

Revitalising city centres by promoting circular lifestyles

NiCE Project Policy Paper

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Authors: Jan GIMKIEWICZ ^a, Maksymilian KOCHAŃSKI ^b, Katarzyna KORCZAK ^b, Lisa FRIEN-KOSSOLOBOW ^a

^a Department III 1 - Sustainable Products and Sustainable Consumption, Circular Economy, German Environment Agency, Wörlitzer Platz 1, Dessau-Roßlau, 06844, Germany

^b Energy and Climate Transition Research Group, Research and Innovation Centre Pro-Akademia, Innowacyjna 9/11, 95-050 Konstantynów Łódzki, Poland

This policy paper presents recommendations on how to revitalise city centres by promoting circular lifestyles. It specifically targets local actors like city administrations and NGO's working to the topic of sustainable city development.

The recommendations were developed based on practical experiences from activities in eight European cities, research activities and through transnational workshops as part of the NiCE project presented on

www.circularlifestyle.eu

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



European city centres are undergoing significant transformation. Many cities are facing growing competition from online retail, declining footfall, vacant commercial spaces, and reduced social and cultural interaction in central urban areas. These trends were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, city centres offer important opportunities for advancing circular lifestyles. By integrating circular lifestyle offers and services, such as repair cafés, reuse centres or sharing hubs, cities can support more sustainable forms of consumption while also revitalising vacant or underused urban spaces. Circular initiatives can also contribute to social cohesion, skills development, and more vibrant city centres.

The findings of the NiCE project show that circular lifestyles cannot rely solely on individual behaviour change or isolated pilot projects. They require supportive urban environments, stable funding, accessible infrastructure, institutional capacity, policy coherence, and cooperation between diverse actors like municipalities, civil society or cultural actors.

This paper presents policy recommendations for cities, regional and national authorities, and other stakeholders seeking to foster circular lifestyles in urban centres. We recognize that not all measures proposed here can be implemented simultaneously in any one city. Rather, our aim is to inspire municipalities by showcasing the range of available options.

The recommendations are organised around four key areas:

- economic barriers;
- governance, capacity and infrastructure limitations;
- awareness and behavioural barriers;
- the need for systemic transformation.

Address economic barriers: Many circular lifestyle initiatives depend on short-term project funding and struggle to secure stable support after pilot phases end. Cities and public authorities should provide long-term funding, micro-grants, rent subsidies, seed funding, risk-sharing mechanisms, and business development support. Successful pilots should be helped to scale through multiannual financing, service contracts, revolving funds, blended finance, and other mechanisms that allow circular offers to become regular urban services.

Strengthen governance, capacity and infrastructure: Circular lifestyles require supportive governance frameworks, sufficient municipal capacity, and accessible infrastructure. Cities should map and activate vacant or underused buildings for circular initiatives, and expand neighbourhood-level infrastructure such as repair points, reuse centres, lending libraries, composting systems, refill stations, sharing hubs, and local circular marketplaces. Municipalities should also build internal capacity by appointing dedicated staff, training municipal employees, improving cross-departmental cooperation, and providing technical assistance, especially for smaller municipalities. Circular economy objectives should be integrated into urban regeneration, municipal strategies, and long-term development plans, while national and regional authorities should provide legal guidance, advisory services, competence centres, and peer-learning opportunities. Temporary and experimental formats should also be used to test innovative solutions and identify scalable approaches.

Address awareness and behavioural barriers: Circular lifestyles are still often understood solely in connection with activities related to recycling, whereas the aspects related to repair, reuse, sharing, renting, and sufficiency-oriented consumption remain less familiar or are less socially accepted. Cities should increase the visibility of circular initiatives, tailor outreach to diverse communities, support hands-on activities and integrate circular economy topics into education and skills development. Successful activities should be used to help reframe circular lifestyles for specific social target groups to show them as attractive, trustworthy, affordable, and convenient actions. Reducing stigma around second-hand goods, repaired products, and shared services is essential for making circular practices mainstream.

Support systemic transformation: Circular lifestyles should not be treated as isolated environmental projects or optional individual choices. They need to be embedded into wider urban transformation strategies, municipal services, investment plans of cities and other stakeholders, and climate-neutrality objectives. Cities should establish local multi-stakeholder networks to enhance local involvement, promote co-creation with residents and local actors, provide a central municipal contact point for circular initiatives, and use city centres as demonstration areas where circular services, social interaction, local resilience, and sustainable urban development are visibly connected.



