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0.3.2 Transnational Strategy for Women Entrepreneurs' Circular Transition

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1 Executive summary

The Transnational Strategy for Women Entrepreneurs' Circular Transition is developed within the WE.Circular project as a common policy-oriented framework for supporting women entrepreneurs across the Danube Region in their circular and digital transition. It responds to the need to strengthen women-led businesses as active drivers of sustainable economic transformation, innovation and competitiveness, while addressing the specific barriers they face in accessing skills, finance, networks, innovation support and policy recognition.

The Strategy is based on the main evidence and lessons generated through the WE.Circular project, including the Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis, Policy Analysis, good practice mapping, pilot activities, stakeholder consultations, co-design processes and policy dialogue. The evidence confirms that women entrepreneurs across the Danube Region are motivated to engage in circular and digital transformation, but their readiness and access to support differ significantly between countries and regions. Many women-led SMEs still need practical knowledge, tailored training, mentoring, financial support, digital tools, clearer information and stronger links with innovation ecosystems.

The Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis identified several recurring barriers: high investment costs, lack of practical knowledge on circular economy models, insufficient digital skills, limited access to finance, lack of mentoring and networking opportunities, weak visibility of support instruments, and low awareness of Smart Specialisation opportunities. At the same time, the analysis highlighted strong interest among women entrepreneurs in circular economy tools, digital technologies, sector-specific training, access to finance and practical support for business model transformation.

The Strategy is further informed by 33 good practices and more than 12 case studies identified within the project. These examples show that effective support for women entrepreneurs requires integrated models combining finance, training, mentoring, networking, visibility, digital tools and policy commitment. They also demonstrate the value of multi-stakeholder ecosystems, circular economy platforms, targeted women entrepreneurship programmes, digital skills initiatives and long-term policy frameworks. The good practices confirm that support measures should be transferable, but always adapted to national and regional conditions.

The practical validation phase of WE.Circular provided additional evidence for the Strategy. The WE.Circular Training Programme “Smart & Sustainable Business for Women Entrepreneurs” attracted 416 applications and enrolled 247 trainees in 11 language versions. In parallel, six circular business models were tested through WE.Circular Labs in the participating countries. The pilots showed that circular transition often starts with practical and visible first steps, such as communication improvements, customer engagement, product redesign, workshops, packaging concepts, service offers or digital improvements. They also confirmed that more complex actions, such as traceability systems, certification, reverse logistics or industrial symbiosis, require longer-term support, finance, technical expertise and partnerships.

Stakeholder engagement was central to the development of the Strategy. More than 40 National Stakeholder Group Meetings had been organised across the participating countries, involving more than 150 stakeholders. Four Transnational Stakeholder Group Meetings, the Co-design Workshop in Prague and the Policy Making Camp in Budapest further supported the development of the Strategy by validating findings, defining strategic pillars, reviewing Regional Action Plans and co-creating policy proposals for gender-smart circular and digital transition. These processes confirmed the need for practical, coordinated and policy-supported action across the Danube Region.

The Strategy is aligned with the wider European and macro-regional policy framework, including the European Green Deal, the Circular Economy Action Plan, the SME Strategy for a Sustainable and Digital Europe, and relevant priorities of the EU Strategy for the Danube Region. Its strongest alignment is with EUSDR Priority Area 8 – Competitiveness of Enterprises, while it also contributes to PA7 – Knowledge Society, PA9 – People and Skills, PA10 – Institutional Capacity and Cooperation, and indirectly to PA6 – Biodiversity, Landscapes, Air and Soil Quality.

The vision of the Strategy is to strengthen the role of women entrepreneurs as active drivers of the circular and digital transition in the Danube Region by improving their skills, innovation capacity, access to support and visibility within policy and business ecosystems. The Strategy is structured around four strategic pillars:

- Circular Economy Transition;
- Digital Transition;
- Policy Improvement;
- Smart Specialisation.

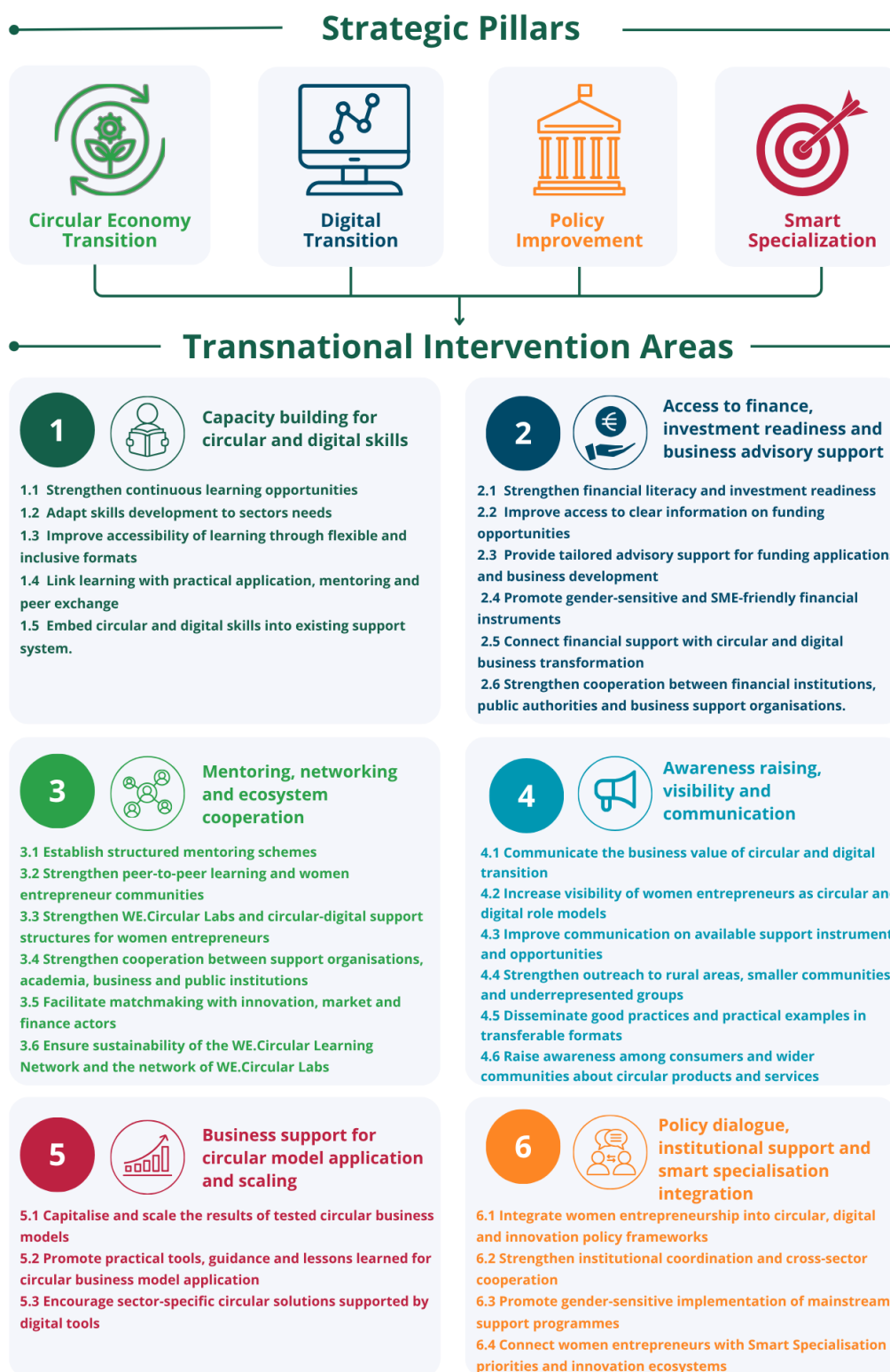


Figure 1-1: Overview of the WE.Circular Strategy structure, own illustration

These pillars are translated into six transnational intervention areas:

1. Capacity building for circular and digital skills;
2. Access to finance, investment readiness and business advisory support;
3. Mentoring, networking and ecosystem cooperation;
4. Awareness raising, visibility and communication;
5. Business support for circular model application and scaling;
6. Policy dialogue, institutional support and Smart Specialisation integration.

