

**Interreg
Danube Region**



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WE.Circular

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Austria

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IRS

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1 Introduction

This Regional Action Plan (RAP) has been developed within the framework of the WE.Circular project. It recognizes that Austria faces unique challenges in supporting women-led businesses in adopting circular economy principles and leveraging digital technologies. This RAP leverages the findings of the Transnational Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis (A1.1) and the Policy and Legislative Framework Analysis (A3.2).

Specifically, this RAP leverages the findings of the following key activities within the WE.Circular project:

- **Activity 1.1: Transnational Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis:** This analysis, conducted across all partner countries, identified the specific skills gaps and needs of women entrepreneurs in the region regarding digital technologies, circular economy principles, and smart specialization strategies.
- **Activity 3.2: Analyzing of existing policy and legislative framework:** This activity mapped the existing policy and regulatory landscape at both the national and regional levels, identifying existing support mechanisms and potential barriers to the circular and digital transition of women-led businesses.
- **Recommendations from National Stakeholder Group (NSHG):** Throughout the project, the project team has consulted with a National Stakeholder Group comprised of policy makers, business support organizations, academia and companies with the aim to validate existing data and gather relevant feedback in key action areas.

The proposed actions in this RAP are designed to address the specific challenges identified through these activities and are tailored to the unique regional context. The implementation of this RAP aims to contribute to the broader objectives of the WE.Circular project, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable circular economy within the Danube Region.

2 Strategic Background and Foundations of the Regional Action Plan

The development of the Austrian Regional Action Plan (RAP) is based on evidence and consultation gathered through the WE.Circular project activities. It consolidates results from the **National Skills Gaps and Needs Analysis (A1.1)**, the **Policy and Legislative Framework Review (A3.2)**, insights from the **National Stakeholder Group consultations**, and outcomes from **Transnational Learning Events** featuring good practices across Europe.

Key Facts and Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Austria is a Central European country with approximately 9.16 million inhabitants. Its economy is dominated by micro and small enterprises: 99.8% of all companies are SMEs, 92% of which are micro-enterprises with fewer than ten employees, and 56% are sole proprietorships. Around 38% of all SMEs are run by women.

Women are above-averagely represented in Austria's start-up ecosystem compared to other EU countries. Particularly strong sectors for women entrepreneurs include health and social work (70% of the self-employed), education (55%), and fashion and textiles (79.7%). Key actors in the Austrian ecosystem for digitalisation, circular economy, and women's entrepreneurship support include:

- WKO – Frau in der Wirtschaft (FiW): Representing the interests of over 140,000 women entrepreneurs
- Circular Economy Forum Austria (CEFA): Austria's largest independent multi-stakeholder platform for the circular economy
- aws (Austria Wirtschaftsservice): Federal promotional bank for business financing
- FFG (Austrian Research Promotion Agency): National research and innovation funding body
- SFG (Styrian Business Promotion Agency): Regional economic development agency for Styria
- Business Frauen Center (BFC): Advisory, mentoring and networking for women entrepreneurs

- Green Tech Valley Cluster Styria: Technology hotspot for climate protection and circular economy in southern Austria
- FH JOANNEUM: Applied sciences university with Digital Entrepreneurship programme

Policy and Legislative Framework

Austria has implemented a comprehensive set of policies and legislative measures to support entrepreneurship and the transition to a circular economy:

- Austrian Circular Economy Strategy (2022): Target of 18% circularity rate by 2030; reduction of material consumption to max. 14 tonnes per capita/year
- Digital Austria Act (DAA): 117 measures and 36 digitalisation principles for digital transformation
- RTI Strategy 2030: Federal strategy for Research, Technology and Innovation with gender equality as a cross-cutting theme
- SME Digital (KMU Digital): Funding programme for individual digitalisation advisory and projects
- Environmental Promotion Act: Dedicated circular economy funding area with EUR 41 million (2024)

Despite this comprehensive policy framework, specific measures targeting women entrepreneurs in the circular and digital economy remain absent. Gender equality is currently addressed mainly as a cross-cutting theme, without dedicated programmes for the circular and digital transition.

