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Danube Region**



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0.2.3 Strategy for Sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs

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RAPIV, SBA, ABW

Versioning and Contribution History

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1 Executive summary

The Strategy for Sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs provides the long-term framework for ensuring that the Labs continue to operate as relevant, adaptable and transferable support structures for women entrepreneurs after the end of the WE.Circular project. Developed within the Interreg Danube Region Programme, WE.Circular addresses a major regional challenge: although many women entrepreneurs are motivated to engage in circular and digital transition, they often lack practical, integrated and gender-sensitive support that can help them translate these ambitions into viable business development. In response, the project established WE.Circular Labs in 12 Danube Region countries as collaborative environments for co-creation, testing, validation and ecosystem connection.

The Strategy builds on the WE.Circular Labs Concept, the Methodology for Pilot Testing, the results of pilot implementation, the Regional Action Plans and the Transnational Strategy for WE Circular Transition. It confirms that the Labs respond to a clearly identified regional gap. Across the Danube Region, women entrepreneurs face common barriers related to limited practical skills for circular and digital transition, lack of integrated business support, difficulties in accessing finance-related guidance, insufficient mentoring and networking opportunities, and weak links to innovation and support ecosystems. The strategy shows that the WE.Circular Labs address these needs through an integrated support model combining skills development, business advisory, test-before-invest logic, stakeholder engagement and ecosystem cooperation.

The analysis presented in the document demonstrates that the WE.Circular Labs are strongly aligned with European, national and regional priorities related to circular economy, digitalisation, innovation, smart specialisation and inclusive entrepreneurship. This gives them strong potential to be embedded into future policy frameworks, public support systems and regional development instruments. At the same time, the pilot phase provided practical evidence that the Labs can generate value for women-led SMEs by helping them move from broad sustainability ambitions to concrete business decisions, while also revealing the conditions needed for longer-term sustainability. These include stronger organisational anchoring, stable stakeholder engagement, diversified funding, prioritisation of high-impact services and continued transnational cooperation.

Based on this evidence, the Strategy defines a common vision for the WE.Circular Labs as a sustainable transnational network of integrated support structures that empowers women entrepreneurs across the Danube Region to develop, test and scale circular and digitally enabled business solutions. The strategic objectives focus on supporting business model redesign and validation, strengthening skills and competences, reducing transformation risks through pilot testing and market validation, fostering cooperation across value chains and innovation ecosystems, and contributing to the development of resilient and future-oriented women-led enterprises.

A central part of the document is the sustainability model of the WE.Circular Labs. It is built around four interrelated dimensions: organisational sustainability, stakeholder engagement, financial sustainability and service sustainability. Organisational sustainability is linked to integration of the Labs into the existing structures of host organisations and the gradual transition from pilot resources to permanent institutional assets. Stakeholder engagement is treated as a core dimension of sustainability, requiring a move from ad hoc participation to more structured and continuous forms of involvement by mentors, chambers, universities, public actors, finance providers and peer communities. Financial sustainability is based on a mixed funding model combining public support, EU and project funding, service-based income and partnership-based contributions. Service sustainability focuses on maintaining a feasible and high-impact service portfolio built around testing and validation, skills and competences, and networking and ecosystem connection, while allowing adaptation to national contexts and continuous improvement over time.

The Strategy also underlines the importance of transnational cooperation as one of the defining features of the WE.Circular Labs model. The Labs are connected not only through a shared methodology, but also through six common WE.Circular business models and a broader network of joint learning, peer exchange, visibility and matchmaking. The experience of the Pop-up Store and Dissemination Event in Bratislava showed that transnational cooperation can support not only knowledge exchange between host organisations, but also the market visibility, recognition and networking opportunities of the women entrepreneurs supported by the Labs.

For implementation, the Strategy proposes a five-year roadmap covering the period July 2026 to June 2031. The roadmap foresees a phased transition from project-based implementation towards stable institutional embedding, structured stakeholder engagement, broader service delivery, funding diversification and long-term transnational continuity. It is complemented by a proportionate framework for

monitoring, evaluation and risk mitigation, designed to help the Labs remain adaptive, accountable and increasingly embedded in the wider support ecosystems of the Danube Region.

The current Strategy positions the WE.Circular Labs as a tested and strategically relevant model for supporting women entrepreneurs in circular and digital transition. Its main added value lies in providing a practical pathway for converting the results of the WE.Circular project into long-term regional capacity, while also creating conditions for transferability and further uptake by interested organisations and policy actors beyond the project lifetime.

2 Scope of the document

DRP0200020 WE.Circular - Boosting digital and industrial capacity for sustainable circular transition of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region is a project implemented under the Interreg Danube Region Programme. Its main goal is to **increase digital and business skills of women entrepreneurs for circular transition** and to **equip the main stakeholders with skills necessary to develop and implement smart specialization strategies**, supporting women entrepreneurs from the Danube Region for transition to industry 4.0 while fulfilling circular economy aspects. It will be achieved through better integrated policies and innovative practical solutions.

By strengthening **digital, industrial, and circular competences**, WE.Circular builds an inclusive ecosystem that connects women entrepreneurs, business support organisations, academia, and policymakers through **training, innovation, and transnational collaboration**.

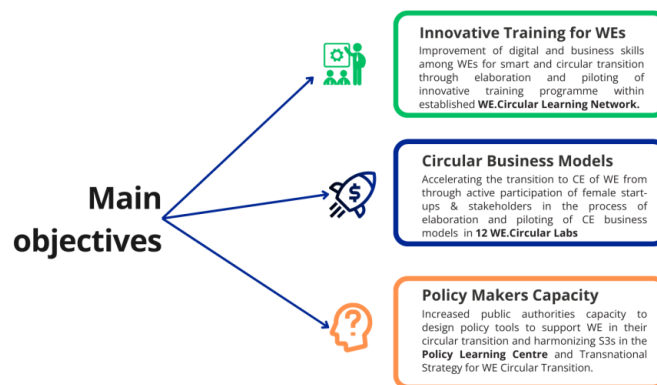


Figure 2-1: WE.Circular project main objectives

The project brings together **15 project partners** and **11 associated strategic partners** from **12 countries** who share the belief that women play a key role in shaping the future of sustainable innovation. Through a combination of **capacity-building, research, policy development, and transnational learning**, WE.Circular strengthens the regional ecosystem that supports women entrepreneurs in adopting circular business models and digital technologies.