On the following pages, you will find further information regarding the challenges, recommendations, and the project context within which this policy paper was developed.



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CHALLENGES FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CIRCULAR LIFESTYLES



Although circular economy principles are increasingly integrated into European and national policy frameworks, the implementation of circular lifestyles at the local level remains fragmented and limited (Kirchherr, et al. 2018).

Through its dedicated work on the topic, the NiCE project highlighted that the transition towards circular lifestyles requires not only technological or infrastructural changes, but also profound behavioural, cultural, institutional, and governance transformations.

Within the project, a circular lifestyle was understood as a set of everyday practices, consumption patterns, and social behaviours that contribute to a circular economy by reducing the use of primary resources, prolonging product lifecycles, preventing waste, and promoting sharing, reuse, repair, refurbishment,

recycling, and sustainable local systems (Szabó, Gimkiewicz and Alaraj 2026). Circular lifestyles, therefore, combine individual behavioural change with enabling urban infrastructures, circular business models, community initiatives, and supportive public policies.

Despite the fact that the NiCE project demonstrated that the implementation of circular lifestyle initiatives is feasible, the wider adoption of this concept in European cities still faces several interconnected challenges and needs (see Figure 1)).

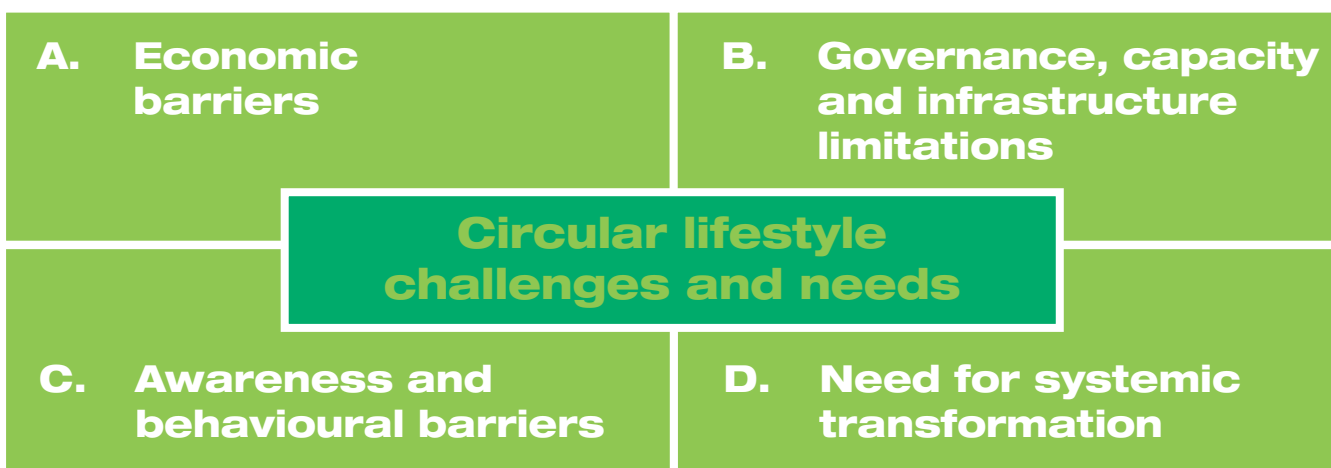


Figure 1: Circular lifestyle challenges and needs, own illustration.

A.**Economic barriers**

One of the most significant barriers concerns insufficient and unstable funding. Circular initiatives in cities often rely on temporary project-based financing, especially EU schemes, while local municipal budgets remain limited (OECD 2020). Smaller municipalities frequently lack the financial resources, staff capacities, and organisational structures necessary to design, coordinate, and scale circular economy initiatives. Grassroots organisations and citizen-led initiatives often depend on volunteer work and unstable funding sources, which limit their long-term sustainability and expansion potential (Purvis, et al. 2025).

Private-sector engagement also remains relatively weak. Many circular initiatives are perceived as economically risky, difficult to scale, or unable to deliver quick financial returns (Saarinen and Aarikka-Stenroos 2023). As a result, circular business models, repair services, reuse centres, and community initiatives often remain niche rather than becoming mainstream urban services.

