

Toward just and inclusive circular economy plans

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Abstract As cities and regions increasingly adopt Circular Economy (CE) strategies to enhance resource-use efficiency and reduce environmental impact, they seek frameworks that are not only sustainable but also transformative (Hadfield et al., 2025). However, a critical dimension often remains underexplored: the unequal accessibility of circular practices and their associated social impacts (e.g., Monciardini et al., 2024). While CE is frequently framed as a pathway to foster urban and regional transitions toward greater resource efficiency, this paper argues that such a perspective risks overlooking—and potentially reproducing—existing socio-economic inequalities (Liu, 2024; Wang & Lo, 2021).

This study focuses on the interaction between vulnerable social groups and CE practices, exploring their social impacts—particularly how such practices may reproduce or challenge structural inequalities. Drawing on empirical research conducted within the DUT ECLECTIC project, the study contributes by situating the CE approach within a justice-oriented framework that centers on the lived experiences and capacities of marginalized communities and social groups. We present and critically reflect on a mixed-methods research design developed to investigate the interaction between CE practices and vulnerable populations. Specifically, the methodology seeks to examine how structural inequalities influence access to CE practices—such as reuse, repair, upcycling, and food waste reduction—and to assess whether these practices serve as mechanisms of empowerment or, conversely, as avenues through which existing inequalities are maintained or exacerbated.

The empirical research combines quantitative household-level surveys with in-depth interviews involving NGOs, social enterprises, and cooperatives across four regions: South Tyrol (IT), Coimbra (PT), Gothenburg (SE), and Jonava (LT). This mixed-methods approach enables a comprehensive understanding of how CE practices are adopted across different socio-economic groups and how they impact both vulnerable and non-vulnerable populations. It also helps identify the main societal effects of CE practices, particularly for vulnerable groups—whether positive (e.g., social inclusion, job creation, community empowerment) or negative (e.g., the reinforcement of systemic privileges, such as those based on class).

While we will present selected preliminary findings from the ECLECTIC project, the primary aim of this presentation is to critically reflect on the methodology itself—its strengths, limitations, and potential for replication. We argue that such an approach is essential for developing inclusive, context-sensitive CE action plans that

incorporate participatory planning and address the diverse needs of local communities, aligning CE strategies with broader goals of environmental and social justice in urban and regional transitions.