

#EUCircularTalks

*YOUTH VOICES ON CIRCULAR ECONOMY
OPPORTUNITIES, GOOD PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES
FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN THE EU CIRCULAR
ECONOMY*

REFLECTION PAPER



Hosted by



**Generation
Climate
Europe**

European
Circular Economy
Stakeholder Platform



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- **Virginijus Sinkevičius;** European Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries;
- **Cillian Lohan;** European Economic and Social Committee Vice-President for Communication;
- **William Neale;** Adviser on Circular Economy and Green Growth in the Environment Directorate General, European Commission;
- **Delara Burkhardt;** Member of the European Parliament;
- **Robina Von Stein;** Founder of RE-NT;
- **Mridul Pareek;** Student specialised in circular societies from the Ghent University;
- **Valeria Botta;** Programme manager for circular economy and textiles at ECOS;
- **Caroline Baeten;** Founder of Dressr;
- **Jean-Pierre Schweitzer;** Policy officer for products and circular economy at European Environmental Bureau;
- **Markus Droemann;** Senior Policy & Public Affairs Manager for Next Generation Internet at Nesta;
- **Philippe Schuler;** Global Impact Manager at Too Good To Go;
- **Carina Millstone;** Executive Director of Feedback;
- **Pieterjan Verhaeghen;** Co-Founder and CEO at Bolt;
- **Pia Eberhardt;** Researcher and campaigner at Corporate Europe Observatory.

About Generation Climate Europe

Generation Climate Europe (GCE) is the largest climate coalition of youth-led networks at the European level, pushing for stronger action from the EU on climate and environmental issues. GCE brings together 460 national organisations across 47 countries in Europe. We are guided by the voices of 20 million young Europeans.

As a coalition of the largest youth networks at the European level, GCE works every day to make the voice of the youth heard across the continent. Generation Climate Europe has the ambition to empower young people, give them the keys to defend their ideals as well as encourage their initiatives.

Introduction

Young people around Europe have already shown on numerous occasions their concerns surrounding climate-related issues, as well as the inevitable implications thereof. The youth engagement for ambitious environmental measures has been seen in climate movements such as Fridays for Future and in many youth organisations. Young people have also stood out as a result of their contributions to developing innovative circular business models so as to put an end to the destructive “take-make-waste” model. Additionally, they have an important role to play in the transition to a circular economy as consumers with different and higher expectations than the generations before them regarding sustainability. They are also innovative entrepreneurs aware of the limit of the current economic model and ready to rethink production and consumption habits as they enter the professional world.

The EU Circular Talks are a new exchange concept of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform. This is a platform which enables Circular Economy Stakeholders to interact and discuss circular topics via online workshops, webinars, or interviews with high-profile supporters and experts of the circular economy. At Generation Climate Europe, we aspired to gather young people and specialists during one European Union Circular Talk to concretely discuss how the youth can play a key role in the transition to a circular economy in Europe. This outcome paper summarises the core ideas and concrete actions that have been evoked during the event.

More precisely, the objective of this Circular Talk was twofold. Firstly, it aimed at highlighting how young people are involved and pushing for action in the area of circular economy through various projects and initiatives. Secondly this Circular Talk aspired to identify key areas in which the youth may play an active role in the circular economy transition in Europe.

Consequently, we discussed the opportunities and challenges that young people encounter when deciding to get involved in projects linked to the circular economy. During this event, we gathered input from various stakeholders, starting with young people, but also policymakers, academics, entrepreneurs, and activists, in order to discuss together the most effective way for the youth to engage in the political, economic and societal changes required to address the environmental challenges before us.

The first phase was an open online discussion, launched on 17 May 2021. During these two preliminary weeks, young Europeans were invited to share their thoughts on the priorities to be addressed at the EU level with regards to the circular economy and how the youth can play an active role in encouraging the shift towards sustainability. The second phase was a virtual event, held on 03 July 2021. This virtual event opened on a panel discussion on the current state of play on Circular Economy within the European Union, on the role the youth has played and can play, in order to weigh in on the sustainable transition and what the European Union can do to encourage youth engagement. The objective of this panel discussion was to gain a comprehensive picture of the situation. Therefore, our panel was made up of policymakers representing the EU Commission, Parliament and European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), a PhD student and an entrepreneur.

