CSA SPE 116 Association Cohort: Key Insights, Outcomes and Future Opportunities

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Introduction

This report summarizes the key insights, outcomes, and future opportunities for the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) arising from the **ESG and SDG Engagement**, a year-long initiative involving seven Canadian industry associations. The cohort was established to apply CSA's Technical Specification on Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Guidance for Associations (CSA SPE 116), facilitate peer learning, and explore opportunities to advance sustainability performance across sectors.

Over the course of eleven engagement sessions, participants shared experiences, challenges, and leading practices related to ESG and sustainability. The discussions generated valuable insights into emerging trends, common risks and opportunities, and the evolving role of associations in supporting sustainability, transparency, workforce attraction, market competitiveness, and sector resilience.

Beyond knowledge exchange, the cohort provided a forum for associations to benchmark their approaches, identify shared challenges, explore realistic solutions, and bring emerging insights back to their organizations and members.

This report presents the key lessons learned, the value and impact of participation in the engagement effort, and recommendations for CSA and participating associations to build on the outcomes of the initiative.

Background

The national cohort that was established for the ESG and SDG Engagement brought together senior leaders from industry associations to apply CSA SPE 116, share best practices and challenges, identify opportunities for alignment and collaboration across sectors.

Participating associations were identified and recruited by the Chemistry Industry Association of Canada (CIAC) based on their role in the chemistry industry value chain and their interest in advancing ESG and sustainability practices. The cohort brought together representatives from seven associations:

- Canadian Fuels Association (CFA);
- Chemistry Industry Association of Canada (CIAC);

- Electricity Canada;
- Fertilizer Canada;
- Forest Products Association of Canada (FPAC);
- Mining Association of Canada (MAC); and,
- Responsible Distribution Canada (RDC).

CIAC served as the cohort secretariat and project champion, providing leadership and coordination for the initiative.

The cohort met eleven times between June 2025 and June 2026. Meetings were structured around the 19 performance areas outlined in CSA SPE 116, with participating associations sharing their current approaches, initiatives, challenges, and future priorities. This provided a consistent framework for examining sustainability practices across organizations with different mandates, membership structures, and levels of ESG maturity.

In addition to the performance area discussions, the cohort explored emerging issues through dedicated sessions, including the implications of amendments to the Competition Act concerning environmental claims (Bill C-59) and the role of standards and conformity assessment in supporting credible sustainability performance. The standards and conformity assessment session also included guest participants from the Canadian Produce Marketing Association and Destination Vancouver, providing perspectives beyond the original cohort.

The final meeting in June 2026 provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on the value and impact of the initiative, identify organizational outcomes, and discuss priorities for continued engagement and a potential second phase.

CSA SPE 116, CSA Technical Specification on Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Guidance for Associations

CSA SPE 116 is a Technical Specification developed to support industry and professional associations in advancing environmental, social, and governance (ESG) practices and contributing to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Recognizing the important role associations play in influencing and supporting their members, SPE 116 provides a structured framework of 19 performance areas to help associations assess their existing sustainability practices, identify strengths and opportunities for improvement, and integrate sustainability considerations into their strategies, operations, and member-facing activities. The guidance is intended to be adaptable to associations of different sizes, sectors, and levels of ESG maturity.

To support its application, SPE 116 includes a self-assessment tool that associations can use to evaluate their current practices and identify priorities for further action. This framework served as the foundation for the cohort discussions, providing a common reference point for participants to share their approaches, compare experiences, and explore opportunities for improvement. By

working through the performance areas collectively, participating associations were able to move beyond individual organizational assessments to identify shared challenges, emerging practices, and opportunities for collaboration across sectors.

Key Insights

While participating associations represented different sectors and were at different stages of ESG maturity, several common themes emerged over the course of the eleven engagement sessions. The following insights reflect shared observations, emerging trends, experiences, and opportunities identified through the cohort discussions.

