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Cradle-ALP

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Summary

This document, authored by the Padova Chamber of Commerce and finalised in January 2026, outlines key information relating to contributors, dissemination level, revision status, and important dates including the due date and submission date. The structure is organised into numbered sections and subsections, which likely correspond to specific topics or areas of focus. The dissemination level is marked as public, indicating open access to the contents, while its comprehensive table of contents demonstrates a detailed and methodical approach.

1. Introduction

1.1. Objective of the Deliverable

The objective of Deliverable D.3.1.1 is to provide a consolidated evaluation of the Cradle-ALP pilot actions based exclusively on the structured feedback collected through the Pilot Action Survey. The deliverable aims to capture the perceptions, challenges, and practical insights of the partners who implemented the pilots, in order to assess the effectiveness of the tools, engagement strategies, and support activities offered to SMEs. By analysing the survey results, the report provides evidence-based conclusions on what worked, what limited participation, and which elements should be strengthened in future cross-regional actions. Ultimately, this deliverable supports the validation process within WP3 and informs the refinement of transformation roadmaps and policy recommendations.

1.2. Why the survey was carried out (purpose of collecting feedback)

The survey was conducted to collect structured and comparable feedback from all partners responsible for implementing the Cradle-ALP pilot actions within their respective regional or sectoral contexts. Its primary purpose was to understand how SMEs perceived the proposed activities, how they engaged with the tools, and which barriers or drivers influenced their participation. As the pilots were carried out across different regions, the survey ensured a harmonised evaluation method capable of capturing diverse experiences within a single framework. Gathering this feedback was essential to validate the pilot actions, assess the relevance and usability of the tools, and verify whether the support offered corresponded to the needs and expectations of SMEs. The results also provide critical inputs for WP3, informing the finalisation of the transformation roadmaps and the formulation of policy recommendations for the Alpine Space.

1.3. Link with the validation of the Pilot Actions

The survey represents a core component of the validation process for the Cradle-ALP pilot actions within WP3. By gathering direct feedback from partners who implemented the pilots, the survey provides an evidence-based assessment of how effectively each activity supported SMEs in exploring circularity and Cradle-to-Cradle principles. The responses allow the consortium to verify whether the pilot actions aligned with their intended objectives, whether the selected tools were appropriate, and whether the engagement strategies were adequate across different regional contexts. These insights serve as a validation layer complementing the technical outputs produced in WP2 and enable an objective evaluation of the pilots' relevance, usability, and impact. The survey results therefore function as a bridge between implementation and strategic refinement, ensuring that the final roadmaps and recommendations reflect real operational experiences and partner needs.

2. Methodology

2.1. Structure of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed as a concise and structured instrument to collect comparable feedback from all partners involved in the pilot actions. It consisted of multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended questions, allowing both quantitative scoring and qualitative explanations. The survey was organised into thematic sections reflecting the key elements of the pilot implementation process: SME engagement, communication channels, barriers encountered, perceived interest of SMEs, evaluation of the activities offered, performance of the tools tested, and lessons learned. Each question targeted a specific aspect of the pilots, enabling a granular analysis of partners' experiences. The combination of closed and open questions ensured both consistency across responses and the possibility to capture contextual insights from each region. Overall, the structure ensured clarity, comparability, and completeness in the evaluation process.

2.2. Target of respondents (pilot action implementers)

The questionnaire was addressed to all project partners directly involved in implementing the Cradle-ALP pilot actions within their respective regional or sectoral contexts. Respondents were therefore the "pilot action implementers", including business support organisations, universities, clusters, chambers of commerce, and innovation agencies. These actors were selected because they coordinated the engagement of SMEs, delivered the tools, organised workshops or matchmaking activities, and monitored the progress of each pilot. Their operational perspective was essential to evaluate how SMEs reacted to the proposed methodologies, which challenges emerged during implementation, and how effectively the tools supported circularity-oriented transformation. By focusing on pilot implementers rather than SMEs themselves, the survey aimed to collect harmonised insights from those with a comprehensive overview of all phases of the pilot process. This ensured that the evaluation was informed by experienced practitioners with direct, hands-on involvement.

