



# Driving sustainable practices in the Cleaning Industry through ESG

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## CleanMind Initiative



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# Introduction



The cleaning industry plays a critical yet often overlooked role in the implementation of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles. As a service-intensive sector operating across offices, public buildings, healthcare facilities, and industrial environments, cleaning services have direct environmental impacts through the use of chemicals, water, energy, and waste management practices. At the same time, the industry is highly labor-dependent, making social factors such as working conditions, health and safety, fair wages, and employee rights central to its ESG performance.

From an environmental perspective, the choice of cleaning agents, equipment efficiency, and waste handling practices significantly influence emissions, chemical exposure, and resource consumption. Socially, the cleaning sector is characterized by a diverse and often vulnerable workforce, where issues related to occupational safety, training, job security, and inclusion are particularly relevant. Governance factors, including compliance with labor laws, transparency in procurement, ethical business conduct, and responsible supply chain management, further shape the sector's sustainability profile.

As ESG considerations increasingly influence public procurement, corporate partnerships, and investment decisions, cleaning companies are facing growing expectations to demonstrate responsible and sustainable practices. Integrating ESG principles into cleaning operations is therefore not only a matter of regulatory compliance or reputational risk management, but also a strategic opportunity to improve service quality, strengthen workforce engagement, and enhance long-term business resilience.

# ESG – the history



The concept of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) has emerged from a combination of financial risk management, societal development, and regulatory evolution. Rather than being the result of a single initiative, ESG has developed gradually over several decades in response to changing expectations of how companies create long-term value.

Early forms of sustainable investing were primarily ethically or values-driven, focusing on the exclusion of certain industries such as tobacco, weapons, or alcohol. These approaches were often motivated by religious or ideological principles and had limited connection to financial performance or risk management

**1990** sustainability became increasingly linked to long-term economic and social development. The publication of the Brundtland Report (1987) introduced the concept of sustainable development, while international environmental and climate initiatives gained momentum. Corporate responsibility began to be viewed as a strategic issue rather than a purely ethical one.

The term ESG gained widespread recognition following the 2004 United Nations report "Who Cares Wins", developed in collaboration with major financial institutions. The report concluded that environmental, social, and governance factors can have a material impact on companies' long-term financial performance.

**2006** the UN Principles for Responsible Investment (UN PRI) were launched, encouraging investors to integrate ESG considerations into investment decision-making. This marked a shift from values-based investing toward a more systematic, risk-focused approach.

The global financial crisis of 2008, along with a series of corporate scandals involving corruption, accounting fraud, and labor violations, highlighted the importance of strong corporate governance. As a result, governance became a central pillar of ESG, emphasizing transparency, accountability, and risk oversight.

Key developments during this period included the Paris Agreement (2015) and the adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Capital flows into sustainable investments increased significantly, and ESG data and ratings began to be standardized by providers such as MSCI and Sustainalytics.



In recent years, ESG has become increasingly embedded in regulatory frameworks and corporate strategies, particularly within the European Union. Initiatives such as the EU Green Deal, the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), the EU Taxonomy, and the Sustainable Finance Disclosure Regulation (SFDR) have transformed ESG from a voluntary concept into a regulated and business-critical framework.

# ESG and the cleaning company

When it comes to cleaning companies and ESG, several factors are particularly important, as the industry has a significant impact on the environment, working conditions, and business ethics.



## E

- Eco-labelled cleaning products (e.g. Nordic Swan Ecolabel, EU Ecolabel)
- Reduced use of chemicals and controlled dosing
- Water and energy efficiency
- Waste management and recycling
- Transportation: electric vehicles, route optimisation, fossil-free fuels
- Climate reporting: CO emissions per assignment or customer

ESG-impact; Can improve competitiveness when clients or procurements agencies require environmental certification

# S

## **This is often the most critical ESG dimension for cleaning companies, as the industry is labour-intensive and exposed to social risks**

- Fair working conditions
- Collective bargaining agreements
- Fair wages, overtime pay, holiday entitlement, and pensions
- Health and safety, employee wellbeing
- Professional identity and job satisfaction
- Ergonomics and protective equipment

(<https://puhastusekspert.ee/en/erasmus-project-cleaning-ergonomics/>)

- Training in chemical handling
- Training and skills development
- Low sickness absence and fewer workplace injuries
- Equality and diversity
- Share of women in management positions
- Non-discrimination policies
- Training and skills development
- Onboarding and continuous training
- Language support for migrant workers
- Supply chain compliance
- Temporary staffing agencies and subcontractors

ESG-impact; Good social practices increase employee satisfaction, reduce absenteeism and better partnership with customers. Overall strengthen the company's reputation..