The recommended measures under these intervention areas reflect the cross-cutting nature of women entrepreneurs' circular transition. Training measures can support both circular and digital capacities; finance measures can enable circular transformation, digital investment and policy improvement; and mentoring or networking measures can connect women entrepreneurs with innovation ecosystems, markets and policy actors. Therefore, the Strategy avoids treating the pillars as isolated areas and instead promotes integrated, coordinated and practical support.

Implementation of the Strategy will be supported through the Regional Action Plans, which translate the common transnational priorities into concrete national and regional actions. The implementation framework also relies on policy uptake, institutional cooperation, continued use of WE.Circular tools and follow-up actions by project partners and stakeholders. Key project results, including the WE.Circular Training Programme, self-assessment tools, good practice knowledge base, circular business models, WE.Circular Labs, Learning Network, Transnational Policy Learning Centre and Virtual Policy Toolbox, should be further used, adapted and integrated into existing support systems.

The Strategy does not aim to create parallel policy structures. Instead, it supports the improvement of existing SME, innovation, digitalisation, circular economy, gender equality and Smart Specialisation instruments so that they better respond to the needs of women entrepreneurs. Its long-term impact will depend on institutional anchoring, policy uptake, stakeholder ownership, financial continuity and the ability to transfer and adapt WE.Circular results to different regional contexts.

2 Introduction

The transition towards a circular and digital economy represents both a challenge and an opportunity for enterprises across the Danube Region. For women entrepreneurs, this transition is particularly important, as it opens new possibilities for innovation, sustainable business development, market positioning and stronger participation in emerging green and digital value chains. At the same time, women-led businesses often face specific barriers related to access to skills, finance, networks, innovation support and policy recognition, which can limit their capacity to fully benefit from the circular transition.

The WE.Circular project addresses these challenges by supporting women entrepreneurs in strengthening their digital and industrial capacities for a sustainable circular transition. Through analysis, stakeholder engagement, pilot activities, good practice identification and policy-oriented actions, the project creates a transnational framework for improving the conditions under which women entrepreneurs can adopt circular economy principles and develop more resilient, innovative and sustainable business models.

The **Transnational Strategy for Women Entrepreneurs' Circular Transition** is developed as one of the key policy-oriented outputs of the WE.Circular project. It builds on the results of the Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis, the identified good practices, the practical experience gained through pilot actions, and the outcomes of stakeholder engagement activities. The Strategy also reflects the priorities emerging from the project's work with partners, stakeholders, women entrepreneurs, business support organisations and policy actors across the Danube Region.

The main purpose of the Strategy is to provide a common transnational framework for supporting women entrepreneurs in their circular and digital transition. It aims to translate the knowledge generated within the project into strategic priorities, recommended measures and implementation directions that can be taken forward by policy makers, public authorities, business support organisations, innovation actors and other relevant stakeholders. In addition, the Strategy aims to support policy uptake and to inform future funding priorities at EU, national and regional level, so that women entrepreneurs are better recognised and supported within circular, digital and innovation-related programmes.

The Strategy is structured around four strategic pillars identified through the project's participatory process:

- Circular Economy Transition;
- Digital Transition;
- Policy Improvement;
- Smart Specialisation.

These pillars reflect the key areas where coordinated action is needed in order to improve the enabling environment for women entrepreneurs and to support their active role in the circular transformation of the Danube Region. The pillars are strongly interconnected in practice. Digital tools can enable the implementation of circular business models, while policy improvement can create the regulatory, financial and institutional conditions needed for both circular and digital transition. Smart Specialisation connects these efforts with regional innovation priorities, sectoral strengths and market opportunities.

The Strategy is intended to serve both as a strategic guidance document and as a practical reference for future action. It will support the integration of WE.Circular priorities into relevant policy documents, programmes, procedures and support schemes. Its implementation will be further supported through the Regional Action Plans developed by project partners, which translate the transnational priorities into concrete actions adapted to national and regional contexts.

At the same time, the Strategy recognises that implementation approaches must remain adaptable to the institutional, economic and entrepreneurial diversity of the Danube Region.

3 Foundation of WE.Circular Strategy: key findings

The Transnational Strategy for Women Entrepreneurs' Circular Transition is built on the main findings, conclusions and lessons generated through the WE.Circular project. Its foundation is based on analytical work, practical validation through pilot activities, identification of good practices, and stakeholder engagement processes carried out across the Danube Region. This evidence-based approach increases the credibility and

transferability of the Strategy, as it allows the proposed strategic directions and measures to be grounded in real needs, tested experiences and different regional contexts.

The Strategy does not start from abstract policy assumptions, but from the real needs of women entrepreneurs, the barriers identified in their business environment, and the practical experience gained through project activities. The evidence collected within WE.Circular demonstrates that women entrepreneurs have strong potential to contribute to the circular and digital transition, but they require more targeted support, better access to knowledge, finance and networks, and stronger recognition in relevant policy frameworks.

3.1 Evidence from the Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis

The Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis was one of the main evidence-based outputs of the WE.Circular project. It analysed the current situation of women entrepreneurs in 12 countries of the Danube Region and identified their needs, barriers and support requirements in relation to the circular economy, digitalisation, smart specialisation and Industry 4.0 transition. The analysis was based on desk research, surveys, stakeholder interviews, case studies and comparative analysis, covering Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Germany/Baden-Württemberg, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

The analysis confirmed that women entrepreneurs across the Danube Region are at different stages of readiness for the circular and digital transition. This uneven level of readiness shows the need for targeted and context-sensitive support measures, especially in regions where circular practices are still at an earlier stage of development.

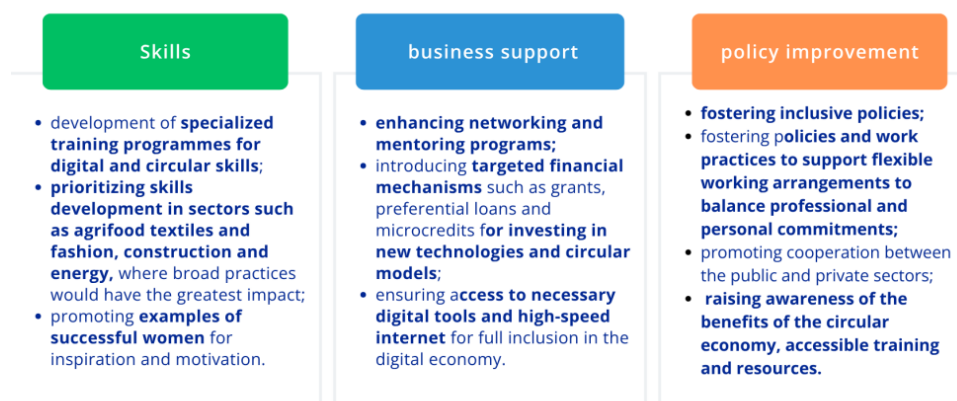


Figure 3-1: Transnational skills needs and gaps, Transnational Analysis, 2025, own illustration

A key finding is that women entrepreneurs generally recognise the importance of circular economy principles and digital transformation for improving competitiveness, operational efficiency and business resilience. The main motivations for applying circular economy principles include expected improvements in operational efficiency and quality, securing competitive advantage, reducing operating costs, responding to customer expectations and strengthening the sustainability profile of the business.

At the same time, the transition is limited by several practical barriers. The analysis identified **high investment costs** as one of the most significant barriers to adopting advanced digital technologies. This is closely connected with **the lack of skills and knowledge on how to implement digital technologies, insufficient public support in the form of funding and training, and the lack of skilled staff**. These barriers were strongly visible across the transnational analysis, but were also specifically highlighted in several country findings.

Another important finding concerns the **lack of knowledge and practical information on how to apply circular economy models**. In several countries, women entrepreneurs are aware of circular economy principles but need clearer, more practical and sector-specific guidance on how to introduce them into their own business models. This includes support for circular product design, waste reduction, reuse, repair, recycling, resource optimisation and new service-based models.

The analysis also showed a **strong need for specialised and practical training**. The top training needs for circular economy transition include access to finance, application of circular economy tools and measures in specific sectors, and use of digital technologies for circular transition. This demonstrates that women entrepreneurs need both

introductory knowledge and advanced, business-oriented support that can be directly applied in their sectors.

