

## Report on the outcomes of a DEI Group

CA20101 - Plastics monitoring detection Remediation recovery  
(PRIORITY)

Fostering Diversity and Inclusion through a Structured Mentor-Mentee  
Program in the CA20101 - PRIORITY Network

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## INTRODUCTION

This report presents a comprehensive overview of the initiatives carried out by the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Group within **COST Action CA20101 – PRIORITY (Plastics monitoring detection Remediation recovery)**. Alongside the Action’s core scientific mission of addressing the global challenges posed by micro- and nanoplastics, the DEI Group has worked to ensure that inclusivity, fairness, and representation are fully embedded in the network’s activities and culture.

Throughout the Action, the DEI Group has developed a structured and multifaceted agenda that combines monitoring, awareness-raising, capacity-building, and dissemination. The activities reported here represent a progression from **baseline analysis to targeted interventions**, designed to foster a more inclusive and collaborative research ecosystem.

Key initiatives include:

- The creation and dissemination of the **newsletter “Small Particles, Big Issues: PRIORITYze DEI” (2023–2025)**, with 42 issues published over two years. The newsletter acted as a continuous communication and engagement tool, linking EU policies, academic practices, and inclusive research culture.
- The **AS-IS Diversity Analysis (July 2023)**, which provided a baseline mapping of the network’s 408 participants according to gender balance, geographical representation (ITC vs. non-ITC), and career stage (young vs. senior researchers). This analysis laid the foundation for evidence-based DEI strategies.
- Two dedicated **Workshops on DEI in STEM disciplines (2024)**, which introduced members to DEI concepts, tools, and strategies, and later deepened the discussion with practical applications, case studies, and policy implications.
- The establishment of a dedicated **DEI Group section on the PRIORITY website**, serving as a permanent repository for resources, updates, and outputs, and ensuring long-term visibility and accessibility of the Group’s work.
- The design and implementation of the **EmpowerMENTOR program (2025)**, a mentorship initiative that successfully connected 23 mentor–mentee pairs across different countries, disciplines, and career stages. This program provided structured guidance, strengthened professional development, and created a replicable model for inclusive mentoring within COST.

Taken together, these activities demonstrate the DEI Group’s commitment to creating a research environment where diversity is not only recognized but actively promoted as a source of strength, innovation, and collaboration. They also illustrate the Group’s capacity to transform DEI from

abstract principles into **tangible practices** that support researchers at multiple levels and contribute to COST's broader mission of excellence through inclusivity.

This report documents the design, implementation, and outcomes of these initiatives, reflecting on lessons learned and outlining perspectives for future DEI integration within international research networks.

## DEI (DIVERSITY EQUALITY INCLUSION) GROUP

The Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Group is a core component of COST Action CA20101 – PRIORITY, established to ensure that the network's scientific objectives are pursued within a framework of fairness, representation, and inclusivity. It acts as a cross-cutting body that embeds DEI principles across the Action, thereby reinforcing COST's broader mission of fostering collaboration and excellence through diversity.

At its foundation, the DEI Group recognizes that diversity is multidimensional and that different forms of representation contribute to the strength and innovation capacity of research networks. Within the Action, the DEI Group conceptualizes diversity along three key axes: **gender balance**, ensuring equal opportunities regardless of gender identity; **geographical distribution**, promoting equitable participation of researchers from Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC<sup>1</sup>) and non-ITC countries alike; and **age**, distinguishing between researchers under 40 and those over 40, to foster intergenerational exchange and ensure balanced representation across different stages of professional life.

The DEI strategy aims to promote an inclusive approach among diverse researchers and working groups, to enhance the content within these groups.

Three main actions have been identified that correspond to the main tasks of the project:

- **Network facilitation;**
- **Research enrichment:** through awareness raising and educational activities on diversity, equality and inclusion;
- **Communication and dissemination:** through the creation of a Newsletter and helpful content that will be posted on the website.

The DEI Group operates under a defined governance model that combines leadership, advisory, and participatory roles:

- **Equality Manager:** *Professor Mariasole Bannò*, responsible for providing strategic direction and ensuring the alignment of DEI initiatives with the overall mission of the Action.

