

4th International RREUSE Conference: The Digital Era of Social Enterprises: trends and opportunities within the circular economy

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The Digital Era of Social Enterprises: trends and opportunities within the circular economy

Close cooperation on harnessing digital trends across the social enterprise community was at the heart of discussions at RREUSE's 4th International Conference on the digital era of social enterprises active in the circular economy. November 16th and 17th 2022 found over 100 enthusiastic participants in Vienna for the highly anticipated event.

This edition of the conference was organised in collaboration with our Austrian member [RepaNet](#), who recently launched the online re-use marketplace [WIDADO](#), a digitalisation initiative for its Austrian members. We explored the trends and opportunities that digitalisation and new technologies can present for social enterprises. Now, more than ever, it is imperative for the sector to embrace digital tools and to come together to discover new opportunities and learn from each other's experiences.

Our event "The Digital Era of Social Enterprises: Trends and Opportunities within the Circular Economy" started in the afternoon of the 16th of November at VHS PAHO, an event and adult education centre in the 10th district of Vienna. The exciting programme promised two days full of insightful sessions, inspiring speeches, and a series of workshops, networking opportunities, and discussion tables that fully engaged all participants and created a positive atmosphere. The conference opened with a [video of Federal Minister Leonore Gewessler](#) addressing our audience and emphasising the importance of climate action and the role of digitalisation in the modern era of the circular economy. The Federal Minister stated that "the application of digital technologies plays a key role in the circular economy. Digital Technologies and intelligent solutions are necessary for the expansion and further development of re-use, maintenance, and repair".

The specialised sessions provided the ideal space for connections to be developed, and for feelings of empowerment, growth, and ambition to flourish. Each day featured keynote speeches that set the tone for the event, and encouraged participants to listen to others' experiences and take valuable lessons from people who might be active in a different field, but are just as dedicated to making a change in favour of the social economy and the circular economy.

Our audience was presented with a series of digital innovations in the field of re-use, including Iris de Corlieu's presentation of [Label Emmaus](#), an online solidarity marketplace that fights against injustice, poverty, and exclusion, and Evolena de Wilde d'Estmael's intervention on [Faircado](#), a free digital tool which offers sustainable alternatives for online purchases from popular e-commerce sites. After establishing the value of digitalisation for the sector, participants were introduced to the support opportunities on a national, regional, and European level. This was a focal point of the keynote speech by Anna Athanasopoulou, the European Commission's Head of Unit - Proximity, Social Economy and Creative Industries. She highlighted the significance of achieving data and digital maturity within the Social Economy, and proceeded to present European initiatives, such as the [European Digital Innovation Hubs](#), that aim at providing support and to those aiming to embrace digitalisation and hoping to become more competitive.



The event also included a series of workshops which presented noteworthy outcomes. Representatives of many different initiatives that aim at making digital tools more accessible to disadvantaged communities talked about their activities and highlighted the ways in which they put digitalisation in the centre of their purpose while also providing employment to people who are excluded from the labour market. Some major takeaways from these sessions included the need to embrace digitalisation and artificial intelligence opportunities for the sector in a constantly changing industry, as well as the importance of delivering soft skills like self-esteem, motivation or language competence to ensure the effectiveness of digital training and bridging the digital divide. The sector is willing to take steps towards a more digital version of their work, and they recognise the value in this decision despite the potential obstacles and difficulties.

The workshops were an opportunity for participants to not only expand their knowledge and exchange perspectives, but also to receive useful information on the opportunities that exist for social enterprises within the field of digitalisation and new technologies. The discussions among attendees were inspired by valuable presentations by experienced speakers who work within the circular and the social economy. Many of the examples that were shared brought different ideas into the spotlight, such as [Commown](#) and its mission to provide repairable hardware and open-source software and create a more sustainable model of consumption for both businesses and citizens, as well as [Techsoup](#) and its dedication to offering hardware solutions to displaced individuals, such as refugees from Ukraine, and [AfB Group](#) and its successful cooperation with corporate partners in the donation of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) equipment.

The impact of our conference was clear by the end of the second day: positive feedback, motivated participants, and valuable new connections proved once again the significance of such gatherings. The entire RREUSE team hopes that our network can take the learnings from this event and use them to grow, evolve and innovate even more in the field of re-use, assisting underprivileged people, helping the environment, and contributing to the circular and the social economy. In the words of Federal Minister Leonore Gewessler, “together we can achieve our goals to strengthen the re-use sector”.

The RREUSE team would like to warmly thank all speakers and participants, as well as our sponsors and partners for their support and generous contribution to making our event possible and elevating the experience: [IDEA-X](#), [Erste Group](#), [City of Vienna](#), [Austrian Federal Ministry for Climate Action, Environment, Energy, Mobility, Innovation and Technology](#), [Volkshilfe](#), and [Trash_Design](#).

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