Digital skills needs differ between countries depending on the level of digital adoption and the maturity of the supporting ecosystem. The analysis identifies one group where the main need is the improvement of advanced digital competences, particularly advanced software and cybersecurity (Czech Republic and Germany/Baden-Württemberg). A second group needs balanced improvement across both basic and advanced digital skills (Austria, Hungary, Moldova, Slovakia, Bulgaria and Slovenia). A third group needs to strengthen advanced software capabilities while also improving basic digital literacy (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Romania and Serbia).

Stakeholder interviews confirmed that women entrepreneurs face **systemic barriers that go beyond individual skills gaps**. These include limited access to finance, insufficient mentoring and networking opportunities, lack of tailored financial instruments, limited access to digital infrastructure, insufficiently gender-sensitive policy and regulatory support, and difficulties in balancing business development with family and care responsibilities.

Smart Specialisation was also identified as an important but underused framework for supporting women entrepreneurs. Although Smart Specialisation Strategies can help connect women-led businesses with innovation ecosystems, circular economy opportunities and digital transformation, the analysis showed low awareness of S3 among women entrepreneurs in several countries. This indicates the need to better communicate S3 priorities and create stronger links between women entrepreneurs, regional innovation ecosystems and policy support instruments.

The recommendations of the Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis provide a clear basis for the WE.Circular Strategy. They point to the need to develop specialised training programmes, strengthen networking and mentorship, increase financial support, improve access to digital infrastructure, promote inclusive policies, focus on key sectors, highlight successful role models, support flexibility and work-life balance, encourage cooperation between government and the private sector, and raise awareness of circular economy opportunities.

3.2 Identified good practices supporting women entrepreneurs' circular transition



Within the WE.Circular project, **33 good practices and more than 12 case studies** were identified and presented by project partners. Within WE.Circular project, good practices are understood as practices that contribute directly to the project's mission and address the needs of its target groups, particularly women entrepreneurs and SMEs across the Danube Region. They stand out for their innovative approach, effective processes or methodological value, supported by clear evidence of success. Equally important is their **transferability** - the potential for the practice, in whole or in part, to be applied in different contexts or policy environments. However, successful transfer always requires consideration of local conditions and appropriate adaptation, so that each practice remains meaningful and effective within its new setting.

For the purposes of the Transnational Strategy for Women Entrepreneurs' Circular Transition, the identified good practices are used not as isolated examples, but as a source of inspiration for defining strategic directions, policy recommendations and implementation mechanisms. They demonstrate what types of support structures, policy measures and ecosystem models can enable women entrepreneurs and SMEs to participate more actively in the circular and digital transition.

The first important lesson emerging from the good practices is the need for **integrated support models combining financial assistance, training, mentoring, networking and visibility**. The examples of women entrepreneurship support programmes show that financial incentives alone are not sufficient. They become more effective when combined with capacity building, business model development, coaching, peer exchange and promotion of successful women entrepreneurs. This aspect is particularly relevant for the Strategy, as women entrepreneurs often face several interconnected barriers at the same time, including lack of finance, limited access to knowledge, weaker business networks and lower visibility in innovation ecosystems. The Moldovan Women in Business Support Programme and the Slovenian ABC Entrepreneurship Programme provide inspiration for such integrated support models, as they combine grants or start-up incentives with training, mentoring, networking and promotion of women entrepreneurs.

A second important inspiration comes from good practices related to **mainstream public funding for digitalisation and circular economy transition**. These examples show that women entrepreneurs can benefit significantly from general SME support schemes when the access conditions are transparent, inclusive and adapted to the realities of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. The Bulgarian measures for ICT vouchers and support for circular economy transition demonstrate that even non-gender-specific programmes can generate strong participation of women-led or women-owned companies when the funding instrument responds to real business needs. This is relevant for the Strategy because it highlights the importance of gender-sensitive design of mainstream programmes, without necessarily creating separate instruments in every case.

The good practices also underline the importance of **knowledge-building and practical learning formats**. Circular economy remains a complex concept for many SMEs, and women entrepreneurs often need practical, sector-specific guidance rather than only general awareness rising. Initiatives such as the Green Circular Academy demonstrate the value of combining theoretical learning with practical workshops, study visits and hands-on examples. For the Strategy, this supports the recommendation that future training should be practical, business-oriented and connected to real circular economy applications, including resource efficiency, waste reduction, circular design, sustainable innovation and circular business models.

Another strategic lesson relates to the role of **digital skills and digital platforms** as enablers of circular transition. The Digital Coalition in Slovakia illustrates how a broad national partnership can support digital skills development, cyber security awareness, ICT training and access to digital learning opportunities. The Romanian good practice on digitalisation within the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Circular Economy shows how digital platforms can support circular economy governance by improving access to data, progress monitoring, practical guides, funding opportunities and public engagement. These elements are highly relevant for WE.Circular, as women entrepreneurs need better access to reliable information, digital tools, legal guidance, funding opportunities and practical resources that can support their circular transition.

The identified good practices further show the value of **multi-stakeholder ecosystems and circular economy networks**. Circular transition cannot be achieved by individual entrepreneurs alone. It requires cooperation between businesses, public authorities, research organisations, business support organisations, clusters, civil society and policy actors. Platforms such as the Circular Economy Forum Austria, Circular Black Forest and

Green Tech BW demonstrate how structured ecosystems can create spaces for knowledge exchange, matchmaking, pilot projects, expert support, innovation and policy dialogue. These examples are important because they show that women entrepreneurs should be better connected to existing circular economy and green innovation ecosystems, instead of being treated as a separate or peripheral group.

A further aspect that informs the Strategy is the importance of **long-term policy frameworks for circular economy transition**. Regional and national policy documents, such as the Vision Circular Economy 2050 Strategy for Styria and the Programme for Development of Circular Economy in the Republic of Serbia, demonstrate how circular transition can be supported through strategic objectives, action plans, stakeholder consultation, green public procurement, innovation measures, awareness raising and support for business transformation.

The good practices also point to the importance of **transferability with adaptation**. Many of the identified models can inspire other Danube regions, but they cannot be copied mechanically. A grant scheme, training academy, digital platform or circular economy network must be adapted to the institutional capacity, funding possibilities, entrepreneurial culture, sectoral structure and policy priorities of each country or region.

The good practices identified within WE.Circular confirm that women entrepreneurs' circular transition should be supported through a combination of **targeted women entrepreneurship measures** and **gender-sensitive mainstream circular and digital transition policies**. Targeted measures are necessary to address specific barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, while broader circular economy, digitalisation and innovation programmes should be designed in a way that ensures equal access, visibility and active participation of women-led businesses.

3.3 Practical validation of circular approaches through pilot activities

The practical validation phase of WE.Circular tested whether the project's tools, training content and circular business models could be applied in real conditions. This step was important for the Strategy because it connected the analytical findings with direct experience from women entrepreneurs and SMEs across the Danube Region.

Two complementary pilot processes were implemented. The first tested the **WE.Circular Training Programme "Smart & Sustainable Business for Women Entrepreneurs"**, while

the second tested the **six circular business models** through the WE.Circular Labs. Together, they provided evidence on both skills development and practical business transformation.

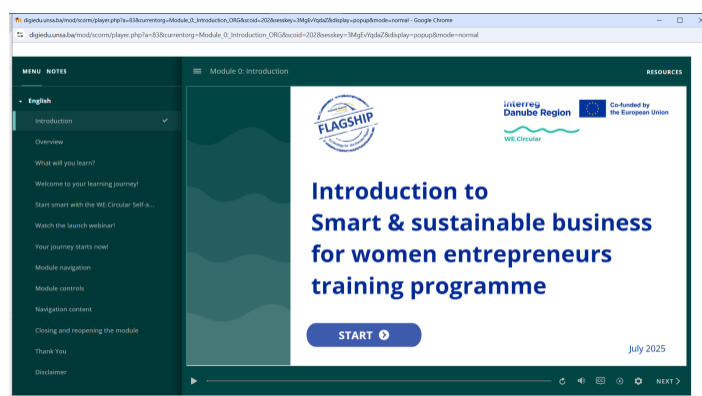


Figure 3-2: Module 0: Introduction of WE.Circular Training Programme

The Training Programme was designed as a multilingual learning pathway covering circular economy principles, circular business models, waste management, sustainable finance, digital transformation, operational digital competences, communication and entrepreneurial mindset. It was delivered through a Moodle-based platform and supported by a self-assessment tool, webinars, quizzes, examples and reflection activities. Its aim was to make circular and digital transition understandable and directly applicable for women entrepreneurs.