Lead Partner:

Regional Agency for Entrepreneurship and Innovations – Varna (RAPIV), Bulgaria

Project Partners:

Varna Free University “Chernorizets Hrabar” (Bulgaria) • Innovation Region Styria LTD (Austria) • Technology Park Varaždin (Croatia) • IREAS – Institute for Structural Policy (Czech Republic) • BWCON GmbH (Germany) • Pannon Business Network (Hungary) • MGFU (Hungary) • Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Štajerska (Slovenia) • Slovak Business Agency (Slovakia) • Ropot Boutique (Romania) • Organization for Entrepreneurship Development (Moldova) • Foreign Trade Chamber of Bosnia and Herzegovina • University of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) • Association of Business Women in Serbia

Associated Strategic Partners:

SPIRIT Slovenia • Ministry of Economy and Industry (Bulgaria) • Ministry of Culture and Innovation (Hungary) • Circular Slovakia • Women Entrepreneurs Club (Hungary) • Ministry of Economy (Moldova) • Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Youth

(Bosnia and Herzegovina) • Economic Chamber of Styria – Dep. founder and economic services (Austria) • City of Varaždin (Croatia) • Chamber of Commerce of Serbia • Viitor Plus (Romania).

One of the main outputs of the project is the present **Strategy for Sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs**. The document defines the long-term framework for maintaining and further developing the Labs beyond the project lifetime as integrated support structures for women entrepreneurs in circular and digital transition. It builds on the WE.Circular Labs Concept, the Methodology for Pilot Testing, the pilot implementation results, the Regional Action Plans and the Transnational Strategy for WE Circular Transition. The Strategy brings together the main lessons learnt, identifies the shared regional needs to which the Labs respond, defines a common vision and strategic objectives, and sets out a sustainability model covering organisational, stakeholder, financial and service dimensions. It also outlines the transnational cooperation logic of the Labs, the implementation roadmap for the period July 2026 to June 2031, and the framework for monitoring, evaluation and risk mitigation. In this way, the document provides the strategic basis for ensuring that the WE.Circular Labs continue to generate value after project closure and remain transferable to other contexts and interested organisations.

3 Background

The WE.Circular Labs were created in response to a clearly identified gap in the Danube Region support ecosystem for women entrepreneurs. The project's transnational analysis showed that many women-led businesses are motivated to engage in circular and digital transition, yet often lack structured and practical support to translate these ambitions into viable business models. In most countries, available measures remain fragmented and tend to focus on isolated aspects such as training or funding, without offering an integrated environment for experimentation, validation and business transformation. The WE.Circular Labs were therefore conceived as a practical response to this gap, providing collaborative spaces where women entrepreneurs can develop, test and refine circular and digitally enabled business solutions in real-life settings. By involving academia, industry, government, and civil society, the Labs ensure that the solutions developed are not only technologically sound but also socially responsible and market-ready.

Within the WE.Circular project framework, the Labs play a central operational role. Established in 12 Danube Region countries, they bring together women entrepreneurs, experts, researchers, policymakers and other ecosystem actors in a Living Lab environment that supports joint value co-creation, rapid validation and practical business experimentation. Their function is to bridge the gap between the supply side of technological and digital solutions and the real needs of women-led enterprises, while at the same time encouraging the development of smarter products, smarter processes and smarter business models. In this way, the Labs translate the project's analytical and methodological work into concrete support for business transformation.

The WE.Circular Labs Concept defined the common framework for establishing and operating the Labs, including their objectives, principles, organisational structure, services and operational phases. The Methodology for Pilot Testing then operationalised this framework by setting out how the Labs should be tested in practice, how users and stakeholders should be engaged, and how the results should be evaluated and used for refinement. Together, these two documents established and validated the WE.Circular Lab model. This Strategy serves as the operational bridge, transforming the WE.Circular Labs from a time-bound project into a permanent regional infrastructure.

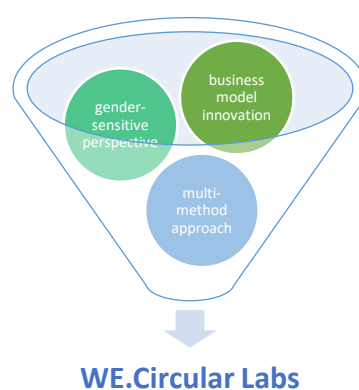


Figure 3-1: WE.Circular Labs approach, credit: own illustration

Sustainability and transferability are critical because the long-term value of the WE.Circular Labs depends not only on what was achieved during the pilot phase, but on whether the model can continue to function and create impact after project closure. The pilot testing confirmed the relevance of the Labs and generated valuable evidence on what works in practice, which elements require adaptation, and which types of support are most useful for women-led SMEs. At the same time, it showed that many

promising actions require continuity, stronger partnerships, further resources and embedding into existing innovation ecosystems. For this reason, the sustainability of the Labs must be understood not only in financial terms, but also as organisational continuity, service durability, stakeholder ownership and the capacity to transfer the model to other contexts and interested organisations. In this sense, the Strategy provides the link between project-based implementation and long-term systemic impact.

3.1 Alignment with the legal framework

The WE.Circular Labs are strongly aligned with the wider European policy framework related to circular economy, digitalisation, innovation and inclusive entrepreneurship. At EU level, the Circular Economy Action Plan, as part of the European Green Deal, promotes sustainable product design, circular business processes, waste prevention, resource efficiency and investment in innovation. At the same time, European initiatives supporting women's entrepreneurship recognise the need to improve access to finance, mentoring, business networks and tailored support. The Labs specifically address the 'Twin Transition' of green and digital shifts, ensuring women entrepreneurs are not left behind in the evolving regulatory landscape of the EU.

The relevance of the Labs is equally strong at Danube Region and national level. Across the 12 participating countries, a broad set of strategies and policy instruments already exists in areas such as SME development, circular economy, digitalisation, smart specialisation and gender equality. However, the policy analysis shows that despite this relatively rich strategic landscape, implementation remains uneven and support measures are rarely sufficiently tailored to the specific needs of women entrepreneurs. Common gaps across countries include difficulties in access to finance, limited digital and circular training opportunities, weak networking and mentoring support, fragmented implementation and insufficient coordination between stakeholders. The Labs serve as the missing link that allows national authorities to hit their circularity targets through a gender-sensitive lens.

The WE.Circular Labs respond directly to these gaps. Rather than duplicating existing policies, they provide an operational mechanism for putting them into practice. The Labs help translate broad strategic priorities into concrete support for women-led businesses by combining co-creation, mentoring, experimentation, testing and ecosystem engagement. In this way, they contribute to the practical implementation of

circular economy and digitalisation strategies, while also supporting regional smart specialisation priorities and more inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystems. This role is particularly important in the Danube Region, where policy ambition is often stronger than the actual delivery of integrated support on the ground.

