CONSUMER INSIGHT ACTION PANEL

DISCUSSING THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF CIRCULARITY

cscp SITRA DBU European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform #CESstakeholderEU

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Introduction

In the last several years, the concept of the circular economy – which aims to create loops of resource use instead of linear chains of production and consumption - has moved to the forefront of many government policies and corporate strategies.

> *"In a circular economy, the value of products, materials and resources is maintained in the economy for as long as possible, and the generation of waste is minimized." – European Commission on Circular Economy*[1]

As part of its long-term strategy to improve well-being for people, planet and economy, the European Union aims to become climate neutral by 2050 and mobilise at least one trillion euros of investment into the European Green Deal[2]. To help attain these goals, the circular economy has been "erected as the number one priority" of the European Green Deal through the implementation of the Circular Economy Action Plan[3]. Circularity is also often mentioned as a key means for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[4] and meeting the commitments of the Paris Agreement[5].

Circularity offers pathways to achieve more sustainable methods of production and consumption and provide benefits to society. It should be noted that circularity is intended as a means to an end rather than an end in itself, where the end goal is to ultimately achieve long-term sustainable development environmentally, economically and socially.[6789] However, in practice, it seems that the discourse on social aspects has been lacking or certainly less prevalent than on economic and environmental aspects[10111213]. Therefore, there is a need to further explore the social impacts of circularity and its potential societal benefits.

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[1] European Commission. Circular Economy. https://ec.europa.eu/environment/topics/circular-economy_de
[2] European Commission. A European Green Deal. https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en
[3] European Commission. Circular economy action plan. https://ec.europa.eu/environment/strategy/circular-economy-action-plan_en
[4] United Nations. Sustainable Development Goals. https://sdgs.un.org/goals
[5] United Nations Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Paris Agreement. https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement
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[13] CIRAIG. Circular Economy: A Critical Literature Review of Concepts; CIRAIG: Montreal, QC, Canada, 2015.

This paper is commissioned by the **Consumer Insight Action Panel** (CIAP), a European multi-stakeholder initiative designed to support the transition to the circular economy by generating, applying and testing consumer behavioural insights in circular strategies in areas such as textiles, plastics and electronics. The overall vision is to enable circular behaviours, by exploring how innovations can enable consumers to reuse, repair, share, recycle, lease and otherwise support circularity and sustainability.
This report was produced within the framework of the Electronics Club, a stakeholder group forming part of the project alongside the plastics club. However, the results are also transferable to other sectors and are not exclusively focused on the electronics sector.

The general purpose of this activity has been to frame, address and better understand social impact related questions in the transition to a more circular economy. We have synthesised the gathered insights into key emerging themes and have identified gaps or areas of future potential in the field. This has been performed by reviewing existing literature, interviewing stakeholders in the field and conducting group discussions to comprehend the current discourse on social impacts of a circular economy.

The specific purpose of this discussion paper is to enhance understanding and to provide emerging ideas and areas of exploration to spark further multi-stakeholder dialogues for advancing and improving the social impacts of circularity.

Gathering Insights

To gather the necessary information for a more comprehensive understanding of the topic of social impacts within a circular economy, individual expert interviews, as well as discussions in expert panels were undertaken, in addition to an extensive literature review. While the desk-based research mainly focused on a broadly understood definition of social influences, the interviews and discussions were deliberately used to obtain more information about the everyday understanding of these impacts.

Since the concept of a circular economy is increasingly being discussed in public, but its actual significance and possible consequences - especially from a social point of view - are difficult to assess, the interviews were conducted with experts from various organisations that have been working on its implementation for several years. For the group discussions, workshops were held with an international audience within the Circular Week 2021 conference and with CIAP club members. Within these, starting with the emerging themes from our literature review, different sub-topics of social influences were identified, possible solutions to challenges proposed and the role of various stakeholder groups discussed.