2.3. Survey administration method

The survey was administered online using a structured digital form, allowing partners to provide their feedback in a simple and standardised way. The online format ensured equal access for all respondents across the Alpine regions and enabled automatic aggregation of results for subsequent analysis. Partners were invited to complete the questionnaire individually, based on their direct experience in coordinating and delivering the pilot actions. The survey was open for a defined period, giving respondents sufficient time to reflect on their activities and collect any internal insights needed to answer accurately. The tool also allowed the inclusion of both closed questions, which facilitated quantitative comparisons, and open comments, which provided richer contextual information. This administration method ensured efficiency, transparency, and consistency in collecting feedback across the **consortium.**

2.4. Types of questions (closed, open, rating scales)

The questionnaire combined different types of questions to capture both quantitative measures and qualitative insights from the partners. Closed-ended multiple-choice questions were used to assess the level of difficulty, interest, and perceived relevance of each activity, enabling clear comparisons across regions. Likert-scale questions allowed respondents to rate specific aspects of SME engagement, tool performance, and overall interest in circularity topics. Open-ended questions complemented these by giving partners the opportunity to explain the reasons behind their choices, describe contextual challenges, or provide additional reflections not captured by predefined options. Some questions asked respondents to rank activities by priority, offering a comparative perspective on what SMEs valued the most. This mix of formats ensured that the survey produced structured, measurable outputs while leaving space for narrative feedback, enabling a more complete and nuanced evaluation.

2.5. Method of analysing the results

The analysis of the survey results followed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative aggregation with qualitative interpretation. Closed questions and rating scales were compiled to produce percentage distributions, frequency counts, and comparative charts, allowing a clear overview of common patterns across partners. Open-ended responses were reviewed and coded into thematic categories, such as engagement barriers, tool strengths, or organisational challenges, to identify recurring insights and differences between regions. Particular attention was given to aligning the qualitative explanations with the numerical data, ensuring that the reasons behind each rating were fully understood. The analysis also looked for consistencies, divergences, and cross-cutting trends emerging from the consortium. This integrated method ensured that numerical indicators were enriched by contextual knowledge, providing a complete and reliable basis for the evaluation of the pilot actions.

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3. Survey Results – Summary by Question

3.1. Profile of respondents

The respondents to the survey were the partners directly responsible for implementing the Cradle-ALP pilot actions in their respective regions and sectors, representing the full diversity of the consortium. They included universities, business support organisations, chambers of commerce, innovation agencies and thematic clusters, all of which played an active operational role in engaging SMEs and delivering the tools developed within the project. Their involvement covered multiple tasks such as recruiting companies, organising workshops and matchmaking sessions, conducting one-to-one assessments, and testing instruments like QuickScan, LCA, and the Circularity Compass. Because of this hands-on experience, respondents possessed a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities encountered throughout the pilots. The survey captured reactions from partners working in different industries—ranging from packaging and chemicals to wood-furniture, textiles, and advanced materials—reflecting the multi-sectoral nature of Cradle-ALP. This diversity ensured a representative overview of regional differences, sector-specific dynamics, and organisational capacities. Importantly, respondents were not SMEs but intermediaries who supported and guided them, allowing the survey to collect insights from actors with a systemic perspective and a complete view of implementation processes. Their consolidated feedback forms the factual basis of this evaluation report.

3.2. Ease/difficulty of SME engagement

The survey results show that engaging SMEs in the pilot actions was generally perceived as challenging across most partner regions. While a few respondents reported relatively smooth engagement processes, the majority indicated that significant effort was required to attract and motivate companies to participate. Several factors contributed to this situation. First, many SMEs faced time constraints and limited internal resources, making it difficult for them to prioritise participation in project activities, especially during economically uncertain periods. Some partners noted that companies were interested in sustainability topics but felt unable to allocate staff time to exploratory or non-mandatory initiatives. Others highlighted that SMEs already advanced in circularity did not perceive additional support as necessary, while those with low awareness struggled to recognise the benefits, resulting in a “polarisation” of interest. In some sectors, such as chemicals or packaging, decision-making processes are more conservative and slower, requiring more personalised engagement and trust-building before companies agree to participate. Additionally, the perceived complexity of the proposed pilot framework or the absence of immediate tangible benefits made some SMEs hesitant. The survey also indicates that engagement was easier when partners already had well-established networks or sector-specific contacts. Conversely, pilots targeting industries where partners had weaker connections required more outreach and introductory communication. Overall, the engagement process proved resource-intensive, confirming that successful SME participation depends on clear value propositions, simplified access conditions, and proactive, relationship-based outreach efforts.