# G

## **Strong governance is essential for credibility, particularly in an industry where unethical practices may occur.**

- Business ethics and legal compliance
- Zero tolerance for undeclared work
- Proper payment of taxes and social contributions
- Policies and monitoring
- Code of conduct
- Whistleblower mechanisms
- Transparency
- Clear reporting of ESG KPIs
- Data protection (GDPR) – employee and customer data
- Board-level responsibility for sustainability issues

ESG-impact; Strong governance builds trust with clients and authorities, and can provide a competitive advantage in tenders, especially for what's coming in the future.

# ESG KPIs for Cleaning Companies (examples)

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- Share of eco-labelled cleaning products (%)
- CO emissions per cleaning hour
- Share of full-time employees
- Sickness absence rate (%)
- Employee turnover
- Coverage by collective bargaining agreements
- Number of health and safety incidents

# ESG and the professional cleaner

## How an Individual Cleaning Professional Can Impact ESG?

An individual cleaning professional can have a significant impact on ESG in practice, especially in the cleaning industry, where daily work directly affects the environment, people, and regulatory compliance. Here is a concrete overview with clear examples.

### E

The daily choices of a cleaning professional directly influence environmental impact.

- Correctly dosing cleaning chemicals= reduces chemical emissions and water usage
- Choosing the right method (microfiber, dry/wet cleaning)= lowers resource consumption
- Turning off machines and lights when not in use= reduces energy consumption
- Properly sorting waste at the client site= supports circular economy practices
- Need-based cleaning and/or using machines instead of manual methods. The cleaner should understand the meaning of cleaning-quality and should by their own do the right choices of ,method, material, etc., to support sustainability in every-day cleaning

ESG impact: Lower environmental footprint, improved chemical safety, enhanced ESG reporting

### S

The cleaning industry is labor-intensive, making the professional central to social responsibility

- Following safety procedures and using protective equipment = fewer workplace injuries
- Reporting hazards, stress, or workplace deficiencies= improves overall work environment
- Treating clients and colleagues professionally= fosters trust and respect
- Participating in training and sharing knowledge with colleagues

ESG impact: Reduced absenteeism, better employee satisfaction, stronger social performance indicators.

### G

Even governance starts with everyday actions.

- Following routines, checklists, and instructions
- Reporting deviations, incidents, or irregularities
- Handling client information and keys responsibly
- Adhering to codes of conduct and ethical guidelines

ESG impact: Reduced compliance risk, increased transparency, and enhanced trust.

# How ESG creates value for buyers of cleaning services

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**ESG can provide significant value for organizations purchasing cleaning services. It is not only a sustainability initiative, it is also a way to reduce risk, improve operational quality, strengthen brand reputation and support long-term business performance.**

**E**

- Lower carbon foot print
- Improved indoor enviromental quality
- Contribution to corporate sustainability targets
- Better ESG reporting data compliance support
- Stronger positioning toward investors, customers and stakeholders

**S**

- Higher and more consistent service quality
- Lower supplier risk
- Reduced reputational risk
- Greater workforce stability
- Improved customer and employee satisfaction
- Support for social responsibility commitments

**G**

- Reduced legal and operational risk
- Improved procurement compliance
- Easier ESG and sustainability auditing
- More transparent supplier relationships
- Stronger trust and accountability

# Ecolabel Index – How it works



Using resources such as Ecolabel Index-which tracks 459 ecolabels across 199 countries-can be a powerful way to clarify, structure, and communicate sustainable working practices within an organisation, including cleaning companies.

The Ecolabel index shows how many products have an environmental label. The higher the share of ecolabelled products, the stronger the focus on sustainability and ESG.

**The most common and simplest KPI;**

Ecolabel Index



Number of ecolabelled products/Total number of products X 100.

**Another more advanced metric;**

## **Weighted Ecolabel Index**

Products can be weighted based on factors such as;

- used volume
- environmental impact
- strategic product category

## E

### **Link to Environmental**

The most direct connection is to the environmental dimension.

**High index** - more products used meet environmental standards

**Low index** - fewer products used meet environmental standards.

It can therefore be used as an indicator of environmental performance when it comes to the amount of used products.

## S

### **Indirect link to Social**

Many ecolabels also include requirements related to;

- chemical management
- wellbeing of both employees and clients
- working conditions in production
- responsible supply chains
- This means that a higher Ecolabel index may also indicate better social standards in the supply chain, might be the connection is more indirect.