Both the interviews and discussions were semi-structured to ensure that the intended aspects were addressed while also allowing additional perspectives to be expressed. The questions asked were based on the results of the previous literature review to ensure a comprehensive coverage of the topic. In addition, further questions have arisen from the discussions themselves. The following list shares an overview of the type of questions we put forward:

What do you consider to be the social impacts associated with circular economy?
What do you consider to be social handprints and footprints (positive and negative impacts) of circularity?
What gaps do you see in the current understanding of social impacts of circular economy?
How do you understand the topic of jobs in relation to social and economic impacts?
What differences in social impacts do you see between developed and less developed countries?
Who do you see as primarily responsible for improving the social impacts of circular economy?

Categorising Social Impacts of Circularity

In the process of the literature review, it became evident that mainly economic and environmental consequences of circularity have been studied, while social consequences have only recently been considered more intensively. In the context of the social effects of the circular economy, both the creation and the loss of jobs are often mentioned. While it is undisputed that jobs, secure incomes, and safe working conditions are of great importance, they do not represent the entirety of social impacts. So far, there appears to be no uniform definition of the social impacts of circularity, which makes their consideration - and even more so their measurement - in the implementation of a circular economy a particular challenge.[14]

As there is no standard methodology or framework to analyze the social impacts of circularity, In the following section an overview of two approaches to better examine and understand circularity from a social perspective is presented.[15]

Social Aspects identified by Padilla-Rivera et al.

Padilla-Rivera et al. (2020) define social impacts of circularity that are based on the sustainability categories of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and Dempsey et al. 2011) (see table below).[16] These categories give an overview of social dimensions of circularity and sustainable development in general. Even though they do not represent an actual definition, the individual categories and thematic focus areas help to illustrate the broad variety of social aspects which can be considered.

Thematic areas*	Labor Practices and Decent Work	Human Rights	Society	Product Responsibility
Social Aspects	1. Employment 2. Labor/Management Relations 3. Occupational Health and Safety 4. Training and Education 5. Diversity and Equal Opportunity 6. Fairdistribution of income 7. Quality and Well-being	8. Investment 9. Non-discrimination 10.Freedom of Association and Collection Bargaining 11.Child Labor 12.Forced or Compulsory Labor 13.Security Practices 14.Human Rights Mechanisms	15.Social inclusion (equity) 16.Social networks 17.Social cohesion 18.Participation and Local Democracy 19.Anti-corruption 20.Public Policy 21.Compliance 22.Supplier Assessment for Impacts on Society 23.Cultural Traditions 24.Tourism and Recreation 25.Local Communities (Sense of community and belongig)	26.Customer Health and Safety 27.Product and Service Labelling 28.Marketing Communications 29.Customer Privacy 30.Compliance 31.Anti-competitive behavior

Figure 1: Thematic areas and aspects for social dimension within CE defined by Padilla-Rivera et al. (2020)

[14] Padilla-Rivera, M. ; Russo-Garrido, S. ; Merveille, N.: Addressing the Social Aspects of a C. E.: A Systematic Literature Review (2020)
[15] Padilla-Rivera, M. ; Russo-Garrido, S. ; Merveille, N.: Addressing the Social Aspects or a C. E.: A Systematic Literature Review (2020)
[16] Dempsey, N. ; Bramley G. ; Power, S. ; Brown, C.: The social dimension of sustainable development: Defining urban social sustainability (2011)

The Social Life Cycle Assessment methodology

Life-cycle oriented methods have been developed to assess environmental impacts along supply chains – from the extraction of raw materials to a product's end of life. The Social Life Cycle Assessment (S-LCA) method is an extension of the methodology to include the social perspective. With this method, both negative and positive effects can be considered.[17] Although this method is usually used for individual products, it is also suitable for assessing complete value cycles. It focuses first on affected stakeholders like workers, local communities, society, consumers, and other value chain actors, and in a second step links the corresponding impact categories such as human rights, working conditions, health and safety, cultural heritage, governance, and socio-economic repercussions. Each of these impact categories can then be split into more sub categories, inventory indicators, and concrete data. [18]

The stakeholder-oriented approach can help to look at social consequences not only from a macro perspective, but also to identify specific consequences for different members of society. However, the predefined impact categories have a broad scope, and a corresponding specification of the influences is necessary in each individual case. Since such a specification might be difficult if expertise on the topic of social impacts is lacking, using a combination of the social aspects defined by Padilla et al. and the S-LCA method is useful, in order to adapt to the particular context being studied.

