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OPSIZO
Diversity and Inclusion in Microenterprises

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Work Package5

Manifesto on D&I in Microenterprises

We, the partners of the OPSIZO project, call upon all relevant stakeholders to take decisive action towards fostering Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) in microenterprises.

Stakeholders we are calling to action:

- Policy makers
- Providers of vocational education and training (VET)
- Microenterprise leaders, entrepreneurs, and managers
- Staff and employees of microenterprises
- Business associations and networks
- Chambers of commerce
- NGOs and civil society organizations

Through collaboration, we urge stakeholders to:

- Build on the insights and progress achieved during the OPSIZO project to identify key areas for intervention and develop tools that promote D&I within microenterprises.
- Recognize the critical role that microenterprises play in the European economy, contributing significantly to employment and business activity across member states.
- Acknowledge the pervasive challenges of gender inequality, occupational segregation, and sexual orientation discrimination that undermine the competitiveness and social fabric of microenterprises.
- Align with the European Union's strategic emphasis on fostering inclusive workplaces as outlined in the EU Gender Equality Strategy for 2020-2025 and the EU SME Strategy 2020.
- Promote continuous education, upskilling, and awareness-building among microenterprise employees and leaders, using D&I as a driver of growth, innovation, and workplace well-being.
- Address the detrimental impact of microaggressions, gender biases, and heteronormative assumptions within microenterprises, emphasizing the urgent need for practical tools to tackle these issues.
- Close gaps in existing resources by providing formalized D&I policies, guidelines, and training tailored to the needs of microenterprises.
- Highlight the potential of inclusive business practices to enhance productivity, innovation, and profitability while fostering a more equitable and just workplace environment.
- Recognize that fostering D&I in microenterprises is not merely a social obligation but a strategic necessity that contributes to long-term resilience and competitiveness.
- Integrate and adopt OPSIZO tools and resources, empowering microenterprises to lead by example in promoting D&I across their operations and within the broader community.

Our call to action: we urge all stakeholders to recognize the urgent need to address D&I challenges within microenterprises. By aligning European and national initiatives, we can ensure coherence and effectiveness in promoting D&I practices across the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

We call upon stakeholders to strengthen partnerships between microenterprises, education providers, and policy makers. Together, we can create learning communities that systematically address D&I challenges, supporting policy makers in identifying needs and formulating effective strategies.

We encourage stakeholders to develop and implement joint projects aimed at delivering training programs that enhance D&I practices within microenterprises. By fostering collaboration, we can build a foundation for inclusive workplaces that drive innovation and competitive advantage.

We also urge stakeholders to engage in collaborative research and monitoring initiatives, helping to assess and continuously improve D&I strategies in microenterprises. Through shared knowledge, we can build a more inclusive and resilient business environment.

Through collaboration, we can achieve:

- The development of courses and materials designed to enhance the capacity of microenterprises to foster inclusive environments and address cultural and operational challenges.
- The strengthening of microenterprises' ability to recognize and manage microaggressions, promoting a more respectful and productive workplace.
- The creation and deployment of tools to assess and improve workplace inclusivity, ensuring that all employees can contribute fully to the success of the enterprise.
- The encouragement of microenterprises to adopt D&I tools and strategies that promote gender equality and support LGBTQ+ inclusion, building a more diverse and dynamic workforce.
- The enhancement of microenterprises' ability to leverage diverse perspectives for innovation and competitive advantage.

We invite all stakeholders across the European Union and beyond to join this manifesto. Your participation is crucial in developing a shared agenda to promote Diversity and Inclusion in microenterprises. Together, we can equip these businesses with the tools and skills needed to create inclusive, innovative, and competitive work environments.

In addition to this manifesto, we are including a **Position Paper on Diversity and Inclusion in Microenterprises** as an annex. This paper provides a deeper analysis of the challenges, purpose, scope, and findings related to fostering D&I in microenterprises. It also outlines a comprehensive action plan, offering concrete steps that stakeholders can take to support inclusive business practices.

OPSIZO position paper

To complement the OPSIZO manifesto, this position paper delves deeper into the structural and cultural challenges facing microenterprises as they strive to implement D&I practices. While the manifesto provides a broad call to action for stakeholders, the policy paper presents a more detailed framework for understanding these issues.

The paper outlines the purpose, scope, and findings of the OPSIZO project, offering actionable insights based on practical experience and research. It serves as both a reflection on the challenges faced by microenterprises and a roadmap for fostering a more inclusive and competitive entrepreneurial ecosystem. With an emphasis on concrete steps, the action plan provides a targeted strategy for stakeholders, including policymakers, VET providers, microenterprise leaders, and business associations, to promote long-term D&I integration.