The pilot attracted **416 applications** and enrolled **247 trainees** in **11 language versions**. The participants came from different sectors, including education and training, professional services, textile and fashion, agrifood and tourism. The feedback was positive: trainees appreciated the clarity, practical orientation and relevance of the modules. Their comments also helped improve the final version of the programme.

In parallel, the six circular business models were tested through the WE.Circular Labs in the 12 participating countries. The process combined co-creation, mentoring, expert consultations and practical testing with women-led SMEs. The aim was not only to support individual companies, but also to check whether the proposed models were realistic, useful and transferable in different sectors and business contexts.

The testing confirmed that the business models are relevant, but their implementation depends on company maturity, internal capacity, sector, available resources and access to partners. Some pilots led to concrete results, such as product redesign, packaging concepts, communication tools, community events, workshop formats, service offers or

digital improvements. In other cases, the main value was strategic clarification: companies identified what could be done immediately and what would require more time, finance, expertise or partnerships.

A clear lesson from the pilots is that **circular transition often starts with practical and visible first steps**. Actions such as storytelling, customer engagement, awareness raising, small-scale workshops, website improvements, brand positioning and initial partnership discussions were easier to test and produced useful results. More complex actions, such as digital traceability, certification, reverse logistics, return schemes, industrial symbiosis or infrastructure upgrades, usually remained at an early stage and require longer-term support.

The pilots also confirmed the **importance of expert guidance**. Finalists valued mentoring and tailored consultations because they helped them translate broad circular ambitions into concrete and realistic actions. At the same time, the process revealed persistent barriers: limited time, insufficient finance, lack of technical expertise and difficulties in activating suitable partners within a short testing period.

For the Strategy, these results are highly relevant. They show that **women entrepreneurs need more than awareness raising**. They need **practical training, staged implementation support, mentoring, access to finance, technical assistance and stronger cooperation with innovation and business support ecosystems**. The pilot activities therefore confirm the relevance of the four strategic pillars of the WE.Circular Strategy: Circular Economy Transition, Digital Transition, Policy Improvement and Smart Specialisation.

3.4 Stakeholder engagement and consultation process

Stakeholder engagement was a central element in the development of the WE.Circular Strategy. It ensured that the Strategy was not developed only on the basis of analytical findings, but also through continuous dialogue with policy makers, business support organisations, academia, SMEs, women entrepreneurs, civil society organisations and other relevant ecosystem actors from the Danube Region.

The consultation process was organised at both national and transnational level. At national level, project partners established National Stakeholder Groups involving representatives of the quadruple helix: public authorities, SMEs, academia and research institutions, business support organisations and civil society. By the end of December

2025, 43 National Stakeholder Group Meetings had been organised across the participating countries involving more than 150 stakeholders. These meetings created a continuous feedback channel for discussing and validating the main project outputs, including the skills needs and gaps analysis, training programme, good practices, circular business models, Regional Action Plans and the Transnational Strategy.

Across the national consultations, stakeholders repeatedly confirmed that women entrepreneurs face interconnected barriers when trying to adopt circular and digital business models. These include limited practical knowledge of circular economy models, insufficient access to tailored funding, administrative complexity, low visibility of available support, fragmented support structures, limited digital and circular skills, and persistent cultural and social barriers. Stakeholders stressed that support for women entrepreneurs should be practical, concrete and action-oriented, combining hands-on training, mentoring, peer learning, role models and better access to existing support instruments.

The national meetings also showed that awareness of circular economy principles is increasing, but practical implementation remains difficult. Stakeholders emphasised that training alone is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by mentoring, guidance, real-life examples and institutional support. The WE.Circular training programme, multilingual Moodle platform and self-assessment tool were positively received, but stakeholders underlined the need for active dissemination and integration of these tools into existing national and regional support systems.

Another important message from the national consultations was the need for better coordination among institutions, programmes and support providers. In several countries, stakeholders noted that relevant policies, funding instruments and support services already exist, but they are often fragmented, poorly communicated or difficult for women entrepreneurs to access. This confirms the need for the Strategy to promote stronger coordination, clearer information channels, better use of digital platforms and stronger cooperation between public authorities, business support organisations, chambers, universities, innovation actors and women entrepreneurs.



Figure 3-3: 1st Transnational Stakeholders Group Meeting, Chisinau, Moldova, 06.2024

At transnational level, 4 Transnational Stakeholder Group Meetings created a space for joint discussion, validation and peer learning. These meetings involved project partners, associated strategic partners, Advisory Board members and stakeholders from different parts of the Danube Region. The first two meetings were focused on the validation of the skills needs and gaps analysis, training programme methodology, innovation contest methodology and policy framework analysis. Stakeholders provided concrete recommendations, including the need to focus on circular economy skills, digital tools, access to finance, mentoring, networking, alternative funding models, role models and better integration of project recommendations into policy documents.

The 3rd Transnational Stakeholder Group Meeting was focused on good practices and their transferability. This process supported the Strategy by identifying practical and transferable models that can inspire policy improvement, ecosystem building and support services for women entrepreneurs.

The 4th Transnational Stakeholder Group Meeting provided a peer-review platform for the draft Regional Action Plans. Partners presented their RAPs and received feedback from peers, Advisory Board members and stakeholders. The review confirmed the need for realistic planning, clear responsibilities, measurable indicators, appropriate timelines and consistent terminology across the plans. It also highlighted common challenges such as limited funding opportunities, low policy coherence and the need for actions that can be initiated within the project timeframe and continued after project closure.

A particularly important step in the consultation process was the **Co-design Workshop** organised in Prague in June 2025. Its purpose was to create a common understanding and methodology for the development of the Regional Action Plans and to support partners in translating challenges into realistic measures and actions. For this purpose, the project developed its own interactive tool (**WE.Build: Action Plan Game**) which

guided participants through the process of identifying challenges, strategic areas, measures, actions, stakeholders, timelines and budgets.



Figure 3-4: Co-design Workshop, Prague, Czech Republic, 06.2025

During the workshop, participants worked in groups covering different country combinations. They prioritised challenges, defined strategic pillars, selected measures, proposed actions, assigned stakeholders, discussed timeframes and budgets, and transferred the results into RAP canvases. This process was important not only for the Regional Action Plans, but also for the Strategy, because it helped clarify the intervention logic linking challenges, pillars, measures, actions, responsible actors and expected results. The workshop also contributed to the definition and practical understanding of the strategic pillars that structure the Strategy: Circular Economy Transition, Digital Transition, Policy Improvement and Smart Specialisation.



Figure 3-5: Policy Making Camp, Budapest, Hungary, 2025

The **Policy Making Camp** organised in Budapest in December 2025 further strengthened the policy dimension of the Strategy. It was designed as a two-day participatory process bringing together policy makers, experts, business representatives and support organisations to analyse policy gaps and co-create practical policy proposals for gender-

smart circular and digital transition. The first day focused on understanding policy ecosystems, mapping gaps and sharing good practices, while the second day focused on the design of policy proposals.

The discussions during the Policy Making Camp confirmed several policy-relevant needs: better access to finance and information on funding opportunities, improved skills for preparing funding applications, stronger digital competences, better outreach to rural and underrepresented women entrepreneurs, one-stop-shop support, stronger mentoring and community-building, better childcare and work-life balance support, and improved institutional coordination. Participants also stressed the importance of gender-sensitive policy design, better data, clearer definitions of circular economy and micro-enterprises, and the need to integrate WE.Circular outputs into mainstream economic development, SME, industrial and innovation policies rather than treating them as separate women-focused initiatives.

The Policy Making Camp resulted in several concrete policy proposal directions that are relevant for the Strategy, including capacity building for policy implementation organisations, integrated support roadmaps for women entrepreneurs, one-stop-shop services, temporary replacement services, circular hubs, integration of circular economy skills into funding programmes, women circular accelerator hubs, financial support for women entrepreneurs, visibility campaigns, daycare support, mindset communication campaigns and regional incubator structures. These proposals provide a practical source of inspiration for the Strategy's recommended measures and implementation framework.

