

WESTERN BALKANS CIRCULAR ECONOMY HUB: CATALYZING REGIONAL TRANSFORMATION THROUGH INNOVATION & COLLABORATION

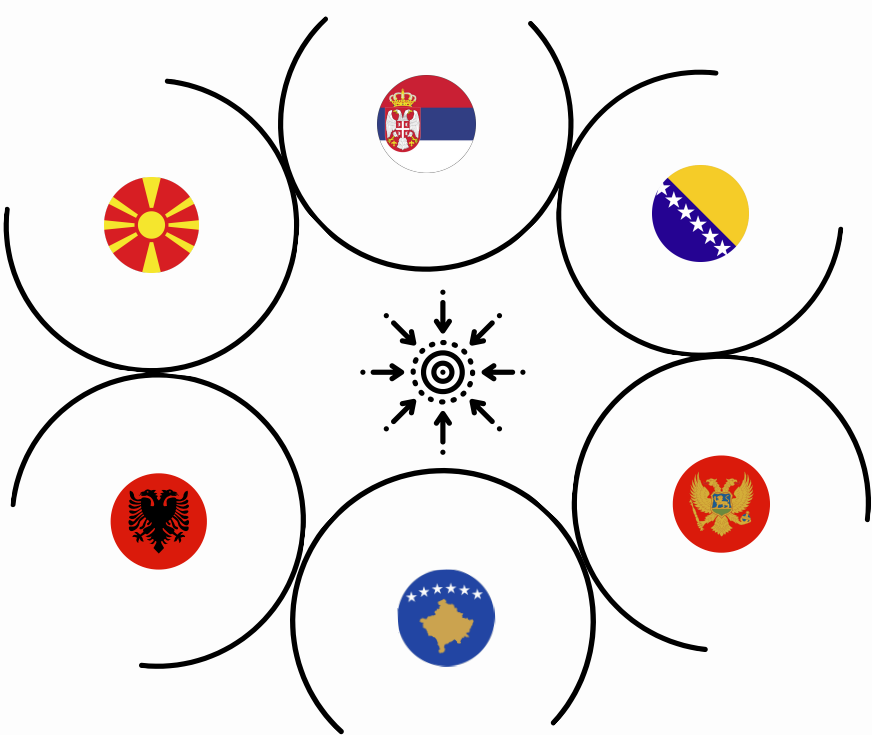
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INTRODUCTION



The transition to a circular economy has become a critical imperative for the Western Balkans (WBs), driven by increasing environmental pressures, climate change, and the need to align with EU sustainability objectives. Although the concept remains relatively new in the region, the development of national Circular Economy Roadmaps and strategic documents demonstrates a growing political commitment. As candidate countries for EU membership, the WBs are tasked with adoption of the principles of the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans, where circular economy is one of the five key pillars. Shared historical, cultural, and economic challenges create strong foundations for regional collaboration, especially because 82% of the region's residents believe that regional cooperation is good for their economy¹.