Building on the manifesto's foundational principles, this position paper aims to guide stakeholders in transforming their commitment to diversity into measurable outcomes that drive innovation, employee satisfaction, and business success.

Problem

The problem of fostering D&I in microenterprises is compounded by several structural and cultural barriers. Microenterprises, defined as businesses with fewer than 10 employees, represent **93% of all enterprises in Europe** and employ around **30 million people** (European Commission, 2023). Despite this, they often lack the formal resources to implement effective D&I policies, such as dedicated budgets, departments, or comprehensive strategies. This limitation disproportionately affects women and LGBTQ+ individuals, who face significant challenges in securing employment, advancing professionally, and accessing leadership roles. For instance, women lead approximately 33% of early-stage entrepreneurs in Europe who have 20 or more employees within five years (Global Entrepreneurship Research Association, 2023), while 47.5% of women are burdened with unsalaried caregiving duties, further limiting their economic potential. LGBTQ+ individuals also experience exclusion, with 6.5% of LGBTQ+-led enterprises in Spain receiving institutional support, compared to much higher support levels for other groups. The COVID-19 pandemic worsened these issues, especially for women and gender minorities, by reducing job opportunities in several sectors.

Furthermore, the cultural barriers within these small businesses often lead to gender stereotypes, microaggressions, and other forms of subtle discrimination. Research shows that companies embracing diversity outperform their peers, with higher innovation, productivity, and employee satisfaction (as detailed later in the Findings section of this paper, referencing specific studies). However, many microenterprises, due to their small scale, either lack awareness of these benefits or the means to implement inclusive policies. This reality necessitates tailored D&I strategies to ensure that microenterprises can foster inclusive environments without being overly burdened by administrative or financial constraints.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy paper is to advocate for the implementation of effective D&I practices in microenterprises across Europe. This paper aims to provide actionable recommendations for addressing gender inequality, LGBTQ+ exclusion, and other barriers that hinder workplace diversity.

Targeting key stakeholders—including policymakers, microenterprise owners, business associations, and vocational education and training (VET) providers—this document seeks to align microenterprise initiatives with broader EU policies, such as the **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025** and the **European Pillar of Social Rights**. It underscores the critical role these stakeholders play in creating more inclusive, equitable workplaces that foster innovation and economic growth.

The urgency of this call to action lies in the proven benefits of D&I, such as increased employee satisfaction, innovation, and competitiveness. By adopting tailored D&I strategies, microenterprises can enhance their potential and contribute to a more inclusive European economy. This paper offers the practical tools to achieve this transformation.

Scope

The scope of this policy paper focuses on addressing key D&I challenges within **microenterprises** across Europe. It specifically targets issues related to **gender equality, LGBTQ+ inclusion**, and other underrepresented groups, recognizing the unique constraints faced by microenterprises, such as limited resources and informal organizational structures.

The recommendations are tailored for **microenterprise owners, policymakers, business associations, and VET providers**, offering practical solutions to integrate D&I strategies within these small-scale businesses. The geographical coverage spans across Europe, with particular attention to the regions involved in the OPSIZO project. While the policy paper provides actionable short- and medium-term recommendations, it also sets the foundation for long-term transformation in workplace inclusivity. The focus is exclusively on **microenterprises**, leaving out larger companies and specific sectors not aligned with the scope. The paper aims to enhance understanding and application of D&I practices, empowering microenterprises to create more inclusive environments.

Methods and process

The OPSIZO project conducted comprehensive testing of its D&I tools between **December 2023 and July 2024**. During this period, **874 participants** were trained, with **224 individuals** attending offline sessions and **660 completing online training** through the OPSIZO platform.

Training was delivered through a combination of face-to-face workshops, online courses, and blended learning environments. Participants included microenterprise owners, employees, HR managers, and future entrepreneurs. The training materials, designed to foster inclusive practices within microenterprises, were assessed for their practicality, relevance, and user-friendliness.

Feedback was collected through written evaluations and online forms, providing a detailed understanding of participants' experiences with the training. This feedback was instrumental in refining the content, ensuring it aligned with the specific needs of microenterprises across Europe. The validation process confirmed the effectiveness of the OPSIZO toolkit in supporting businesses to create more inclusive workplaces. However, some challenges were noted in convincing microenterprise leaders to adopt the D&I tools, though the overall reception of the training by participants was positive and encouraging.