Labour practices and decent work, human rights, society and product responsibility can be used as an overview of thematic areas and aspects for the social dimension within CE (defined by Dempsey et al. and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation). In general, it has been found that a categorisation and comprehensive assessment of the social impacts of circularity is difficult - not least because of the lack of a uniform definition and methods - but that clear key aspects nevertheless emerge that should be taken into account when implementing a circular economy.

[17] Publications Office of the European Union: Social Life Cycle Assessment: State of the art and challenges for supporting product policies. (2015)
[18] Life Cycle Initiative: Social Life Cycle Assessment (S-LCA) (2021)

Exploring Social Impact Themes

In addition to the literature review, expert interviews and discussions were conducted to gain a better understanding of social impacts within a circular economy.
After a first round of interviews with five experts, these were analysed in order to be able to cluster main topics and challenges. This resulted in five emerging themes (Work, Fairness, Social Equity, Social Norms, Narratives), from each of which two key questions could be drawn. The topics and questions were then discussed in two workshops with 39 participants at the Circular Week 2021 conference, as well as with the members of the Electronics Club.

The following table includes an overview of the topics and the associated key questions:

Table 1: Social impact themes and emerging gaps and opportunities

Tensions and challenges	Gaps and opportunities
Work What is certain is that the circular economy will bring about changes in the labour market – the challenge is to manage this in a socially responsible way.	How can the positive changes in the labour market (creation of new jobs, integrative approaches) best be supported and the negative changes (loss of employment in non-cyclical contexts) be cushioned? What reskilling and upskilling strategies are promising for the labour market to make the European workforce fit for the circular economy?
Fairness Where a benefit of a move towards circularity might be felt in one place, there could be direct or indirect negative implications for other places and trade-offs between e.g. developed and developing countries could emerge.	How can the representatives of different regions best enter into dialogue and find common solutions? What kind of mechanisms would work best? How could these trade-offs be balanced in the future?
Social equity It is unclear how the concept of the Circular Economy will lead to greater social equality, in terms of inter- and intragenerational equity, but also diversity in its various forms and aspects.	How can be ensured that all social groups are represented, and that diversity is a key element in the creation of a new circular economy? Which monitoring mechanisms should be installed in the long term?
Social norms Social norms and other trends partly work against the principles of the Circular Economy, e.g. the ever shorter life span of	Is there a way to transform or use these social trends so that they might even support the Circular Economy? If not, who can influence social norms and how?

products and the desire to always own the latest model.	
Narratives There is a lack of clear narrative on the social impacts of the circular economy, limiting the ability of consumers to engage with those benefits as an incentive for circular behaviours.	How can the social side of the circular economy become as present and widely understood as the economic and environmental sides? How can we provide consumers with the information and knowledge they need to feel a connection on the social side of the circular economy?

Below we present the key findings from interviews and workshops on each of the topics in turn, and consider the tensions or challenges raised, as well as some of the potential opportunities and areas for further exploration. These are intended as inputs to further discussion, and not a comprehensive list or analysis of the range of challenges and available solutions.

Work - Beyond job creation, to livelihood and employee wellbeing

As in the academic literature, the topic of job creation or loss was raised frequently in the interviews. With the loss of a number of existing jobs also comes the opportunity for entirely new sources of income - especially in the field of recycling and refurbishing. In the context of creating new sources of income, it was argued that these do not automatically guarantee safe working conditions and that this aspect should not be neglected when evaluating new value chains. For example, production of a product which is seen as circular or sustainable does not in itself automatically guarantee that all jobs in the supply chain adhere to health and safety standards.