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<sup>1</sup> The current list of ITC countries includes Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Croatia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Malta, Moldova, Montenegro, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and Ukraine. For gender were considered: women, men and prefer not to say.

- **Equality Advisor:** *Dr. Camilla Federici*, offering specialized expertise on DEI frameworks and practices, and ensuring their methodological integration across activities.
- **Virtual Mobility Grantee:** *Dr. Chiara Leggerini*, in charge of implementing and coordinating specific DEI-related initiatives, including structured programs aimed at capacity building and inclusivity.
- **Action Chair:** *Professor Stefania Federici*, who provides overarching leadership to the Action and ensures that DEI principles are embedded in the Action's strategic agenda.
- **Vice-Chair:** *Dr. Aleksandra Tubić*, supporting the Chair and contributing to the integration of DEI perspectives in decision-making processes.
- **Members:** 21 additional researchers, representing different countries, disciplines, and career stages, who actively contribute to the Group's mission by bringing diverse perspectives and ensuring broad participation.

The Group functions as both a **conceptual hub** and a **facilitating body**. On one hand, it provides a conceptual framework that defines how diversity, equity, and inclusion are understood and operationalized within the Action. On the other hand, it acts as a facilitator, ensuring that these principles permeate the entire network, from working groups to collective initiatives. By doing so, it builds a culture where inclusivity is not limited to formal representation, but embedded in the way research is designed, communicated, and disseminated.

In essence, the DEI Group represents the Action's commitment to creating an equitable research ecosystem, where excellence is achieved not despite diversity, but through it. It institutionalizes the idea that inclusive structures are fundamental to advancing science, strengthening collaboration, and producing outcomes that are both innovative and socially responsible.

#### NEWSLETTER - SMALL PARTICLES, BIG ISSUES: PRIORITYze DEI

Between May 2023 and June 2025, the DEI Group of COST Action PRIORITY developed and disseminated a dedicated newsletter entitled "*Small Particles, Big Issues: PRIORITYze DEI*" ([ISSUE](#)). Over the past two years, 42 issues were published, making the newsletter one of the most consistent and visible instruments for embedding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) within the Action. The newsletter was designed not only as an internal communication tool, but also as a platform to connect the Action with broader European and international discussions on inclusivity in research. Its added value for COST can be summarized in several interrelated dimensions:

- **Awareness and understanding:** By consistently addressing DEI topics, the newsletter helped raise awareness among members, offering reflections on structural challenges and opportunities in integrating inclusivity across research practices.

- **Dissemination:** It acted as a vehicle for spreading information both inside the Action and beyond, ensuring that COST's efforts reached a wider audience of researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders.
- **Narrative thread:** Each issue contributed to building a continuous storyline linking EU policy developments, academic practices, and the evolving culture of inclusive research. This created coherence and long-term engagement across the network.
- **Accessible resources:** The newsletter systematically included links to reports, toolkits, policy briefs, and academic articles, thereby equipping members with practical tools and knowledge to apply DEI in their own work.
- **Active engagement:** Through interactive elements such as quizzes, surveys, and event reminders, the newsletter fostered a participatory spirit and encouraged members to contribute actively to the Action's DEI agenda.

By combining informative content with interactive features, the newsletter became more than a communication channel; it evolved into a capacity-building tool. It supported researchers in understanding the relevance of DEI for their own disciplines and provided evidence-based resources to guide inclusive practices. At the same time, it reinforced COST Action PRIORITY's visibility and credibility as a network committed not only to scientific excellence but also to social responsibility. The sustained publication of 42 issues has left a durable mark on the Action's culture. Beyond documenting activities, the newsletter created a sense of continuity, linking individual events and initiatives into a coherent narrative. Its format and impact provide a replicable model for other COST Actions that aim to integrate DEI into their governance and outreach.

*PRIORITYze DEI* illustrates how a simple, regular tool of communication can grow into a strategic asset, amplifying inclusivity, fostering dialogue, and embedding DEI principles in the long-term legacy of COST Action PRIORITY.