Key Challenges and Needs

The analysis and NSHG consultations identified the following key challenges for women entrepreneurs in Austria:

- Limited access to financing and funding opportunities for circular and digital business models (77% of survey respondents cite high investment costs as a barrier)
- Lack of practical knowledge of circular economy concepts, digital tools and AI applications (55% of women entrepreneurs request training on introduction to the circular economy)

- Low awareness of available support instruments and funding opportunities (74% are not familiar with the Smart Specialisation Strategy)
- Restricted access to networks, mentoring and exchange formats
- Insufficient political and structural support for women-led businesses in the CE/digital transition

3 Visions for 2026-2030: Envisioning the Region in a Circular and Digital Future

By 2030, Austria will be a country where women entrepreneurs actively contribute to the circular economy and digital transformation. Women-led businesses will be recognised as key drivers of innovation, sustainability and resource efficiency.

This RAP supports this vision through targeted measures, partnerships and the expansion of existing programmes. It contributes to the transnational strategy of the WE.Circular project by:

- Contributing to increased resource efficiency within the Austrian economy, with a particular focus on women-led enterprises
- Advancing strategic pillars: promoting circular business models, enhancing resource and waste management, and raising awareness and building capacity
- Fostering greater coherence and synergy within the Danube Region, ensuring that women entrepreneurs are at the forefront of the transition to a sustainable and circular economy by 2030

4 Regional Action Plan Measures

4.1 Measure 1: Access to Finance and Business Support for Women Entrepreneurs in the Circular and Digital Transition

Pillars: Measure 1 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition,
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☒ Policy improvement
- ☐ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Limited access to financing and investment readiness for circular and digital business models
- Low financial literacy and insufficient advisory support for funding applications
- Lack of tailored financial instruments for women entrepreneurs
- Fragmented business support ecosystem without a central point of contact

Actions for implementation of Measure 1:

1.1 Financial Fitness for Women Entrepreneurs – modular financial training

Development and delivery of modular financial training programmes for women entrepreneurs with a focus on the circular and digital economy. Training covers: fundamentals of business financing, accessing aws, FFG and EU funding, impact investment and green finance, and preparation for bank meetings and pitch situations. Alignment: in line with Austria's SME Digital Strategy and the National Circular Economy Strategy.

1.2 Digital Information Platform on Funding and Financing

Development of a central, user-friendly online platform consolidating all relevant funding and financing sources for women entrepreneurs in the circular and digital

sectors. Content includes aws, FFG, SFG and EU programmes as well as private impact investment opportunities.

1.3 Mentoring for Financial Negotiations

Establishment of mentoring formats specifically preparing women entrepreneurs for financing negotiations. Experienced entrepreneurs and finance experts accompany participants in preparing funding applications and bank meetings.

1.4 Piloting Microfinance and Impact Investment Models

In cooperation with financial institutions and business angels, develop pilot programmes specifically tailored to women entrepreneurs in the circular and digital sectors. Establish a network of investors interested in sustainable and circular solutions.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Impact
1.1 Financial Fitness Training	IRS, WKO/FiW	BFC	2026–2028 (annual)	Number of trained women entrepreneurs (target: 30/year); number of successful funding applications; participant satisfaction rate $\geq 75\%$
1.2 Digital Funding Platform	IRS	aws, FFG, SFG, WKO	Pilot 2026; expansion 2027	Platform operational; number of listed funding sources; website traffic; user feedback
1.3 Mentoring for Financial Negotiations	IRS, BFC	WKO/FiW	2026–2028 (annual)	Number of mentoring sessions; number of supported women entrepreneurs (target: 15/year)
1.4 Pilot Microfinance / Impact Investment	IRS	SFG, financial institutions, business angels	2027–2028	Number of partnership agreements; 1 pilot product developed; 10 connected women entrepreneurs

Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	Development and piloting of Financial Fitness Training; launch of digital funding platform (beta version); first mentoring round for financial negotiations; initiate dialogue with financial institutions on gender-responsive products.
2027	Delivery of second Financial Fitness cycle with updated content; full operation of funding platform; second mentoring round; formalise first partnership with financial institution; organise investor event.
2028	Third Financial Fitness cycle; evaluation and update of platform; evaluate pilot gender-responsive financial product; final event and documentation of successful financing stories; secure integration into existing funding programmes.

4.2 Measure 2: Building Circular and Digital Skills for Women Entrepreneurs

Pillars: Measure 2 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition,
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☐ Policy improvement
- ☒ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Lack of specific training programmes on circular economy and digital skills tailored to women entrepreneurs
- Low awareness of AI applications, data economy and circular design in practice (41% of women entrepreneurs request training on AI and circular economy)
- Particular need among women entrepreneurs aged 40+/50+ and in the agricultural sector
- Time constraints and work-life balance as barriers to participation in training

Actions for implementation of Measure 2:

2.1 WE.Circular Training Programme – modular capacity building

Delivery and continuous updating of the WE.Circular Training Programme for women entrepreneurs. Modules include: introduction to the circular economy, circular design and business models, AI and the data economy in business, cybersecurity for SMEs, digital marketing and e-commerce, and resource optimisation. Flexible learning formats (webinars, hybrid, self-paced) enable broad participation.

2.2 Circular Agriculture and Bioeconomy Training

A dedicated training module for women entrepreneurs in agriculture and the bioeconomy. Developed in cooperation with LFI Styria and the agricultural chambers, practical content covers circular production methods, digital tools (sensors, data analytics) and new business models based on renewable raw materials. Pilot region: Styria.

2.3 Mindset Training: Courage, Leadership and Self-Efficacy

Complementary short formats addressing entrepreneurial confidence, resilience and future-oriented thinking. These formats target in particular women entrepreneurs aged 40+/50+ and combine personal development with concrete transfer tasks for daily business practice.

2.4 Peer-Learning Circles and Knowledge-Sharing Events

Establishment of thematic peer-learning circles to accompany training participants in applying circular and digital solutions in their businesses. Complemented by national and regional events showcasing good practices and success stories.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Impact
2.1 WE.Circular Training Programme	IRS, FH Joanneum	FH JOANNEUM, WKO/FiW, BFC	2026–2028 (annual)	Number of women entrepreneurs per training cycle (target: 30); satisfaction rate \geq 75%; number of updated modules

2.2 Circular Agriculture Training	IRS, LFI Styria	Agricultural chambers,	Pilot 2026; expansion 2027–2028	Number of participating women farmers/entrepreneurs (target: 20); number of implemented digital solutions
2.3 Mindset Training	IRS, BFC	WKO/FiW	2026–2028	Number of trainings (target: 4/year); participant satisfaction; self-efficacy score (pre-post)
2.4 Peer-Learning Circles and Events	IRS	WKO, FH JOANNEUM, CEFA	2026–2028 (annual)	Number of peer sessions (target: 6/year); number of participants; number of documented good practices

Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	Update of training content (new modules: AI & CE, cybersecurity); pilot delivery of WE.Circular Training Programme; development of Circular Agriculture module in cooperation with LFI Styria; first peer-learning circles; first national knowledge-sharing event.
2027	Second training cycle with updated content; expansion of Circular Agriculture Training to additional regions; second peer-learning round; evaluation of training impact; 2 knowledge-sharing events.
2028	Third training cycle; publication of best practices from Austrian case studies; closing event with success stories; assessment of competence development and satisfaction rates; secure integration into existing educational offerings (LFI, WKO).