3.3. Communication channels used

The survey indicates that partners relied on a wide mix of communication channels to reach SMEs, combining direct and indirect approaches to maximise visibility and response rates. Direct contact—via email, phone calls, or personal invitations—was unanimously used and considered the most effective method, particularly when existing relationships or previous collaborations were already in place. This personalised outreach was essential for explaining the purpose of the pilots and addressing initial doubts from companies. Many partners also used newsletters and institutional mailing lists to disseminate information more broadly, although these channels generated interest mainly among SMEs already attentive to circularity topics. Social media platforms, especially LinkedIn, were employed to increase public visibility, but their impact on concrete SME participation was evaluated as moderate, often functioning more as awareness tools than actionable engagement drivers. Several partners engaged SMEs through workshops, webinars, sectoral events, trade fairs, and cluster meetings, where the project could be presented to targeted audiences in a more interactive format. These settings helped create trust and allowed partners to contextualise the pilot activities within broader industry trends. In some regions, partners leveraged connections with other projects, innovation networks, or internal departments to amplify outreach. Matchmaking events, both online and onsite, also acted as communication touchpoints. Overall, the results show that effective engagement required a multilayered strategy, where direct communication served as the anchor and broader channels supported early awareness and visibility.

3.4. Barriers encountered in engaging SMEs

The survey clearly highlights a set of recurring barriers that limited SME engagement across the different pilot areas. One of the most frequently mentioned obstacles was the lack of time: many SMEs operated under significant workload pressure or were dealing with difficult market conditions, leaving little room for participation in non-essential activities. Several partners noted that SMEs prioritised short-term operational needs over exploratory initiatives, even when the topics were perceived as relevant. Another major barrier was the limited availability of financial or human resources to allocate to external projects. Some companies feared that participation might require excessive documentation or follow-up, especially when the pilot offer was communicated through a call for proposals, which some SMEs perceived as bureaucratic or demanding compared to the expected benefits. A further obstacle was the insufficient knowledge of circularity, Cradle-to-Cradle principles, or sustainability-related tools among less mature SMEs, which made it harder for them to understand the immediate value of joining the pilot. Conversely, highly advanced companies sometimes showed low interest because they felt they were already well positioned on circularity and did not perceive added value in adopting new tools. Sector-specific factors also played a role: in industries such as chemicals or packaging, long decision chains and conservative approaches reduced responsiveness. Lastly, economic instability in certain regions created an unfavourable context for voluntary participation. Overall, these barriers demonstrate that engaging SMEs requires clear value propositions, reduced administrative burden, and tailored communication strategies to match different levels of awareness and readiness.

3.5. Role of the local ecosystem

Survey responses show that the involvement of the local ecosystem played a significant but uneven role in supporting SME engagement across the regions. In several cases, partners activated their networks of clusters, chambers of commerce, regional agencies, innovation centres, and universities to broaden outreach and reinforce credibility. These intermediaries helped disseminate information, recommend suitable SMEs, and provide initial endorsements that increased trust and motivation among companies. In regions where established sectoral clusters or thematic networks existed—such as textiles, plastics, or wood-furniture—their involvement was particularly effective, as they could mobilise companies already familiar with sustainability initiatives. Local events, fairs, and workshops hosted by regional institutions also served as strategic entry points for presenting the pilots and initiating first contacts with SMEs. However, the survey also highlights that ecosystem involvement varied significantly among partners. Where networks were weak, fragmented, or not strongly connected to circularity topics, support for SME recruitment was limited. Some partners noted that specific industries lacked active local bodies capable of promoting innovation-oriented collaborations, reducing opportunities for coordinated outreach. In certain contexts, economic uncertainty or competing regional initiatives acted as additional barriers, diluting ecosystem effectiveness. Overall, the results confirm that strong and well-aligned local ecosystems substantially facilitate engagement, while weaker or non-specialised ecosystems require partners to invest more effort in direct, one-to-one outreach. Strengthening regional cooperation structures could therefore enhance future circularity initiatives.