#### THE AS-IS REPORT ON DIVERSITY WITHIN COST ACTION PRIORITY

On 31 July 2023, the DEI Group conducted an *AS-IS* evaluation aimed at providing a baseline understanding of diversity within COST Action CA20101 – PRIORITY ([1-AS-IS.docx](#)). This assessment served as a critical step in mapping the current composition of the Action, identifying strengths and potential areas of improvement in terms of inclusivity and representation. The total number of participants at the time of analysis was **408**, reflecting the dynamic and multidisciplinary nature of the network.

The AS-IS analysis focused on three fundamental dimensions of diversity: **gender balance**, **geographical distribution**, and **career stage**.

1. **Gender balance.** The evaluation examined the representation of women, men, and individuals who preferred not to disclose their gender. This dimension is essential for assessing the degree of gender inclusivity within the Action and for identifying whether

structural imbalances exist in participation. Gender diversity is particularly relevant in STEM-related COST Actions, where women are often underrepresented. Mapping gender distribution within the network provides evidence to support more equitable participation in future initiatives.

2. **Geographical distribution.** A second dimension concerned the balance between participants from **Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC)** and those from non-ITC countries. COST places significant emphasis on ensuring participation from ITC members, as these countries often face structural disadvantages in research funding and networking opportunities. The AS-IS analysis, therefore, allowed the Action to monitor whether these inclusiveness objectives were being met, and whether cross-country collaboration was effectively bridging disparities in access and resources.
3. **Career stage.** Finally, the report analyzed the distribution of participants according to their career stage, distinguishing between **young researchers (under 40)** and **senior researchers (over 40)**. This dimension is particularly significant in a mentorship-oriented environment, as it reveals whether early-career scientists are adequately represented and supported within the Action. The balance between young and more experienced researchers also reflects the Action's capacity to combine fresh perspectives with established expertise.

The AS-IS report represented more than a simple descriptive exercise: it provided a foundation for strategic action. By establishing a clear baseline, the evaluation offered evidence to guide the design of targeted DEI initiatives within the network. The analysis confirmed the importance of adopting a multidimensional view of diversity, recognizing that inclusivity cannot be achieved by focusing on a single aspect, but rather through the integration of gender, geography, and career stage.

Moreover, the results highlighted the **added value of systematic monitoring**. Collecting data on diversity allows the Action to move beyond symbolic commitments and to implement evidence-based measures. It also enhances transparency and accountability, both internally, towards members of the Action, and externally, towards stakeholders and funding bodies.

The AS-IS analysis of July 2023 served as a baseline assessment that paved the way for more structured initiatives, such as the EmpowerMENTOR program launched in 2025. By identifying existing gaps and strengths, it ensured that subsequent DEI strategies were grounded in data rather than assumptions. This process demonstrated the Action's commitment to embedding diversity, equity, and inclusion at the heart of its mission, making inclusivity not an optional add-on but a central driver of excellence and collaboration within COST Action PRIORITY.

## WORKSHOPS

As part of the broader effort to integrate Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) principles into the COST Action PRIORITY network, two dedicated workshops were organized in 2024. These events

represented a progressive pathway: from raising initial awareness and introducing basic DEI concepts to deepening the discussion with practical strategies, case studies, and long-term policy implications.

The first workshop (**22 January 2024**), entitled “*Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Research: Strategies in STEM Disciplines*”, was designed to introduce COST members to the core concepts and strategies of DEI in research.

Following the **welcome and introduction** by Professor Mariasole Bannò (Equality Manager) and Dr. Camilla Federici (Equality Advisor), the session continued with a presentation by **Chiara Leggerini (PRIORITY Virtual Mobility Grantee)**. Her contribution focused on the *AS-IS analysis* conducted within the Action, which mapped the network's composition according to gender balance, geographical distribution (including ITC and non-ITC countries), and career stages. The results provided a baseline assessment of diversity within the COST Action, highlighting both strengths and areas for improvement, and thus offering an evidence-based foundation for subsequent DEI strategies.

This was followed by an intervention from **Tiffany Sprague (UNDP Eurasia)**, who shared perspectives from an international policy and development standpoint. Her talk underscored the global relevance of DEI principles, emphasizing how inclusivity strengthens not only academic collaborations but also broader societal initiatives. By connecting COST Action PRIORITY with the United Nations' frameworks, the intervention placed the Action's DEI efforts within a broader global agenda for equality and sustainability.