Findings

During the piloting phase of the OPSIZO project, participants across various training sessions provided valuable qualitative feedback. This input was essential for refining the training modules and improving the overall user experience of the OPSIZO platform. Participants generally rated the training as "good" or "excellent," praising the platform's ease of use and the helpfulness of tools like the OPSIZO game, self-assessment modules, and customizable certificates. Some suggestions for improvement included incorporating more video content and practical examples to increase engagement, which will be integrated into future guidelines. Additionally, accessibility on multiple devices, including smartphones, was highlighted as a key strength.

Beyond these operational insights, the piloting revealed broader policy-level findings, reinforcing the importance of D&I within European microenterprises. The feedback underlined the need for simple, scalable tools that are adaptable to diverse business environments, making D&I practices more attainable for small businesses. The OPSIZO toolkit exemplifies how practical resources can promote inclusivity, aligning with key EU initiatives such as the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025. The toolkit's versatility and user-friendliness demonstrate its potential to become a critical resource in fostering inclusive work environments.

Research indicates that implementing D&I strategies offers clear advantages. **Productivity gains** are notable: A 2023 report from Diversity for Social Impact revealed that SMEs with robust D&I practices reported a 37% increase in productivity. This increase stems from enhanced creativity and problem-solving capabilities generated by diverse teams. Similarly, **employee satisfaction** correlates strongly with inclusive workplaces. The EY European DEI Index highlighted that organizations recognized as "DEI Leaders" reported higher levels of employee satisfaction, linked to an increased sense of belonging and psychological safety, both crucial for job satisfaction and retention. Finally, D&I efforts also impact **retention rates**, with companies that prioritize inclusion seeing a 42% decrease in turnover, leading to substantial cost savings in recruitment and training (Society for Human Resource Management – SHRM).

These findings underscore the need for action, as outlined in the following action plan, which addresses both short-term interventions and long-term strategies for fostering D&I in microenterprises.

Action plan

Building on the OPSIZO project findings and manifesto, this strategy outlines targeted and collaborative steps to foster D&I in microenterprises. The action plan aims to drive systemic change. It enhances inclusivity and boosts innovation and competitiveness in microenterprises across Europe.

For policy makers:

- **Integrate D&I into policy frameworks:** embed D&I into national and EU policies, aligning with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 and the EU SME Strategy 2020.
- **Provide incentives:** introduce financial incentives like grants or tax breaks to support microenterprises in adopting inclusive practices (i.e. continuous education and D&I training initiatives).

For VET providers:

- **Develop tailored D&I training:** design training programs specifically addressing the needs of microenterprises, focusing on gender equality, LGBTQ+ inclusion, and bias management. VET providers

are encouraged to use the [OPSIZO toolkit](#) as a foundational resource to develop and customize their own training modules, ensuring relevance and effectiveness in diverse business contexts.

- **Collaborate with microenterprises:** work closely with businesses and policymakers to ensure that training programs are relevant, accessible, and reflect real-world challenges.
- **Provide continuous support:** offer ongoing upskilling opportunities, ensuring that microenterprise leaders and employees can adapt to the evolving landscape of workplace inclusivity.

For microenterprise leaders:

- **Implement D&I strategies:** recognize the strategic value of inclusivity by embedding D&I into company policies and daily operations, fostering a culture where diverse perspectives are valued and innovation thrives.
- **Invest in employee development:** empower employees through continuous training and resources that encourage equal participation and a culture of respect. Engage in leadership training to model inclusive behavior.
- **Promote collaboration:** partner with external stakeholders to gain support and resources, ensuring that D&I becomes an integral part of your business strategy.

For business associations and chambers of commerce:

- **Advocate for D&I:** champion the integration of D&I at the policy level and within the business community. Act as intermediaries between businesses, VET providers, and policymakers to ensure inclusive practices are promoted.
- **Offer D&I resources:** provide microenterprises with access to D&I tools, training programs, and best practice guides that support the development of inclusive work environments (e.g., the [OPSIZO toolkit](#), which offers practical tools and training modules tailored for fostering diversity and inclusion).
- **Facilitate networking:** create opportunities for microenterprise leaders to share their experiences, challenges, and successes in fostering D&I, building a community of learning and support (e.g., through platforms like the [OPSIZO community](#), which encourages collaboration and exchange of best practices).

Implementing this action plan enables stakeholders to contribute to the long-term resilience and competitiveness of microenterprises, ensuring they reap the benefits of enhanced innovation and productivity brought by a diverse workforce.