This alignment with the legal and policy framework is highly relevant for the long-term sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs. Because the Labs address policy priorities that are already recognised at European, national and regional level, they have strong potential to be embedded into future programmes, public support systems and innovation ecosystems beyond the lifetime of the project. Their sustainability therefore depends not only on organisational or financial continuity, but also on their capacity to function as an implementation-oriented instrument that strengthens the uptake of circular, digital and gender-sensitive policies in practice.

3.2 Lessons learnt from pilot testing of the Labs

The pilot testing of the WE.Circular Labs represented the moment when the conceptual model of the Labs moved into practice. After the co-creation phase, the participating women-led SMEs worked together with experts and stakeholders to identify the most relevant circular business model pathway, define the main barriers and opportunities, and shape pilot scenarios that reflected their actual business situation. In this way, the pilot phase was not designed as a purely technical exercise, but as a real-life validation process through which the Labs could test how well their support logic responds to the needs of women entrepreneurs in different sectors and national contexts.



Photo 1: National co-creation workshops in Bulgaria and Moldova, (April – May 2025), photo credit: own resources

Across the participating countries, the process followed a broadly similar rhythm. It started with the identification of specific company needs and circularity challenges during co-creation, continued with expert consultations and refinement of business model scenarios, and then moved into a period of practical testing in which selected ideas, improvements or service elements were explored in real conditions. Some

companies used the pilot phase to test new communication tools, product or packaging concepts, service extensions or digital elements. Others used it to validate assumptions, narrow their focus and define more realistic priorities for future implementation. This variation is important, because it shows that the Labs were capable of working with enterprises at different stages of maturity and with different levels of internal capacity.

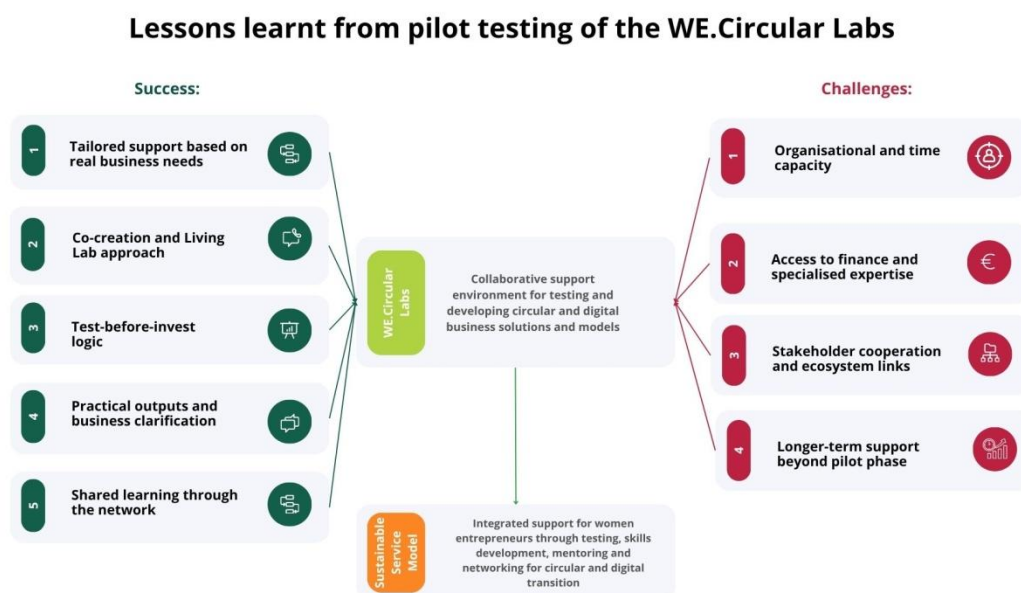


Figure 3-2: Main lessons learnt from pilot testing of the WE.Circular Labs, credit: own illustration

What emerged most clearly from the pilot phase was that the WE.Circular Labs are most useful when **they help women entrepreneurs move from broad sustainability ambitions to concrete business decisions**. The process worked particularly well where it helped companies clarify what exactly needed to change, what could realistically be tested, and what kind of support was necessary to move further. In a number of cases, the pilots produced visible practical outputs, such as improved communication concepts, more clearly defined services, digital improvements, new engagement approaches or stronger market positioning. In other cases, the main achievement was not a finished innovation, but a more precise understanding of the business model, a better-structured development path and a clearer sense of what should come next. This also proved valuable, because for many small enterprises clarity and prioritisation are essential preconditions for further growth.

The process also confirmed the practical strength of the Living Lab approach. The **Labs generated the greatest value** where support was not reduced to advice alone, but combined mentoring, stakeholder dialogue, networking, business model reflection,

collaborative ideation and scenario development. This made it possible to connect circular economy principles with the everyday realities of individual businesses and to adapt proposed solutions to their actual capacities. In this sense, the pilot phase showed that the effectiveness of the Labs lies not only in the relevance of the business models themselves, but also in the way the support is delivered. The collaborative and trust-based character of the process was one of its strongest assets. The same is true for the “test before invest” logic, which gave companies room to explore options and assess feasibility before committing to major organisational or financial steps. For many women-led SMEs, this reduced uncertainty and made circular transition more approachable.

At the same time, the pilot testing made visible a number of recurring **challenges** that were shared across countries. Many of the participating enterprises were micro or small businesses with limited staff time, limited technical expertise and a strong dependence on the founder’s personal involvement. As a result, even where motivation was high, implementation often progressed more slowly than originally expected. In other cases, businesses faced broader structural barriers linked to the cost of circular innovation, access to finance, certification requirements, legal uncertainty, lack of infrastructure or weakly developed circular value chains. The process also showed that successful circular transition depends heavily on the quality of stakeholder engagement. Where companies were able to draw on stronger collaboration with experts, business support organisations, academia, public actors or market partners, they were better positioned to turn ideas into realistic actions. Where such support was weaker, progress depended much more on individual effort and remained harder to sustain.

These experiences point to several broader lessons. One of the most important is that the **WE.Circular Labs work best when they start from concrete business problems** rather than from abstract circular economy language. Although the participating companies came from different sectors and local environments, many of them struggled with similar issues, such as access to sustainable materials, production and logistics constraints, weak market visibility, low customer awareness, fragmented ecosystems and insufficient access to finance or expertise. The Labs created the most value when they helped businesses translate these barriers into concrete priorities and realistic pathways for action. Another important lesson is that **the Lab model must remain flexible**. Not every enterprise is ready for the same type or intensity of support. Some need awareness building, mentoring and business model redesign, while others are ready for piloting, investment preparation or broader ecosystem development. The pilot

phase showed clearly that one short intervention cycle cannot be expected to deliver the same kind of outcome for all companies, and that strategic clarification is often as important as implementation itself.