These contributions enriched the central lecture delivered by **Dr. Rita Bencivenga (University of Genoa)**, ensuring that the workshop did not only introduce theoretical DEI frameworks but also grounded them in concrete data analysis and international policy perspectives.

- **Keynote Speaker:** Dr. Rita Bencivenga (University of Genoa)
- **Participants: 72**
- **Main focus:** Initial approaches to DEI in STEM fields, providing participants with tools and frameworks to begin integrating inclusivity into their work.
- **Topics covered:**
  - First approaches to DEI in research.
  - Tools and frameworks for inclusive practices.
  - Challenges in integrating DEI into STEM disciplines.
- **Outcome:** The workshop successfully raised awareness, encouraging COST members to reflect on DEI issues and engage in knowledge sharing. It marked a significant first step in establishing a shared understanding of the importance of inclusivity in scientific contexts.

The second workshop (**23 July 2024**) built upon the foundation established earlier in the year, moving toward a more advanced and practice-oriented discussion.

After the **welcome and introduction** by Professor Mariasole Bannò and Dr. Camilla Federici, the session began with a **COST contribution**, which contextualized the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion within COST Actions and highlighted how DEI initiatives strengthen research coordination and collaboration at the European level by Professor Stefania Federici.

Following this introduction, **Dr. Rita Bencivenga (University of Genoa)** delivered a lecture on *equality, diversity and inclusion in research and teaching*, offering strategies for the effective integration of DEI in STEM disciplines. Her talk emphasized the transition from theoretical principles to applied practices, presenting concrete tools and examples of institutional implementation.

A distinctive feature of this workshop was the **interactive “elevator pitch” session**, where **participants themselves presented** short interventions on how the *Gender+ perspective* could be meaningfully integrated into their own academic fields. These contributions offered a diverse range of disciplinary insights, spanning the natural sciences, engineering, and social sciences, demonstrating how gender and diversity considerations intersect with various research domains. The exercise fostered reflection, peer-to-peer learning, and the exchange of best practices across the network.

The workshop concluded with remarks by **Professor Mariasole Bannò**, who summarized the discussions and underlined the importance of embedding the Gender+ perspective as a transversal dimension within the Action’s long-term strategy.

- **Keynote Speaker:** Dr. Rita Bencivenga (University of Genoa)
- **Participants:** 98
- **Main focus:** Advanced discussion on DEI implementation, emphasizing practical applications, institutional examples, and sustainability.
- **Topics covered:**
  - In-depth exploration of DEI strategies and their concrete application in academic and research settings.
  - Case studies and examples from European institutions, providing tangible models of practice.
  - Policy implications and the sustainability of DEI efforts in the long term.
- **Outcome:** The workshop provided COST members with practical tools, reinforced professional and research networks, and prepared the ground for ensuring that DEI becomes a lasting legacy of the Action. With 98 participants, it marked a significant moment of collective engagement and capacity building within the network.

Together, these two workshops exemplify the Action’s commitment to embedding DEI in its scientific and organizational culture. The staged progression, from awareness-raising to advanced implementation, ensured that members were not only introduced to DEI concepts but also equipped with practical strategies to apply them. This dual approach strengthened the foundation

for a sustainable DEI agenda within COST Action PRIORITY, bridging knowledge, practice, and long-term policy perspectives.

#### CREATION OF THE DEI GROUP SECTION ON THE PRIORITY WEBSITE

To further strengthen visibility and accessibility of its initiatives, COST Action PRIORITY created a dedicated **DEI Group section** on its official website: <https://ca-priority.eu/structure/dei-group/>. This space was designed as both an information hub and a reference point for members of the network as well as external stakeholders interested in diversity, equity, and inclusion practices.

The DEI webpage highlights the **primary mission** of the Group: to promote diversity, equality, and inclusion within the COST PRIORITY framework. It introduces the Group's structure and role, presenting it as a cornerstone of the Action's strategy to embed inclusivity across governance, research, and outreach.