4.3 Measure 3: Awareness Raising and Visibility for Women Entrepreneurs in the Circular Economy

Pillars: Measure 3 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition,
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☒ Policy improvement

□ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Low awareness among women entrepreneurs of the opportunities offered by the circular economy and digital transformation
- Insufficient visibility of women entrepreneurs as pioneers in the circular economy
- Lack of communication on role models and purpose-driven entrepreneurship

Actions for implementation of Measure 3:

3.1 Awareness Campaign 'Women Go Circular'

Development and implementation of a national awareness campaign highlighting positive role models and purpose-driven entrepreneurship by women in the circular economy. Communication channels: social media, regional media partners, events (e.g. at the Circular Economy Summit 2026). Publication of best practice examples from Austria. Alignment: contributes to the Austrian Gender Equality Strategy and the Circular Economy Communication Strategy.

3.2 WKO Digi-Check and 'Future Check-ups' for Women Entrepreneurs

Cooperation with the WKO to actively promote existing self-assessment tools (WKO Digi-Check, Circular Economy Check). Supplemented by facilitated online workshops guiding women entrepreneurs through the check-up process and deriving concrete next steps.

3.3 Circular Economy Summit and Network Cooperation

Active participation at the Austrian Circular Economy Summit and cooperation with the Circular Economy Forum Austria and other relevant events. Presentation of project findings and women entrepreneur success stories on national platforms.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Impact
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3.1 Awareness Campaign 'Women Go Circular'	IRS, WKO/FiW	CEFA, media partners, BFC	2026–2027	Campaign reach; number of published best practices (target: 10); social media engagement
3.2 Digi-Check and Future Check-ups	IRS, WKO	CEFA	2026–2028 (annual)	Number of check-ups conducted (target: 50/year); number of derived action plans
3.3 CE Summit and Network Cooperation	IRS, CEFA	WKO/FiW, Green Tech Valley	2026–2028	Number of events with WE.Circular contribution; number of participants; number of cooperation partners

Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	Design and launch of the 'Women Go Circular' campaign; first events and social media activities; pilot Digi-Check workshops; contribution to Circular Economy Summit 2026.
2027	Continuation of campaign; integration into national communication channels; second cycle of Digi-Check workshops; documentation and dissemination of success stories; network events with partners.
2028	Closing communication; publication of collected best practices; evaluation of campaign reach; recommendations for follow-up activities beyond the project.

4.4 Measure 4: Strengthening Networks and Mentoring for Circular and Digital Women Entrepreneurs

Pillars: Measure 4 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition,
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☐ Policy improvement
- ☒ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Limited access to networks and mentoring programmes with a CE/digital focus for women entrepreneurs
- Lack of intersectoral networking between business, research and policy
- Specific need among women founders aged 40+/50+ (Startup 50+ target group)

Actions for implementation of Measure 4:

4.1 Establishment of the 'Circular and Digital Women Network' Austria

Establishment of an Austria-wide network for women entrepreneurs in the circular and digital sectors. In cooperation with the Circular Economy Forum Austria and FH Joanneum, a shared platform for knowledge exchange, visibility and collaboration will be built. The network includes: regular networking events, an online exchange platform, linkage to the WE.Circular Learning Network, and subgroups by sector and region.

4.2 Mentoring Programmes for Women Entrepreneurs aged 40+/50+

Development and delivery of mentoring formats specifically for women founders and entrepreneurs aged 40+/50+. Experienced mentors from the circular and digital sectors accompany participants in transforming their business models. Linkage with the Startup 50+ programme of IRS.