An equally important finding concerns the added value of the WE.Circular Labs as a transnational network. The pilot phase showed that **the strength of the network lies in the diversity of the partner organisations behind the Labs**. Chambers, business support organisations, research actors, innovation intermediaries and sectoral experts all contributed different forms of knowledge and support. This diversity created synergies between entrepreneurship support, policy understanding, circular economy expertise, digital innovation and stakeholder mobilisation. At the same time, the common methodology and the exchange of experiences across countries created real benefits in terms of joint learning, peer review and cross-border transfer of ideas. This gave the Labs a collective strength that goes beyond the individual national pilots and reinforces the transferability of the overall model. In this sense, the value of the WE.Circular Labs lies not only in what each Lab can do on its own, but also in the shared learning capacity of the network as a whole.

The pilot testing confirmed that the WE.Circular Labs are relevant, practical and capable of generating value for women-led SMEs, but it also showed that their long-term impact depends on continuity beyond the project framework. The experience of the pilots suggests that the Labs should be understood not as one-off support actions, but as flexible and evolving structures that require differentiated services, stable access to expertise, strong stakeholder engagement and continued links to wider innovation and business support ecosystems. This is precisely why a sustainability strategy is needed: to ensure that the lessons, methods and partnerships built through the pilot phase can continue to create value after the project ends.

3.3 Joint problems and needs in the Danube Region

Across the Danube Region, women entrepreneurs face a set of common barriers that are directly linked to the types of support provided by the WE.Circular Labs. Although national and regional contexts differ, the available evidence shows a consistent pattern. Women-led businesses are interested in circular and digital transition, but often lack the practical conditions needed to turn this interest into concrete business development. The **most recurring needs** concern **access to relevant skills, practical business support,**

finance-related guidance, mentoring, networking and clearer links to existing support ecosystems.

Across the region, women entrepreneurs need support that goes beyond general awareness raising and helps them understand how circular economy principles and digital tools can be applied in their own sectors and business models. The Regional Action Plans (RAPs) repeatedly highlight the need for specialised training, modular learning formats, peer-learning opportunities and more flexible approaches that take into account time constraints, uneven starting levels and different business realities. This directly confirms the relevance of the Labs' role in skills development and competence building. A second common problem is the lack of integrated business support for applying and testing change. In many countries, women entrepreneurs do not only need knowledge, but also practical guidance in redesigning business models, validating ideas, adopting circular solutions, using digital tools and identifying realistic development pathways. Access to finance appears as another shared challenge. The issue is not only the shortage of suitable funding, but also the difficulty of identifying opportunities, understanding procedures, preparing applications and linking finance to concrete circular and digital investments.



Figure 3-3: Joint problems and needs of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region and the response of the WE.Circular Labs, credit: own illustration

The RAPs and the Transnational Strategy for WE Circular Transition also show a strong and repeated need for mentoring, networking and ecosystem cooperation. In many countries, women entrepreneurs remain weakly connected to innovation actors, business support organisations, research institutions, public authorities and peer

communities. This reduces their visibility, limits access to relevant contacts and makes circular and digital transition more difficult to sustain. For this reason, both the transnational and national documents give strong importance to mentoring networks, peer learning, learning circles, matchmaking, role models and cooperation platforms. These needs correspond directly to the networking and stakeholder engagement role of the WE.Circular Labs.

These joint problems point to a clear regional need for integrated, gender-sensitive support structures that combine skills development, business support, finance-related guidance and ecosystem connection. This is exactly the space where the WE.Circular Labs create added value. Their service logic responds to the main shared needs identified across the Danube Region and therefore provides an important analytical bridge to both the Regional Action Plans and the Transnational Strategy.

3.4 SWOT analysis of WE.Circular Labs

The SWOT analysis brings together the main findings from the previous sections and provides a strategic overview of the current position of the WE.Circular Labs. The analysis shows that the WE.Circular Labs already have a strong foundation. Their main strengths lie in the fact that they are based on a tested model, respond to clearly identified regional needs, and combine several forms of support that are often fragmented in existing ecosystems. The Labs benefit from a common methodology, a shared set of six business models, practical pilot experience, and a transnational network of partners with diverse competences. They have also shown that they can provide value to women entrepreneurs through co-creation, business model support, testing, mentoring and stakeholder engagement. This gives them a clear strategic identity and differentiates them from more conventional support schemes focused only on training or funding.

At the same time, the SWOT confirms that the Labs still face internal limitations that must be addressed for long-term sustainability. Their future development may be constrained by uneven institutional capacity across host organisations, differences in local ecosystem maturity, limited staff time and resources, and the fact that not all services can be sustained at the same level in all countries. Another internal challenge is the dependence on project-based momentum. While the pilot phase created strong evidence and visibility, the Labs now need stronger organisational anchoring, service

prioritisation and continuity mechanisms in order to move from project implementation to long-term operation.

The external environment, however, creates significant opportunities for further development. The policy analysis and the Regional Action Plans show growing recognition of the need for circular economy support, digitalisation, women's entrepreneurship promotion and stronger innovation ecosystems. This creates favourable conditions for embedding the Labs into future national, regional and European support frameworks. Additional opportunities arise from the possibility to connect the Labs with funding schemes, mentoring initiatives, education and training measures, innovation support structures and transnational cooperation mechanisms. The visibility already generated through the WE.Circular network, the Pop-up Store, the business models and the Learning Network can also help position the Labs as a recognisable and transferable support model beyond the project lifetime.

At the same time, several external threats should be taken into account. The most important risks relate to uneven institutional uptake, limited long-term funding, fragmented stakeholder engagement and the possibility that the Labs remain perceived as project-based rather than as embedded support structures. There is also a risk that ecosystem weaknesses present in some countries, such as limited cooperation, lack of specialised expertise, weak market demand for circular solutions or insufficient policy implementation, could reduce the effectiveness of the Labs if they are not actively addressed. In addition, the diversity of partner structures, while a major strength, may also create inconsistency if the common WE.Circular logic is not maintained over time.



Figure 3-4: SWOT Analysis for WE.Circular Labs, credit: own illustration

4 Vision and strategic objectives

4.1 Common vision of WE.Circular Labs

The common vision of the WE.Circular Labs is to become a sustainable transnational network of integrated support structures that empowers women entrepreneurs across the Danube Region to develop, test and scale circular and digitally enabled business solutions.