B.**Governance, capacity and infrastructure limitations**

In many European cities and regions, circular economy objectives are not yet adequately integrated into local regulations, planning instruments, urban development strategies, or long-term municipal visions (OECD 2020). Policy coherence between European, national, regional, and local levels is often weak, resulting in fragmented implementation, unclear responsibilities, and limited institutional ownership. Many municipalities lack specialised staff, interdisciplinary cooperation mechanisms, technical expertise, and institutional support structures necessary to translate strategic ambitions into concrete actions (Żak-Skwierczyńska and Wojdał 2026). Interdisciplinary cooperation mechanisms are often underdeveloped, and municipal departments often work separately, without sufficient coordination between environmental, mobility, economic, social, and urban planning sectors (OECD 2020).

At the same time, citizens often lack access to the infrastructure required to adopt circular lifestyles in their everyday lives. Repair services, reuse centres, composting systems, sharing platforms, refill systems, sustainable mobility infrastructure, and local circular marketplaces remain unevenly distributed or insufficiently developed. This may even cause for motivated citizens to find circular practices inconvenient, inaccessible, or time-consuming (Pacheco, van der Werff and Steg 2025).

As a result, circular initiatives frequently remain isolated, disconnected from wider urban transformation agendas, and difficult to scale.

C.

Awareness and behavioural barriers

The transition towards circular lifestyles is strongly influenced by social norms, consumption habits, and cultural expectations (Boermans, et al. 2024). Consumerism, fast-fashion culture, convenience-oriented lifestyles, and the throwaway mentality are major barriers to circular transition. Additionally, consumption can also be understood as a learned behavior, which may be associated with identity, social groups, or enjoyment and can be therefore hard to change (Gimkiewicz, et al. 2022).

Many citizens still perceive circular economy primarily as recycling, while practices such as repair, reuse, sharing, renting, or sufficiency-oriented consumption are less familiar or socially accepted (Korsunova, Horn and Vainio 2021). Ownership continues to be associated with comfort, status, and success, whereas second-hand products or shared services may still face social stigma or concerns regarding quality and hygiene (Laitala and Klepp 2018).

Awareness campaigns alone often have only temporary effects if they are not supported by long-term educational approaches, community engagement, and accessible circular infrastructure (Subri, et al. 2025). Moreover, behavioural patterns differ significantly depending on age, income, education, and living environment, which means that circular lifestyle policies must consider social diversity and inclusiveness.

D.

Need for systemic transformation

The findings of the NiCE project demonstrate that the implementation of circular lifestyles cannot rely solely on individual responsibility or isolated pilot projects. Circular lifestyles require systemic transformation of urban environments, governance structures, economic incentives, infrastructure, and cultural norms.

Cities therefore need integrated approaches that combine policy support, stakeholder cooperation, education, local community engagement, and accessible circular services (OECD 2020). Only through such coordinated and multi-level actions can city centres become spaces that actively support sustainable consumption, social interaction, local resilience, and climate neutrality. In response to these challenges, the NiCE project developed and tested a range of practical approaches aimed at supporting cities in the transition towards circular lifestyles.

3

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



A.

Addressing economic barriers

Funding and institutional support

The NiCE project demonstrated that circular activities are more resilient when embedded into long-term governance structures and municipal strategies. Therefore, cities and public authorities should:

- fund circular lifestyle offers such as workshops and repair cafés, ensuring they are free or low-cost;
- provide micro-grants, equipment loans, and facilitation training for local organisers;
- provide flexible seed funding and micro-grants for innovative or higher-risk activities that may not yet have a proven business model;
- design flexible funding and support schemes that accommodate different organisational models, scales, and temporary formats;
- offer rent subsidies for circular offers (e.g. with a local rental subsidy fund);
- facilitate private-sector engagement in circular offers by providing targeted economic incentives, start-up grants, risk-sharing mechanisms, and access to affordable premises for circular businesses, repair services, reuse centres, sharing platforms, and social enterprises;
- support the scaling of circular business models by moving successful pilots beyond short-term project funding through multiannual financing, service contracts, revolving funds, blended finance, and business development support that strengthens financial viability and helps circular offers become regular urban services;
- embed funding for circular lifestyle initiatives into long-term urban development, climate, and social policy budgets;
- create permanent municipal coordination roles or units responsible for managing circular transition funding and institutional support.