3.6. SMEs' interest in circularity and transformation

The survey shows that SME interest in circularity and transformation topics is generally present but highly uneven across regions and sectors. Many partners reported that companies recognise the strategic relevance of sustainability and feel increasing pressure from markets, clients, and regulatory trends to adopt more circular practices. For these SMEs, the themes addressed by Cradle-ALP were considered culturally important, aligned with broader industry evolution, and potentially beneficial for future competitiveness. However, interest did not always translate into active participation. Several respondents noted a clear polarisation: SMEs already working on circularity or familiar with bio-based materials were receptive and engaged, while others—especially those with limited prior exposure—struggled to perceive the immediate value of joining the pilot. In some cases, economic uncertainty reduced companies' willingness to invest attention in medium-term transformation topics. Certain sectors, such as packaging, already accustomed to sustainability requirements, displayed moderate enthusiasm, as many companies felt they had already implemented the main actions. Meanwhile, SMEs in more traditional or conservative sectors needed stronger incentives and clearer benefits to justify involvement. Despite these differences, the overall feedback suggests that the thematic relevance of circularity is widely acknowledged, but practical engagement depends on perceived urgency, sector maturity, and available internal resources. This underscores the importance of tailoring communication and support strategies to different readiness levels within the SME landscape.

3.7. Reasons behind the level of interest

The survey responses provide a nuanced picture of the factors influencing SMEs' level of interest in circularity and transformation topics. One of the recurring reasons for moderate or inconsistent interest is the perceived mismatch between long-term sustainability goals and short-term business pressures. Many SMEs acknowledge the importance of circularity but deprioritise it when facing economic uncertainty, reduced revenues, or limited staff availability. Partners also highlighted that companies with previous experience in sustainability or bioeconomy initiatives were more open and curious, while those with no prior exposure struggled to understand how the proposed tools and pilot activities could create concrete value. Some respondents noted that the thematic scope of the project was at times perceived as too broad or abstract, making it harder for SMEs to grasp immediate benefits. Another influential factor was the internal maturity level: advanced SMEs often considered the pilot activities too basic compared to their existing strategies, while less mature ones viewed them as too complex or demanding. Sectoral context also played a role; industries already regulated or strongly oriented toward environmental standards showed higher baseline interest, whereas traditional manufacturing sectors required more persuasion. In addition, partners mentioned that the absence of financial incentives or tangible outputs reduced motivation among companies with limited resources. Overall, the level of interest observed is shaped by a combination of economic conditions, prior knowledge, sectoral dynamics, and perceived value—confirming that engagement strategies must be differentiated accordingly.

3.8. Priorities among different types of activities (1:1, matchmaking, collective, transborder)

The survey reveals clear patterns in how SMEs prioritised the different types of activities offered during the pilot actions. Across the consortium, one-to-one assistance emerged as the most valued format, largely because it provides tailored support, allows companies to speak openly about their challenges, and offers a clear and immediate benefit-to-effort ratio.

Partners noted that SMEs appreciate personalised guidance that directly addresses their specific needs rather than generic or broad-level content. Matchmaking activities also received positive evaluations, particularly when conducted onsite. Physical meetings facilitated trust-building, spontaneous conversations, and opportunities for discovering unexpected synergies—elements that are harder to reproduce online. However, partners pointed out that online matchmaking reached a larger number of SMEs, though with lower interaction quality. Collective activities such as workshops and thematic seminars were perceived as helpful for learning, benchmarking, and gaining sector-level insights, but participation often depended on time availability and the relevance of the topic. The least prioritised activities were transborder events. While these offer theoretical value in fostering cross-regional exchange, SMEs tended to perceive them as requiring excessive effort relative to the expected benefits, especially when travel was involved. Several partners mentioned that transborder events can become meaningful only when highly curated, with clear matchmaking targets and tangible outcomes. Overall, the ranking indicates that SMEs respond best to formats that minimise time investment, maximise concreteness, and provide direct, actionable value.