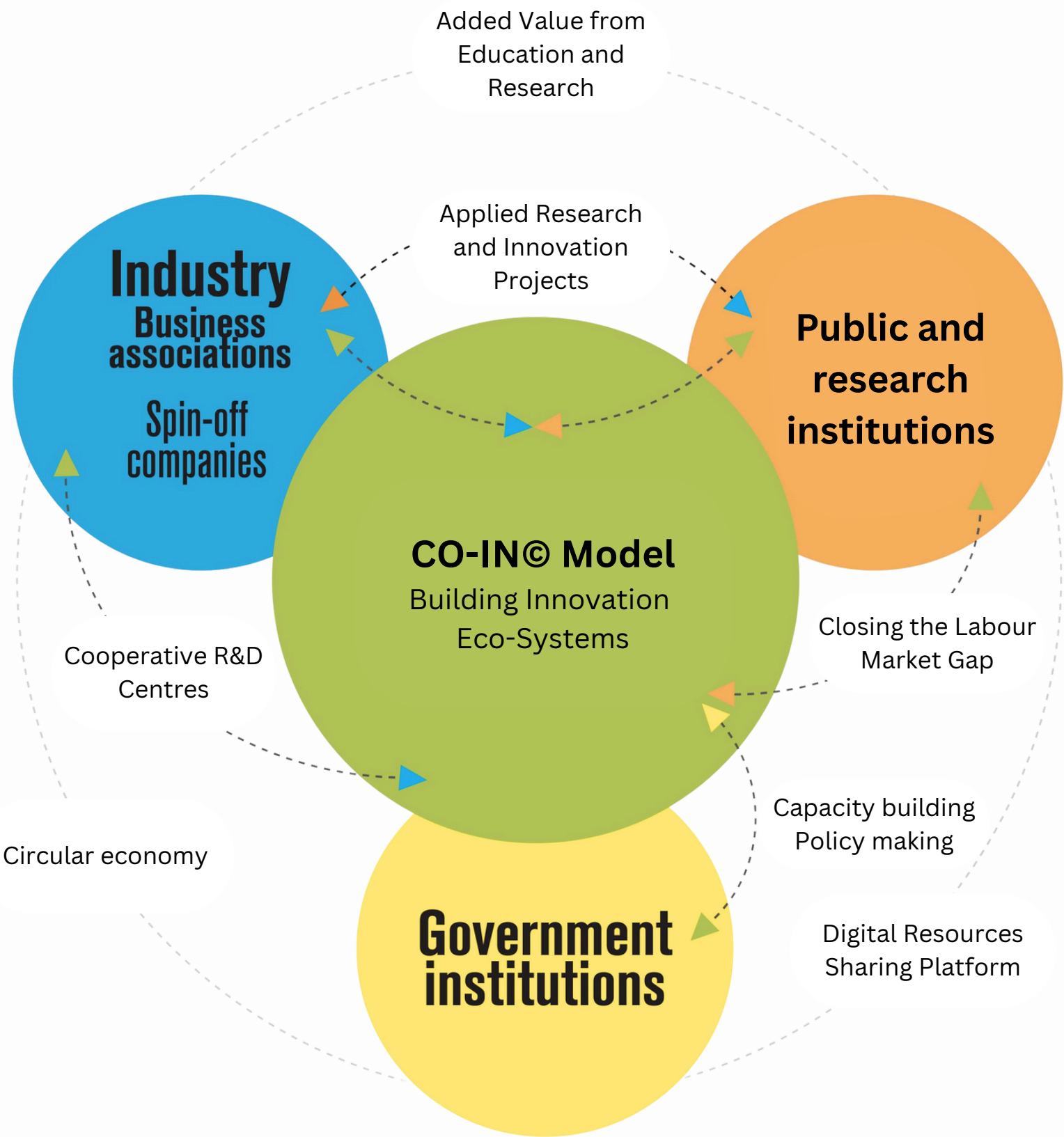
The Western Balkans Circular Economy Hub (WBCEH) emerges as a catalyst, streamlining resources, building capacities, and connecting stakeholders to accelerate the transition, foster innovation, and unlock economic and environmental benefits for the region.

1. Balkan Barometer 2024, Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

OBJECTIVE

The Western Balkans Circular Economy Hub is envisioned as a focal point that connects different stakeholders across the Western Balkans, including Chambers of Commerce, companies, educational institutions, professionals, and students, in order to foster communication, collaboration, and networking between them with the goal of speeding up the transition to circular economy in the region.

Considering that national circular economy hubs already exist in some of the WB countries, WBCEH aims to address the problem from a broader perspective, consolidating existing circular Hubs' efforts at the national level and tailoring the activities and its offer to the regional context, so that stakeholders from each of the six countries can benefit.



METHODOLOGY

WBCEH is founded on the Collaborative-Innovative (CO-IN)© Model, developed by IECE and the Civil Engineering Institute of Macedonia.

This model fosters partnerships between education, business, and government sectors, promoting knowledge sharing, innovation, and sustainable growth. It strengthens human capital, supports eco-innovation, and enhances competitiveness, contributing to building learning organizations, entrepreneurial universities, and a resilient, knowledge-based economy.

At the heart of the Hub is a commitment to fostering a supportive environment where stakeholders can connect, learn, and innovate. The Hub will build strong partnerships with organizations active in the circular economy across the region - Partners of the Hub, working collaboratively to design solutions adapted to each national context and to combine best practices into new, innovative approaches.