B.

Addressing governance, capacity and infrastructure limitations

Access to spaces and facilities

To implement circular lifestyle initiatives, it is essential that they have access to suitable spaces. In many cases, vacant and underused spaces provide important opportunities for revitalising city centres through the integration of newer uses which draw in investments and visitors, for example circular and community-oriented activities. Therefore, cities should:

- ensure ongoing mapping of vacant municipal buildings;
- allocate underused municipal properties (e.g. empty shops in municipal owned buildings, underused libraries or community centres) as permanent or temporary places for circular activities;
- engage in dialogue with property owners and negotiate incentives for them to provide access to their spaces for circular lifestyle initiatives for free or for a reduced rent amount.

Strengthen municipal implementation capacity

Many municipalities lack sufficient staff capacity, technical expertise, and organisational resources to effectively implement circular economy policies and initiatives. Therefore, cities and regional authorities should:

- appoint dedicated staff responsible for circular economy implementation,
- provide training and capacity-building opportunities for municipal employees,
- ensure access to technical expertise on repair, reuse, sharing, composting, refill systems, and circular service models,
- create shared regional support structures or provide external technical assistance for smaller municipalities.

Improve cross-departmental coordination

Circular transition intersects with multiple policy areas, including mobility, housing, public procurement, waste management, economic development, education, social inclusion, and urban planning. Therefore, cities should:

- establish practical cooperation mechanisms between environmental, mobility, economic, social, procurement, and urban planning departments,
- integrate circular economy objectives into multiple municipal policy areas and service sectors,

- establish interdisciplinary working groups and joint planning processes within municipal administrations,
- encourage shared responsibility for circular transition across departments rather than concentrating responsibility exclusively within environmental units, and
- ensure that circular lifestyle initiatives are incorporated into long-term infrastructure planning and local development strategies.

Expand accessible circular infrastructure

Many citizens are willing to adopt more sustainable practices but still lack access to convenient, affordable, and visible circular services in their everyday environments.

Therefore, cities should:

- support the development of neighbourhood-level circular infrastructure, including repair points, reuse centres, lending libraries, composting systems, refill stations, sharing hubs, sustainable mobility links, and local circular marketplaces,
- ensure that circular services are affordable, visible, and easy to access across different neighbourhoods and social groups,
- integrate circular infrastructure into existing public services, community facilities, and urban regeneration projects,
- prioritise accessibility for different age groups, abilities, and income levels, and

- facilitate cooperation between municipalities, community organisations, social enterprises, and local businesses in the delivery of circular services.

Circular economy in urban regeneration

Urban regeneration projects often overlook opportunities to strengthen local circular economies, community resilience, and sustainable everyday practices, while repair, reuse, sharing, local production, and community-based activities can contribute to more vibrant, socially connected, and economically resilient urban spaces.

Therefore, cities should:

- include circular economy objectives in urban regeneration and city centre revitalisation strategies;
- create multifunctional community spaces supporting repair, reuse, sharing, and local production activities;
- integrate circular services and community-based initiatives into redevelopment plans from the early planning stages;
- use regeneration projects to strengthen local identity, social cohesion, and sustainable economic development;
- encourage cooperation between urban planners, local communities, businesses, cultural organisations, and circular economy actors during regeneration processes.

National support structures and legal coordination

Many local circular initiatives operate with limited administrative capacity and often struggle to navigate complex legal, organisational, and regulatory frameworks. Therefore, national and regional authorities should:

- create national support networks connecting a wide range of stakeholders, including municipalities, NGOs, educational institutions, businesses, and practitioners working on circular lifestyles;
- provide legal guidance and practical toolkits on topics such as reuse regulations, temporary use of spaces, liability issues, taxation, public procurement, or organisational models;
- establish and fund peer-learning, mentoring programmes, and exchange of good practices;
- establish competence centres or advisory services supporting the implementation and scaling of circular initiatives;
- create paid “circularity coordinator” roles within municipalities, NGOs, or local partnerships;
- conduct or commission mapping and networking activities identifying existing circular actors and cooperation opportunities; recognise coordination and community-building activities as essential infrastructure for the circular transition.

