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SYNERGIES BETWEEN THE CIRCULAR AND COLLABORATIVE ECONOMIES: INTEGRATED APPROACHES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract: This article explores the synergies between the circular and collaborative economies within the European Union, highlighting how these models can complement each other to promote resource efficiency, social innovation and inclusive growth. The circular economy emphasizes waste reduction, material reuse and sustainable production cycles, while the collaborative economy focuses on shared access to goods and services, promoting community engagement and new business models. By analysing policy frameworks and institutional initiatives, the authors identify the mechanisms through which circular and collaborative approaches converge. The research examines regulatory challenges and institutional barriers that may hinder the simultaneous development of both economic models. The paper argues that integrated strategies – combining circular resource management with collaborative consumption practices – can enhance the EU's transition towards sustainable and inclusive economic systems. By providing a conceptual framework and empirical illustrations, the article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how the European Union can harness circular and collaborative economies together, rather than in isolation, to address sustainability and social cohesion objectives. The authors conclude that promoting interactions between circular and collaborative economic models is becoming a strategic imperative for the EU.
Keywords: circular economy, collaborative economy, collaborative consumption, resource efficiency, social innovation, sustainable production, integrated approaches
JEL Classification: Q01, Q56, D16

1. Introduction

The increasing complexity of global environmental issues, for instance, resource depletion, climate change, and by-product waste accumulation, demands a gradual yet profound shift toward more sustainable socio-economic systems. Traditional linear models of production and consumption, commonly known as "take-make-dispose" no longer fit within ecological limits or ensure long-term stability. Instead, sustainable models such as the circular and collaborative economies offer more efficient and, in certain respects, resilient alternatives.

Examining the relationship between the circular and collaborative economies is at the forefront of sustainability in practical terms. Both models promote resource efficiency and systemic resilience. The circular economy aims to reduce waste and extend material lifecycles,

mainly by means of regenerative loops, while the collaborative economy encourages shared access over individual ownership. Bringing the aforementioned models within sectoral realm can lead to practical ways in approaching sustainable economy and social innovation. In practical terms, this approach has the distinct force function to improve resource efficiency, in tandem with promoting sustainable production and consumption, and an ultimate goal of expanding access to goods and services.

Primarily, the convergence of the circular and collaborative economies is bottomed on the factors of technological and scientific advances as well as the climate issues, which we set as cofactors. These factors level up new forms of access-based consumption and reinforce circular production lines across various economic sectors.

Digital platforms act as key go-betweens for sharing goods and services grounded on the triangle principle: reuse-repair-recycle. The circular and collaborative economies gain from this technological mediation as both are connected and use open public platforms.

Although both models pursue worthwhile goals in climate action and economic development, they have not been sufficiently studied, neither at the level of public policy nor with respect to their potential synergy. This latter aspect represents a huge gap and neglected area in development policy. Our study attempts to advance this understanding through the lens of relevant EU policies. Simultaneously, this paper discusses the integrated concept of the circular and collaborative economies.

2. Methodology

As we integrated the main policy-related documents in the analytical loop, the research aims to provide an in-depth assessment of the European Union's policy architecture in connection to circular and collaborative economies. On the other end of the spectrum, we tend to provide multi-layered research to understand how policy instruments, socio-technical innovation, and behavioural change interact within the European Union's sustainability agenda.

As we research this topic, it becomes clear that policy analysis needs to evolve beyond sectoral divisions towards cross-cutting approaches. Our methodology addresses the diverse aspects of the topic by integrating interdisciplinary, analytical, and descriptive methods, as well as both qualitative and quantitative dimensions.

Perspectives from economics, sociology, technological sciences, and environmental studies tend to cover the multidisciplinary basis, which is essential for tracing the roots of what we call synergy in this paper.

The methodological strategy presents theoretical and empirical frameworks, allowing for the assessment of the extent to which policies drive measurables outcomes. By bringing together policy analysis from various fields, it aims to examine the current trends, assess policy design, and elucidate the integrated concept of circular and collaborative economies. Ultimately, this combined approach helps to better understand how the European Union is moving toward a more resource-efficient and socially resilient economy.

