#EUCircularTalks

Bridging local and European networks: How circular hubs can drive inclusive regional growth

EVENT SUMMARY

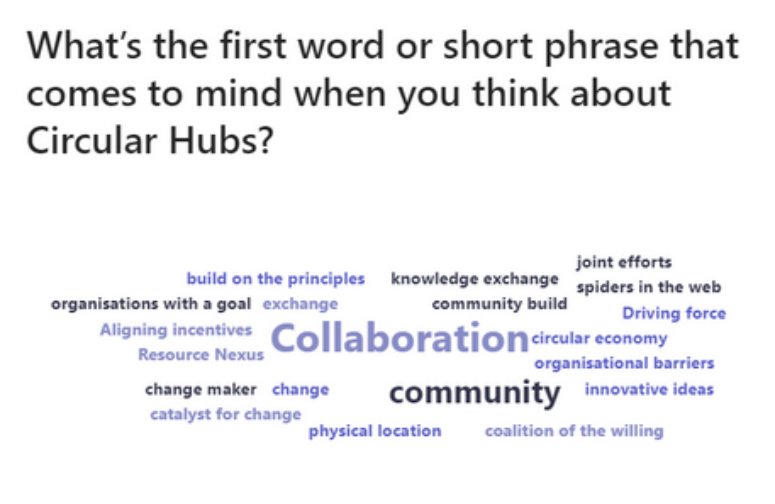
December 2024

Background

The ECESP Coordination Group members agreed to establish the Leadership Group (LG) Towards a European Network of Circular Economy Hubs in order to better understand how circular hubs function. The group organised its first #EU Circular Talks event on 6 December 2024 with a view to empowering circular hubs by exploring how they could leverage existing European networks to amplify local impact, support inclusive growth and address key challenges relating to policy and funding.

Summary of the debate

The LG invited the panelists to explore the role of circular hubs in advancing the EU's circular economy agenda and sought to build a consensus on the definition of circular hubs. The participants discussed the characteristics of a circular hub and how shared definitions could enhance cross-regional collaboration. The interactive word cloud revealed that community, collaboration and change were recurring themes.



Panelists highlighted the need for stronger links between local hubs and larger EU networks. Establishing cross-regional connections was seen as vital for resource sharing, knowledge transfer and policy alignment. The discussion focused on sustainable funding mechanisms for hubs, with some examples of hubs that fund themselves through training, consultancy or partnerships.

The potential for circular hubs to drive equitable development, especially in regions that are lagging behind economically, was a key topic. Panelists discussed the role of hubs in supporting local employment, promoting Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) and fostering community-led innovation.

Panelists and participants identified key challenges for circular hubs, including regulatory barriers, insufficient access to financing and difficulties in scaling up local innovations. They agreed that clearer EU policy support and alignment was needed.

Pending questions

Member commitment: How do members demonstrate their commitment to circular hubs? Is it through membership fees, signed declarations, time investment or in-kind contributions? What strategies have proven effective in securing and maintaining member commitment?

Business model sustainability: What are the key elements of a solid business model for circular hubs? Beyond member contributions, what other components can ensure long-term financial sustainability and operational resilience?

Regional sufficiency and social acceptance: How can circular hubs balance regional sufficiency and social acceptance while maintaining a holistic perspective of the circular economy?

Guidance for new circular hubs: What advice would you offer to organisations that are looking to establish a circular economy hub in their region? What steps should they prioritise to ensure success?

Policy support and advocacy: What types of support would be most valuable from European policies and policy makers? Are there specific policy areas or instruments that should be targeted to better support circular hubs?

Online discussion: main takeaways

There was partial consensus on the key characteristics of a circular hub, which include community-driven impact, capacity-building and cross-sectoral collaboration.

Several models for financial sustainability were discussed, with an emphasis on partnerships with industry, revenue-generating activities and the role of WISEs. Participants called for more exchange opportunities between hubs across EU regions, as cross-learning can foster better policy alignment and avoid duplication.

Panelists stressed that engaging communities through education and partnerships is essential for the long-term success of circular hubs.

The role of SMEs was seen as critical to the success of circular hubs. Many participants called for dedicated support for SMEs, including funding, training and access to networks.

Conclusions

Circular economy hubs foster member commitment through a combination of financial contributions, active participation and resource sharing. Members often pay fees, contribute knowledge and engage in tasks ranging from event support to project development. Some hubs use probationary periods to assess alignment with their mission. Funding partners are also expected to provide more than financial aid, offering expertise, meeting rooms or logistical support to support hub activities, creating a sense of shared responsibility and community.

Hubs sustain their business models through diversified revenue streams, including membership fees, education services, project funding and ecosystem-based services that facilitate multi-stakeholder collaboration. Flexibility and agility enable hubs to co-create initiatives with partners and adapt to emerging needs, ensuring resilience and independence from single funding sources.

Achieving regional sufficiency and social acceptance requires linking local resources with broader circular systems. Decentralised models, closed-loop designs and platforms for data sharing are key strategies. Transparent communication and policy alignment support social acceptance, while local actions remain connected to the larger circular economy.

In order to strengthen hubs, European policy makers could simplify funding for inter-hub meetings, centralise support for repetitive processes, and promote cross-regional collaboration.

Shared platforms for data and best practices would enhance transparency, scalability and inter-hub cooperation.