



# NEWSLETTER 1

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## PROJECT BACKGROUND

The SUSFUR project aims to promote sustainable furniture production in the Western Balkans by strengthening the collaboration between VET providers and the business sector. Business models in the furniture sector tend to favour relatively short product lifetimes to secure replacement sales, while a lack of incentives and an inadequate take-back infrastructure inhibit reuse. Evidence points to the use of low-quality materials and poor design as primary obstacles to a circular economy in furniture. The impact of tourism in economic growth of the Western Balkan has triggered a surge in interest in home improvements and supply with cheap trend-led furnishings. This has resulted in fast furniture manufacturing with high environmental costs due to disposal practices and waste management.

The project scope will be to promote sustainable furniture production as part of greening the processes and activities of SMEs in the circular economy through strengthening the inter-linkage between the VET sector and business sector.

Most important outputs will be:

- Build capacities of 18 VET providers on circular business models for sustainable furniture;
- Engage 60 VET learners through WBL methods to eco-design furniture products;
- Develop support mechanisms to nurture the green transition of SMEs and their staff

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# KICK-OFF MEETING LJUBLJANA, SLOVENIA FEBRUARY 10-12, 2025

Ljubljana welcomed partners of the SUSFUR Erasmus+ project with crisp February air and a spirit of collaboration. Hosted by the University of Ljubljana's Department of Wood Science and Technology, the kick-off meeting marked the official launch of the project, which aims to promote sustainable furniture production in the Western Balkans.

The first day began with registration and partner introductions, followed by an overview of the project timeline and work packages presented by the University of Ljubljana and ESI. Boštjan Lesar and Ornest Sarachi shared the quality plan, ensuring transparent project management, and participants toured the university's state-of-the-art laboratories. Financial management was discussed by Tanja Benko Korinšek, and the day concluded with a dinner at Restavracija Most, offering an opportunity for informal networking.

On day two, ESI led sessions on WP2, focusing on research, training, and hands-on learner engagement in eco-design. Discussions on WP5, led by NH, finalized the project's visual identity and communication strategy. The meeting closed with a clear roadmap of next steps, leaving partners with strengthened relationships, a shared vision, and a strong foundation for collaboration.



The second day began with renewed focus on research and training. ESI led the session on WP2, detailing the upcoming research report and the training program for VET providers. Partners discussed deadlines, tasks, and the role of learners in eco-design, emphasizing the importance of practical engagement in the green transition. The morning continued with WP5 on dissemination and visibility, led by NH. Here, the consortium debated logo options, finalized the project's visual identity, and explored strategies for communication and sustainability. The discussions highlighted the importance of visibility not only for the project's success but also for inspiring broader change in the furniture sector.

By midday, the meeting drew to a close with a recap of next steps and a shared sense of accomplishment. Partners departed with clear responsibilities, a unified vision, and strengthened relationships. The kick-off meeting had not only launched SUSFUR formally but also created a spirit of collaboration that will carry the project forward.

## CLOSING REFLECTION

*The SUSFUR Kick-off meeting in Ljubljana was more than an administrative milestone; it was a gathering of minds committed to reshaping the future of furniture production in the Western Balkans.*



# TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH REPORT

## SUSFUR Research Report – First Findings

The SUSFUR consortium has released its *Transnational Research Report* (Deliverable 2.1), prepared by the University of Ljubljana, marking a major milestone in the project's journey toward sustainable furniture production in the Western Balkans.

The report provides the first comprehensive analysis of the sector, combining desk research and fieldwork across Slovenia, the Netherlands, Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia & Herzegovina. It explores the state of the furniture industry, vocational education and training (VET) systems, and the readiness of SMEs to adopt circular business models.

### KEY INSIGHTS

- Outdated production practices, limited reuse infrastructure, and skill mismatches remain barriers to sustainability.
- Each partner country's furniture sector was mapped, highlighting employment trends, material sourcing, production technologies, and waste management practices.
- National frameworks were compared against EU directives and the Sofia Declaration on the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans (2021–2030).
- The report identifies urgent needs for green and digital skills in the workforce, essential for eco-design and circular transition.

### WHY IT MATTERS

This research lays the groundwork for the next phases of SUSFUR:

- Designing training formats for VET providers.
- Developing digital learning platforms.
- Supporting SMEs with up-skilling roadmaps.
- Informing policy recommendations to ensure long-term competitiveness and sustainability.