Strategic integration, monitoring and policy coherence

Circular lifestyle initiatives often remain isolated when they are not embedded into long-term municipal strategies, action plans, and regulatory frameworks. Therefore, local, regional, and national authorities should:

- develop municipal circular economy action plans with clear responsibilities, budgets, timelines, indicators;
- establish monitoring systems to measure progress in repair, reuse, sharing, sufficiency, sustainable consumption, and access to circular services;
- integrate circular lifestyle objectives into climate, energy, mobility, procurement, housing, social, and urban development policies;
- align local circular economy measures with European, national, and regional policy frameworks to reduce fragmentation and unclear responsibilities;
- use regulatory and economic incentives, including circular procurement criteria, reduced rents, fee exemptions, and preferential access to public spaces, to support circular lifestyle initiatives;
- explicitly promote circularity beyond waste management by including sufficiency, sharing, repair, reuse, and sustainable consumption in municipal policy documents and implementation tools.

Temporary and experimental formats

Many innovative circular solutions emerge through small-scale experimentation and grassroots collaboration, but often struggle to secure long-term support. Therefore, public authorities should:

- fund and enable pilot projects, temporary initiatives, and experimental formats that allow innovative ideas to be tested before large-scale implementation;
- create non-commercial and low-threshold spaces where local actors, citizens, NGOs, artists, and entrepreneurs can experiment with new solutions;
- recognise experimentation and occasional failure as a necessary part of innovation and learning processes;
- use temporary and experimental initiatives as opportunities to identify scalable solutions, new cooperation models, and emerging local needs.

C. Addressing awareness and behavioural barriers

Promotion and visibility of circular lifestyles

Circular lifestyle initiatives often remain niche, are rarely located directly in city centres, and are frequently known only among people already interested in sustainability. Therefore, cities should:

- promote circular lifestyles as attractive, convenient, and socially desirable through positive storytelling, successful examples, trusted messengers, local role models, and greater visibility in mainstream urban spaces,
- tailor outreach to diverse communities by offering multilingual, hands-on introductions to circular lifestyle initiatives and activities, e.g. repair or reuse;
- run or commission local awareness campaigns: use public transport screens, local media, and “Sustainability Ambassadors” to promote circular lifestyles in their city;
- leverage existing events: for example, participate in the EU Week for Waste Reduction to boost visibility and engagement;
- map existing circular lifestyle practices and identify which high-value circular strategies, such as reduce, reuse, repair, refurbish, and share, are most suitable for local socio-economic conditions.

Hands-on community engagement and awareness raising

Circular activities are more likely to be adopted when citizens can directly experience and practice them in their everyday lives. Therefore, cities should:

- organise, fund, or host hands-on community activities such as repair cafés, reuse workshops, swap events, urban living labs, and co-creation sessions;

- prioritise low-barrier and interactive formats that encourage participation from residents with different backgrounds and skill levels;
- combine awareness-raising campaigns with practical demonstrations and opportunities for citizens to test circular solutions in everyday life;
- encourage community-led initiatives and citizen participation in designing, implementing, and evaluating circular lifestyle activities.

Integration of circular lifestyles into education and skills development

Behavioural change towards circular lifestyles is most effective when learning is practical, participatory, and embedded in everyday environments.

Therefore, policymakers and educational institutions should:

- integrate circular economy topics into school curricula, university programmes, and vocational training;
- establish and fund living labs, repair workshops, and hands-on educational activities for different age groups;
- encourage cooperation between educational institutions and local circular businesses or NGOs;
- promote intergenerational learning formats where practical skills such as repair, reuse, or resource-saving practices can be shared between citizens.

D.

Addressing the need for systemic transformation

Stakeholder cooperation and co-creation for systemic circular transformation

The transition towards circular lifestyles requires more than individual behaviour change or isolated pilot projects.

Therefore, cities should:

- establish and coordinate multi-stakeholder networks to co-design and co-implement circular initiatives;
- promote co-creation processes involving citizens, artisans, local communities, NGOs, businesses, schools, and cultural institutions to build ownership;
- establish a central point of contact within the municipal administration for circular lifestyle initiatives;
- link stakeholder cooperation to long-term urban transformation strategies, municipal services, investment plans, and climate-neutrality objectives;
- use city centres as demonstration areas where circular services, social interaction, local resilience, and climate-neutral urban development are visibly connected;
- ensure that circular lifestyle policies combine funding, infrastructure, education, governance, and behavioural change measures rather than relying on isolated projects or individual responsibility.

