

From Digital Transformation to Digital Responsibility: Operationalising CDR in SMEs through the COEUS Project

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Abstract

The paper analyses how COEUS translated CDR into an SME-oriented capability-building model and how this model performed in transnational pilot implementation. It uses an exploratory case-study design based on an analysis of COEUS project results, including a baseline survey of 170 SMEs, a stakeholder survey of 59 respondents, trainer and SME selection reports, pilot implementation reports, and final evaluation documents. The baseline assessment showed that SMEs had the greatest educational needs in understanding CDR, sustainable digital infrastructure, stakeholder engagement, employee cybersecurity training, and incident-response planning. In response, COEUS selected 50 trainers and 48 SMEs across five pilot countries and tested a hybrid model combining transnational seminars, national kick-off meetings, and one-to-one mentoring. Post-training evidence shows strong trainer readiness and measurable learning effects among SMEs. In the matched SME impact assessment (N = 34), statistically significant and mostly large improvements were recorded in GDPR, malware and ransomware awareness, renewable energy understanding, e-waste management, and sustainable digital procurement. The findings show that CDR can be managed in SMEs as a capability-building process supported by trainers, business support organisations, and public authorities. This approach strengthens safer, more sustainable, and more inclusive digitalisation in regional business ecosystems. The paper shifts attention from large companies to SMEs and trainers as key actors in CDR implementation. COEUS demonstrates that CDR becomes actionable for SMEs when diagnosis, training, mentoring, and institutional support are designed together.

Keywords: corporate digital responsibility; SMEs; trainers; COEUS; ethical; sustainability management.