After having set the scene, the approximately 50 attendees joined one of the four workshops dedicated to sectors we consider as priorities: Food, Digitalisation, Energy, and Textiles. The objective of these workshops was to gather the opinions and priorities of young people on these key policy areas. Each workshop hosted a discussion between two speakers with expertise in the topic who shared their knowledge, experience, and advice on the current challenges of the priority sector with regards to circularity. Exchanges also addressed what can be done by young people to promote change and what the European Union should do to encourage and facilitate youth initiatives.

Key figures of the online event

- Online discussion on a dedicated forum: May 17 to June 27
- Online event: June 3
- Around 50 attendees
- 14 speakers from various backgrounds
- From European Institutions, Entrepreneurs, NGOs and Scholars
- After the event, the online discussion remained active during phase 3 to act as a follow-up, to pursue, enrich, and react to the discussions we had during the online event.



The final phase of the EUCT is the publishing of this outcome document that gathers and synthesizes the discussions. This document is meant to be a mainspring and a facilitator for youth engagement, as well as a resource document for policymakers to identify key measures to support young Europeans' initiatives.

Setting the scene: what circularity means and key factors to the development of a circular economic model

The 'circular economy' has varying definitions depending on who you ask, with the most overlapping concept being its elimination of waste alongside a complete re-evaluation of the current linear system. In terms of the public mindset, GCE asked its Instagram followers "What does the circular economy mean to you", and we were happy to receive 59% of answers supporting a "system change". This demonstrates that the youth, or at least a part of it, do recognise the need for radical change, that not only must our mindsets change but also the system which allows waste to flourish. One of our panellists, William Neale, Adviser on Circular Economy and Green Growth at the European Commission, DG Environment, stresses that the integration of the circular economy should be based around value retention. This essentially means ensuring that the value of resources injected in the economic circuit is preserved as long as possible before resources are ejected as waste or emissions. This value retention scheme would therefore be inherently both environmentally and economically beneficial. He goes further to describe a four-fold plan on achieving this value retention: increasing resource efficiency, increasing product durability, using more renewable inputs, and as a last resort ensuring we recuperate maximum residual value; in layman's terms ensuring as much of the resource is recycled in its final stage.

Delera Burkhardt, Member of the European Parliament, addressed the limitations of today's linear approach in her opening introduction. The linear approach refers to the tendency of modern societal consumption and production to follow a "take, make, consume, dispose" model.

The main issue here is the unsustainable assumptions inherent within our current model, namely assumptions of abundant and cheap resource and energy supply. However, we know this narrative can no longer be accepted with most energy production and resource extraction incurring huge environmental and social costs, therefore not "low cost" for the environment or society. This will remain true until we shift into a cradle-to-cradle approach where resources are reduced, reused, and as a last resort recycled.

Recycling as a last resort seems to be a repeated theme amongst our panellists and policymakers suggesting there is currently more focus ensuring products stay in the economic flow for as long as possible. This being the most efficient approach because recycling as a concept inherently means at least a degree of waste in most cases. Broadly, the circular economy re-characterises waste from a burden into an economic asset ensuring its continuation within the economic flow. In turn this new addition of economic value will create jobs, provide green economic growth and create a healthier environment.

When considering what needs to be in place to ensure circularity has the best chance of success, three main points surfaced. One, regulation and clear directive to ensure there are strong economic incentives for circularity. Two, as stressed by Robina von Stein, founder of RE-NT, a company which aims to develop technology to help fashion brands and retailers to participate in the circular economy, infrastructure and sufficient capital are essential to the emergence of circular models. Finally, all panellists agree on the importance of collaboration.

is is because if all firms have the target of circularity, it becomes a lot easier for each individual firm to reach the target. Speaking from her experience, Robina Von Stein insisted on the hardship of being "a sole circular producer in a linear world".