Insight #1: Associations Are Staying the Course on ESG Despite ESG Headwinds

Despite increasing political, economic, and regulatory pressures affecting ESG, participating associations continue to advance sustainability initiatives. While some organizations are reassessing their terminology, communications, and priorities, sustainability remains an important consideration in supporting risk management, operational performance, competitiveness, and long-term sector resilience.

Discussions concerning amendments to the Competition Act (Bill C-59) highlighted the challenges associations face in communicating environmental performance and supporting members in making credible sustainability claims. Regulatory uncertainty has influenced the development of sustainability-related guidance and communication materials, with some organizations adopting more cautious approaches to public claims and disclosures.

The discussions reinforced that although ESG terminology and messaging may evolve, the underlying commitment to responsible business practices, continuous improvement, and sustainability performance remains relevant across participating sectors.

Insight #2: ESG Expectations Are Shifting Toward Measurable Performance and Credible Evidence

Associations are operating in an environment where ESG is increasingly being framed in terms of risk management, measurable performance, and credible evidence. In response, associations are strengthening sustainability frameworks, placing greater emphasis on data quality and traceability, and exploring verification, certification, and other assurance mechanisms to demonstrate progress and support transparent communications.

Across the cohort, participants shared examples of sustainability scorecards, performance indicators, certification programs, and continuous improvement requirements used to assess and communicate sector-wide performance. Some associations are transitioning toward more formal certification and third-party auditing, while others are strengthening their approaches to collecting, reporting, and benchmarking sustainability data.

These discussions highlighted a broader shift from narrative-based sustainability claims toward approaches that provide consistent, reliable, and verifiable information. Associations have an important role in helping members understand evolving expectations and adopt practical methods for measuring, demonstrating, and communicating sustainability performance.

Insight #3: Associations at All Levels of ESG Maturity Benefit from Peer Learning

The cohort demonstrated that associations benefit from peer learning regardless of the maturity of their sustainability programs. Associations with less mature programs gained practical ideas, tools, and approaches from peers with more established initiatives, while those with advanced programs used the discussions to benchmark their practices, validate existing approaches, identify gaps, and remain informed of emerging developments.

Participants highlighted the benefits of comparing approaches, testing ideas, and bringing insights back to their organizations, leadership teams, and members. The discussions also provided opportunities to learn from different approaches to sustainability governance, program implementation, industry engagement, and assurance.

The use of CSA SPE 116 as a common framework helped structure these discussions, providing a consistent reference point while recognizing differences in association mandates, membership structures, and organizational capacity. The experience demonstrated that peer learning can support both the development of new sustainability initiatives and the continuous improvement of existing programs.

Insight #4: Cross-Sector Learning May Be as Valuable as Value-Chain Learning

The cohort was intentionally assembled from associations connected to the chemistry value chain to explore shared ESG challenges, opportunities, and interdependencies across related industries. However, the discussions also demonstrated the value of learning from associations outside the resource and chemistry sectors.

The dedicated session on standards and conformity assessment, which included perspectives from outside the original cohort, provided an opportunity to consider how sustainability programs and assurance approaches are applied in different sectors. Participants subsequently expressed interest in expanding future engagement beyond the resource sector through strategic and targeted recruitment.

These discussions suggest that future association sustainability initiatives could benefit from balancing value-chain relevance with broader cross-sector participation. While value-chain collaboration can help address shared dependencies and sector-specific challenges, cross-sector learning can introduce different approaches, practical solutions, and opportunities for innovation.

Insight #5: Many ESG Risks and Opportunities Transcend Sector Boundaries

The discussions revealed that many ESG risks and opportunities facing associations are not sector-specific. Common priorities included workforce development, sustainability assurance, industry engagement, public trust, market access, and emerging technologies.

Participants also recognized that progress on certain sustainability objectives depends on collaboration across sectors and value chains. For example, discussions on transition pathways highlighted how achieving emissions reductions and other sustainability improvements in one industry may depend on technologies, infrastructure, and actions in other sectors.

Identifying shared risks and opportunities could create opportunities for greater alignment, collaboration, and collective action among associations and their members. Participants expressed interest in exploring a cross-sector ESG risk and opportunity assessment, while emphasizing the importance of building on existing assessments and avoiding duplication.

