



Amsterdam  
The Netherlands

# Amsterdam Circular: Learning by doing

In 2015 Amsterdam commissioned an in-depth study on the potential of a circular economy. The project was the first large-scale research study in the world that uses the ‘city circle scan’ methodology. The scan identifies the areas in which the most significant, tangible progress in realising a circular economy can be achieved. This potential impact is significant and can result in more jobs, bring added value to the city’s economy, and reduce carbon dioxide emissions and material use.



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<http://bit.ly/2hEd397>

## Approach

In Amsterdam, two value chains are very important: the building and construction sector and the organic and biomass industry. The city circle scan showed that the implementation of material reuse strategies had the potential to create a value of €85 million per year within the construction sector and €150 million per year with more efficient organic residual streams. The city involved the private sector and research institutes in this process and they fully agreed with the outcomes.

An innovation programme pooled together forces from both private sector and research institutes, and allowed the city to speed up the transition towards a circular economy. Amsterdam is now running a dedicated programme

‘Learning by doing’ that aims to prove in practice that the circular economy is profitable in all aspects. This project is based on an integrated approach. For example, Amsterdam integrated the principles of circularity from the start in the urban planning strategy of the city’s largest transformation area ‘Harbor – City’ with 70,000 houses. ‘Learning by doing’ is a multidisciplinary effort, not the sole responsibility of the sustainability department but also involves the city departments for spatial planning, purchasing, real estate, economic development, etc.

Focusing on the building sector, Amsterdam launched the first roadmap on circular buildings, which included clear indicators to help and challenge the private sector to develop circular buildings and circular city districts.

## Challenges

Research and capacity building are essential to successfully transition towards a circular economy. For the moment, Amsterdam is focusing on the ‘Learning by doing’ programme to show circular economy can have benefits for everyone.

At the same time, Amsterdam is trying to adapt to a circular economy by forging new business models shifting from products to services and creating new legal and financial instruments. The city had to overcome traditional barriers in administration and think about new forms of cooperation, such as cross-sector thinking and multidisciplinary working.

It was crucial for Amsterdam to involve citizens in this transition. As consumers, they are drivers of change, along with the private sector. One of the city’s main challenges has been to translate the concept of circular economy into the daily lives of citizens. At a time of global access to information and communications as well as new forms of democracy, they have a newfound power to shape public policies and deliver their own solutions for the future.

## Impact

In the space of a year and a half, Amsterdam has been able to translate the research outcomes into a dedicated programme with projects in the building sector.

The ‘Learning by doing’ programme gives the city a huge opportunity to learn about all aspects of a circular economy and about the role local governments should and could play. It has a clear impact on the city administration. Processes and ways of working have been modified, and the use of governmental instruments like tendering land for circular buildings has become more common. Many municipal departments are now getting involved by launching their own projects.

Thanks to results generated in the research stage, the private sector is willing to commit to multi-stakeholder projects in the city.

An in-depth evaluation combined with strategic advice for the next political term from 2018 to 2022 helps Amsterdam focus on results, with short-term achievable goals.

Finally, the implementation of circular economy initiatives has bolstered the international position of the city. Amsterdam is perceived as a front-runner. This attracts companies and start-ups, which consider the city as a living lab to expand their business.

## Lessons

One key takeaway is to work closely together with the private sector and research institutes. And since circular economy projects rely on a cross-sectoral

approach, it is essential to involve the entire city administration from the very beginning.

The circular economy can sometimes be perceived as an abstract and conceptual movement. Project leaders must make the circular economy tangible and practical, for both professionals and citizens.

A good method to achieve a circular economy is to use existing strategies, such as green procurement. A clear starting point for every city is to get an in-depth insight into their city’s make up. Then, based on clear criteria, leaders must choose the most relevant value chains, from both an economic and an ecological perspective.



*“National governments won’t make today’s economy circular. Businesses and consumers are the real drivers. We, as local governments, can make it happen by facilitating and stimulating this transition. Amsterdam decided to prove in practice that a circular economy is profitable in all aspects while developing further knowledge to be shared worldwide.”*

**Abdeluheh Choho**, deputy mayor