

A circular revolution in European Cities: Inside the LET'S GO CIRCULAR! journey

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#sustainableurbandevelopment #localauthorities**

When ten European cities decided to work together to accelerate their transition toward circular, regenerative, and resource-efficient urban systems, none of them could fully anticipate how much the journey would transform their teams, their policies, and in many cases, their own understanding of what a circular city truly means. Over 2.5 years, the URBACT IV network LET'S GO CIRCULAR! became more than a project - it became a laboratory, a support system, and, as many partners described it, a circular family.



Dr. Eleni Feleki, LET'S GO CIRCULAR! Lead Expert

This article takes readers inside that journey: the methods, the breakthroughs, the challenges, and the collective achievements of Munich, Granada, Guimarães, Riga, Lisbon, Cluj-Napoca, Corfu, Malmö, Tirana, and Oulu - ten cities united by a common ambition to reshape their future.

A network built on learning, trust, and transformation

From the outset, the network set a clear commitment: circular economy would not remain a fashionable concept or a series of isolated pilot projects. It would become a place-based, participatory, and implementable strategic agenda, anchored in real value chains, local governance, and community engagement.

Cities joined the network from different starting points, some with advanced circular strategies, others with limited experience. Yet, perhaps the most striking outcome was how quickly the group developed a shared vision. As Riga's project coordinator put it, *"the journey could be described in five words: Fun, Support, Inspiration, Growth and Knowledge"*.

Others echoed this sense of evolution. *"We started from a low level of knowledge,"* said Cluj's communication expert, *"but through transnational exchanges and the support of experts, we developed a very comprehensive plan of actions... hoping it will become reality as soon as possible"*.

For many, the network was transformative not only technically, but personally. *"It feels a bit weird... I am a bit sad that this is ending,"* admitted Tirana's ULG coordinator. *"I enjoyed my 2.5 years being part of the project"*

Circularity as a shared language

Early in the process, the ten cities undertook a baseline study to map out the most pressing circular value chains in their territories. The group quickly identified several shared priorities, including textiles, food, household waste, water, and energy systems, as well as key R-strategies such as repair, reuse, recycling, redesign, rethink, and renew.

These insights became the foundation of a common methodology built on three pillars:

1. Local co-creation through URBACT Local Groups (ULGs)

Each city assembled a diverse ecosystem of municipal departments, businesses, universities, NGOs, utilities, and innovators. Together, they mapped challenges and opportunities, co-designed solutions, and shaped Integrated Action Plans

(IAPs). ULGs became micro-laboratories of democratic participation, proving that circularity is as much a cultural and organizational transition as it is a technical one

2. Transnational exchange as a learning accelerator

Over ten high-intensity Transnational Exchange (TEX) meetings, from Munich during the activation phase to Granada for the final event, cities immersed themselves in each other's challenges and solutions. Study visits, peer discussions, and thematic deep dives created a high-trust environment, where partners could be honest about obstacles and bold about ideas. These exchanges helped cities benchmark themselves, refine their approaches, and gain confidence in experimenting with new policies and models.

3. Testing actions: small pilots with big impact

Rather than waiting for their strategic plans to be completed, cities were encouraged to prototype early. These "testing actions" ranged from repair cafés to circular gastronomy pilots, textile reuse schemes, green events, material hubs and circularity arenas, composting initiatives, "bike hospitals" and digital platforms. They provided evidence, revealed logistical barriers, mobilised stakeholders, and made circularity more tangible for citizens and politicians alike.

Across the network, partners consistently reported that testing actions "transformed circularity from theory into practice," built municipal confidence, and grounded their IAPs in real-life conditions.

A turning point: The Mid-Term Reflection

Halfway through the project, the network held a Mid-Term Reflection (MTR) - a structured moment to pause, evaluate progress, and recalibrate. Cities did not simply share updates; they reflected deeply on how their understanding and governance of circularity had matured.



Four key insights emerged:

1. Circular literacy had significantly increased

Cities moved beyond associating circularity solely with waste to adopting a systems-thinking perspective involving value chains, innovation, social inclusion, governance, digitalisation, and spatial planning. This conceptual maturity became one of the most important shifts highlighted during the MTR.

2. Municipal collaboration improved

Departments that had rarely interacted - environment, planning, mobility, economic development, procurement, education - began working together in new ways, breaking long-standing silos.

3. Stakeholder groups gained strength and ownership

ULGs became more active, diverse, and committed. Creative formats - repair cafés, co-design sprints - boosted participation and stimulated genuine co-creation.