3. Main Findings

3.1. Conceptual and applicative dimensions of the convergence between the circular and collaborative economies

Circular and collaborative economic models jointly yield shared resources as a core element of their convergence. Digital platforms enable both individuals and organizations to access commonly used goods. For instance, peer-to-peer rental platforms for equipment allow users to borrow used products rather than purchase new ones, which reduces demand for new production, and consequently lowers material use, and minimizes waste (Heinrichs, 2016).

Another important dimension is the extension of product lifecycles. Collaborative economy practices, such as sharing, leasing, and reusing, naturally prolong the functional lifespan of goods. For instance, clothing rental services facilitate garment reuse and align with circular-economy

principles by reducing textile waste and encouraging more sustainable consumption practices. Such examples reinforce circular strategies and show the way to access-based systems, where the focus shifts from ownership and disposal toward longevity, efficiency, and cultural adaptation in consumption behavior.

Community involvement is another synergistic dimension, wherein social engagement plays a role as a catalyst for the development of interpersonal networks that, in turn, increase trust and cooperative behavior. Accordingly, this social dimension enhances the effectiveness of circular practices, as communities can jointly create sustainable systems and exchange knowledge on resource management.

With this background, social entrepreneurship is evolving as an emerging paradigm with the purpose to line up neatly the principles of circular and collaborative economies. In such a manner, organizational success can be redefined through the lens of community well-being. In this social model, financial profit is redefined and subordinated to the social mission, not representing an ultimate goal. Moreover, within social entrepreneurship, collective action is meant to empower beneficiaries to become active contributors to value creation. In this sense, social initiatives, participatory actions, could encourage the initiation of new forms of collaboration, innovation and shared responsibility.

It is worth noting that the collaborative economy is increasingly serving as a platform for policy coordination within the European Commission, bridging tense institutional areas such as environmental and economic policy. In this sense, the collaborative economy contributes to policy connectivity and intersectoral integration.

In recent times, new partnerships have emerged between circular and collaborative economy models, emphasizing that circularity is intrinsically linked to community development and, implicitly, to a more equitable society. The collaborative economy, based on a culture of repair and maintenance, requires a transformation in consumer behaviour. Starting from the fact that products can be repaired, reused and shared, thus extending the functional life of goods, these approaches erode the practice of continuous purchases. At the same time, these practices lead to the obsolescence of the material accumulation concepts as a prosperity standard. Simplicity and voluntary sufficiency step in and gradually take up their positions.

As a result, local collaborative initiatives have proliferated across EU. Amsterdam, in particular, distinguishes itself as a leader in "sharing cities" initiatives that implement circular economy principles and collaborative methodologies. The Amsterdam Circular Strategy focuses on material reuse and closed-loop production by fostering policies and partnerships among private companies, public authorities, and community groups (Calisto F. et al., 2023).

International stakeholders play a key role in advancing the principles of circular and collaborative economies through various tangible projects and programs. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) promotes circular economy principles globally, notably through initiatives such as the International Resource Panel. UNEP aims to reduce resource inefficiency and pollution, as well as to facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships by putting together key stakeholders from governmental institutions, the private sector, and civil society organizations (UN Environment Programme, 2018).

As for the EU side, the European Commission implements targeted policy initiatives and invests in research and innovation. The Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe programs have funded projects that integrate circular-economy principles with collaborative consumption models across sectors such as digital services, textiles, electronics, and construction (European Commission, 2024). Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework that delineates the reciprocal linkages between the circular and collaborative economies in the EU.

As for the civil society sector, one can mention the profiled Ellen MacArthur Foundation, which provides wholehearted support for circular-economy models. Its Circular Cities Initiative

demonstrates how collaborative platforms enable cities to function as genuine hubs of multilevel circularity, including shared mobility, resource exchanges, and peer-to-peer networks (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2019). This integrated urban approach put forth a city's capacity to act as a catalysts for the transition toward more sustainable economic models, where resources are efficiently utilized and recirculated through collaborative networks and digital sharing infrastructures.