## G

### **Link to Governance**

The index can also reflect how companies work with

- sustainability strategies
- responsible sourcing
- monitoring sustainability targets

**In other words, it can show how sustainability requirements are integrated into purchasing decisions.**

# Ecolabel Index - The impact on ESG

## E – Environmental

**Eco-labelled cleaning products (such as the Nordic Swan Ecolabel or the EU Ecolabel) are designed to:**

- reduce the release of hazardous chemicals into water systems and the natural environment
- have a lower climate impact through requirements on raw materials, production processes, and often the use of concentrated formulations
- be biodegradable and free from particularly harmful substances

*Result: A smaller environmental footprint, easier environmental reporting, and stronger data to support climate and environmental targets.*

## S – Social

**The impact here is often underestimated, yet critically important:**

- Reduced risk of allergies, respiratory issues, and skin irritation among cleaning staff
- Clearer labelling and fewer hazardous substances = safer handling
- Demonstrates responsibility toward both employees and customers, especially in sensitive environments such as schools, healthcare facilities, and offices

*Result: Improved working conditions, fewer occupational injuries, and a stronger employer brand.*

## G – Governance

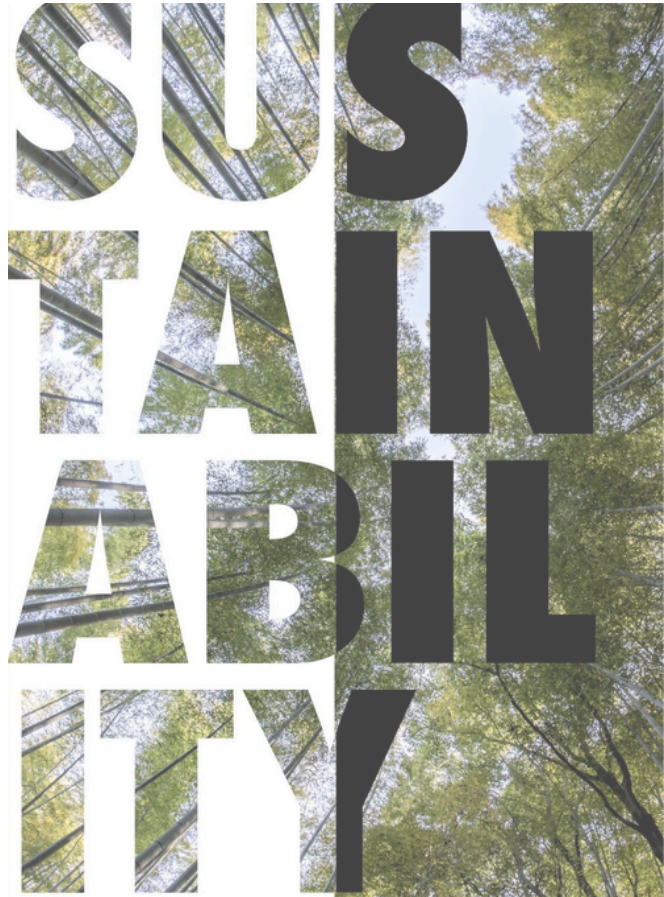
**Eco-labelled chemicals also support strong governance practices:**

- Easier compliance with legal requirements and chemicals legislation (such as REACH)
- Simplified implementation of clear procurement policies and sustainable operational routines
- Greater credibility in procurement processes, especially where ESG requirements carry significant weight

*Result: Reduced risk, improved control, and greater transparency.*

# Summary Ecolabel Index

**Using  
Ecolabel Index  
helps  
organisations  
to:**



- Make data-driven and credible decisions
- Establish clear, verifiable, and transparent routines
- Strengthen both internal understanding and external sustainability communication

This makes sustainability efforts more concrete, measurable, and trustworthy—qualities increasingly valued by customers, regulators, and investors.

# Key ESG Resources – Quick Reference

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## Global Frameworks & Guidelines

**GRI** – Sustainability reporting: [globalreporting.org](https://www.globalreporting.org)

**SASB** – Industry-specific ESG metrics: [sasb.org](https://www.sasb.org)

**TCFD** – Climate-related risk: [fsb-tcfd.org](https://www.fsb-tcfd.org)

**UN Global Compact** – Human rights, labor, environment, anti-corruption: [unglobalcompact.org](https://www.unglobalcompact.org)

**OECD Guidelines** – CSR & supply chain responsibility: [oecd.org/corporate/mne](https://www.oecd.org/corporate/mne)

**Nordic Swan Ecolabel (Svanen)** – Environmental performance, chemicals, circular economy: [svanen.se](https://www.svanen.se)

**EU Ecolabel** – EU-recognized environmental certification: [ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel)

**Ecolabel Index** – Database of 459 ecolabels worldwide: [ecolabelindex.com](https://www.ecolabelindex.com)

## Investor & Financial ESG

**PRI** – Responsible investment: [unpri.org](https://www.unpri.org)

**MSCI ESG Ratings** – Corporate ESG risk: [msci.com/our-solutions/esg-investing](https://www.msci.com/our-solutions/esg-investing)

**Refinitiv ESG** – Data & benchmarking: [refinitiv.com/en/sustainable-finance/esg-data](https://www.refinitiv.com/en/sustainable-finance/esg-data)

## Learning & Best Practices

**Harvard Business Review** – ESG strategy: [hbr.org/topic/sustainability](https://www.hbr.org/topic/sustainability)

**World Economic Forum** – ESG reports & trends: [weforum.org](https://www.weforum.org)

**SustainAbility / ERM** – Guides & consulting: [sustainability.com](https://www.sustainability.com)



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