companies operating at the end of the supplychain were not aware they used (hazardous) chemicals in their operations. Convincing the target group that they were, in fact, the target of the project needed a lot of effort during the first three project years. Once this was accepted, providing seminars and consultations became very popular among companies.

Onboarding companies revealed that basic knowledge and skills in chemicals risk management were often missing, resulting in different degrees of legal non-compliance. This was more apparent with companies at the end of the supplychain than with chemical producers, and with smaller companies than with those that were larger.

The project´s hands-on and pointed approach elevated the awareness of substitution and chemicals risk management among an array of companies across sectors through the team's continued presence at the national level and with an incredible investment of resources. However, this reinforced the sizeable need for further allocation of human and financial resources to provide affordable support to companies to overcome their varying challenges.

4 Achievements

Through the project's work many business stakeholders in the Baltic States were made aware of their obligations under the REACH Regulation, including those pertaining to chemicals risk management.

It can now be said that Baltic companies are better fit for REACH! The numerous successful cases of substitution and reduction in use of hazardous substances attest to this. Going forward, companies within the region are better equipped with the attitude and competencies to continue on this trajectory.

It is no small achievement that six contracted partner companies and 81 others have implemented activities on hazardous substances management, which includes 47 substitution cases of products and processes. This shows that substitution is possible also for small and medium sized companies.

In addition to the activities related to chemicaks risk management, the Fit for REACH team developed tools, guidances and publications for a wider audience of businesses which are available for future use. It put together training programmes and online courses that will be sustained after the project.

In cooperating closely with the national public authorities – the REACH help desks, the Ministries of Environment, Social Affairs, Health and Economy – the project received the necessary clout for successfully connecting with the target group. Similarly, the competent authorities benefitted from the project actively engaging with companies and improving their legal compliance.

Lastly, the project's connection to an international network regarding chemicals risk management contributed with concrete cases, findings and recommendations for improvement in the European context.

5 Conclusions – What is left for After-LIFE?

The project has shown the level of support needed by companies to better implement the REACH Regulation. However, the efforts were huge: 33,547 person hours (19 FTE person years) were spent by seven expert-partners consulting six partner companies in-depth and more than 120 companies on smaller cases and case selection.

The six partner companies spent 39,581 person hours (22.5 FTE) for their case implementation.

Deciding how to continue support for companies after the project and how this may be institutionalised is an ongoing discussion among the project partners, authorities and those at the regional level. This is because the issue exists beyond Baltic States.