Essentially, a circular economy implies development of new products with sustainability as the key driver rather than feeding the consumer mentality of “buying of the new”. Therefore, promoting circularity starts with making one’s voice heard and highlighting that, contrary to what is regularly asserted, consumerism is not a model young people are looking for but a model that is imposed on us. Concretely, there are many actions that can be taken. Young people can read up on circularity, increase their knowledge on this issue, and engage in discussions on how to best implement a circular model. They can choose to work for companies or organisations that encourage circularity, join a sustainability focused youth group, and make use of their political and civic rights at the local, national, and European levels. .

Many opportunities can be seized, from voting for green parties, to reaching out to representatives, demonstrating, signing petitions, or completing public consultation, such as the ones launched by the European Commission. In short, encouraging circular economy implies we no longer conform unwittingly to our linear world but instead to acknowledge its flaws and actively lead a life more focused around circularity. The beauty of the circular economy is the ease with which it can align itself alongside almost all aspects of one’s life from cleaning to shopping to gardening.

To conclude this initial discussion, as Mridul Pareek a young academic specialised on circular societies underlined, the limited nature of our planet’s resources does not restrict our well-being. Societal well-being has unlimited potential and is disconnected from the planet’s material resources

Textiles

Major obstacles to a transition into a circular system:

- the lack of transparency and greenwashing practices
- higher costs of sustainable alternatives

What can young people do to support the circular economy?

- consume less
- adopt circular habits of consumption, like thrifting, renting or clothes swapping
- Engage in activism and advocacy activities
- Take part in legislative public consultations such as the European “Have your say”
- Vote

Textiles and the circular economy: why does it matter?

The textile industry is amongst the most polluting worldwide. Its environmental impacts are plentiful, from emitting high levels of CO₂ emissions, driving resource depletion and generating large amounts of waste. Indeed, clothing production emits 1.2 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually, which is more than the emissions of maritime shipping and international flights combined.

With the rise of the so-called ‘fast fashion’ in the 2000s, relying on mass production, low prices, and ever-changing trends, the fashion industry is projected to intensify its yearly production even further from 62 million tons in 2015 to 102 million tonnes by 2030. In the EU, the amount of clothes bought per household has increased by 40% between 1996 and 2012. In this linear business model, clothes are not regarded as long-lasting items by consumers, but rather as disposable.

At Generation Climate Europe (GCE), we believe that the textile industry has a great potential to become circular and should therefore be a priority sector to be tackled in the transition to a circular economy.

What does it mean for the textiles industry to be circular?

A circular economy for textiles means that products, in this case clothing, are kept at their highest value during their use phase, to then re-enter the economy after their end-of-life, thus never ending up as waste. Concretely, a circular business model for textiles aims at reducing waste through reuse and recycling, lowering resources use and pollution associated with clothing production. In this circular model, prolonging the lifetime of clothing is the underlying objective of each stage of the value chain, from design to production and end-of-life treatment.

This objective appears to be of particular interest to young EU citizens, as illustrated by their answers to the question “which words come to your mind when you think of the circular economy for fashion?”. Indeed, answers revolved around the concepts of sharing, repair, recycle, and thrifting, which are all aimed at extending clothing use and are directly in contradiction with the current fast-fashion model where clothes are often thrown away after only 7 or 8 wears. This idea of product life extension is also linked to the concept of consuming less, since the product’s value is retained within the economy as long as possible, leading not only to environmental benefits but also social (e.g., sharing clothes promotes community relations).

In short, transitioning to a circular textiles industry will mean that clothes are used longer, designed with their end-of-life in mind and made with recycled and more sustainable fibres.

Obstacles in achieving a circular business model for textiles

Achieving a circular economy for textiles requires a system-level change, which entails a global shift of the value chain towards a circular business model. However, this shift from a linear system to a circular one is hindered by several obstacles, especially from the consumer side.

Young EU citizens, when asked about the major difficulties they face trying to implement circular practices into clothes purchasing, seemed to encounter two main types of obstacles: a lack of information and higher costs of sustainable alternatives.

As consumers, young people have an important role to play in supporting circular business models, but need to be provided with accurate information in order to make informed decisions. This is particularly true for the textiles industry, where greenwashing practices are becoming more common, following the increasing environmental awareness of consumers. A recently published report by the Changing Markets Foundation has found that while most fashion brands are making claims about being sustainable, 59% of the products linked to a green claim were not in line with the guidance on green claims by the UK's Competition Markets Authority (CMA). Transparency must be strengthened in regards to the production processes, especially the sourcing of materials, chemical usage, and labour conditions.