The website clearly defines the **primary objective** of the DEI Group: to promote diversity, equality, and inclusion within the COST PRIORITY framework. It emphasizes three main dimensions of inclusivity:

- **Geographical distribution**, with a focus on participation from Inclusiveness Target Countries (ITC).
- **Career stage**, highlighting the involvement of young researchers alongside senior academics.
- **Gender balance**, aiming to ensure fair and representative participation across the network.

By framing DEI as a cross-cutting priority, the website reinforces the idea that inclusivity is integral to achieving research excellence and collaboration.

The webpage presents the governance of the Group, which combines strategic leadership and broad membership:

- **Equality Manager:** *Professor Mariasole Bannò*
- **Equality Advisor:** *Dr. Camilla Federici*
- **Virtual mobility grant:** *Dr. Chiara Leggerini*
- **Action Chair:** *Professor Stefania Federici*
- **Vice-Chair:** *Dr. Aleksandra Tubić*
- **Members:** 21 researchers from different countries and disciplines, ensuring diverse perspectives and representation.

The DEI Group's webpage documents and provides access to its significant contributions:

- **AS-IS analysis (July 2023):** a baseline diversity assessment of 408 participants across gender, geography, and career stage.
- **Newsletter "Small Particles, Big Issues: PRIORITYze DEI" (2023–2025):** 42 issues serving as a dissemination and engagement tool, linking EU policies, academic practices, and inclusive research culture.

## MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

The **EmpowerMENTOR program** was developed within the framework of COST Action CA20101 – PRIORITY (*Plastics monitoRIng detectiOn RemediaTion recoverY*) as a flagship initiative of the DEI Group, to embed diversity, equity, and inclusion into the Action’s collaborative culture. Mentorship was identified as a key tool for fostering professional growth, supporting early-career researchers, and promoting inclusivity across gender, geography, and career stages ([2-Mentor mentee.docx](#)).

The program was designed to:

- Promote **diversity and inclusion** across three dimensions: gender balance, geographical representation (with a focus on Inclusiveness Target Countries, ITC), and career stage (young vs senior researchers).
- Support **mentees** in navigating academic and professional challenges, guiding research planning, grant applications, publications, and career development.
- Strengthen the **PRIORITY network** through meaningful one-to-one relationships that build trust, exchange knowledge, and foster long-term collaboration.

EmpowerMENTOR followed a structured three-month process (June–July 2025) consisting of:

1. **Kick-off Meeting (June 2025):** introducing mentors and mentees, aligning expectations, and presenting program objectives and tools.
2. **Three one-to-one mentoring sessions:** organized flexibly between mentors and mentees, focusing on tailored guidance, skill development, and professional support.
3. **Closing Meeting (July 2025):** sharing experiences, documenting best practices, and identifying follow-up opportunities for collaboration.

The program successfully established **23 mentor–mentee pairs**, carefully matched according to research fields, academic level, and diversity criteria. This ensured that the pairings were both scientifically relevant and inclusive.

To ensure consistency and effectiveness, the DEI Group developed three key tools:

- **Suggested Topics for Discussion:** a guide covering career development strategies, research planning, funding opportunities, interdisciplinarity, and work-life balance.
- **Good Practices in Mentorship:** emphasizing respectful communication, active listening, constructive feedback, and mutual accountability.
- **Evaluation Form:** combining quantitative and qualitative feedback to assess the program’s effectiveness and gather lessons learned.

Feedback from both mentors and mentees was overwhelmingly positive. Mentees described the program as **enriching, motivating, and empowering**, highlighting the practical support it provided for their research and careers, as well as the value of being treated as equal partners. Mentors emphasized the **mutual learning** dimension, noting that they gained exposure to new techniques, intercultural insights, and fresh perspectives.

The program not only improved individual skills and confidence but also reinforced the network's inclusivity, creating bridges across countries, disciplines, and generations. Importantly, it served as a **replicable model** for mentorship within COST Actions, demonstrating how structured programs can foster professional development while advancing DEI objectives.

EmpowerMENTOR illustrates how mentorship can function as both a professional development tool and a mechanism for inclusivity. By embedding DEI principles into its design and execution, the program contributed to COST Action PRIORITY's broader mission of promoting equitable, collaborative, and impactful research. Its legacy lies in having created a structured, evidence-based, and scalable model for inclusive mentoring in international research networks.