4.3 Intersectoral Networking: Business, Research and Policy

Organisation of events and formats bringing together women entrepreneurs, research institutions, funding bodies and political decision-makers. The aim is to jointly develop approaches to systemic barriers and strengthen the voice of women entrepreneurs in political processes.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Impact
4.1 Circular and Digital Women Network	IRS, CEFA	FH Joanneum	2026–2028	Number of active members (target: 100 by 2028); number of events/year (target: 4);

				participant satisfaction
4.2 Mentoring 40+/50+	IRS, BFC	WKO/FiW,	2026–2028 (annual)	Number of mentoring tandems/year (target: 15); number of trained mentors; business model improvement rate $\geq 70\%$
4.3 Intersectoral Networking	IRS	FH JOANNEUM, WKO, CEFA	2027–2028	Number of intersectoral events (target: 2/year); number of participants and partners

Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	Network setup 'Circular and Digital Women Network': founding event, online platform development, initial membership recruitment; launch of first mentoring programme 40+/50+; connection to WE.Circular Learning Network.
2027	Consolidation of network; second mentoring cycle; first intersectoral networking event; establish peer-learning format; expand membership to additional regions.
2028	Institutionalisation of network within existing structures (WKO, CEFA); third mentoring programme; second intersectoral event; final reporting; sustainability plan for post-project phase finalised.

4.5 Measure 5: Policy Dialogue and Structural Support for Gender-Sensitive Circular and Digital Transition

Pillars: Measure 5 is contributing to the strategic pillars:

- ☒ Circular economy transition,
- ☒ Digital transition
- ☒ Policy improvement
- ☒ Smart Specialization

Challenges, barriers and gaps:

- Insufficient political and structural support for women-led businesses in the CE/digital transition
- Absence of a national strategy for female entrepreneurship in the circular economy and digital fields
- Work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities as a structural barrier for women entrepreneurs
- Limited participation of women entrepreneurs in political decision-making processes
- **Actions for implementation of Measure 5:**

5.1 Capacity Building for Policymakers and Public Institutions

Delivery of targeted information and capacity-building sessions for policymakers, regional authorities and public institutions. Content: circular economy legislation, gender-sensitive policy design, innovation support for SMEs. Use of materials from the Transnational Policy Learning Centre (TPLC). Alignment: contributes to Austria's RTI Strategy 2030 and the Digital Austria Act.

5.2 Stakeholder Participation in Legislative Processes

Creation of structured opportunities for women entrepreneurs, business associations and chambers to provide feedback on existing legal frameworks. Organisation of consultation events; submission of findings via the WE.Circular Virtual Policy Toolbox.

5.3 Work-Life Balance and Caregiving: Structural Support

Advocacy for the introduction or expansion of measures supporting women entrepreneurs with family and caregiving responsibilities: flexible funding formats, consideration of parental leave periods in funding programmes, tax incentives for household-related services. Cooperation with the Circular Economy Task Force.

Action	Responsible organization	Supportative organization	Time-frame	Impact
5.1 Capacity Building for Policymakers	IRS	WKO, CEFA, BMK, TPLC	2026–2028	Number of trained policymakers/institutional representatives (target: 20); improved

				understanding of CE/digital policy frameworks
5.2 Stakeholder Participation in Legislation	IRS, WKO/FiW	NGOs, universities	2027–2028	Number of consultation events (target: 2); number of submitted position papers; number of engaged stakeholders
5.3 Work-Life Balance and Caregiving	IRS	WKO/FiW	2027–2028	Number of advocacy activities; number of recommendations included in policy documents

Implementation of the actions:

year	Planned activities
2026	Development of a capacity-building programme for policymakers and institutional representatives based on TPLC resources; update training modules on gender-sensitive, circular and digital policy frameworks.
2027	Delivery of capacity-building sessions; first stakeholder consultation event to review existing legal and policy frameworks; advocacy activities on work-life balance measures; documentation and dissemination via TPLC.
2028	Second capacity-building cycle; awareness and information campaigns for SMEs on legal framework conditions; final policy brief with recommendations for future strategy development.

5 Monitoring of the Regional Action Plan implementation

The monitoring of the Regional Action Plan (RAP) implementation is an essential process to ensure that planned activities are effectively executed, progress is measured, and corrective actions are taken where necessary.