Secondly, the higher costs of sustainable alternatives is a recurring issue, which is linked to the issue of cost externalities, meaning that the current price at which fast fashion items are sold does not include their environmental and social impacts. If taken into account, their price would skyrocket compared to more circular alternatives. This issue is critical as it shows that prices do not reflect the real impact of these clothes and also because access to sustainable products should be available to everyone.

Overall, young people are increasingly aware of the fashion industry's environmental impacts, but the lack of transparency and higher costs of sustainable alternatives impede the transformation of awareness into concrete actions. Raising consumer awareness, notably by better informing consumers, will be a key issue to tackle in the transition to a fully circular economy.

How to support the transition to a circular textiles industry?

Clothing has become an important part of young people's lives, as a way to express their individuality. They have therefore a central role in promoting more sustainable and circular business models as consumers of fashion products.

The best way to support this transition is first to consume less. Indeed, the underlying concept of the circular economy is to extend the lifecycle of products, which means wearing our clothes much longer. Then, it is key to promote alternative and circular ways of consumption to the fast-fashion model, through thrifting and buying secondhand clothing, sharing clothes or using rental services such as dressR in Belgium. Participating in local events such as clothes swap is also a way to promote sustainable consumption. Resorting to these circular ways of buying clothing creates demand, helping shift away from the current fast fashion dominated industry model, and thereby can have a long-term impact on the textiles industry business model.

There are also actions that can be led at the policy and legislative levels. Engaging in activism activities at the local or European level can be a way to have a significant impact, for example by getting involved in youth associations such as Generation Climate Europe. Equally, young people can contribute to the law-making process by participating in the European Commission public consultations through the 'Have your say' initiative. Then, don't forget to use your voting rights! It is a way to show what kind of future society the youth desire.

Digitalisation

Major obstacles to a transition into a circular system:

1. Structural obstacles

- Digitalisation seen as a solution, not a driver of climate change
- The weight of digital corporations on the economy and the political games
- The difficulty of leading a systemic change co-constructed by all the actors of digitalisation

2. Individual-level obstacles

- Lack of awareness
- Gap between awareness and action

What can young people do to support the circular economy?

- Change their consumption habits: refuse, reuse, refurbish, repair; rather than purchase
- Engage with local initiatives such as community repair events and repair cafes
- Engage in politics: vote, lobby, take part in public consultations
- Interrogate our relationship with digital devices and define consciously the limits we should set to technology and progress
- Question “easy” solutions

Digitalisation and circular economy: why does it matter?

Our world is becoming increasingly digitised, as if it was the natural pathway to progress. Not only is digitalisation a goal per se, it is often presented and perceived as the key to solve the climate crisis. As if digitalisation was immaterial. To the contrary, digitalisation is highly material. For a phone to be produced, 85 kg of waste and 55 kg of carbon emissions have been generated. Besides, electronic device production requires a great deal of raw materials. The extraction of which can cause health hazards and majoritively undertaken in very poor working conditions, not to mention its pollution of waters and soils. Electronic devices contribute to the ecological disaster over their entire lifecycle.

Indeed, only after a few years, if not less, devices are thrown away or stored unused in drawers, which results in a waste of rare resources. Each year, we produce around 50 million tons of electric and electronic waste around the world. Less than 20% of which is properly recovered and recycled.

In conclusion, hardware has a heavy impact on the environment. Less known is the fact that our usage of digital devices is also highly material. The digital sector is responsible for 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, which is more than the aviation sector. Each email sent, each research on the internet, results in GHG emissions due to the utilisation of networks and data centers

What would be a sustainable digitalisation?

The concept of sustainable digitalisation refers to the process of digitising the economy in a long-lasting and green way. Sustainable digitalisation is structured around four pillars: consuming less, recycling, adopting sustainable use of devices, and integrating social considerations.