It was emphasised that to make circularity 'social', people who lose their jobs in the course of circularisation should be offered new sources of income. In addition, it must be ensured that people are given access to the necessary education and upskilling. Alongside the aspect of creating an economic livelihood, the importance of an intact living environment was emphasised. Its impact on peoples physical and mental health – whether directly though employment or otherwise - was highlighted as another key social aspect of circularity. For example, if the steps taken to create a circular product expose employees to dangerous substances, steps need to be taken to ensure that the process does not impact negatively on the social side through implications for their health.

To mitigate the negative effects of changes in the labour market due to the circular transition, reskilling and upskilling, as well as a healthy work-life balance, should be supported. As a circular economy will also require good international cooperation, the recognition of international training

certificates and intercultural training programmes should be expanded. Approaches such as lifelong learning, modular training, and the sharing of knowledge between young and older generations can also help to ensure that no people are left in a worse position as a result of the transition.

While a more circular economy is primarily aimed at protecting the environment, this does not mean that there is not still a risk of hazardous substances being released during recycling processes, for example. Such cases are already being recorded and must be prevented if circularity is to be implemented in a social way. These aspects reveal that beyond the topic of jobs, the issue of circularity also raises questions about health and wellbeing on a global scale.

Fairness – Understanding and balancing social impacts across borders

While there are certainly many positive social impacts of the circular economy to be explored, it is also important to acknowledge the various tensions that exist. Where a benefit of a move towards circularity might be felt in one place, there could be direct or indirect negative implications for other places, as a result of the change. As a consequence, conversations are emerging around various trade-offs and how these could be balanced in the future.

For example, developed countries increasing “their” circularity through reduced waste exports (perhaps due to increased reuse or recycling opportunities in the region) raises questions of fairness. For developing countries who may have previously relied upon Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) for income, employment and material resources, this disruption to the value chain, with a resulting reduction in the number of waste electronic devices reaching them, could have significant implications for livelihoods, despite potential reduction in work with hazardous materials.

From another angle, the creation of jobs with high – often technical – knowledge requirements in developed countries, in relation to the loss of jobs in less developed countries with fewer educational opportunities, has similar implications.

However, the greatest challenges to implementing the CE in developing countries themselves appear to be limited institutional capacity and a lack of access to the requisite finance and technology. Low institutional capacity may constrain the use of punitive measures such as taxes on poor waste management, for example, and limited access to investment capital can act as a brake on innovation.

Low-income countries will continue to experience rapid rates of urbanization for decades to come, and primary resources will be needed to fill the infrastructure gap. Unlike developed countries, developing countries have minimal stocks of in-use buildings and materials for reuse. Demand for consumer goods is also expected to rise; for example, the experience from developed and emerging countries suggests that new goods and individual ownership are likely to be preferred over 'second-life' goods and asset-sharing.

In order to find solutions that take into account the development goals of both low-income countries and higher-income countries, a dialogue must be pursued. Local production chains can generate local jobs and at the same time allow regional specialisations that can be exchanged with other regions. Meetings, forums, and conferences of economic and administrative representatives could support these processes.

Social equity – Ensuring inclusion and an accessible circular economy

It seems that there has been no detailed analysis of how CE could support the promotion of social equity, in terms of inter- and intragenerational equity, gender, racial and religious equality and other diversity, financial equality, or in terms of equality of social opportunity. This could raise issues, for example if the cost of products increases due to potential overengineering which may be present if all products strive for repairability. In the end, the benefit of the advances in design may not actually be achieved if not everyone has the education, confidence or services to repair devices. So, alongside technical developments, there needs to be attention paid to the social factors which influence citizens' interaction with and effective use of products, as well as the impact of circular products on their lives, whether financial or other.

Linked to this, more circular supply chains do not necessarily mean better working conditions or more participation for workers in the manufacturing industries, especially in developing countries which may have less access to knowledge, infrastructure or machinery. As the circular economy relies more on automation and technology, the original shift in cost associated with encouraging production in certain locations might shift back with more onshoring. A more circular economy might lead to the loss of jobs that are done by people with less access to education and therefore have limited or no other options (i.e. women working in the production of textiles in Asia), meaning that improving circularity in supply chains might lead to more inequality in some cases. Overall, the number of jobs and livelihoods might go down in places where it is not easy to get other jobs.