This suggests potential value in developing a more coordinated understanding of common ESG challenges and interdependencies to inform future collaboration and practical responses.

Insight #6: Workforce Attraction Is Emerging as a Strategic Sustainability Priority

Across multiple sectors, workforce attraction and retention were identified as increasingly important sustainability priorities. Associations reported growing efforts to engage students, young professionals, and future workers by demonstrating the societal contributions, sustainability practices, and career opportunities associated with their industries.

Participants shared examples of workforce development initiatives, educational partnerships, youth outreach programs, and public awareness campaigns aimed at strengthening interest in their respective sectors. They also recognized that workforce challenges often extend beyond individual industries, creating opportunities to share approaches and collaborate on talent development.

The discussions highlighted the connection between sustainability performance, industry reputation, and workforce attraction. Communicating how industries contribute to environmental stewardship, community well-being, and broader societal objectives can help strengthen public understanding and attract individuals seeking meaningful careers.

These findings suggest an opportunity for associations to more deliberately integrate sustainability messaging into workforce development and engagement strategies, while sharing effective approaches across sectors.

Insight #7: Sustainability Assurance is Evolving

Several participating associations have established sustainability assurance systems incorporating standards, codes of practice, certification, verification, auditing, performance reporting, and continuous improvement mechanisms.

The discussions highlighted that assurance approaches vary depending on sector needs, program maturity, organizational capacity, and expectations. Some associations are moving toward more formal certification and third-party auditing, while others continue to rely on voluntary frameworks, verification mechanisms, or industry codes of practice. Participants also highlighted the importance of establishing baseline commitments, ensuring consistent implementation, and allowing flexibility based on organizational size and risk.

There was growing interest in strengthening verification and audit approaches and leveraging emerging technologies, including digital credentials, traceability systems, and digital product passports, to improve efficiency, transparency, and trust.

These discussions reinforced that sustainability assurance is not a one-size-fits-all approach. There is value in sharing experiences and identifying practices that support credible, consistent, and practical assurance across different sectors and organizational contexts.

Insight #8: Digital Technologies and AI Are Emerging as Sustainability Enablers

Associations recognize that digital technologies and artificial intelligence offer opportunities to strengthen sustainability performance, improve data management, and support greater transparency across value chains.

Participants identified digital credentials, digital product passports, traceability technologies, and interoperable data platforms as potential tools to improve how sustainability information is collected, exchanged, verified, and communicated. These technologies could help streamline assurance processes, reduce administrative burdens, and improve the usability of sustainability information.

Artificial intelligence also emerged as an area of growing interest, particularly in relation to data analysis and assurance activities. However, participants raised concerns about the absence of clear guardrails and consistent approaches for AI use, including risks related to data quality, accuracy, privacy, governance, and ethical considerations.

The discussions highlighted opportunities for continued learning, knowledge sharing, and collaboration on responsible technology adoption. They also suggest potential value in exploring common guidance, leading practices, and standards that support the effective and responsible use of emerging technologies in sustainability programs.

Insight #9: Advanced Sustainability Programs Often Reflect an Implicit Social Purpose

The discussions revealed that associations with established sustainability programs are often advancing broader societal contributions, even where these have not been formally articulated as an organizational social purpose.

Participants described how existing sustainability initiatives reflect commitments to areas such as health and safety, environmental stewardship, responsible industry practices, community well-

being, and sustainable economic development. While social purpose is not consistently defined or formally incorporated into association strategies, these activities often reflect an underlying commitment to creating value beyond the immediate interests of members.

Participants identified opportunities to more clearly articulate and communicate these contributions, particularly in relation to public understanding, member engagement, and workforce attraction.

The discussions also highlighted the importance of effective community engagement, including early engagement, two-way dialogue, and building trust. While associations often support public engagement indirectly through their members, they can play an important role in providing resources, common messaging, and leading practices.

These findings suggest an opportunity for associations to better connect their sustainability activities with their broader societal contributions, helping members communicate the purpose, meaning, and value of their industries.