Indeed, a circular economy is not only about “closing the loop” between the production and products’ end of life. It is also pivotal to improve the environmental impact at each stage of the life cycle. For example, it is crucial to design data centers from an ecological perspective; to set up low emission supply chains, and to increase the lifespan of products. Extending the lifetime of certain electronic devices (washing machines, smartphones, laptops and vacuum cleaners) by one year would result in saving 4 million tons of CO₂ equivalent or, equivalently, to take 2 million cars off the road for a year. This dimension seems to be increasingly perceived by EU citizens. Indeed, when GCE asked our audience what comes to their mind when hearing sustainable digitalisation, the “right to repair” was the top answer.

According to the RightToRepair Campaign, the right to repair implies that products are designed for repair, that consumers are aware of the products' repairability and that repairing is more interesting than buying from an economic point of view. Therefore, not only is repairing beneficial to the environment, but not having to replace depreciated products would also be beneficial to citizens, in terms of economic expenses. Depreciation is the costs associated with products, technology, machinery wearing out, and breaking over time. This last point on the benefits to citizens is core to the circular economy. Indeed, sustainability is also about well being. In the frame of digitalisation, the question is "How does technology really contribute to our wellbeing?". Our position is not radical, and we believe that digitalisation has been hugely positive for humanity. In fact, digitalisation can encourage a green transition with the digital product passport being a prime example. However, we are convinced that digitalisation is a tool, not an objective. More digitalisation does not necessarily entail more happiness. We need to understand where digitalisation is important and necessary to us, and, to put an end to other attention-stealing, and environmentally-unfriendly uses.

The road to a sustainable digitalisation is strewn with obstacles

The shift to an environment-friendly digitalisation is slowed by two types of obstacles: structural challenges and individual misconceptions and awareness-action gap.

Let's start with structural obstacles first. Up until recently, the majority of environmental issues were not debated by politicians. In the case of digitalisation, the problem lies even further as it is usually considered as the solution to climate change. This also has to do with the fact that the key actors of digitalisation, such as the GAFA corporations heavily weigh on political decisions given their economic influence.

That's why the shift to a sustainable digitalisation requires a system change. Regulating the digital sector implies changes in a large number of fields, be they competition rules, eco-design standards, advertising, or warranties for example. Yet, pursuing such changes is highly challenging. It necessitates a strong understanding of the issue, time, and coordination between the key stakeholders (independent repairers - key to a circular economy, producers, suppliers, and consumers). However, it is very difficult if not impossible to gather them all for negotiation rounds. Besides, given the scale of the task, the question is: are the politicians eager to carry out this long-lasting and contrarian fight?

The second problem arises at the individual level. First, there is a lack of awareness, as illustrates the outcome of the [survey](#). Generation Climate Europe set up from April to June on the Digital Product Passport. One-third of our respondents indicated that they were not aware of these impacts, maybe even more important, a few blankly said that they did not care. Although the scale and representation of the survey are limited, it shows that awareness is the first major obstacle to overcome. However, heightening awareness is not enough. Indeed, our survey also revealed that a large majority of respondents were aware of the environmental and social impacts of the digital sector, and yet had never purchased a digital product on the merits of its social and environmental footprint. In other words, some of the people aware of the impact do not act accordingly. Pushing for the ecological transition therefore requires closing the gap between awareness and action. The reasons for lack of action identified by the audience during the online event and the survey's respondents are higher prices, limited sustainable alternatives and advertising. The conclusion we can draw from it is that major adjustments to the market are necessary for behavioural change, which brings us back to the structural challenges mentioned above.

What can the youth do?

The Circular Talk enabled us to pinpoint opportunities for the youth to promote more circular production methods and consumption habits with regards to digitalisation. There are actions that young people can undertake starting from today. A first step is to refuse consumerism, to repair, or refurbish rather than replace. Spending money responsibly is essential, because every cent endorses a business model. There is also the possibility to engage with local initiatives such as community repair events and repair cafes, in which you will be able to improve your repair and maintenance skills. Besides, such places generate an intergenerational dialogue which is key to questioning our relationship with the new technologies.

In a longer-term perspective, you can engage in the political debates. It starts with voting. At all levels, we have the possibility to choose the party or the candidate whose program defends our ideals best. You can also organise and lobby your representatives on the issues you care about. Integrating an activism association is a possibility to increase your visibility. Finally, you can get involved in the lawmaking processes via public consultations, such as through the "Have your say" platform of the European Commission.