The Labs aim to provide practical support environments where women-led businesses can strengthen their innovation capacity, connect with relevant stakeholders and actively contribute to a more sustainable and competitive economy

4.2 Strategic objectives

The **overall objective** of the WE.Circular Labs is to **accelerate the circular and digital transformation of women-led businesses in the Danube Region through structured co-creation, validation and ecosystem integration.**

More specifically, the Labs aim to:

- Support women entrepreneurs in redesigning and validating circular and digitally enabled business models,
- Enable the development of intelligent products, intelligent processes and intelligent business models,
- Reduce transformation risks through pilot testing and market validation mechanisms,
- Strengthen skills and competences related to circular economy, digitalisation and business model innovation,
- Foster collaboration across value chains and regional innovation ecosystems,
- Facilitate alignment with smart specialisation priorities and regional development strategies,
- Contribute to the creation of resilient, competitive and future-oriented women-led enterprises.

5 Sustainability model of WE.Circular Labs

The sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs depends on their ability to continue functioning after the project as relevant, accessible and adaptable support structures for women entrepreneurs. This requires a model that does not rely on a single source of continuity, but combines organisational anchoring, diversified funding and continued relevance of services. The Transnational Strategy for WE Circular Transition already points in this direction by emphasising that long-term impact will depend on institutional anchoring, policy uptake, stakeholder ownership, financial continuity and the continued use and adaptation of WE.Circular tools and structures. The Regional Action Plans further confirm that sustainability should be built through integration into existing ecosystems rather than through parallel structures.

5.1 Organisational sustainability

Organisational sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs **depends first on their integration into the existing structures of partner organisations**. This was already embedded in the original Lab model, where the Labs were established within the existing capacities, competences and institutional settings of the project partners. This approach remains the most realistic basis for continuity, because it allows the Labs to build on organisations that already have a role in business support, innovation, research, training, regional development or stakeholder coordination. In practice, this means that the future of each Lab should be linked to the host organisation's existing mandate, services and partnerships, while keeping the common WE.Circular logic and identity visible at network level.

A sustainable organisational model also requires a clear governance approach and role distribution. The Labs do not need a heavy standalone structure, but they do need clearly assigned responsibilities for coordination, service delivery, stakeholder communication, knowledge sharing and follow-up.



Figure 5-1: Resource Transition Matrix: from pilot resources to sustainable institutional assets, credit: own illustration

At local level, the host organisation should act as the operational anchor of the Lab, while involving supportive actors such as universities, chambers, clusters, business support organisations, local authorities and experts according to their competences. At transnational level, continuity can be supported through a light coordination model that preserves exchange between Labs, enables transfer of practices and maintains shared methodological principles. The Transnational Strategy for WE Circular Transition underlines that the value of the network lies not only in the individual Labs, but also in their collective learning capacity and their ability to continue as a transnational support network.

Long-term stakeholder engagement is another core element of organisational sustainability. The WE.Circular process has shown that the Labs are strongest when they function as connectors between women entrepreneurs and the wider quadruple helix ecosystem. For this reason, sustainability should include regular mechanisms for stakeholder involvement, such as mentoring pools, learning circles, advisory groups, thematic events, peer exchange and cooperation with public and private support actors. The RAPs also repeatedly emphasise the importance of building or maintaining networks, mentoring systems, peer-learning formats and cooperation platforms, which confirms that stakeholder engagement should not be treated as a one-off project activity, but as a permanent function of the Labs.

5.2 Stakeholder engagement

The long-term sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs depends not only on organisational continuity and financial resources, but also on the active involvement of relevant stakeholders. The pilot phase showed clearly that the effectiveness of the Labs is strongly influenced by the quality of cooperation between women entrepreneurs and the wider support ecosystem. Where companies were able to engage experts, business support organisations, academia, public actors and market partners, the Lab process generated more realistic solutions, stronger confidence and better conditions for implementation. Where such cooperation was weaker, progress depended more heavily on individual effort and was harder to sustain.

For this reason, stakeholder engagement should be treated as a core dimension of sustainability rather than as a supporting activity. The WE.Circular Labs were designed as collaborative structures based on co-creation and quadruple helix interaction, which means that their long-term value depends on their ability to remain connected to the actors that shape local and regional innovation ecosystems. This includes not only women entrepreneurs as direct users of the Labs, but also mentors, chambers, universities, innovation organisations, clusters, public authorities, finance providers, NGOs and peer communities. Their continued involvement helps ensure that the Labs remain relevant, trusted and responsive to changing needs.

A sustainable engagement model requires moving from ad hoc participation to more structured and continuous forms of involvement. In practice, this may include the establishment of mentoring pools, advisory groups, peer-learning circles, thematic stakeholder communities, matchmaking formats and regular cooperation with institutional partners. It also requires clarity about roles and expected contributions, so that stakeholders do not participate only occasionally, but gradually develop a sense of ownership and shared interest in the continuation of the Labs. In this way, stakeholder engagement becomes part of the operating model of the Labs rather than an activity linked only to specific project phases.

Stakeholder sustainability also depends on mutual value. The Labs will be more sustainable where participation creates visible benefits not only for the supported women entrepreneurs, but also for the involved organisations and experts. These benefits may include access to innovation cases, visibility, networking opportunities,

policy feedback, stronger regional partnerships, new service opportunities or contribution to shared circular and digital transition goals. Building this reciprocal value is important for maintaining motivation and long-term commitment across the ecosystem.

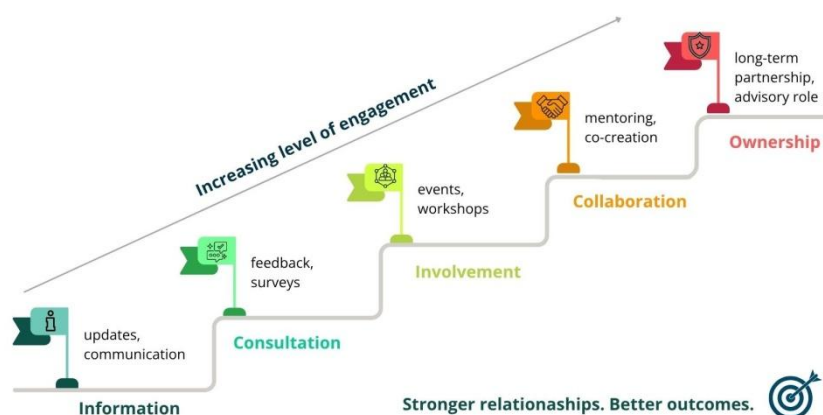


Figure 5-2: Stakeholder engagement ladder, credit: own illustration

In this sense, stakeholder engagement is both a challenge and a strategic opportunity for the WE.Circular Labs. If it is managed in a structured and continuous way, it can strengthen the legitimacy, outreach and long-term embeddedness of the Labs within national and regional support ecosystems. It is therefore an essential precondition for the sustainability of the WE.Circular Lab model beyond the project lifetime.