To ensure that the needs of all social groups are taken into account in a circular economic system, knowledge sharing and up- or reskilling as well as diversity must be seen as key elements. Knowledge on transitioning processes should be shared between industries and countries, but also workers and consumers should be upskilled so that they can take a part in and actively contribute to the transition. For workers, this may entail trainings on circular technologies and/or business models, for consumers repair skills and the ability to assess offers regarding, for example, their trustworthiness and durability or repairability (e.g. when buying a refurbished phone) become crucial. Cultural differences should be seen as an opportunity for more creativity and innovation and an open exchange should be sought.

The social impacts should not only be considered, but measured if possible. As already mentioned, social life cycle assessment models – which also take an international view of product life cycles – can be used for this purpose. Product information and labels that show the social impact of a product could help to make consumers more aware of the social consequences of their purchasing decisions.

Social norms – Adapting to and influencing consumer behaviour

Our understanding of the context around consumer decision-making is developing – from the need for trust in the process, to the need for education, to the influence of factors such as identity and self-expression (e.g. through acquiring new products).

Overarching trends will have implications for consumption patterns. For example, the lifespan of many products is getting shorter, and social norms of having the latest gadgets seem to remain. This clearly conflicts with the circular economy principle that products need to be used as long as possible. As mentioned previously, demand for consumer goods in developing countries is expected to rise; with new goods and individual ownership likely to be preferrable over 'second-life' goods and asset-sharing.

But there are also other trends that can support the transition to a circular economy. Second-hand and vintage fashion are becoming more popular and younger generations are tending towards being more interested in the experience of a product than in owning it. These developments are supported by sharing platforms, media and marketing and this potential can also be used for other circular behaviours. Educational policies, legal product design requirements or taxes on virgin materials can also support these social movements.

In addition, policies and business can make it easier for the consumer to change his behaviour. One example is an initiative by Sepp Eisenriegler, social entrepreneur in Vienna, Austria, who has recently worked on a repair voucher for consumers who wish to have their electrical device repaired. With this voucher, the city pays a certain % of the bill, up to 100 Euros. The offer has been extremely well received and people actually make use of it.

Narratives - Defining the 'social' element of the circular economy

As discussed previously, there is no universal definition of the social side of circularity. Therefore, the results of the interviews and discussions on this topic are also diverse, depending on the angle from which the topic is approached.
For example, one perception is that the idea of the circular economy emerged from routes around the economy and environment and it is only now that we are considering how the social side fits in. Another interpretation focuses more on how the social impacts might mirror some of the economic impacts.

> *'Social impact is a very wide topic. It varies a lot in terms of what people think of – some consider as creation of jobs, some as policy, some getting rid of policy, consumer side access to cheap clothes/electronics, social cohesion. It depends how you define the circular economy too – there are lots of definitions.' – Anna Härri*

The definition of social impacts also depends on the perspective. While consumers may be concerned about safety and access to products, workers may be more focused on working conditions. Businesses may have to balance higher wages with the accessibility of their products, and decision-makers also need to consider not only social impacts on individuals but also on society as a whole. These are only a few examples, but they illustrate that the social impacts of a circular economy can be interpreted very differently depending on the stakeholder group.

While the concept of a social dimension to sustainability is generally accepted, its implementation in sustainability strategies has not been very clearly defined or agreed. Social impacts can be anything associated with humans that can have an impact on their physical health, happiness, opportunities, living environment, education, hopes and fears. However, as with any very broad approach, this lack of focus could limit the depth of impact.

> *'The impacts aren't yet measured by companies or governments. There's a lack of indicators and metrics.' – Patrick Schröder*

With a lack of definition comes an inability to measure the impacts, which in turn can limit the potential incentives for progress. However, some prototypes are beginning to emerge. For example, Circwaste in Finland has been working on the development of circular economy social impact indicators[19]. In addition, emerging real-life examples are starting to build a better picture, especially in terms of consumer behaviour and habits.