In a broader approach, we believe it is crucial to interrogate your relationship with the digital world. We should define the limits of technology and refuse to let it own us. We must remain the actors of our own lives. Industries and politics keep hammering that digitalisation expansion responds to the youth demand for technological progress. If this is not what we believe in, it is our responsibility to prove them wrong. We have the right to say that we refuse a world in which the environment and decent working and living conditions are threatened because we, young people, supposedly crave for ever more performing phones to spend hours scrolling social media pages.

Finally, to make the sustainable transition come true, we need to question apparently "easy" solutions. As we tried to depict in this report, solutions are embedded in a complex system and it is important to consider secondary effects before choosing the best possible paths.

Food

Major obstacles to a transition into a circular system:

- Systemic policy feedback loops between European policymakers and the agri-food corporations leading among others to funding for food production that targets linear modes of production (Common Agricultural Policy).
- Goal setting is not followed by concrete action
- Current policies are not adapted to local needs and challenges

What can young people do to support the circular economy?

- Change one's diet
- Favor goods produced locally and with less packaging
- Engage in politics at all levels
- Discuss this issue and raise awareness
- Examine the role of the Social and Solidarity Economy as the foundation for a sustainable future

Food and circular economy: why does it matter?

This Workshop was centred upon Food, Food Waste, Circular Economy, and the role of young people in the above issues. In the first part of the Workshop, the two guests, Carina Millstone and Jammie Crummie were asked what Food Waste and Circular Economy meant to them. In defining Food Waste and its place in Circular Economy, Jammie Crummie focused on an individual based approach to tackling the issue, whereas Carina Millstone introduced the subject on a holistic system level.

We heard first from Jammie Crummie, from the food-waste social impact platform "TooGoodToGo". In his presentation, Food Waste and Circular Economy were placed within the global context of climate change but with an emphasis on the impetus of human behaviour: the human need for food is the best placed to combat climate change and food waste, and in so doing, integrating food into a circular system.

How so? By harnessing our daily food consumption and changing our consumption habits, as individuals we can have "the most immediate, impactful, and simple action against climate change".

Although TooGoodToGo has a marketplace - which allows consumers to buy assortments of food that cannot be typically sold (for they are the surplus food that has not been consumed on that day, and hence will go to waste), at a lower price than normal selling price - TooGoodToGo sees Food Waste as more than a marketplace. In its view, the market is a vehicle with which to inspire others to take action against food waste: whether that may be other businesses, individual households, or even institutions such as schools. In the last 5 years, the TooGoodToGo platform has helped over 75 million meals from becoming waste, delivering across 15 countries, and becoming the largest B2C marketplace for surplus food in the world.

In effect, TooGoodToGo have coined their impact as the "Win-Win-Win": a "Win" for the consumer as they benefit from discount prices for food, and have explored new foods whilst fighting food waste; a "Win" for the supplier of the food who has reduced their own surplus food, as well as their waste disposal costs all the while attracting new customers; and a "Win" for TooGoodToGo who has taken advantage of this gap in the market of food waste to bring these two agents of positive change together to reduce food waste across different countries.

The influence and impact of an individual's decisions can therefore only be placed in the contexts that surround them, a recurring motif in the fight for reducing food waste and integrating a circular economy. Carina Millstone thus accentuated the latter: although individual action is important, a system perspective on food is essential to tackle its ingrained role as a rigid, wasteful, and resource-intensive sector that defies change in the light of climate change.

This systems' perspective begins with an examination of the emissions impact of the food system. As highlighted by Clarke et al (2020), if all but the food sector ceased to emit carbon emissions, the goal of 1.5°C of global temperature increase would still be surpassed due to the devastating impact of the food sector. The food sector, therefore, does have the greatest capacity for positive change if harnessed properly and if transformed into a more circular system with individual consumption changes and systemic structural changes to the market of food production. Moreover, individual changes cannot be limited to reducing food waste, as a plant-based diet itself can limit the emissions one indirectly emits through food consumption.