5.3 Financial sustainability

Financial sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs requires a mixed funding model. A single funding source is unlikely to provide stable long-term continuity, especially given the diversity of national contexts and host organisations. A more resilient model is one that combines public support, project funding, service-based income and, where relevant, sponsorship or partnership-based contributions. This is consistent with the logic which highlights financial continuity as one of the key conditions for sustaining the results of WE.Circular and points to future use of national programmes, EU funds, Interreg, Horizon Europe and partnerships as possible continuation pathways.

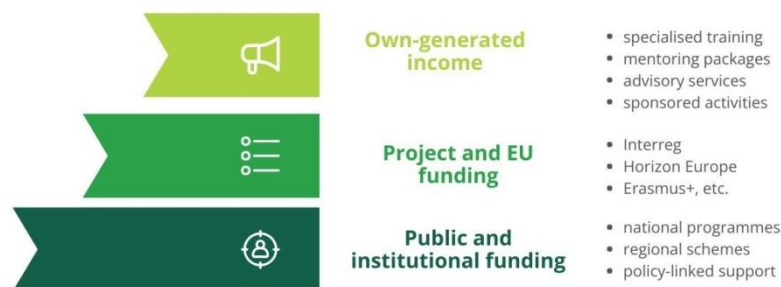


Figure 5-3: Financial sustainability model of WE.Circular Labs, credit: own illustration

Public funding will remain important, particularly where the Labs contribute to priorities already recognised in national and regional policies, such as SME development, digitalisation, circular economy, women's entrepreneurship, innovation and smart specialisation. The RAPs show that in many countries these priorities are already linked to existing policy frameworks and funding instruments, even if support for women entrepreneurs still needs to become more targeted. This creates an opportunity to position the Labs not as external project activities, but as practical delivery mechanisms that can be connected to national or regional support schemes. Relevant options may include entrepreneurship and innovation programmes, digitalisation schemes, training budgets, regional development instruments, circular economy calls and recovery or competitiveness funds.

EU funding can complement this by supporting transnational learning, innovation pilots, ecosystem cooperation and further development of common tools. The WE.Circular Strategy explicitly suggests continued use and adaptation of project outputs through future funding opportunities and broader institutional uptake. In this sense, EU programmes should not be seen only as a continuation of project financing, but also as a way to support scaling, transferability and upgrading of the Lab model.

At the same time, long-term financial sustainability will be stronger if the Labs gradually diversify their revenue streams. Not all services should become fee-based, because the Labs are intended to remain accessible and inclusive. However, selected services can over time generate income, especially where they offer clear added value to enterprises or institutions. These may include specialised training modules, tailored mentoring packages, business model advisory services, facilitated workshops, innovation support for companies, ecosystem events, or commissioned support for public or corporate partners. A gradual approach is important. In the early stage, public and project-based

funding may dominate, but over time the share of service-related and partnership-based income can increase, creating a more balanced and flexible model.

5.4 Service sustainability

Service sustainability means that the WE.Circular Labs continue to offer support that is relevant, feasible and clearly valuable for women entrepreneurs. The pilot activities show that the Labs are most effective when they focus on practical and accessible support rather than overly complex interventions. This suggests that long-term sustainability depends not on offering as many services as possible, but on prioritising high-impact services that respond to real needs and can realistically be maintained by host organisations and partners.

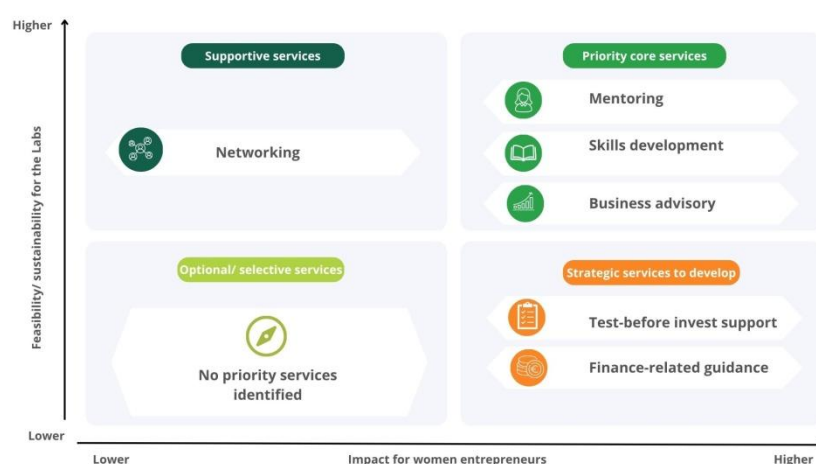


Figure 5-4: Service portfolio matrix: prioritising WE.Circular Labs services

In this respect, the most sustainable service portfolio is likely to be built around the 3 service areas already embedded in the Lab model: **support for testing and validation**, **support for skills and competences**, and **support for networking and ecosystem connection**. These areas correspond strongly with the needs identified across the region and are repeatedly reflected in the RAPs through measures related to training, mentoring, peer learning, funding advisory, visibility, networking and practical support for circular and digital business development. They also match the transnational intervention areas defined in the Strategy, especially capacity building, access to finance

and advisory support, mentoring and networking, and business support for circular model application and scaling.

At the same time, service sustainability requires adaptation to national and institutional contexts. The WE.Circular Labs were never intended to function as identical units in all countries. Their strength lies precisely in the balance between a common framework and local flexibility. Some Labs may be stronger in training and mentoring, others in business advisory, co-creation, digital tools, policy connection or stakeholder mobilisation. The service portfolio should therefore remain aligned with the core WE.Circular logic, but be adapted to the capacities of the host organisation, the maturity of the local ecosystem and the specific needs of women entrepreneurs in the country or region. This is also consistent with the RAPs, which translate common priorities into different national combinations of measures and implementation arrangements.

Service sustainability depends on continuous improvement. The pilot phase has already shown that some services are easier to apply and more immediately useful, while others require more time, technical support or external resources. For this reason, the Labs should continue to use simple monitoring and feedback mechanisms to assess which services generate most value, which need refinement and where additional partnerships are required. This can include participant feedback, follow-up with supported entrepreneurs, tracking of service uptake, documentation of good practices and regular reflection with stakeholders. In this way, the service portfolio can remain dynamic and responsive rather than fixed. Continuous adaptation based on evidence and user experience will be essential for keeping the WE.Circular Labs relevant over time.