4. Testing actions shaped strategies

Testing actions were repeatedly described as catalysts. Many cities refined or even reshaped their strategic focus based on what testing actions revealed.

After the MTR, the network strengthened its approach: more focus on value-chain thinking, deeper peer review, stronger monitoring, and greater political engagement were introduced to ensure high-quality and feasible IAPs

Cities take action: From vision to implementation

All ten cities ultimately delivered Integrated Action Plans - each adapted to local realities but sharing common elements such as a circular vision, diagnostics, priority areas, actions, governance mechanisms, and monitoring frameworks.

Some highlights from the cities' action portfolios include:

Granada: incentives for circular businesses, digital transparency initiatives, reverse-vending machines, and community composting systems.

Tirana: a Circular Economy Hub, reusable packaging systems for farmers, annual “Buy Local, Waste Less” campaigns, green events, and a digital circularity platform.

Guimarães: a textile circularity hub, industrial symbiosis plans, R&D for textile waste recovery, and sustainable procurement for textiles.

Cluj-Napoca: a reusable resources centre, food donation systems, circularity in public procurement, and inclusion of CE themes in education.

Lisbon: circular tourism pass, construction materials bank, neighbourhood circular business platforms, biowaste management, and local food systems.

Oulu: circular procurement, CE-based construction pilots, biochar solutions, and a model for Oulu as a platform for circular innovation.

Munich: circular construction hub, urban mining activities, digital procurement platforms, and take-back systems for reusable tableware.

Riga: sustainable event guidelines, public awareness campaigns, Sadarbnica space for reuse activities, and circular approaches to construction.

Malmö: a textile resource hub, circular job models, indicators for circular economy, and improved sorting systems.

Corfu: biowaste valorisation, CE curricula in schools, marine waste recovery initiatives, and incentives for circular businesses.

These action plans did not remain isolated documents; several cities, including Munich, Riga, and Oulu, secured formal political approval, a significant step toward long-term implementation.

Peer reviews: One of the most valued tools

Four rounds of structured peer reviews were held, each offering cities a safe and constructive environment to strengthen their IAPs. Partners repeatedly praised the process for improving strategic coherence, feasibility, monitoring, governance, and clarity.

The collaborative spirit echoed in these sessions reaffirmed the core premise of the network: cities learn best from other cities facing similar challenges.



Beyond outputs: The human side of circularity

What makes LET'S GO CIRCULAR! particularly unique is how strongly partners emphasised the human dimension of circular transition.

Guimarães' project manager described it as *“a more human way to do projects... a platform to really share and ask questions,”* where outputs are *“interlined with human needs and human connections and therefore more likely to lead to actionable solutions.”*

Malmö's climate strategist highlighted the long-term journey still ahead, but also the importance of *“continuing to build trust and knowledge with the business community.”*

For Granada, the network offered something rare in municipal life: time - time to think, reflect, exchange, and co-create. *“URBACT for us means time,”* said their project coordinator. *“It's a big opportunity to create a big family”* working toward circular transition together.

This is how all partners' characterised their journey in LET'S GO CIRCULAR! during the final meeting in Granada.

Wordcloud poll



How would you like to characterise your LET'S GO CIRCULAR! journey?

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Looking ahead: From plans to transformation

As the network concludes its formal cycle, cities are preparing for the next chapter: implementation.

Several priorities stand out:

- Securing financing and embedding circularity into municipal budgeting.
- Scaling value-chain interventions, especially in textiles, construction, food, and digital solutions.
- Strengthening citizen engagement and education for long-term behavioural change.
- Deepening political support and institutionalising circular governance.
- Continuing inter-city cooperation through future EU programmes

A legacy of ambition and solidarity

If one message resonates across testimonies and achievements, it is that circular transition is not a solitary endeavour. It requires collaboration, experimentation, courage, and shared learning.

Across ten cities, that message came to life through testing actions, co-design, ULG plenary and smaller group meetings, study visits, transnational exchanges, trilateral focused meetings and many more.

The LET'S GO CIRCULAR! network leaves behind not only action plans, tools, and tested actions, but also a strengthened community of changemakers determined to continue the work.



Or, as one partner put it more simply:

“We are friends now - and that matters for circularity.

Interested to read all our communication outputs? Find in our webpage, the Quarterly Reports that highlight our progress analytically and our thematic knowledge treasures, here: [URBACT LET'S GO CIRCULAR! Network](#)

Find our project on [linked in](#)