EXPECTED RESULTS

The research of already existing circular economy hubs in the WB region, Europe and in other continents resulted in the creation of the following activities that the Hub will offer to its target audience groups (MSMEs, youth and women), concluded as most relevant for the WB region's needs: creating a digital platform that will serve as a central hub for accessing a variety of resources, information, and services; online educational courses and training on circular economy topics; networking and other events to foster and advance circular solutions in the region; mentorship program; and promoting good circular business practices, among other initiatives.

These activities aim to bring the following results on a macro level:

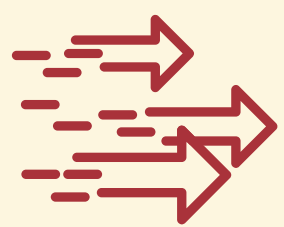
- Accelerating the transition in the Western Balkans by streamlining different types of information and resources in one stop place;
- Promoting circular economy growth in the region by enabling regional cooperation between different actors and stakeholders to provide and exchange knowledge, experience and best practices between them;
- Empowering individuals, businesses, and stakeholders with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive within the circular economy framework.



Private sector enterprises with improved/new circular services into their operations & boosted competitiveness



Target groups increase their skills as well as access & use intermediation services & support systems to make informed decisions



Private sector enterprises have better policy support to do business & increase their efficiency

100 BEST CIRCULAR PRACTICES INITIATIVE

CONCLUSION

The Hub fosters social and societal innovation by helping businesses, communities, and individuals adopt circular economy practices that directly improve social well-being by promoting waste reduction and transformation, creating green jobs, or boosting sustainable entrepreneurship. These activities directly meet social needs such as better living environments, local employment, and improved health outcomes through cleaner air, soil, and water.

At the same time, WBCEH aims to act as a driver of societal innovation by contributing to systemic changes across the Western Balkans: helping governments align with EU Green Agenda goals, transforming industries toward circular models, strengthening regional cooperation, and supporting a shift in the citizens' mindset and public values toward sustainability.

These are structural changes that can reshape economies, governance, education systems, and markets in the region.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This project and poster is developed as part of the RECONOMY programme which is an inclusive and green economic development program of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation in the Eastern Partnership and the Western Balkan countries, together with IECE.



HELVETAS



Western Balkans Circular Economy Hub: Catalyzing Regional Transformation Through Innovation & Collaboration

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Abstract

The transition to a circular economy (CE) is critical for the Western Balkans (WBs), driven by growing environmental pressures, climate change impacts, and the region's aspiration to align with EU sustainability objectives, particularly the European Green Deal and the Green Agenda for the Western Balkans. Although the concept of CE remains relatively new in the WBs, the development of national Circular Economy Roadmaps and other strategic documents shows an emerging political and institutional commitment. Regional collaboration is essential, given the historical, cultural, and economic ties among the countries and the recognition that joint efforts can bring greater economic and environmental benefits.

In response to these challenges and opportunities, the Western Balkans Circular Economy Hub (WBCEH) was established as a regional catalyst for change. Founded on the Collaborative-Innovative (CO-IN)© Model, developed by IECE and the Civil Engineering Institute Macedonia, the Hub fosters partnerships among business, education, and government sectors to co-create knowledge, strengthen human capital, enhance competitiveness, and drive sustainable innovation. WBCEH is designed to support existing national efforts, consolidate resources, and create a common platform for stakeholders from all six WB countries.

The Hub's activities—such as the creation of a digital platform for resources and services, online educational courses, regional networking events, mentorship programs, and promotion of best circular practices—specifically target MSMEs, youth, and women, as key drivers of regional transformation. These initiatives aim to streamline information, foster cooperation across borders, and empower businesses, institutions, and individuals with the skills needed to succeed in the circular economy.

Beyond economic benefits, WBCEH seeks to foster social innovation by helping stakeholders adopt circular practices that improve community well-being, create green jobs, and contribute to healthier environments. Simultaneously, it promotes societal innovation by driving systemic changes in governance, industry, education, and public attitudes toward sustainability, supporting the long-term resilience and prosperity of the Western Balkans region.

Key words: Circular Economy, Western Balkans, CO-IN Model, Regional Transformation