6 Transnational cooperation of the Labs

From the beginning, the Labs were conceived not as isolated national support points, but as a connected network of structures operating within a shared methodological framework across the Danube Region. This transnational dimension gives the Labs added value that goes beyond what each individual host organisation could provide on its own. It creates the conditions for exchange of knowledge, transfer of experience, joint learning and broader visibility of women entrepreneurs' circular and digital transition.

The common foundation for this cooperation lies in the fact that all Labs were developed on the basis of the same Concept and methodological logic, while being tested and adapted in different national contexts. At the same time, the Labs also share a common set of six WE.Circular business models, which provide a practical and transferable framework for working with women-led enterprises across sectors and countries. These six models cover different but complementary pathways of circular and digital transition, including circular design, resource optimisation, production improvement, smart digital enablement, market education and collaborative ecosystems. In this way, the network is connected not only through shared principles, but also through a common portfolio of practical business transformation approaches.

This means that transnational cooperation is not limited to general exchange between partners. It also includes shared learning around how these business models are interpreted, tested and further refined in different environments. The same model can generate different applications depending on sector, company readiness, institutional support and local ecosystem conditions. This creates valuable opportunities for peer learning, because the Labs can compare how common business models perform in practice, what kinds of support are most effective, and which adaptations are needed to respond to national and regional realities.

An important practical expression of this transnational cooperation was the WE.Circular Pop-up Store and Dissemination Event in Bratislava. The event brought together women entrepreneurs, experts, innovators and partners from several Danube countries and created a shared space for presenting circular business solutions, strengthening visibility and building international connections. Finalists from 12 countries presented their projects and displayed real products during the event, which allowed the transnational network to move from exchange of methods to direct promotion of circular businesses and their market-facing solutions.

The Pop-up Store also demonstrated that transnational cooperation can support the Labs through concrete joint promotional and matchmaking formats. In addition to company presentations, the event included product display, direct networking opportunities and a dedicated networking session attended by finalists, guests and experts. This created conditions for new contacts, collaborations and practical exchange between companies and ecosystem actors. The event was therefore not only a

dissemination activity, but also a support mechanism for visibility, outreach and market connection within the wider WE.Circular network.

The development of a catalogue and the presentation of products in a shared transnational setting are equally relevant in this context. They show that the Labs can cooperate not only in supporting internal learning and testing, but also in creating common formats for external communication, showcasing business cases and strengthening the recognition of women-led circular solutions across borders. This is an important dimension of sustainability, because long-term cooperation between Labs should also help companies gain broader exposure and access to opportunities beyond their local ecosystem.

In practical terms, transnational cooperation should therefore serve several complementary functions. It should support continued exchange of methods, tools and service approaches between Labs. It should also support peer learning between host organisations through comparison of experiences, challenges and implementation choices. In addition, it should sustain the common use and further development of the six WE.Circular business models as a shared support framework that can be transferred, adapted and capitalised on beyond the project lifetime. At the same time, it should continue to generate joint visibility, networking and matchmaking opportunities for women entrepreneurs through shared events, catalogues, dissemination formats and cross-border promotion.

For the long-term sustainability of this cooperation, the network should remain light, practical and function-oriented. It does not require a complex formal structure, but it does require continuity in communication, knowledge sharing and joint reflection. This can be supported through regular coordination between Labs, peer-learning meetings, thematic exchange around the six business models, joint dissemination of good practices and continued use of common WE.Circular tools and platforms. The WE.Circular Learning Network, the shared business models, the Labs themselves and the broader knowledge base created through the project provide a strong starting point for this continued cooperation.

A practical basis for the continuation of transnational cooperation after the end of the project can also be provided through the existing WE.Circular Transnational Learning Network for women entrepreneurs. As part of this activity, Memorandum of Understanding have already been signed and include a light framework for post-project

cooperation, such as annual meetings, rotating national coordination and a validity period of five years after project closure. This existing mechanism can support the continued exchange of information, good practices, events and cooperation opportunities among the Labs without requiring the creation of a new formal structure. In this way, the transnational sustainability of the Labs can build on arrangements that have already been agreed within the project and that are realistic in terms of partner capacity. Where members of the Transnational Learning Network are also involved in the WE.Circular Labs, they can play a practical role in ensuring continuity of communication and follow-up. They may act as relay points for sharing information on relevant events, calls, good practices and Lab-related activities, while also helping to maintain links between national Lab structures and the wider transnational cooperation framework. This would make the continuation of exchange more concrete and accessible, while preserving the light and flexible character of the network.

In strategic terms, transnational cooperation strengthens the ability of the WE.Circular Labs to remain relevant, innovative and transferable over time. It reduces the risk that each Lab develops in isolation, while reinforcing a common identity built on shared methods, shared business models and shared learning. The long-term value of the initiative therefore lies not only in the sustainability of each individual Lab, but also in the exchange, comparison, joint visibility and cooperation generated through the transnational network.

7 Implementation Roadmap (July 2026- June 2031)

The implementation roadmap translates the sustainability model of the WE.Circular Labs into a phased process for the period of 5 years, after completion of WE.Circular project (July 2026– June 2031), combining organisational anchoring, stakeholder engagement, service development, institutional integration and long-term transnational continuity. It also reflects the gradual transition from project-based resources and stakeholder participation towards more permanent institutional capacities, structured engagement mechanisms and stable service delivery within the host organisations. In the first phase of implementation, continued transnational exchange may also be supported through the existing Learning Network and its MoU-based cooperation

framework, including annual meetings, rotating coordination and the sharing of relevant information, events and good practices among participating Labs and stakeholders.

Period	Main actions	Support stakeholders	Expected results
07.2026-06.2027	<p>Integrate the Labs into existing partner structures.</p> <p>Define internal coordination roles and governance responsibilities.</p> <p>Map which pilot-phase resources, methodologies and stakeholder functions can be transferred into regular organisational practice.</p> <p>Maintain the core support services tested during the project, especially mentoring, advisory support, training, networking and business model guidance. Identify core stakeholder groups and initiate structured engagement formats such as mentoring pools, advisory contacts or peer-learning communities.</p> <p>Start continued use of the shared WE.Circular business models, tools and service formats.</p>	Project partners, associated strategic partners, business support organisations, experts	Labs are operationally anchored and continue functioning after the pilot phase with a clear internal structure, identified stakeholder base and core service offer
07.2027-06.2028	<p>Expand service delivery to a broader group of women entrepreneurs.</p> <p>Strengthen mentoring, matchmaking, peer learning and stakeholder cooperation. Build stronger links with chambers, universities, innovation actors, finance providers and public support institutions. Establish more regular stakeholder involvement mechanisms, including mentoring pools, advisory groups, thematic cooperation formats and peer-learning communities.</p> <p>Use the Labs more actively as local support entry points for circular and digital business development.</p>	Chambers, universities, Digital Innovation Hubs, clusters, finance and advisory organisations, local authorities	Labs move from continuation to active service expansion and ecosystem activation, with stronger outreach and broader stakeholder involvement.