Insight #10: Associations Can Support Market Diversification Through ESG

Growing trade uncertainty, changing customer expectations, and efforts to diversify beyond traditional markets are increasing the importance of ESG in supporting market access and competitiveness.

The discussions highlighted the role associations can play in helping members understand evolving sustainability-related requirements, identify new market opportunities, and respond to expectations for credible performance information, traceability, and transparency.

Participants shared examples of how association activities are evolving beyond promoting the sustainability of their sectors toward helping members navigate data, disclosure, and traceability requirements in domestic and international markets. This includes identifying market opportunities, understanding barriers to entry, and developing practical resources to support members in responding to customer and regulatory expectations.

Participants also recognized that established sustainability programs, standards, and assurance mechanisms can help demonstrate responsible practices and build confidence among customers, investors, and other interested parties.

These discussions suggest that associations can play an increasingly important role in translating ESG-related market expectations into practical guidance, resources, and approaches that support member competitiveness and market diversification.

Insight #11: Standards and Conformity Assessment Can Strengthen Association Sustainability Programs

The dedicated discussion on standards and conformity assessment highlighted the important role these tools can play in supporting credible, consistent, and effective association sustainability programs.

Participants explored the distinctions between standards, technical specifications, guidance documents, and conformity assessment mechanisms, including certification, verification, testing, inspection, and auditing. The discussion demonstrated how standards can establish common expectations and requirements, while conformity assessment provides mechanisms for demonstrating whether those requirements have been met.

Participating associations shared different approaches to incorporating standards and assurance into their sustainability programs. These discussions highlighted the importance of selecting approaches appropriate to sector needs, program maturity, risk, and expectations, recognizing that formal certification may not always be necessary or appropriate.

The session also identified opportunities for standards and conformity assessment to support greater consistency across value chains, strengthen public confidence, and facilitate continuous improvement. Emerging technologies, including digital credentials and traceability systems, were identified as potential tools to further enhance these approaches.

For CSA, the discussions highlighted an opportunity to strengthen associations' understanding of standards development and conformity assessment, support the application of existing standards and guidance, and identify potential gaps where new standardization activities may be beneficial.

More broadly, the cohort demonstrated the value of engaging associations in identifying common needs and exploring how standards and related tools could support practical and credible sustainability outcomes across sectors

Value and Impact of Participation

The final cohort meeting provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on the benefits of participation and identify how the discussions informed their organizations' activities and priorities.

Participants consistently highlighted the value of having a trusted forum to exchange experiences, validate approaches, identify emerging issues, and learn from associations facing similar challenges.

Area of Value	Value and Impact
Validation and Benchmarking	Participants used the cohort to compare approaches, validate existing practices, identify gaps, and benchmark their ESG efforts against peers. The discussions provided confidence that organizations were on the right track while highlighting opportunities for improvement.

Awareness of Emerging Trends and Risks	The cohort increased awareness of emerging ESG trends, policy developments, risks, opportunities, and expectations. Participants gained insights into topics such as social purpose, standards and assurance, Bill C-59, public engagement, workforce attraction, digital credentials, traceability, and artificial intelligence.
Practical Ideas and Tools	Participants gained practical ideas, tools, frameworks, codes, standards, and approaches that could be adapted within their own organizations. The discussions remained focused on implementation and real-world application rather than theory.
Cross-Sector Relationships and Peer Networks	The cohort created a trusted forum for candid discussion and strengthened relationships among association leaders across sectors. Participants valued the opportunity to learn from peers facing similar challenges, develop relationships with CSA, and build a network that can serve as an ongoing resource and sounding board.
Supporting Leadership and Board Discussions	Participants reported bringing insights, emerging practices, and strategic considerations back to senior leadership teams, boards, and members. They valued having practical examples, peer perspectives, and emerging issues to share with leaders, boards, and members within their organizations.
Capacity and Competency Building	Participation strengthened the knowledge, skills, confidence, and ESG competencies of association leaders. The cohort provided a practical learning environment that enhanced participants' ability to lead sustainability initiatives, advise members, and respond to emerging ESG challenges and opportunities.
Reality Check During ESG Headwinds	At a time when ESG is often portrayed as declining in importance, participants valued the opportunity to understand what other associations were actually doing. The cohort reinforced that sustainability efforts remain active across sectors, even as language and messaging evolve, providing reassurance and perspective during a period of heightened scrutiny and uncertainty.