3.9. Reasons behind the preferences expressed

The survey responses clearly explain why SMEs expressed specific preferences among the different types of activities offered in the pilot actions. One-to-one support was prioritised because it provides the highest perceived value: companies receive targeted advice, can discuss sensitive or strategic issues openly, and feel that the time invested produces concrete outcomes. Partners emphasised that SMEs appreciate personalised assistance, especially when it helps them understand how circularity concepts apply to their actual processes and business models. Matchmaking activities were valued for their relational advantages. Face-to-face formats were especially appreciated, as they enabled real exchanges, stronger trust-building, and immediate exploration of collaboration opportunities. Online matchmaking reduced travel time but often resulted in weaker interaction, which explains why onsite formats were generally preferred when feasible. Collective activities such as workshops and seminars ranked lower because SMEs often perceived them as more generic and less directly applicable to their immediate needs. Participation required a longer time commitment, and the benefits—though useful—were harder to quantify. Finally, transborder activities were viewed as the least attractive due to logistical burdens, travel requirements, and unclear direct benefits for individual SMEs. Partners noted that SMEs tend to prioritise local relevance and practical outcomes over cross-border networking unless the value proposition is extremely explicit. Overall, the preferences reflect a strong SME preference for efficiency, relevance, and direct applicability.

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3.10. Lessons learned from SME engagement

The survey highlights several important lessons regarding SME engagement that can inform future circularity-oriented initiatives. First, partners learned that engagement efforts must be highly targeted and clearly communicate the concrete benefits for SMEs. General messaging on sustainability is not sufficient; companies respond better when they understand how a specific tool or activity can solve an operational problem or create new business opportunities. Second, early and continuous communication is essential. SMEs require time to internalise new concepts, assess internal capacities, and align participation with their workload. Several partners emphasised the importance of announcing activities well in advance, simplifying the language used, and avoiding bureaucratic formats such as calls for proposals, which some SMEs found intimidating or disproportionate to the expected results. Third, the survey shows that engagement strategies must be adaptive. What works for one sector or region may not work for another, and partners must be ready to adjust their approach, focusing on personalised outreach when collective promotion fails. Building trust through existing networks, clusters, and intermediaries remains a crucial enabler. Fourth, SMEs are more inclined to participate when they see tangible, short-term advantages, such as tailored guidance, actionable recommendations, or opportunities for concrete collaboration. Lastly, financial or resource constraints significantly influence SME responsiveness, meaning that supportive incentives—financial or in-kind—can improve participation. These lessons underline the need for a pragmatic, flexible, and value-driven engagement model.

3.11. Tools used in the pilot actions

According to the survey results, partners tested a variety of tools during the pilot actions, each supporting different dimensions of circularity assessment and business transformation. The most widely used tool was the QuickScan, selected by a majority of partners because it provides an accessible, structured entry point for discussing circularity with SMEs. QuickScan enabled practitioners to guide companies through key topics such as materials, processes, governance, and business models, while also stimulating reflection and dialogue. Some partners also employed the Circularity Compass, which helped SMEs visualise their position within circular value loops and identify improvement areas. Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) was used more selectively, mainly by partners with technical expertise or by SMEs already familiar with environmental evaluation. Its use offered deeper insights into material flows and environmental impacts but required more time and skill. Additional tools, such as Lego Serious Play or Sustainable Business Model Canvas, were applied in specific contexts to foster creativity, co-design, or strategic thinking. The choice of tools varied depending on internal partner skills, SME maturity, and regional priorities. The survey indicates that tools were generally chosen either because they were new and promising, matched SME needs, or aligned with partners' existing competencies. This diversity reflects the adaptability of the pilot framework, allowing each region to select the most relevant instruments for engaging companies in circular transformation.

3.12. Criteria for selecting the tools

The survey responses highlight several key criteria that guided partners in selecting which tools to apply during the pilot actions. One of the most common motivations was the perceived fit between each tool and the specific needs or maturity level of the SMEs involved. Partners chose tools they considered accessible, practical, and capable of generating meaningful insights without requiring excessive preparation or technical competence from the companies. QuickScan, for example, was frequently selected because it offered a straightforward and structured way to initiate a conversation on circularity, making it suitable for SMEs entering the topic for the first time. Another important selection criterion was the internal expertise and familiarity of the implementing partners. Tools already known or previously used within their organisations allowed for smoother facilitation and more effective delivery. Conversely, some partners selected tools precisely because they were new and offered innovative approaches, which could stimulate interest among SMEs and enrich the overall piloting experience. Availability of resources and time also influenced choices: tools requiring extensive data gathering, such as LCA, were selected only when the SMEs demonstrated sufficient readiness and interest. Additionally, some partners considered the strategic relevance of the tool for their regional sector or policy context, ensuring alignment with existing initiatives. Overall, tool selection reflects a balance between practicality, innovation, internal competence, and SME-specific needs, demonstrating flexible and context-driven decision-making across the consortium.