Period	Main actions	Support stakeholders	Expected results
07.2028-06.2029	<p>Review and refine the service portfolio based on monitoring and feedback.</p> <p>Document successful cases, service formats and methodological lessons.</p> <p>Formalise the most relevant cooperation models and integrate the most effective services and engagement mechanisms into existing entrepreneurship, innovation or training structures.</p> <p>Continue strengthening governance, staff roles and institutional ownership of Lab functions.</p>	Stakeholders involved in service delivery, policy actors, partner organisations	Labs consolidate results and strengthen their institutional relevance through more stable service models, clearer ownership and documented practice.
07.2029-06.2030	<p>Scale the most effective Lab functions through stronger organisational uptake and connection to national or regional support instruments.</p> <p>Diversify funding sources and strengthen continuity of stakeholder engagement.</p> <p>Support longer-term ownership by institutional partners and ecosystem actors.</p> <p>Continue exchange between Labs through shared learning, joint visibility actions and transfer of practical approaches.</p>	Public authorities, support agencies, funding bodies, project partners	Labs operate with broader recognition, stronger funding mix and better integration into existing support ecosystems.
07.2030-06.2031	<p>Maintain a stable core set of high-impact services adapted to national contexts.</p> <p>Continue transnational cooperation through shared business models, common tools, dissemination, exchange of practices and joint learning formats.</p> <p>Maintain the Labs through embedded organisational roles, active stakeholder networks and regular service delivery within host structures.</p> <p>Position the Labs as recognised long-term support structures for women entrepreneurs in circular and digital transition.</p>	Strategic partners, policy actors, support ecosystems across countries	Labs function as sustainable support structures with continued transnational cooperation and long-term relevance beyond project logic.

8 Monitoring, evaluation and risk mitigation

Monitoring, evaluation and risk mitigation are essential for ensuring that the WE.Circular Labs remain functional, relevant and sustainable beyond the project lifetime. Since the Labs are conceived as flexible and evolving support structures, their long-term success depends not only on the implementation of activities, but also on the ability to follow progress, assess results, identify emerging risks and adapt the model where needed. In this sense, monitoring and evaluation should serve as a practical management tool supporting continuous improvement, institutional learning and better strategic decision-making.

The monitoring approach should reflect the main sustainability dimensions of the Labs. This means following their organisational continuity, the quality of stakeholder engagement, the stability of funding, the relevance and uptake of services, and the continuity of transnational cooperation. It should also pay attention to the level of participation of women entrepreneurs and SMEs as the main target group of the Labs, since limited time, staff capacity and competing business priorities may affect their ability to engage continuously in Lab-related activities. The framework should remain proportionate and feasible for host organisations, using a limited set of practical indicators rather than creating unnecessary reporting burden. Both quantitative and qualitative information are important. Quantitative data can show continuity and scale of implementation, while qualitative feedback can provide insight into service relevance, user experience and areas where adjustment is needed.

Evaluation should take place on a regular basis throughout the implementation period. A light annual review can help assess whether the Labs are progressing in line with the roadmap, while a broader mid-term reflection can support adjustment of services, stakeholder mechanisms and organisational arrangements. A final review at the end of the strategy period should assess the overall sustainability of the Labs, including their institutional anchoring, stakeholder ownership, service continuity, financial resilience and continued transnational value. Where useful, light follow-up may also be supported through exchange within the Transnational Learning Network, allowing partners to share progress, good practices and practical experiences.

Risk mitigation should be integrated into the same process. The main risks identified in the strategy include weak organisational anchoring, uneven stakeholder commitment,

insufficient long-term funding, fragmented ecosystems, limited service capacity and weakening of transnational cooperation. Another relevant risk concerns the limited engagement of women entrepreneurs and SMEs themselves, especially where participation requires additional time and effort that may be difficult to maintain alongside everyday business operations. These risks should be addressed through timely action such as clearer role allocation, service prioritisation, structured stakeholder engagement, diversified funding approaches and continued use of common tools and cooperation formats. In this way, monitoring and risk mitigation reinforce each other and help the Labs remain adaptive, evidence-based and increasingly embedded in the wider support ecosystem.

Risk area	Main risk	Mitigation approach
Organizational	Weak internal anchoring or limited staff capacity	Define clear roles, integrate Lab functions into host structures, document responsibilities and methods
Stakeholder engagement	Declining participation or weak engagement	Maintain regular engagement formats, demonstrate mutual value, strengthen long-term cooperation mechanisms
Target group engagement	Limited participation of women entrepreneurs / SMEs due to time and capacity constraints	Use flexible participation formats, keep services practical and relevant, strengthen targeted outreach and adapt engagement models to participants' real business capacity
Financial	Insufficient long-term funding	Diversify funding mix, link Labs to public and EU instruments, gradually develop selected revenue-generating services
Service	Services become too broad, weakly used or difficult to maintain	Prioritise high-impact services, adapt to local context, review feedback regularly
Transnational	Weakening of cooperation or loss of common identity	Maintain light but regular exchange, continue shared tools and business models, organise joint learning and visibility actions

A practical and proportionate monitoring and risk mitigation framework will help the WE.Circular Labs remain adaptive, accountable and sustainable throughout the implementation period July 2026 – June 2031.

9 Resources

D.2.1.1 WE.Circular Labs Concept – final version (2025)
D.2.1.2 Methodology for pilot testing – final version (2025)
Act.2.3 Co-creation methodology – final version (2025)
D.2.4.2 Pilot Testing Report (2026)
O.3.2 Transnational Strategy for WEs Circular Transition (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Austria (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Bosnia and Herzegovina (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Bulgaria (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Croatia (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Czech Republic (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Germany / Baden-Württemberg (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Hungary (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Moldova (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Romania (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Serbia (2026)
O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Slovenia (2026)
Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis (2025)
Transnational Policy and Legislative Framework Analysis / Policy Analysis (2025)
National Stakeholder Group Meetings Reports (2025–2026)
Good practice descriptions collected within WE.Circular (2025–2026)
WE.Circular business model documents (six common business models used across the Labs network) (2025–2026)
D.2.2.4 Pop-up Store in Bratislava (2026)