These outcomes demonstrate that the cohort provided value beyond information sharing. It supported organizational learning, informed ongoing initiatives, strengthened professional networks, and helped participants identify opportunities for further action.

While the extent of implementation and longer-term impact varies among participating associations, the discussions provide a foundation for continued collaboration and a more structured assessment of outcomes in future phases.

Recommendations for Participating Associations

The findings suggest opportunities for participating associations and CSA to build on the relationships, knowledge, and practical experience developed through the cohort.

1. **Continue Cross-Sector Collaboration and Engagement**
   Build on the relationships established through the cohort by maintaining opportunities for peer

learning, sharing experiences, and discussing emerging sustainability issues. Consider focused sessions on common challenges where participants can exchange practical approaches, resources, and lessons learned.

2. **Identify Opportunities to Address Shared ESG Risks and Opportunities**
   Explore opportunities to collaborate on ESG risks and priorities that extend across sectors and value chains. Where possible, leverage existing organizational assessments and initiatives to identify common challenges, potential areas for alignment, and opportunities for coordinated action without duplicating work

3. **Strengthen the Application of Standards, Assurance, and Emerging Technologies**
   Continue to assess how standards, guidance, conformity assessment, and emerging technologies can strengthen sustainability programs. Areas for further learning could include digital credentials, traceability, data quality, digital assurance, and responsible AI use, with consideration for different levels of program maturity and organizational capacity.

4. **Strengthen the Connection Between Sustainability, Public Engagement, and Workforce Development**
   Explore opportunities to better communicate the societal contributions of participating industries and strengthen approaches to community engagement, public education, and workforce attraction. Associations could share practical examples and resources that help members communicate sustainability outcomes and engage experts effectively.

5. **Promote the Use of CSA SPE 116**
   Share CSA SPE 116 with peer associations and encourage its use as a framework for reviewing sustainability practices, identifying organizational strengths and gaps, and supporting continuous improvement. Participating associations could also share examples of how they have applied the guidance to help others understand its practical value.

Recommendations for CSA

1. **Continue and Expand the Association Cohort Model**
   Build on the success of the initial cohort by exploring a second phase involving additional associations, sectors, and value chains. A future phase could maintain CSA SPE 116 as a common reference framework while incorporating a more structured approach to reviewing association practices, identifying shared strengths and gaps, and supporting practical improvements.

   Expansion should be targeted to ensure a balance between value-chain relevance and broader cross-sector learning, reflecting participants' interest in engaging associations beyond the resource sector.

2. **Engage Participating Associations as Leaders Within the CSA SPE 116 Community of Practice**
   Engage participating associations as early contributors to CSA's planned SPE 116 Community

of Practice, recognizing their experience in applying the guidance and sharing sustainability approaches.

Opportunities could include developing association case studies, sharing tools and resources, contributing to peer-learning sessions, and supporting discussions on common challenges.

This would help preserve the knowledge and relationships developed through the cohort while making practical insights available to a broader network of associations.

3. **Support Learning and Innovation on Emerging Sustainability Topics**
   Develop targeted engagement opportunities on topics identified as priorities by cohort participants, including:

   - Standards, conformity assessment, and evolving sustainability assurance models;
   - Digital credentials, traceability, product passports, and digital assurance;
   - Artificial intelligence governance and responsible application;
   - Workforce attraction, public engagement, and social purpose; and
   - Sustainability-related market access and competitiveness.

   Sessions could involve additional associations, technical experts, and relevant individuals to broaden perspectives and identify practical solutions.