3.13. Perceived performance of the tools

The survey results indicate that the overall performance of the tools tested during the pilot actions was positively assessed by partners, though with differences depending on the maturity level of the participating SMEs and the complexity of each tool. Most respondents rated the tools as meeting or exceeding SME expectations, particularly when the tools were easy to understand, quick to apply, and capable of generating concrete and actionable insights. QuickScan received especially favourable feedback because it encouraged meaningful discussions, offered a structured overview of circularity dimensions, and helped SMEs identify their starting point without requiring extensive data collection. Tools such as the Sustainable Business Model Canvas and Circularity Compass performed well for companies already familiar with strategic planning or circular economy concepts, providing a visual and conceptual framework that supported reflection and innovation. More complex tools like LCA were appreciated by technically advanced SMEs but considered too demanding for those lacking internal expertise or resources. In some cases, partners observed that SMEs expected more immediate and tangible outputs, which suggests the need to clarify the purpose and scope of each tool before implementation. Despite these variations, the survey confirms that the tools were generally well received and served as effective catalysts for awareness, self-assessment, and strategic orientation. The perceived value increased significantly when partners provided clear explanations and contextualised the tools within the company's specific challenges and opportunities.

3.14. Qualitative feedback on the tools

The qualitative feedback collected through the survey provides important nuances on how SMEs perceived and interacted with the tools used during the pilot actions. Many partners reported that SMEs appreciated tools that were intuitive, visually clear, and easy to apply during short meetings. QuickScan stood out in this respect: it encouraged open dialogue, helped SMEs reflect on their practices, and offered a non-technical entry point into circularity topics. Several comments emphasised that the conversational nature of the tool made it particularly effective for building trust and stimulating engagement. In contrast, tools requiring detailed data inputs or more advanced understanding—such as LCA—were perceived as valuable but challenging for less mature SMEs. Some companies expressed curiosity but felt overwhelmed by the level of technicality or the perceived time investment. Partners highlighted that explaining the purpose and expected outcomes in simple, accessible language was critical for maintaining interest. A few respondents also noted that the tools' added value increased significantly when combined with personalised guidance or practical examples drawn from the SME's own context. Creative tools like Lego Serious Play generated positive reactions in settings focused on co-design or innovation, though their applicability depended heavily on group dynamics. Overall, the qualitative feedback shows that tools perform best when tailored to SME readiness, introduced with clear explanations, and embedded within a supportive facilitation process.

3.15. Additional final comments from partners

The final open-ended comments in the survey offer additional insights that complement the structured questions and highlight broader reflections from partners on the pilot experience. Several respondents stressed that SME engagement in circularity topics requires stronger incentives—financial, regulatory, or reputational—to overcome structural barriers such as limited resources, economic uncertainty, and competing operational priorities. Some partners suggested that simplifying procedures and reducing the administrative burden associated with participation would make future initiatives more attractive for smaller companies. Others noted that the thematic complexity of the project tools occasionally required extra explanation, indicating the need for clearer communication materials and introductory resources. A recurring comment emphasised the importance of national-language communication when promoting pilot activities, ensuring better comprehension and reducing the perception of abstraction. Respondents also highlighted that cross-border activities, while valuable in principle, require more intensive preparation and targeted matchmaking to deliver concrete benefits for participants. A few partners reflected on the usefulness of collecting more detailed baseline information about SMEs' initial level of circularity maturity to better tailor outreach and support strategies. Overall, the additional comments underscore that circular transformation processes must be context-sensitive, user-friendly, and supported by clear value propositions to foster stronger SME participation and more impactful outcomes.