The stakeholder engagement process confirmed that women entrepreneurs' circular transition requires a combination of policy support, practical capacity building, financial instruments, digital tools, mentoring, visibility, ecosystem cooperation and long-term coordination. The consultations also showed that stakeholders are willing to remain engaged when they see that their input is reflected in project outputs. This participatory approach strengthened the relevance, ownership and implementation potential of the WE.Circular Strategy and ensured that its strategic pillars and recommended measures are grounded in both evidence and the practical experience of stakeholders across the Danube Region.

4 Legal and Policy Framework

The WE.Circular Strategy is positioned within the wider European, macro-regional, national and regional policy framework related to circular economy, digital transition, women entrepreneurship, SME competitiveness, innovation and Smart Specialisation.

The **Report from the Policy Analysis** reviewed the existing policy and legislative frameworks in 12 Danube Region project countries. The analysis confirms that many countries already have strategies and programmes related to circular economy, digitalisation, SME development, gender equality and Smart Specialisation. However, these frameworks are often broad in scope and do not always address the specific needs of women entrepreneurs in the circular and digital transition.

At European level, the Strategy is aligned with the **European Green Deal** and the **Circular Economy Action Plan**, which promote sustainable growth, resource efficiency, circular production, sustainable consumption and waste prevention. It is also linked with EU priorities for women entrepreneurship, SME development, digitalisation and innovation. The Policy Analysis highlights that women entrepreneurs should be recognised as an important source of innovation and sustainable development, especially in the context of Europe's green and digital transitions.

The Strategy also corresponds to the **SME Strategy for a Sustainable and Digital Europe**, as it focuses on helping women-led SMEs access finance, develop digital skills, adopt circular business models and participate in sustainable value chains. This is particularly relevant because many women-led businesses in the Danube Region are micro, small or medium-sized enterprises and need practical, accessible and targeted support.

The Policy Analysis identified a broad range of national and regional policy frameworks, strategies, programmes and legislative instruments relevant to the wider context of women entrepreneurs' circular and digital transition. These include documents related to circular economy, SME development, digitalisation, innovation, Smart Specialisation, gender equality, waste management and sustainable development. However, only part of these frameworks contains specific measures for women entrepreneurs, while many address SMEs or green and digital transition more generally. This confirms one of the main policy gaps addressed by the WE.Circular Strategy: the need to better integrate women entrepreneurship into existing circular, digital and innovation policy frameworks.

The analysis also shows that implementation gaps remain across the Danube Region. These gaps are particularly visible in access to finance, tailored training, outreach, regional coverage, policy coordination, practical support and gender-sensitive measures. In several countries, women entrepreneurs must rely on general SME support schemes, which are not always adapted to their specific barriers related to skills, networks, visibility, digital capacity, investment readiness and work-life balance.

The WE.Circular Strategy responds to these gaps by providing a transnational framework that can support better policy alignment and more practical implementation. It does not aim to replace existing policy frameworks, but to strengthen their relevance for women entrepreneurs and to support the integration of WE.Circular priorities into programmes, procedures, support schemes and Regional Action Plans.

The Transnational WE.Circular Transition Strategy is strongly aligned with the **EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR)**. Its strongest connection is with **Priority Area 8 – Competitiveness of Enterprises**, as the Strategy supports the competitiveness of women-led SMEs through circular and digital transition, business model innovation, resource efficiency, mentoring, access to finance, market opportunities and stronger cooperation between business support organisations, innovation actors and policy makers.

The Strategy also contributes to other relevant EUSDR Priority Areas:

- **PA7 – Knowledge Society**, through training, good practice transfer, innovation, Smart Specialisation and cooperation between academia, research, business and public authorities.
- **PA9 – People and Skills**, through the development of circular, digital and entrepreneurial skills for women entrepreneurs.
- **PA10 – Institutional Capacity and Cooperation**, through policy learning, stakeholder engagement, Regional Action Plans and improved coordination between institutions.
- **PA6 – Biodiversity, Landscapes, Air and Soil Quality**, indirectly, through circular economy practices that reduce waste, improve resource efficiency and support more sustainable business models.

5 Strategic Framework for Women Entrepreneurs' Circular Transition

The strategic framework of the WE.Circular Strategy translates the findings from the project analyses, good practices, pilot activities and stakeholder consultations into a common direction for action. It defines the long-term ambition of the Strategy, the objectives to be pursued, and the strategic pillars through which women entrepreneurs' circular transition can be supported across the Danube Region.

The framework is based on the understanding that women entrepreneurs are not only a target group of support measures, but also important actors of circular innovation, digital transformation and sustainable economic development. To unlock this potential, they need an enabling environment that combines skills, finance, mentoring, digital tools, policy support, market access and stronger links with innovation ecosystems.

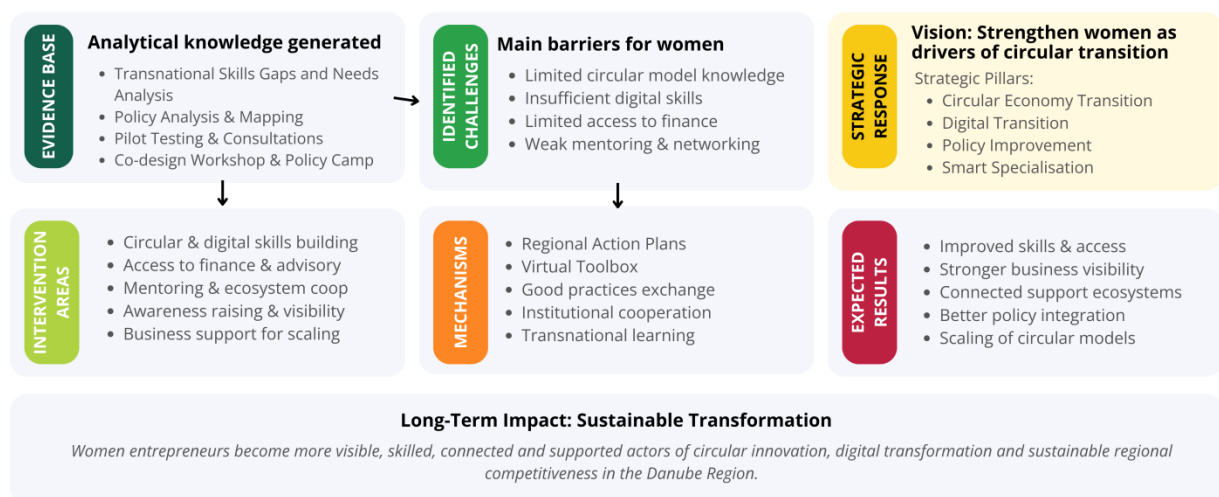


Figure 5-1: Intervention logic of the WE.Circular Transnational Strategy, credit: own illustration

5.1 Vision

The vision of the WE.Circular Strategy is:

To strengthen the role of women entrepreneurs as active drivers of the circular and digital transition in the Danube Region by improving their skills, innovation capacity, access to support and visibility within policy and business ecosystems.

This vision reflects the need to move beyond fragmented support and create a more coordinated framework in which women-led businesses can develop, test and scale circular solutions. It also recognises that circular transition is closely linked to digital transformation, policy improvement and Smart Specialisation, all of which are necessary to support sustainable and competitive business development.

By strengthening women entrepreneurs' participation in circular and digital transition, the Strategy aims to contribute to broader economic, social and environmental impact: more competitive and resilient women-led SMEs, increased inclusion and visibility of women in innovation ecosystems, and wider uptake of resource-efficient and sustainable business practices across the Danube Region.

5.2 Strategic Objectives

The overall objective of the Strategy is to provide a transnational framework for supporting women entrepreneurs in adopting circular economy principles, strengthening digital and industrial capacities, and contributing to sustainable economic transformation in the Danube Region.