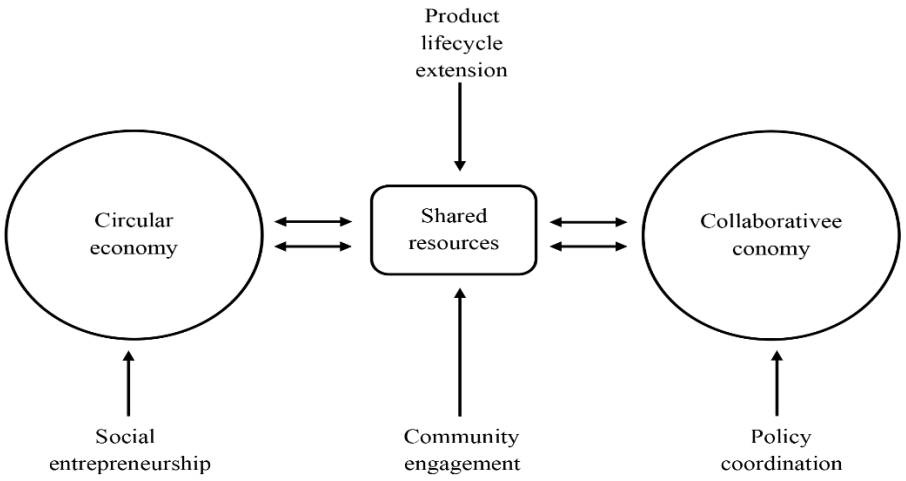

Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the synergies between the circular and collaborative economies within the European Union
Source: designed by the authors based on European Commission (2018) and European Commission (2023).

Drawing on recent institutional and urban developments, the integrated concept posits that the collaborative business models and platforms can facilitate the advancement of the circular economy. On the one hand, the collaborative economy, based on sharing resources and access rather than conventional ownership, is expected to expand sectorally. On the other hand, the circular economy will use collaborative models as an effective vehicle for scaling regenerative practices and waste minimization strategies.

Implementing the integrated concept of the circular and collaborative economies would require promoting coordinated initiatives to support both the collaborative and circular economy altogether. This would involve developing digital platforms to facilitate resource sharing and reuse, adopting public policies that integrate circular-economy practices into strategic economic sectors, and attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). In addition, effective collaboration between governmental institutions and the private sector could support the implementation of pilot projects and the creation of sustainable innovation hubs.

3.2. Integrated approaches to the circular and collaborative economies within EU policy architecture

In 2015, the European Union adopted its first comprehensive policy-wrapping initiatives for the circular economy, the Circular Economy Package (European Commission, 2015a). This Package pursued two overarching objectives: (1) reconciling environmental and economic goals, and (2) supporting economic recovery in the aftermath of the 2009 financial crisis and its ensuing recession. This framework was based on comprehensive economic and methodological assessments of the implementation of circular economy principles in European Union economic sectors. These assessments incorporated strategic directions discussed in policy forums and insights from academic conferences. The initial Circular Economy Package aimed to increase competitiveness, create employment opportunities, and promote sustainable economic development.

The Circular Economy Action Plan, adopted in 2020 (European Commission, 2020), as a key component of the European Green Deal, introduced a series of measures focused on the entire product life cycle. This Action Plan emphasized sustainable consumption, waste prevention, and the retention of resources within the European Union economy for as long as possible (European Commission, 2020).

In implementing consumption-related policies, the European Union has increasingly addressed the need for more sustainable and circular consumption patterns. According to the EU Circular Economy Action Plan released in 2020, circularity in consumption entails maximizing the value of resources, materials, and products through their repeated and diversified reuse (European Commission, 2020). Despite the multiple benefits outlined in the Plan, there are gaps in regard to the implementation instruments, particularly across product categories, industrial sectors, and mechanisms for reducing consumption by product type. To address these issues, in 2022 the EU adopted its Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (European Commission, 2022) and in 2024 enforced the Regulation on Eco-design for Sustainable Products (European Union, EUR-Lex, 2024).

The European Union Directive 2018/851, part of the Circular Economy Package, amends the Waste Framework Directive and sets specific targets. These targets include recycling 55% of municipal waste by 2025 (European Union EUR-Lex, 2018), reducing total waste generation to 10% by 2030 (European Commission, 2023) and promoting the waste hierarchy through economic measures. However, the directive does not cover the recycling of all categories of waste. For example, it does not cover industrial waste traded across borders, which represents almost 90% of all waste (Kovacic, 2020).

A comprehensive and integrated framework for waste management is missing, one that would set clear targets for the recycling and reuse of industrial waste. It should implement robust mechanisms to monitor transboundary waste movements and promote economic strategies that facilitate the transition to sustainable industrial practices. In addition, the framework should stimulate technological progress and encourage collaboration between EU Member States to ensure the full management of industrial waste in the circular economy.