[19] Circwaste. Monitoring. https://materiaalitkiertoon.fi/en-US/Monitoring

Continuing the Discussion

Through the exploration of various emerging themes related to the social impacts of the circular economy in the previous section, a number of tensions and challenges have emerged. However, with each of these existing gaps or issues comes an opportunity to innovate, to develop and to create a more holistic circular economy.

During our expert interviews and discussions, it became clear that the responsibility for considering the social impacts of CE lies with manufacturers and policy makers as well as with the consumer. Therefore, all stakeholders should be involved in further discussions in order to develop holistic approaches and facilitate their acceptance and implementation.

In the 'exploring social impact themes' chapter, the five identified core themes (work, fairness, social equity, social norms, narratives) and related key questions which were discussed with experts, and put forward in the workshops, were introduced. The questions discussed, which are also listed in the table above, are only a first selection. In order to further improve our understanding of the social impacts of a circular economy and to take appropriate measures, it is necessary to further elaborate on the five thematic areas.

This paper is just the start of a conversation – we encourage you to use this as a basis for discussions and a space to start to generate ideas for the future development of the social side of the circular economy.

Ways to continue to the conversation

If you are looking for inspiration on how to continue the conversation, below we have included some ideas for practical ways to take this conversation on social impacts of the circular economy forward in different contexts.

<u>Within your team or small groups</u>

As a small group you could dive into the topic from the perspective you hold within your team or organisation. Initially you could consider each of the themes from your context:

- What resonates with your experience?
- Are there additional issues emerging?
- Which of the solutions seem most promising in your situation?

- What role could your team or organisation play?
- Which other stakeholders would you work with to address the topic?

This could take the format of a group discussion using the table of emerging issues and key questions as a basis, and focusing on the questions above in turn. To take this further, you could consider which areas you could build upon or address in your current or future work, and share with other teams or key stakeholders which you would like to involve.

In a meeting with representatives of one or two other key stakeholders

By bringing together two or more different stakeholders, you can start to have a dialogue on what social impact of the circular economy looks like from your different perspectives and explore the key areas where you could work together to address challenges or increase positive social impact. Some key discussion points could include:

- Which of the 5 themes resonate most from each perspective? Which of these do you have in common?
- Of the areas in common, are there already some ways you are working on the topic together that you could build upon?
- Is there the potential for new joint initiatives or discussions on areas of shared interest?
- Are there additional social impact topics which emerge from discussing the links between your stakeholder perspectives?

From this type of discussion, you may be able to strengthen and build upon existing social impact related work, align shared objectives, scope future shared work or identify gaps for further discussion and potential.

Within larger groups or multi-stakeholder groups

When you bring together a multi-stakeholder group, you will be able to view the topic of social impacts from a whole range of perspectives. In this context there is a lot of potential for exploring the crossovers found between the different stakeholder perspectives, as well as the current gaps which could become future areas of potential shared multi-stakeholder work on the topic. Depending on the group size and preferences, a workshop format may work well to gather perspectives, ideas, challenges and potential collaborative solutions, using the emerging themes as a starting point. Some key focus areas of a workshop or discussion could be:

- **Mapping perspectives:** which areas resonate most with which stakeholder groups? What do you have in common? Where do different strengths lie? Are there other stakeholders who could be involved in the future to bring insight on underrepresented topics?
- **Areas of most potential:** which themes/topics/solutions sit at the intersections of your group's areas of social impact interest or expertise? If you worked together on these, which would offer the most potential for impact?
- **Ways of working on social impact together:** having identified areas of potential collaboration, what could each stakeholder bring to the topic? What would be your particular area of focus? What would you need to take action on this (e.g. in further discussions, as a future intervention or experiment, as a piece of joint research)? What would be your shared desired outcomes and impacts?