The Strategy pursues the following strategic objectives:

1. Support women entrepreneurs in adopting circular economy principles and circular business models.

The Strategy aims to help women-led businesses move from awareness of circular economy concepts to practical application. This includes support for resource efficiency, waste reduction, reuse, repair, redesign, sustainable production, circular services and new business models, while promoting a phased and gradual approach that enables SMEs to start with realistic circular actions and progress towards more systemic transformation over time.

2. Strengthen digital capacities as an enabler of circular transition.

Digital tools can support circular business development by improving resource tracking, customer engagement, market access, communication, data use, process optimisation and transparency. The Strategy therefore promotes digital skills and practical digital solutions adapted to the needs and capacities of women-led SMEs.

3. Improve access to tailored support, mentoring, finance and networks.

Women entrepreneurs need more than general information. They require practical guidance, mentoring, peer learning, access to finance, visibility, role models and connections with business support organisations, innovation actors, research institutions and policy makers.

4. Promote gender-sensitive and inclusive policy improvement.

The Strategy supports the integration of women entrepreneurship into existing and future policies related to circular economy, digitalisation, SME competitiveness, innovation and Smart Specialisation. It promotes policy measures that recognise the specific barriers faced by women entrepreneurs and improve access to support instruments.

5. Connect women entrepreneurs with Smart Specialisation priorities and innovation ecosystems.

The Strategy aims to strengthen the participation of women-led businesses in regional innovation ecosystems and connect their circular solutions with sectors and priorities identified through Smart Specialisation Strategies.

6. Ensure implementation through Regional Action Plans and transnational cooperation.

The Strategy provides a common framework, while the Regional Action Plans translate its priorities into concrete actions adapted to national and regional contexts. Transnational cooperation supports peer learning, transfer of good practices and continuity of WE.Circular results.

5.3 Strategic Pillars

The WE.Circular Strategy is structured around four strategic pillars. These pillars reflect the main areas where coordinated action is needed to support women entrepreneurs' circular transition.

Pillar 1: Circular Economy Transition

This pillar focuses on supporting women entrepreneurs to adopt circular economy principles and transform them into practical business solutions. It covers circular product and service design, resource efficiency, waste prevention, reuse, repair, recycling, product life extension, sustainable materials and circular business models.

The pillar responds to the finding that many women entrepreneurs recognise the importance of circular economy but need practical guidance, sector-specific examples, mentoring and support to apply circular approaches in their own businesses.

Pillar 2: Digital Transition

This pillar focuses on digitalisation as an enabler of circular economy transition. It includes digital skills, digital tools for circular business, e-commerce, online communication, data use, AI, cybersecurity, traceability, customer engagement and digital platforms.

The pillar reflects the need to strengthen digital readiness among women entrepreneurs and to show how digital tools can support resource efficiency, process optimization, market access, business innovation and sustainable growth.

Pillar 3: Policy Improvement

This pillar focuses on creating a more supportive policy and institutional environment for women entrepreneurs. It addresses the need for gender-sensitive support schemes, better access to finance, improved coordination between institutions, clearer information channels, simplified procedures, mentoring systems and stronger integration of women entrepreneurship into circular, digital and innovation policies.

The pillar is important because many existing policy frameworks are broad and do not sufficiently address the specific needs of women-led businesses in the circular and digital transition.

Pillar 4: Smart Specialisation

This pillar focuses on linking women entrepreneurs' circular transition with regional innovation priorities and Smart Specialisation Strategies. It aims to connect women-led SMEs with innovation ecosystems, clusters, research organisations, universities, technology providers and priority sectors where circular and digital solutions can create added value.

The pillar supports the idea that women entrepreneurs should be more visible and active within innovation-driven regional development, not only as beneficiaries of support but also as contributors to sustainable and smart economic transformation.

The implementation of these pillars requires the involvement of different stakeholder groups. Women entrepreneurs and SMEs are the main target group and active users of the proposed support measures. Policy makers and public authorities are essential for policy improvement, funding alignment and integration of recommendations into existing programmes. Business support organisations, chambers, innovation agencies, universities, research organisations, Digital Innovation Hubs, financial institutions and civil society organisations play an important role in providing training, mentoring, advisory support, networking, innovation links and practical implementation support. Their coordinated involvement is necessary to ensure that the strategic pillars are translated into concrete and sustainable actions.

6 Transnational intervention areas and measures

The recommended measures of the WE.Circular Strategy are derived from the overall evidence generated through the project, including the Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis, Policy Analysis, good practice mapping, pilot activities and stakeholder consultation. The measures respond to recurring needs identified across the Danube Region and translate the four strategic pillars into practical fields of intervention.

Intervention Area	Circular Economy Transition	Digital Transition	Policy Improvement	Smart Specialisation
Capacity building for circular and digital skills	strong	strong	partial	strong
Access to finance and investment readiness	strong	strong	strong	partial
Mentoring, networking and ecosystem cooperation	strong	strong	strong	strong
Awareness, visibility and communication	strong	strong	strong	partial
Circular model application and scaling	strong	partial	partial	strong
Policy dialogue and S3 integration	partial	partial	strong	strong

This overview matrix demonstrates that intervention areas are cross-cutting and mutually reinforcing, driving a holistic transnational strategy.

Figure 6-1: Relationship between Strategic Pillars and Transnational Intervention Areas, credit: own illustration

Since women entrepreneurs' needs are interconnected, the measures often contribute to more than one pillar at the same time. For this reason, they are grouped under transnational intervention areas, which represent practical fields through which the strategic pillars can be implemented in a coordinated way. For example, a training measure may strengthen both circular economy knowledge and digital capacity, while also supporting Smart Specialisation if it is linked to priority sectors. A finance measure may enable circular business transformation, digital investment and policy improvement at the same time. Similarly, mentoring and networking actions may support business development, innovation ecosystem access and better connection with policy actors. This confirms that the implementation logic of the Strategy should reflect the cross-cutting character of women entrepreneurs' circular transition. For this reason, the Strategy groups the recommended measures under **transnational intervention areas**. These intervention areas are not separate from the strategic pillars. They represent practical fields of action through which the pillars can be implemented in a coordinated and realistic way. They were defined by analysing the recurring needs, gaps and proposed actions across the available RAPs and identifying where similar types of measures can be combined at transnational level.

The following transnational intervention areas are proposed:

1. Capacity building for circular and digital skills

2. Access to finance, investment readiness and business advisory support
3. Mentoring, networking and ecosystem cooperation
4. Awareness raising, visibility and communication
5. Business support for circular model application and scaling
6. Policy dialogue, institutional support and smart specialisation integration

This approach allows the Strategy to remain aligned with the four strategic pillars, while presenting the recommended measures in a way that reflects how support is actually needed and proposed in practice: integrated, cross-sectoral and adapted to the realities of women entrepreneurs and SMEs.

6.1 Capacity building for circular and digital skills

This intervention area responds to the need for practical, accessible and sector-relevant training for women entrepreneurs. It addresses gaps in circular economy knowledge, digital skills, business model innovation, cyber security, online marketing, AI, e-commerce, eco-design, and the use of digital tools for resource efficiency.

The focus is not only on general awareness raising, but on practical learning that helps women entrepreneurs apply circular and digital solutions in their own businesses. Learning approaches should be gender-sensitive, inclusive and accessible, taking into account care responsibilities, limited time availability and geographical barriers, particularly for women entrepreneurs in rural or remote areas. Flexible formats are therefore especially important, including online training, hybrid workshops, self-paced learning, peer-learning circles and self-assessment tools.

This intervention area mainly supports the strategic pillars **Circular Economy Transition**, **Digital Transition** and **Smart Specialisation**. It strengthens women entrepreneurs' practical knowledge of circular economy principles, circular business models, resource efficiency and sustainable production, while also improving their digital skills and ability to use digital tools for business transformation and creating circular added value. By linking skills development with priority sectors and innovation potential, it also contributes to Smart Specialisation. The area also has a partial link to **Policy Improvement**, especially when circular and digital skills are integrated into existing entrepreneurship support systems, public programmes and institutional services.

Measure 1.1 Strengthen continuous learning opportunities for circular and digital transition

Measure 1.2 Adapt skills development to sectors with circular and digital transformation potential

Measure 1.3 Improve accessibility of learning through flexible and inclusive formats

Measure 1.4 Link learning with practical application, mentoring and peer exchange

Measure 1.5 Embed circular and digital skills into existing entrepreneurship and innovation support systems.