Analysis of the EU's main policies along the circular economy reveals a weak valorisation of the collaborative economy. As shown in Table 1, the EU's policy has gradually shifted from waste management priorities to system-level sustainability objectives. Thus, EU circular economy policies primarily focus on two core components: (1) sustainable or circular consumption, and (2) waste recycling and/or reuse. Consequently, EU initiatives tend to address in a pragmatic manner the determinants of consumption (personal, psychological, social, and cultural), the prevailing consumption models (linear, circular, collaborative, sustainable), as well as the implementation instruments, including eco-design, product durability, and standardization.

Table 1. Selected EU regulations and communications on the circular economy, years 2014–2023

Year	Regulations and communication
2014	- Communication of the Commission addressed to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - "Towards a Circular Economy: A Zero Waste Programme for Europe" (COM(2014) 398 final).
2015	- **Communication of the Commission addressed to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions - "Closing the Loop: An EU Action Plan for the Circular Economy" (COM(2015) 614 final).** This Communication includes proposals to amend the following directives: • **Directive 2000/53/EC** on end-of-life vehicles.

	• **Directive 2006/66/EC** on batteries and accumulators and waste batteries and accumulators. • **Directive 2012/19/EU** on waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE); • **Directive 1999/31/EC** on the landfill of waste. • **Directive 94/62/EC** on packaging and packaging waste. • **Directive 2008/98/EC** on waste, including a legislative proposal to extend the minimum legal guarantee for goods sold online to two years.
2016	- Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing rules for the market availability of CE-marked fertilizing products and amending Regulations (EC) No 1069/2009 and (EC) No 1107/2009. **- Launch of the "Innovation Deals for a Circular Economy" Initiative**, open between 26 May and 15 September 2016, aimed at identifying perceived regulatory barriers to innovation within the circular economy framework. **- Adoption, on 30 November 2016, of the Ecodesign Working Plan 2016–2019**, as part of the "Clean Energy for All Europeans" package. **- Launch of the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste**, including the development of a common EU methodology for measuring food waste and the preparation of EU guidelines to facilitate food donation and the use of unsold food products as feed for animals.
2017	- **Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2011/65/EU** on the restriction of the use of certain hazardous substances in electrical and electronic equipment. **- Communication on the role of waste-to-energy processes in the circular economy** (European Commission, 2017b). **- Launch of the Circular Economy Finance Support Platform.**
2018	**- Circular Economy Monitoring Framework.** **- Amendment to Directive (EU) 2018/851** on waste. **- European Union Strategy for Plastics.**
2020	**- Circular Economy Action Plan.** **- European Industrial Strategy.**
2022	**- Circular Economy Measures Package.** **- New policy framework on biodegradable and compostable plastics.**
2023	- Revision of circularity indicators.

Source: elaborated by the authors based on data and insights from Kovacic, Z., Strand, R. (2020); Iordachi, V., Popa V., Popa N. (2022); European Commission (2023), European Union, EUR-Lex (2022, 2024).

As for the collaborative economy, EU policies separately address the regulatory frameworks for digital platforms, innovation and entrepreneurship, labor-market and social-protection regulations. These policies are complemented by specific initiatives on cybersecurity, data protection standards, and the development of digital infrastructure necessary for the effective functioning of collaborative models (Dijmărescu, 2023). EU policies also aim to maintain a balance between promoting technological innovation and ensuring quality and safety standards for users, including effective mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the impact of these policies.

Adopted by the European Commission in 2015, the Digital Single Market Strategy was the first comprehensive EU-level policy to address challenges from new economic models and globalization (European Commission, 2015a). Specifically, the Strategy aims to expand consumer access to digital goods and services across the EU by dismantling cross-border barriers to online trade. Moreover, it creates an enabling environment and ensures a level playing field for digital innovation. The Strategy also highlights the need to harness the EU's digital growth potential by substantial investments in communication infrastructure and advanced technologies, such as cloud computing and Big Data systems.

Between 2016 and 2017, the EU introduced a series of transformative measures that redefined the digital landscape across Europe. Among the most significant achievements were the

abolition of roaming charges to improve cross-border connectivity and updating data protection standards to align with updated digital security and privacy standards. The introduction of cross-border content portability and the ban on unjustified geo-blocking also advanced e-commerce and supported the ongoing integration of the Digital Single Market.

