

Output Factsheet

Output title: Pilot testing of innovative circular business models

Summary of the output (max. 2500 characters)

O.2.2 Pilot Testing of Innovative Circular Business Models presents the practical validation of 6 circular business models developed within the WE.Circular project to support women-led SMEs in the Danube Region. The models are: BM1 Circular Design Accelerator, BM2 Resource Champions, BM3 Production Optimizers, BM4 Smart Digital Enablers, BM5 Market Educators and BM6 Collaborative Ecosystems.

The output documents how the models were tested through the WE.Circular Labs, using a Living Lab and “test before invest” approach. This allowed women entrepreneurs to explore selected circular actions in real business conditions before committing to larger financial, technical or organisational changes. In total, 38 companies started the pilot testing process and 29 completed it. The testing covered 12 countries, different sectors, levels of business maturity and circular economy challenges.

The output presents the methodology, participation, data collection tools, feedback mechanisms and key outcomes of the testing process. It shows how the models supported companies in clarifying their circular value proposition, identifying practical first steps, improving product, service or packaging ideas, better understanding materials and resource use, strengthening customer engagement, exploring digital visibility and defining partnership needs.

The testing also identified common barriers faced by women-led SMEs, including limited time and internal capacity, financial constraints, lack of specialised expertise, limited access to partners and the need for longer-term support for advanced circular solutions such as certification, traceability, reverse logistics, return systems or larger production changes.

Feedback from companies, experts, peer reviewers and project partners was used to improve the final business models. The revisions strengthened the phasing of actions, distinction between basic and advanced steps, digital readiness logic, partnership guidance, customer validation, market trust and simple impact monitoring. As a result, the final models became more practical, realistic and transferable.

The output provides a public and transferable overview of the pilot testing process and does not disclose sensitive company-level information. It serves as a bridge between the development of the innovative business models and their future application, replication and upscaling across the Danube Region and beyond.

Contribution to the programme and project objectives, output and result indicator, as well as to the targets set for the Priority Area concerned (max. 2000 characters)

The output contributes directly to the WE.Circular project objective of increasing the digital, business and circular economy capacities of women entrepreneurs in the Danube Region. By testing the six innovative circular business models in real SME conditions, the output demonstrates how women-led companies can move from general circular economy intentions to practical, business-oriented transition pathways.

The pilot testing supports the project's objective to deliver innovative practical solutions for the circular and digital transition of women entrepreneurs. It validates the relevance, feasibility and adaptability of the business models developed through the Innovation Contest, co-creation activities, peer review and WE.Circular Labs. The output therefore strengthens the project result by transforming the models from conceptual frameworks into tested and improved tools that can be used by SMEs, mentors, business support organisations and policymakers.

The output contributes to programme objectives by supporting innovation, competitiveness, circular economy uptake and smarter use of resources in the Danube Region. It also strengthens transnational cooperation by drawing on testing experience from the participating countries and by creating transferable learning for the wider region.

The pilot testing confirms that women-led SMEs need practical, phased and accessible support for circular transformation. It highlights the importance of digital tools, resource efficiency, product and service redesign, customer engagement, market education and ecosystem cooperation. In this way, the output contributes to the development of more inclusive, sustainable and innovation-oriented regional economies.

The output also supports policy learning by showing what type of support women entrepreneurs need in practice: mentoring, expert advice, market validation, digital readiness support, financial instruments and stronger cooperation networks. These findings can inform future regional action plans, SME support schemes, smart specialisation strategies, circular economy measures and women entrepreneurship policies.

How can the output be used and by whom (target group), what is the benefit and the impact for these target groups and the target area / Danube Region? (max. 1500 characters)

The output can be used by women entrepreneurs, mentors, business advisors, business support organisations, innovation agencies, chambers of commerce, policymakers, training providers and other stakeholders supporting circular and digital transition.

Women-led SMEs can use the output to understand how circular business models can be tested in practice and what type of first steps may be realistic for companies with limited resources. The output helps them identify possible entry points such as product redesign, material efficiency, packaging improvement, customer communication, simple digital tools or partnerships.

Mentors and business advisors can use the output to structure support for companies. It provides evidence on what works well, what challenges companies face and how support should be phased according to company readiness.

Business support organisations and innovation actors can use the output to design advisory services, workshops, training activities, innovation contests, voucher schemes or mentoring programmes focused on circular business model innovation.

Policymakers can use the output to better understand the practical barriers and support needs of women entrepreneurs in the circular and digital transition. The findings can inform future policy measures, funding schemes, regional action plans and ecosystem-building activities.

The benefit for the Danube Region is the creation of tested, practical and transferable knowledge on how to support women-led SMEs in circular transformation. The output contributes to stronger circular economy uptake, better SME resilience, improved innovation capacity and more inclusive participation of women entrepreneurs in the green and digital transition.

How can the sustainability of the output be ensured and where and to whom is it going to be transferred? (max. 1500 characters)

The sustainability of the output can be ensured by integrating the tested business models and pilot testing lessons into the continued work of WE.Circular Labs, business support organisations, innovation agencies, chambers of commerce and regional support ecosystems. The models can be used beyond the project as practical tools for mentoring, advisory services, workshops, training programmes, peer learning and SME support schemes.

The output will be transferred to women entrepreneurs, mentors, business advisors, policymakers, associated strategic partners and other stakeholders in the Danube Region. It can also be used by organisations outside the partnership that wish to support circular business model development among women-led SMEs.

Its sustainability is strengthened by the fact that the models are flexible and adaptable. They are not designed as fixed templates, but as pathways that can be adjusted to different sectors, company sizes, markets and levels of readiness. This allows them to be reused in different national and regional contexts.

The output is also connected with other WE.Circular results, especially the CE Business Models Toolkit and the WE.Circular Labs approach. Together, these outputs provide a practical support package for circular and digital business transformation.

Long-term transfer can be supported through publication on project platforms, dissemination through partner networks, use in training and mentoring activities, integration into regional SME services, and reference in policy learning and regional action planning. In this way, the output can continue to support women entrepreneurs and regional stakeholders after the end of the project.