6.2 Access to finance, investment readiness and business advisory support

Access to finance is one of the key conditions for enabling women entrepreneurs to participate in the circular and digital transition. Circular business models, digitalisation, eco-design, new technologies, sustainable materials, certification, market access and resource-efficient processes often require initial investment, while many women-led micro and small enterprises face difficulties in securing suitable financial support.

The challenge is not only the availability of funding, but also the ability to identify relevant opportunities, understand eligibility conditions, prepare applications, assess investment risks and communicate the value of circular and digital business models to financial institutions or investors. For this reason, access to finance should be combined with investment-readiness support and practical business advisory services.

This intervention area aims to improve the capacity of women entrepreneurs to access and use financial instruments for circular and digital transformation. It also calls for funding bodies, financial institutions, public authorities and business support organisations to make existing instruments more accessible, transparent and better adapted to the realities of women-led SMEs.

This intervention area mainly supports **Circular Economy Transition, Digital Transition and Policy Improvement**. Access to finance and advisory support enables women entrepreneurs to invest in circular products, sustainable materials, resource efficiency, eco-design, digital tools and new technologies. At the same time, the area contributes strongly to policy improvement by promoting more accessible, gender-sensitive and

SME-friendly financial instruments, clearer information channels, simplified procedures and better cooperation between financial institutions, public authorities and support organisations. It also contributes partly to **Smart Specialisation** when financial support is connected with innovation-driven sectors and regional priority areas.

Measure 2.1 Strengthen financial literacy and investment readiness of women entrepreneurs

Measure 2.2 Improve access to clear information on funding and support opportunities

Measure 2.3 Provide tailored advisory support for funding applications and business development

Measure 2.4 Promote gender-sensitive and SME-friendly financial instruments

Measure 2.5 Connect financial support with circular and digital business transformation

Measure 2.6 Strengthen cooperation between financial institutions, public authorities and business support organisations.

6.3 Mentoring, networking and ecosystem cooperation

This intervention area addresses the need for stronger connections between women entrepreneurs and the wider support ecosystem. Circular and digital transition requires not only knowledge and finance, but also access to mentors, peers, business support organisations, innovation actors, chambers, universities, investors, technology providers and policy stakeholders.

Women entrepreneurs often face limited access to networks where business opportunities, funding information, innovation partnerships and market contacts are exchanged. This is especially relevant for women-led micro and small enterprises, entrepreneurs in rural areas, and women working in sectors that are less connected to innovation ecosystems. Mentoring, networking and ecosystem cooperation can help them transform ideas into practical actions, increase confidence, improve visibility and access new partnerships. In this context, the involvement of visible role models and successful women entrepreneurs in mentoring structures can inspire participation, build confidence and demonstrate practical pathways for circular and digital business development.

This intervention area supports all four strategic pillars. It contributes to **Circular Economy Transition** and **Digital Transition** by connecting women entrepreneurs with expertise and practical support. It supports **Smart Specialisation** by linking women-led businesses with innovation ecosystems and priority sectors. It also contributes to **Policy Improvement** by creating regular channels for dialogue between entrepreneurs, support organisations and public institutions.

Measure 3.1 Establish structured mentoring schemes for circular and digital entrepreneurship

Measure 3.2 Strengthen peer-to-peer learning and women entrepreneur communities

Measure 3.3 Strengthen WE.Circular Labs and circular-digital support structures for women entrepreneurs

Measure 3.4 Strengthen cooperation between support organisations, academia, business and public institutions

Measure 3.5 Facilitate matchmaking with innovation, market and finance actors

Measure 3.6 Ensure sustainability of the WE.Circular Learning Network and the network of WE.Circular Labs.

6.4 Awareness raising, visibility and communication

This intervention area addresses the need to make circular and digital transition more visible, understandable and accessible for women entrepreneurs. Across the Danube Region, many women-led SMEs are still not sufficiently aware of available support instruments, funding opportunities, circular economy tools, digital solutions or Smart Specialisation priorities. At the same time, successful women entrepreneurs working with circular and digital approaches are often not visible enough as role models.

Increasing the visibility of successful women entrepreneurs should be treated as a strategic tool for inspiration, confidence-building and behavioural change. Role models can be involved as multipliers, mentors and practical examples, helping other women entrepreneurs understand the benefits, entry points and concrete pathways towards circular and digital business transformation.

Awareness raising should therefore go beyond general promotion. It should help women entrepreneurs understand the practical business value of circular and digital

transition, increase their confidence to participate in support programmes, and improve the visibility of women-led circular innovation. Communication activities should use accessible language, practical examples, local success stories and digital channels, while also applying gender-sensitive and inclusive approaches that take into account time constraints, care responsibilities, limited mobility and geographical barriers, particularly in rural and underserved areas.

Communication should also reach rural areas, smaller communities and underrepresented groups, not only established urban ecosystems. Awareness raising should not only inform, but also motivate action by demonstrating clear business benefits, practical steps and achievable entry points into circular and digital transition.

This intervention area mainly supports **Circular Economy Transition, Digital Transition** and **Policy Improvement**, while also contributing to **Smart Specialisation** when communication is linked to innovation ecosystems, priority sectors and S3 opportunities

Measure 4.1 Communicate the business value of circular and digital transition

Measure 4.2 Increase visibility of women entrepreneurs as circular and digital role models

Measure 4.3 Improve communication on available support instruments and opportunities

Measure 4.4 Strengthen outreach to rural areas, smaller communities and underrepresented groups

Measure 4.5 Disseminate good practices and practical examples in transferable formats

Measure 4.6 Raise awareness among consumers and wider communities about circular products and services.

6.5 Business support for circular model application and scaling

This intervention area focuses on supporting women entrepreneurs in moving from awareness and learning towards practical circular business transformation. Circular transition should be treated as a gradual business development process, where tested models, practical tools, mentoring and small implementation steps can help companies improve products, services, processes and market positioning over time. This gradual approach is particularly relevant for women-led SMEs, which often operate with limited

resources and require phased, low-risk entry points into circular transformation before scaling more complex solutions.

The focus is not only on testing new ideas, but also on **capitalising on the circular business models already tested within WE.Circular**, refining the tools developed during the project, and supporting wider application, replication and scaling. Women-led SMEs should be supported in adapting circular solutions to their own business reality, including resource efficiency, reuse, repair, product redesign, sustainable materials, circular services, product life extension, local value chains, customer engagement and digital tools that enable circularity.

This intervention area mainly supports **Circular Economy Transition**, while also contributing to **Digital Transition** when digital tools are used to support circular practices. It also supports **Smart Specialisation** when circular model application is connected with priority sectors and innovation ecosystems, and **Policy Improvement** when lessons from business application are used to improve future support schemes and procedures.

Measure 5.1 Capitalise and scale the results of tested circular business models

Measure 5.2 Promote practical tools, guidance and lessons learned for circular business model application

Measure 5.3 Encourage sector-specific circular solutions supported by digital tools.

6.6 Policy dialogue, institutional support and smart specialisation integration

This intervention area focuses on improving the policy and institutional environment for women entrepreneurs' circular and digital transition. The project findings show that many countries already have strategies, programmes and support instruments related to circular economy, digitalisation, SME development, gender equality and innovation. However, these frameworks are often fragmented, insufficiently coordinated, or not clearly adapted to the specific needs of women-led micro and small enterprises. This includes structural barriers such as limited access to tailored financial instruments, insufficient recognition of women entrepreneurs in policy design, and lack of support measures addressing work-life balance and care responsibilities.

The aim is not to create parallel policy structures, but to improve the way existing frameworks, programmes and institutions support women entrepreneurs. This includes stronger policy dialogue, better coordination between responsible institutions, clearer access to support, gender-sensitive implementation of mainstream programmes, and stronger links between women entrepreneurs and Smart Specialisation priorities. Strengthening these links can improve access to innovation ecosystems, funding opportunities and sector-specific support, while also increasing the visibility of women entrepreneurs as contributors to regional economic development.

This intervention area mainly supports **Policy Improvement** and **Smart Specialisation**, while also contributing to **Circular Economy Transition** and **Digital Transition** by creating the institutional conditions needed for practical implementation.