*The findings confirm that while the furniture industry is economically significant, systemic reform in both education and industry practices is needed to achieve a successful green transition.*



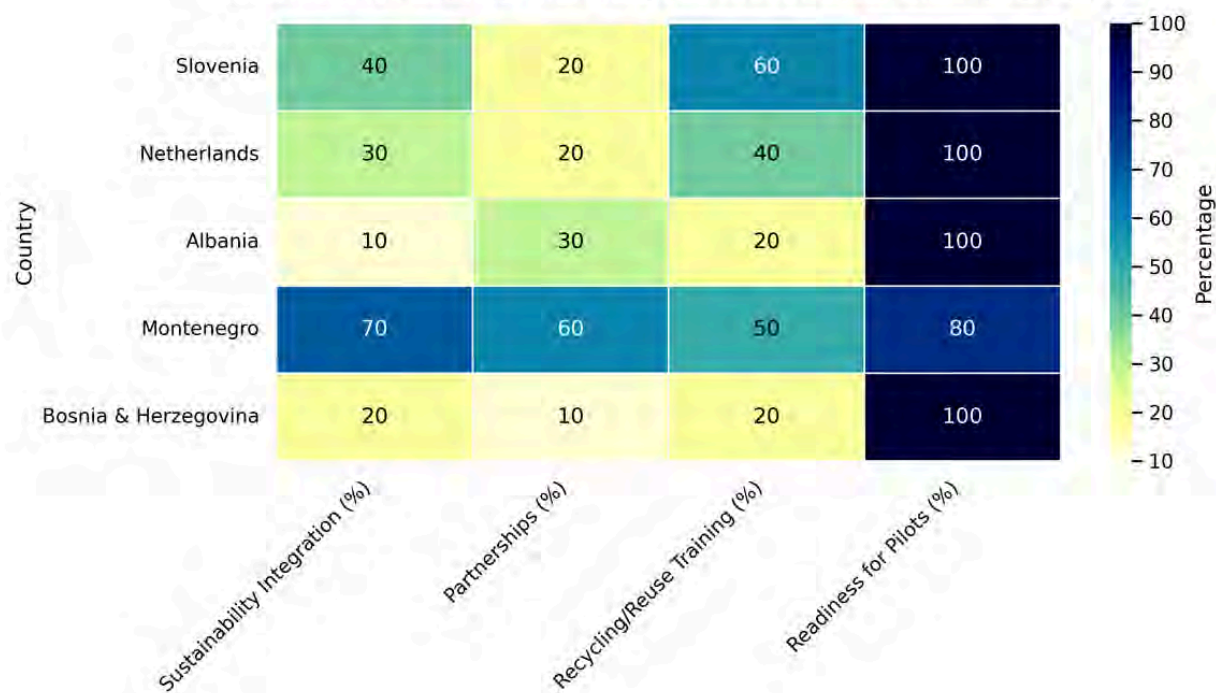
# FOCUS GROUPS

Across Slovenia, the Netherlands, Albania, Montenegro, and Bosnia & Herzegovina, vocational education and training (VET) institutions in the furniture and wood sector show growing awareness of sustainability and circular economy principles, but progress is uneven.

- In Slovenia, sustainability is mostly teacher-driven with limited external collaboration.
- The Netherlands demonstrates stronger integration of eco-design and lifecycle thinking, though resource gaps and weak industry ties persist.
- Albania's Faculty of Forestry Sciences has introduced a Circular Economy course, but vocational schools and training centers lack dedicated content and staff capacity.
- Montenegro shows promising integration, with most institutions embedding sustainability and expressing strong interest in pilots, though outdated materials and limited resources remain barriers.
- Bosnia & Herzegovina faces systemic challenges—rigid curricula, lack of expertise, and poor industry collaboration—yet institutions are eager to pilot new approaches.

Overall, enthusiasm for innovation is high, but institutions consistently call for updated teaching materials, teacher training, industry partnerships, and practical engagement opportunities to make sustainability education effective.

Sustainability Readiness and Integration in VET Sector (Furniture/Wood)