   Where common challenges or gaps are identified, CSA could assess opportunities for supporting resources, guidance, research, or future standardization activities.

4. **Pilot a Collaborative ESG Risk and Opportunity Assessment Approach**
   Explore a focused, cross-sector ESG risk and opportunity assessment involving interested participating associations. Building on the discussions held during the cohort, the assessment could identify shared risks, value-chain interdependencies, and opportunities for coordinated responses.

   To ensure the approach is practical and avoids duplication, CSA should first review existing assessments undertaken by participating associations and identify common themes that warrant further exploration.

   The results could inform the development of a streamlined, replicable approach for other sectors and value chains.

5. **Seek Input on the Future Evolution of CSA SPE 116**
   Engage participating associations to gather structured feedback on their experiences applying CSA SPE 116, including its usefulness, clarity, applicability, and any gaps identified through implementation. Several participants expressed interest in exploring whether SPE 116 could evolve into a formal standard, potentially supporting a more consistent and assessable approach to association sustainability practices.

CSA could assess the need, feasibility, interest, and potential value of such an evolution, including whether defined requirements and an associated conformity assessment approach would be appropriate. This assessment should consider the diversity of association structures, mandates, and ESG maturity to ensure that any future document remains practical, accessible, and responsive to user needs.

Proposed Next Steps

The initial cohort demonstrated the value of bringing associations together around a common sustainability framework to share experiences, strengthen knowledge, and identify opportunities for collaboration. Building on these outcomes, a proposed Phase 2 initiative could provide a more structured opportunity to expand participation, assess the application of CSA SPE 116, and translate shared insights into practical activities and resources.

Potential priorities for Phase 2 include:

1. **Expanding participation:** Engage additional associations through targeted recruitment, including sectors beyond the original chemistry value chain, while preserving opportunities for focused value-chain collaboration.
2. **Strengthening practical application:** Support associations in using CSA SPE 116 to assess their current practices, identify gaps, and prioritize improvement opportunities.
3. **Advancing shared priorities:** Facilitate targeted discussions and collaborative activities on emerging topics, with particular attention to standards and assurance, digital technologies, AI, workforce development, and common ESG risks.
4. **Capturing and sharing outcomes:** Develop case studies, practical resources, and opportunities for knowledge exchange through the planned CSA SPE 116 Community of Practice.
5. **Informing future standardization:** Gather structured feedback from associations to evaluate potential enhancements to CSA SPE 116, including the feasibility of developing a formal standard and the role of conformity assessment.

The proposed second phase should build on the strengths of the initial cohort while placing greater emphasis on practical application, demonstrated outcomes, and targeted collaboration.

Continued engagement would provide CSA with further insight into how associations apply sustainability guidance, where common challenges and opportunities exist, and how standards and related tools could support more consistent and credible sustainability practices across sectors.

Conclusion

The CSA SPE 116 Association Cohort demonstrated the value of structured, cross-sector collaboration in supporting industry associations as they navigate evolving sustainability expectations.

The initiative provided a forum for benchmarking, practical knowledge exchange, and the identification of shared challenges, while helping participants strengthen their understanding of emerging trends, assurance approaches, and opportunities for organizational improvement.

Importantly, the discussions reinforced that associations play a significant role in translating broader sustainability objectives into practical programs, guidance, and resources that support their members.

The experience also highlighted opportunities for CSA to build on its role as a convener and standards development organization by facilitating collaboration, supporting the application of CSA SPE 116, and identifying emerging needs for guidance, standards, and conformity assessment.

The next opportunity is to build on the knowledge and relationships established through the cohort and translate these insights into practical, measurable outcomes that support association sustainability leadership and broader adoption of credible sustainability practices.

About the Author

Coro Strandberg is President of Strandberg Consulting and a nationally recognized sustainability and social purpose consultant. She advises businesses, boards and industry associations on integrating sustainability and social purpose into strategy, governance and operations. Her work with associations includes educating them about CSA SPE 116 as a resource for advancing sustainability and convening value chain partners to learn and collaborate. She is a co-author of CSA SPE 116.

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