For workshop settings, a mixture of whole-group and small group discussion methods can be useful, depending on the group size. In our social impact workshops, we used an online collaborative whiteboard tool to share information, provide a structure, gather individual and group inputs, and to cluster ideas.

Figure 2: Example image of the Miro board used in the social impact workshops

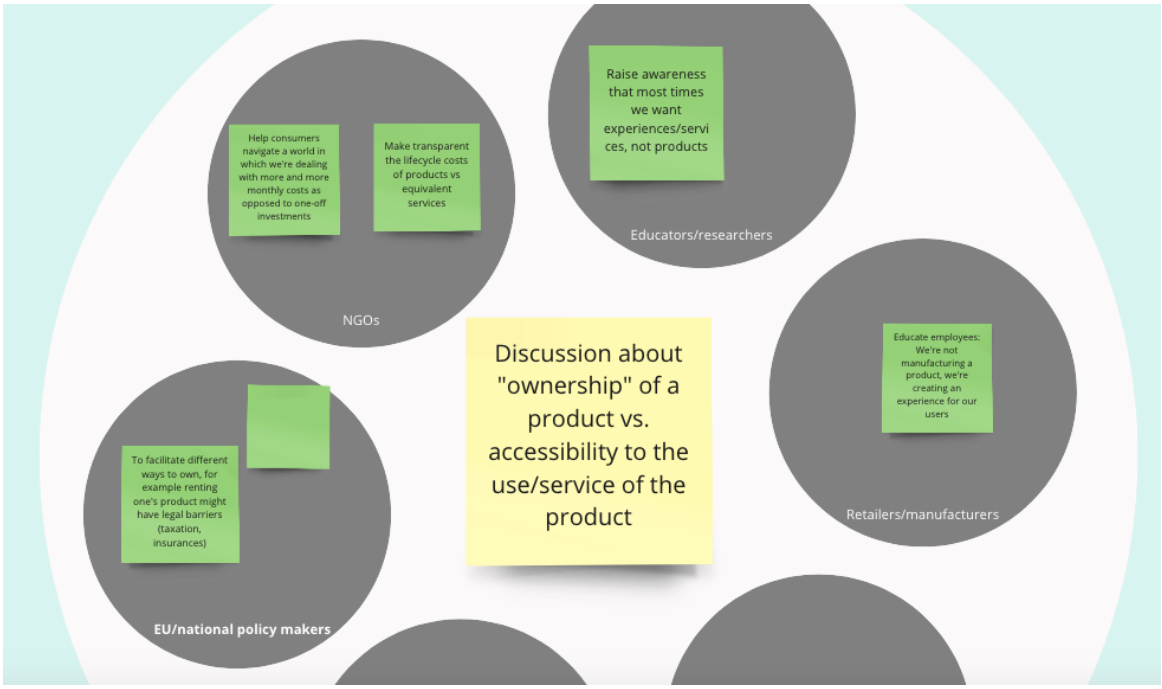

Figure 3: Example image of the Miro board used in the social impact workshops

Could this multi-stakeholder meeting turn into a longer-term grouping around the topic? What would the focus or aim be (e.g. for further discussion, sharing work and ideas, or collaborative projects)? Which format would make most sense for those involved?

We hope that these ideas give you some inspiration for how you could continue the conversation. Please do get in touch if you would like to share your discussions – we'd love to hear how you are taking the topic forward.

The social side of the circular economy has a huge amount of potential, and there is a lot still to explore. We hope that this discussion paper, with its emerging themes and key questions, has provided something that can be used as a basis for further discussions, research and work on the social impacts of the circular economy.

Contributions

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Name	Organisation
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Jean-Pierre Schweitzer	EEB
Christoph Ratay	Technical University of Munich
Kilian Kaminski	Refurbed
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Pascal Leroy	WEEE Forum
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Kaoru Inoue	GeSI
Laetitia Vasseur	HOP
Marcus Bergmann	HOP
Ronan Groussier	HOP
Eyrún Gudjonsdottir	Renas
Anja Ronesen	Renas

Resources

Author	Title
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