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ABOUT THE NICE PROJECT



About NiCE

This policy paper has been developed within the framework of the NiCE project. NiCE stands for ‘From Niche to Centre – City Centres as Places for Circular Lifestyles’. By testing real solutions in eight pilot cities and working with local partners across Central Europe, NiCE brings circular lifestyles from niche ideas to everyday reality. NiCE is supported by the Interreg CENTRAL EUROPE Programme with co-financing from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

A total of nine project partners from eight countries are involved in the project.

In addition to the German Environment Agency (UBA) as lead partner these are:

ENVIROS from the Czech Republic, StadtLABOR from Austria, the Bistra Scientific Research Centre from Slovenia, the National Agency for New Technologies, Energy and Sustainable Economic Development (ENEA) from Italy, the University of Budapest for Technology and Economics from Hungary, Creative Industry Košice from Slovakia, and the Research and

Innovation Centre Pro Akademia and the City of Brzeg Dolny from Poland.

The foundation of our recommendations

The recommendations in this paper are largely based on our firsthand experiences during the pilot activities in the eight participating cities. Throughout the process, the pilots were continuously monitored using the monitoring tool CC-PEM (see Tools section below). Citizens and stakeholders were also invited to share their perspectives via surveys, and

a comprehensive evaluation report was produced to assess the pilots' outcomes.

Prior to implementation, we conducted stakeholder and needs analyses for each pilot city, which revealed early insights into political, financial, and structural gaps. Additionally, we organised transnational stakeholder workshops in Košice, Brussels, and Dessau, where we collaborated with external experts to identify needs and address gaps. The findings from these workshops have also informed this paper.

Finally, NiCE published two academic articles, whose research insights have been incorporated into these recommendations.



Tools & Resources

All information, results, and tools from NiCE are available on our knowledge platform:

<https://circularlifestyle.eu/>

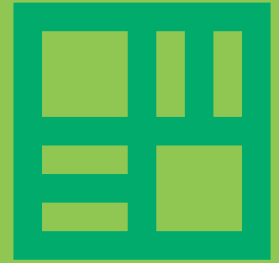
YOU CAN FIND THE SPECIFIC DOCUMENTS HERE:

- **NiCE Pilot blogs & videos** documenting the pilot activities in 8 cities: <https://circularlifestyle.eu/pilots>
- **NiCE Resources** supporting implementation of circular lifestyle offer in cities (e.g. guidelines, tools, educational materials, scientific articles): <https://circularlifestyle.eu/resources>
- **NiCE Online Seminars:** <https://circularlifestyle.eu/online-seminars>
- **NiCE Virtual Exhibition** presenting 30 good practices of circular lifestyle offer in Central Europe: <https://circularlifestyle.eu/virtualexhibition>



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WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENT



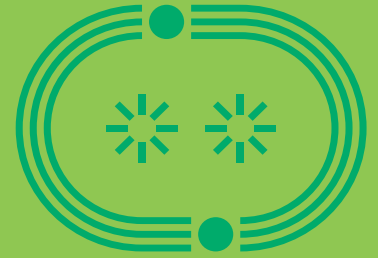
Cities are more than just places of consumption. They serve as hubs for community, learning, cultural exchange, and sustainability. To further foster these aspects, experimental approaches in practice are essential. Beyond financial and legal frameworks, society as a whole should embrace the courage to trial and experiment, even with the understanding that not every attempt will immediately succeed. This “culture of experimentation” (Parodi et al. 2023) should also be recognised and supported within local government administrations.

Interim uses, real-world experiments, and pilot projects can instil greater confidence among participants in the face of upcoming changes. These formats unlock their full potential for the necessary sustainability transformation when they connect people, account for diverse interests, and are designed in a participative manner. They create learning environments where all stakeholders can actively shape change processes, experience a sense of agency, and develop sustainable practices.

For the project partners at NiCE and all involved stakeholders, it has been worthwhile to have the courage to try new approaches, test ideas, and learn from mistakes. In every pilot city, something enduring has emerged. Therefore, our pilots have shown, the willingness to experiment is not just a risk, but it can be the foundation for lasting impact and shared growth.

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