4. Cross-cutting Insights

4.1. General trends observed

Across all partners, the survey reveals several common trends: SME interest in circularity exists but is highly uneven; personalised support is consistently preferred over general activities; and time and resource constraints are the main barriers to participation. Tools that are simple, visual and quick to apply are the most effective, while complex assessments work only with more mature SMEs.

4.2. Differences across regions or sectors (if relevant)

Differences emerged mainly in SME readiness and sector maturity. Regions with strong clusters or established sustainability networks found engagement easier, while traditional sectors or areas with weaker ecosystems required more effort. Some industries, such as packaging or textiles, were already familiar with circularity concepts, whereas others perceived them as new or less urgent.

4.3. Common elements across responses

Partners consistently reported the need for clearer value propositions, reduced administrative burden, and earlier communication to maximise SME participation. Trust-based outreach and direct contact proved universally effective. SMEs appreciated practical, concise tools and concrete examples, confirming that hands-on, tailored guidance works better than abstract or generic activities.

4.4. Cross-cutting challenges and recurring issues

The main recurring challenges were economic uncertainty, lack of time, limited internal skills, and difficulty understanding the immediate benefits of circularity. Complex tools or long processes discouraged participation. Some sectors faced long decision chains or conservative attitudes. These structural limits underline the need for simplified, targeted, and incentive-based engagement models.

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5. Conclusions

The survey results confirm that the pilot actions were effective in raising awareness and stimulating initial steps toward circular transformation among SMEs, despite notable engagement challenges. Tools such as QuickScan and the Circularity Compass proved particularly valuable because they offered clear and practical entry points into complex topics. While SME participation was uneven across regions, those involved generally appreciated the personalised guidance and structured reflection enabled by the pilots. The actions succeeded in demonstrating the relevance of circularity, highlighting both opportunities and gaps within each sector. Overall, the pilots provided a solid foundation for advancing Cradle-to-Cradle principles in the Alpine Space.

A major strength of the pilot actions was their flexibility, allowing partners to adapt tools and approaches to local contexts and SME readiness levels. Personalized support emerged as the most impactful format, reinforcing the importance of tailored engagement. The pilots also enabled meaningful cross-regional learning among partners. However, improvements are needed to simplify procedures, strengthen communication, and provide clearer value propositions to SMEs. Time constraints, economic pressures, and varying levels of circularity maturity reduced participation. More intuitive communication materials and early engagement strategies would enhance future effectiveness. Incentives—financial or operational—could further increase SME commitment.

The survey feedback offers essential insights for refining WP3 outputs, including the final transformation roadmaps and policy recommendations. It highlights the importance of designing support services that are accessible, concrete, and responsive to SME needs. The findings confirm that circular transformation requires not only technical tools but also strong facilitation, stable local ecosystems, and incentives to overcome structural barriers. These insights will guide the project in aligning its recommendations with regional and EU policy frameworks, ensuring realistic and actionable proposals. The feedback also strengthens the evidence base for future interventions, helping policymakers target resources where they can have the greatest impact.

The overall evaluation of the pilot actions shows that Cradle-ALP succeeded in opening a structured dialogue with SMEs about circularity, offering practical tools and tailored support that helped companies reflect on their current practices and future opportunities. Despite the heterogeneous levels of readiness across regions and sectors, the pilots demonstrated that SMEs are willing to engage when the value proposition is clear, the process is simple, and the expected effort is proportional to the benefits received. The strongest lesson learned is that circular transformation cannot rely on generic awareness-raising alone: it requires personalised guidance, concrete examples, and support mechanisms that speak directly to the operational realities of SMEs. Engagement strategies must be flexible, combining direct one-to-one outreach with targeted collective activities, while avoiding overly bureaucratic formats that discourage participation. Another key insight is the importance of strong local ecosystems—clusters, chambers, innovation agencies—which act as essential intermediaries for building trust and connecting SMEs to new opportunities. At the same time, persistent barriers such as time constraints, economic uncertainty, limited internal skills, and the perceived complexity of circularity tools highlight the need for incentives and simplified processes in future initiatives. The pilots also showed that tools perform best when matched to SME maturity levels, and that qualitative facilitation is as important as the tool itself. These lessons will help shape more effective circularity programmes and inform policy recommendations that are realistic, actionable, and grounded in real SME experience across the Alpine Space.

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