Measure 6.1 Integrate women entrepreneurship into circular, digital and innovation policy frameworks

Measure 6.2 Strengthen institutional coordination and cross-sector cooperation

Measure 6.3 Promote gender-sensitive implementation of mainstream support programmes

Measure 6.4 Connect women entrepreneurs with Smart Specialisation priorities and innovation ecosystems.

7 Implementation framework

The implementation framework explains how the Transnational Strategy for Women Entrepreneurs' Circular Transition will be translated into practical action across the Danube Region. The Strategy provides the common transnational direction, while implementation will take place through a combination of Regional Action Plans, policy uptake, institutional cooperation, continued use of WE.Circular tools and follow-up actions by partners and stakeholders.

The implementation approach follows the logic already defined in the Strategy: the four strategic pillars provide the overall direction, while the transnational intervention areas and recommended measures translate these pillars into practical fields of action. The Strategy therefore does not create a separate implementation system, but supports better coordination and use of existing policy frameworks, support schemes, networks, institutions and project results.

The **Regional Action Plans** represent the main instruments for translating the Strategy into concrete national and regional action. While the Strategy defines common priorities at transnational level, the Regional Action Plans adapt them to the specific institutional, economic and entrepreneurial context of each participating country or region. Through them, partners define specific measures, actions, responsible organisations, supporting stakeholders, timelines, indicators and expected results. This allows the Strategy to remain flexible enough for the diversity of the Danube Region, while still ensuring coherence around the same strategic pillars and intervention areas. They support the implementation of the Strategy by identifying how recommended measures can be introduced into existing programmes, support services, policy processes, training systems, mentoring schemes, financial advisory structures and innovation ecosystems.

Project partners will play a key role in initiating and coordinating follow-up actions in their countries and regions. Associated Strategic Partners, policy makers and public authorities will be essential for policy uptake, institutional alignment and integration of recommendations into relevant programmes and procedures. Business support organisations, chambers, innovation agencies, universities, Digital Innovation Hubs, financial institutions, women entrepreneurship networks and civil society organisations will support the practical implementation of measures. Their role will be especially important in providing training, mentoring, advisory services, access to finance, networking, communication and links with Smart Specialisation ecosystems.

The implementation of the Strategy should build on the tools, methodologies and structures developed within WE.Circular. These include the WE.Circular Training Programme, self-assessment tools, good practice knowledge base, circular business models, WE.Circular Labs, Learning Network, Transnational Policy Learning Centre and Virtual Policy Toolbox.

The Strategy should support the continued use, adaptation and integration of these outputs into existing national and regional support structures. The aim is to avoid one-off project results and instead ensure that WE.Circular tools continue to support women entrepreneurs after the project end. Several RAPs already emphasise the importance of institutionalising developed mechanisms, sustaining the WE.Circular Learning Network and embedding project tools into national and regional ecosystems.

Particular attention should be given to the sustainability of the WE.Circular Labs and Learning Network. These structures can continue to serve as spaces for mentoring, peer

learning, practical business support, exchange of good practices and cooperation between entrepreneurs, support organisations and policy actors.

Policy uptake is a central part of the implementation framework. The Strategy should support the integration of WE.Circular priorities into existing and future policy documents, programmes, procedures, funding schemes and institutional practices.

This does not necessarily require the creation of new strategies or separate programmes. In many cases, implementation can be achieved by improving existing SME, innovation, digitalisation, circular economy, gender equality and Smart Specialisation instruments so that they better address women entrepreneurs' needs.

The Policy Making Camp confirmed the need to integrate WE.Circular outputs into mainstream economic development, SME, industrial and innovation policies rather than treating them as separate women-focused initiatives. It also highlighted the importance of one-stop-shop support, circular hubs, policy implementation capacity, financial support, visibility campaigns and regional incubator structures as practical directions for policy uptake. Policy uptake can be supported through:

- consultation with policy makers and Associated Strategic Partners;
- use of the Transnational Policy Learning Centre and Virtual Policy Toolbox;
- integration of Strategy recommendations into relevant policy revisions;
- inclusion of gender-sensitive criteria in support schemes;
- alignment with Smart Specialisation and innovation frameworks;
- continued stakeholder dialogue at national and transnational level;
- development of practical guidance tools to support institutions and business support organisations in applying the Strategy's recommendations in their existing programmes and services.

The long-term impact of the Strategy depends on the extent to which its measures are embedded in existing institutions, policies and support ecosystems. Sustainability should therefore be ensured through institutional anchoring, financial continuity, stakeholder ownership and transfer of project results to wider groups of users.

Successful implementation will require continued cooperation beyond the project lifetime. Existing structures such as business support organisations, women entrepreneurship networks, universities, chambers, public authorities and innovation

actors should be encouraged to take ownership of relevant tools and measures. Future funding opportunities, including national programmes, EU funds, Interreg, Horizon Europe and private-sector partnerships, can also support continuation and scaling.

Transferability is equally important. The Strategy offers a common framework that can be adapted by different regions according to their policy context, institutional capacity, economic structure and entrepreneurial ecosystem. The lessons from WE.Circular should therefore remain available for other Danube regions and stakeholders interested in supporting women entrepreneurs' circular and digital transition.

To ensure long-term impact beyond the project duration, the sustainability of WE.Circular results should be supported through institutional anchoring, continued policy uptake and integration into existing SME, innovation and circular economy support systems. Particular attention should be given to maintaining and further developing the WE.Circular training resources, digital tools, knowledge base and stakeholder networks. Future sustainability may also depend on identifying complementary funding opportunities, strengthening ownership among regional stakeholders and encouraging continued transnational cooperation.

8 Resources

D.1.1.2 Joint Transnational Skills Needs and Gaps Analysis. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.3.2.1 Report from the Policy Analysis. WE.Circular project, 2025.

O.1.2 Pilot Testing of WE.Circular Training Programme. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.2.4.2 Pilot Testing Report. WE.Circular project, 2026.

D.3.3.1 Report from Co-design Workshop. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.3.4.1 National Stakeholder Group Meetings – Period 1. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.3.4.1 National Stakeholder Group Meetings – Period 2. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.3.4.1 National Stakeholder Group Meetings – Period 3. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.3.4.1 National Stakeholder Group Meetings – Period 4. WE.Circular project, 2025.

Report from the 1st Transnational Stakeholder Group Meeting. WE.Circular project, 2025.

Report from the 2nd Transnational Stakeholder Group Meeting. WE.Circular project, 2025.

Report from the 3rd Transnational Stakeholder Group Meeting. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.3.4.2 Report from the 4th Transnational Stakeholder Group Meeting. WE.Circular project, 2025.

Annex 6: Report and Methodology – Policy Camp. WE.Circular project, 2025.

D.3.6.2 Policy Making Camp. WE.Circular project, 2025.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Austria. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Bosnia and Herzegovina. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Bulgaria. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Croatia. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Czech Republic. WE.Circular project, 2025.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Germany / Baden-Württemberg. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Hungary. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Moldova. WE.Circular project, 2026.

Regional Action Plan: Romania. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Serbia. WE.Circular project, 2025.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Slovakia. WE.Circular project, 2026.

O.3.1 Regional Action Plan: Slovenia. WE.Circular project, 2026.

ABC Entrepreneurship Programme – Good Practice Description: Slovenia. WE.Circular project, n.d.

Green Circular Academy – Good Practice Description. WE.Circular project, n.d.

Programme for Circular Economy Development – Good Practice Description. WE.Circular project, n.d.

Circular Black Forest – Good Practice Description. WE.Circular project, n.d.

Green Tech BW – Good Practice Description.

Vision Circular Economy 2050 Strategy Styria – Good Practice Description: Austria.

Circular Economy Forum Austria – Good Practice Description.

Digital Coalition – Good Practice Description: Slovakia.

Governmental Support Measures for Digitalisation and Circular Economy – Good Practice Description: Bulgaria.

Key Measures on Digitalisation within the National Strategy and Action Plan for the Circular Economy – Good Practice Description: Romania.

Supporting Women Entrepreneurship in Moldova through the ODA Grant Programme – Good Practice Description.

Women Entrepreneurship in Circular Economy – Good Practice Description: Moldova.