The transport sector shows how ridesharing and car sharing platforms are transforming urban mobility. In the accommodation sector, platforms such as Airbnb have disrupted the short-term rental market, altering both tourism supply and urban housing policies. In finance, fintech firms and crowdfunding platforms have expanded access to capital and fuelled innovation, while also raising new regulatory and consumer protection issues.

The European Commission's Communication, "A European Agenda for the Collaborative Economy" (European Commission, 2016) and the European Parliament's Resolution of 15 June 2017 constitute primary policy frameworks for regulating and advancing the collaborative economy across the European Union (European Parliament, 2017). These policy documents provide explicit guidance on consumer protection, specify regulatory requirements for businesses, and assist public authorities in formulating and implementing policies. The Agenda for the Collaborative Economy is grounded in Digital Single Market principles and is consistent with major legislative instruments, including the Services Directive, the E-Commerce Directive, and the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive. This policy document seeks to foster innovation and maintain robust regulatory standards capable of safeguarding all stakeholders. The Figure 2 presents a matrix of European Union policy frameworks in the environmental/circular and digital/collaborative sectors, aiming to show the main distinctions and interactions between legislative instruments and market-based solutions.

Figure 2. EU policy interaction matrix of the circular and collaborative economies

Strategic and regulatory frameworks for circularity • Circular Economy Package (2015) • Circular Economy Action Plan (2020)	Regulatory/legislative level	Regulatory frameworks for the collaborative economy • Digital Single Market Strategy (2015) • European Agenda for the collaborative economy (2017)
Environmental policy orientation	Strategic convergence • Consumer protection • Impact monitoring • Eco-design and sustainability standards • Data protection and transparency	Digital policy orientation
Sectoral and operational applications of circularity • Textiles Strategy (2022) • Eco-design for Sustainable Products Regulation (2024) • Waste reduction, repair and reuse	Operational/market practice level	Market-driven collaborative platforms • Uber • Airbnb • Kickstarter • Fintech

Source: elaborated by the authors based on Kovacic, Z., Strand, R. (2020); Heinrichs, H. (2013); Schor, J. B. (2021).

Reportedly, European collaborative platforms face significant limitations in both revenue and geographic expansion. Most operate in only a few EU Member States and report modest financial outcomes compared to global leaders. In contrast, international companies such as Uber, Airbnb, Uber Eats, and Kickstarter generated about 45 billion euros in 2023 (Business of Apps, 2025; Yahoo Finance, 2023), representing nearly 40% of the collaborative economy's total revenue across all EU Member States (Eurostat, 2024).

It is important to acknowledge that Uber and Airbnb are early examples of the collaborative economy model. Both have faced substantial criticism due to their disruptive socio-economic impacts (Schor and Vallas, 2021). For Uber, the widespread availability of low-cost ride-hailing services can encourage people to use taxis more and rely less on public transportation. This shift may worsen urban congestion. In case of Airbnb, the platform has been linked to real estate speculation and higher rental prices, as converting private residences into commercial assets can increase housing demand and reduce affordability.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the European Union legislative framework reveals interconnections between the circular and collaborative economies. However, these interconnections rarely align in practice, in particular due to the fragmented nature of the European Union policy on the circular and collaborative economies. Furthermore, the transformation of the European Union economy into a full circular model still remains uncertain. Currently, the concept of circularity is limited to a number of economic sectors that may in future generate a multiplier impact in other areas of economic activity.

Waste reduction and environmental objectives are essential for the EU's circular economy policy. In parallel, it is necessary to encourage innovation in production processes and business models. The ecological or green dimension should not overshadow innovation and technological development but allow for synergies between the circular and collaborative economies. Aligning the circular economy with the collaborative economy integrates collective engagement and promotes responsible consumption as a societal ethic, not just a political objective.

The collaborative economy, for its part, has a substantial impact across key sectors of the EU economy, especially through vertical business models in transport, accommodation, and financial services. The rapid technological progress of recent decades has brought profound changes to the Single Market of the EU.

Under these conditions, a thorough understanding of the dynamics of circular and collaborative economies is essential for promoting effective public policies that would allow for synergies between these two economic models.

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