It will provide regular insights into the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned during the execution of the five measures, ensuring that the RAP remains aligned with the objectives of the WE.Circular project and the evolving national context.

The following **core KPIs** will be monitored to measure progress under each measure:

Measure	KPI
Measure 1 – Access to Finance	Number of trained women entrepreneurs per year (target: 30); number of successful funding applications; number of partnership agreements with financial institutions; functionality and usage of the funding platform
Measure 2 – Knowledge and Skills	Number of women entrepreneurs per training cycle (target: 30); satisfaction rate $\geq 75\%$; number of updated training modules; number of participating women in Circular Agriculture Training
Measure 3 – Awareness-Raising	Campaign reach; number of published best practices (target: 10); number of Digi-Check workshops delivered; social media engagement
Measure 4 – Networks and Mentoring	Number of active network members (target: 100 by 2028); number of mentoring tandems/year (target: 15); number of networking events/year (target: 4); participant satisfaction
Measure 5 – Policy Support	Number of trained policymakers/officials (target: 20); number of consultation events; number of recommendations included in policy documents

Monitoring frequency:

- **Comprehensive evaluation and reporting:** Once per year (December), summarising progress, KPIs, and key findings.
- **Mid-term review:** Conducted in mid-2027, assessing cumulative results and determining if any corrective measures or updates to the RAP are needed.
- **Final evaluation:** Conducted in late 2028, summarising overall performance, sustainability prospects, and policy impact

Monitoring will be implemented by IRS with the support of the listed stakeholders under each Measure.

Information will be collected by regular e-mails, provided feedback from the participants in the different initiatives, attendance lists and reports, interviews, and public information available.

If the monitoring process identifies underperformance or KPIs not being met, the following corrective actions will be applied:

1. **Review of the specific measure or action to determine root causes** (e.g., insufficient outreach, budget limitations, or stakeholder engagement).
2. **Adjustment of implementation plans** (e.g., extending timelines, reallocating responsibilities, or introducing additional promotional activities).
3. **Engagement of additional partners or experts to strengthen weak areas** (e.g., trainers, mentors, policy advisors).
4. **Update of the RAP**, if necessary, to realign objectives or adapt to new contextual or policy developments.

6 Recommendations for enhancing long-term impact

The sustainability and transferability of the Austrian RAP are crucial to ensure that the results achieved within the WE.Circular project continue to generate tangible benefits beyond the project's lifetime.

Institutionalisation of Developed Mechanisms

The structures developed through WE.Circular – in particular the 'Circular and Digital Women Network', the Financial Fitness Trainings and the Mentoring Programme – should be integrated into existing national and regional structures. Key partners such as WKÖ/FiW, the Circular Economy Forum Austria, BFC and SFG can play a pivotal role in ensuring continuity.

Alignment with National Strategies

Long-term policy impact requires stronger linkages between the RAP and Austria's national strategies (Circular Economy Strategy, Digital Austria Act, RTI Strategy 2030).

The Virtual Policy Toolbox and the TPLC developed under the project constitute valuable resources for policymakers.

Continuation of the WE.Circular Learning Network

Sustaining the WE.Circular Learning Network as a national and regional knowledge-exchange hub is essential for knowledge transfer. The Virtual Toolbox can function as a central repository for methodologies, training materials and success stories.

Financial Sustainability

Financial sustainability can be achieved by aligning future initiatives with existing funding instruments: Horizon Europe, future Interreg programmes and national funding programmes (aws, FFG, SFG). In parallel, private sector partnerships and sponsorships can support ongoing activities.

Continuous Monitoring and Adaptation

The monitoring system established under the project should remain operational beyond 2028, coordinated by IRS in collaboration with relevant institutions. Regular adaptation ensures the RAP can respond to changing framework conditions and emerging challenges.