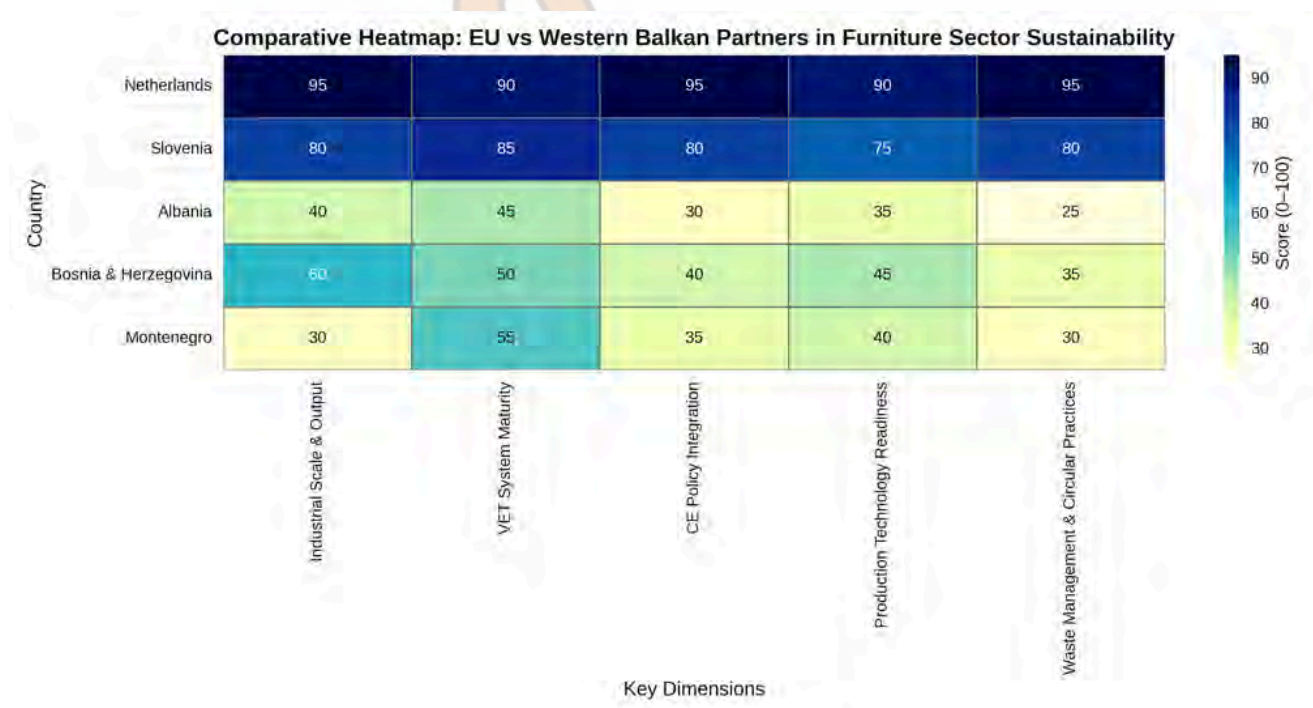


# RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis reveals a clear divide between EU partners (Netherlands and Slovenia) and Western Balkan partners (Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Montenegro) in the furniture sector. EU countries operate at a larger industrial scale, supported by advanced vocational education systems, strong circular economy policies, and modern production technologies. Their waste management practices are comprehensive, with reuse centers, refurbishment hubs, and circular procurement embedded in national strategies.

By contrast, Western Balkan partners face systemic constraints: smaller production capacity, fragmented or donor-driven circular economy initiatives, outdated technologies, and limited training provision. While Bosnia shows export strength and some adoption of advanced tools, Albania and Montenegro remain heavily reliant on imports and manual production. Across the region, skill gaps in digital manufacturing, circular principles, and waste management persist.

Overall, the EU partners demonstrate maturity and integration, while the WB partners highlight the urgent need for capacity building, updated curricula, and stronger industry collaboration. These findings provide the baseline for developing tailored training modules and pilot programs under the SUSFUR project, ensuring that sustainability and circular economy practices can be scaled across diverse contexts.





## PROJECT CONSORTIUM



Co-funded by  
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University of Ljubljana, Biotechnical Faculty is a member of the University of Ljubljana. Within the framework of this project, most of the activities will be carried out by the Department of Wood Science and engineering which is the leading research organisation working in the field of wood engineering in Slovenia, with a tradition of almost 70 years. The department currently employs 50 people. The Department of Wood Science and Engineering is thus the largest research organisation in the field of wood science and engineering in Slovenia. It is one of the top 5 most reputable organisations for the study of wood science and engineering in Europe. The Department of Wood Science and Engineering studies wood from a material perspective.

ECREC purpose is to promote entrepreneurship and innovation for green growth through researching, training, and consultancy. Within the organization are gathered experts with more than 30 years' experience in the field of energy, environment, circular economy. ECREC is acknowledged organization at local, national and international level and wishful partner for cooperation in the field of sustainable local and regional development which promotes and develops traditional values through a modern approach and contributes to strengthening the capacities of local communities. ECREC has a huge network of local partners in the wood industry.

Wood Industry Cluster of Albania -Tirana (WICA) is a non-profit NGO founded in March 2019, whose primary goal is improving companies' competitiveness, thus understanding world trends and changes in the global market, as well as adjusting the participants' own production to such trends and changes. Very important partners that supported the creation of WICA were the Ministry of Energy and Infrastructure, Ministry of Finance and Economy, Albanian Investment Development Agency and Forest Sciences Faculty, Agriculture University of Albania. We are in continuous collaboration with these institutions. There are 20 companies that adhere to WICA.

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Merceza L.t.d., headquartered in Srebrenik (Northeast Bosnia region), has successfully operated since 1996, and is one of the leading Bosnian-Herzegovinian furniture company. Based on the concept of "Everything in one place", it offers over 250,000 domestic and foreign manufacturers, according to the quality of different price ranges, offers a wide selection and shopping for everything needed for home and family, making Merceza one of the most desirable furniture companies ins Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the beginning of 2000, Merceza launched its own design programme for furniture design and production and marketed its brands: Merceza furniture and solid wood products.

New Horizon (NH) is a non-governmental organization founded in 1999, in Ulcinj (Montenegro). The mission of the organization is to increase the participation of the citizens in local processes and broader, contributing in that way to developing the democracy and promoting good governance, through the realization of educational and integration programs.

NH works on several areas: Youth Non-formal Education; Good Governance, Inter-Ethnic Dialogue and Civil Society Strengthening. New Horizon NGO is accredited by Ministry of Regional-Investment Development and Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations as the Resource Centre for CSOs for the south region of Montenegro.

*"Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them."*