Additionally, the food system we operate in now is a linear one, as opposed to a circular one. Its linearity stems from its propensity to create waste and not maximise its materials: we cultivate crops and livestock, we process and package and distribute them, and we eat them without utilizing the waste created across all three stages. This system requires an enormous volume of inputs that are not recycled or re-used, such as water, fossil fuels, and fertilizers; and leads to increasing emissions linked to intensive use of the above. This linear food system is ingrained in global trade flows, which entails a constant drive for growth and expansion at the detriment of biodiversity, and protected natural areas.

What would be circular food systems?

In order to counter this linear wasteful system, a circular food system that strives for optimisation of available natural resources without pesticide or excessive fertilizer use, produces predominantly plant-based crops that are less input intensive, and distributes the outputs efficiently and with the least emissions across local customers and businesses is necessary.

This system would create its own positive feedback loops between the inevitable waste that is created, and the inputs that are needed: for example, using inedible food waste for livestock feed or compost. Waste streams are therefore revitalised as to “limit the encroachment of agriculture onto remaining pockets of wilderness”.

To conclude, food waste and circularity necessitates to be examined at the individual and microeconomic scale as well as at the system and macroeconomic scale. Food waste and the circular economy touch upon two important and intertwined notions of individual behaviour and system change: these need to be mobilised effectively in the consumption and production sectors in order to successfully transition food production and consumption into circular systems.

What can the youth do?

Youth involvement in this issue of food, food waste, and circular economy, echoes the structural issues mentioned in the paragraphs above. Activism needs to bring together individual actions towards reducing emissions and waste linked to food, as well as reforming and changing the deep-rooted flaws in our current food systems (in both the demand and supply sides).

Carina Millstone, Executive Director of Feedback highlighted that the key appeal of this sector, in terms of potential activism for youth, is its accessibility. We as humans directly control what we consume, and this consumption sends direct feedback to the producers and distributors of food. In essence, changing our diets is empowering as it has a direct impact on emission reduction and has knock-on effects throughout the food supply chain (i.e., prioritizing local organic produce over packaged imported produce).

This sentiment was echoed by Jammie, who reinforced the notion that the youth are agents of change and that through diet change and increased awareness about emissions linked to the current linear food system, the youth can have a real impact on the future of the sector.

Additionally, Carina brought to light the need to be more involved in the communities that surround us, to organise and rally together to politicise the issue of food, and to raise our concerns with our local representatives. In her view, the current linear structure of food is self-supporting due to constant policy support for corporatism to expand within the food sector and to place profits over planet wellbeing. Carina concluded that young people should therefore research these topics in depth, organise platforms upon which to discuss these issues and raise concerns at a European and global level, and examine the role of the Social and Solidarity Economy as the foundation for a sustainable future.

What are the obstacles to advocacy in this sector, and how to counter them

The suggestions and recommendations above, although very empowering, are still rooted in a context where resistance will be met. In part through the difficulty of changing systemic policy feedback loops between European policymakers and the agri-food corporations, and in part due to cultural habits of food consumption that are deeply embedded in communities. Nonetheless, the speakers debated and discussed these issues with those who were present in the Workshop. Cillian Lohan, the Vice-President in charge of Communications at the European Economic and Social Committee, raised concerns about the difficulties concerning the policy frameworks of the food sector, noting that there are contradictions between growing Circular Economy policy and the funding for food production from the Common Agricultural Policy that targets uncircular modes of production.

To this effect, Jammie and Carina agreed the positive knock-on effects of circular food production would only bear its fruit once subsidies had been altered to buttress circular and regenerative agriculture. Youth involvement here relies on strong connections with local elected officials, to politicise the issue of food and show that the youth are aware, and determined to make changes to the system – yet their success depends on their strength to rally under a common cause. Moreover, Carina highlighted that although this is a daunting task, focusing on specific sub-sectors guarantees results; and to this effect, revealed that fighting industrial meat production is paramount due to the “fundamentally extractive and fundamentally linear” nature of the production. Additionally, politicising food waste is all the more essential as although the Sustainable Development Goals promote a reduction of food waste by half, no country has yet started to take decisive steps in this direction. The role of the private sector comes into play here, as highlighted by Jammie, as this sector can politicise the issue and create opportunities for gaps in the market to address environmental issues while providing services to customers.

Secondly, integrating tailor-made and context-specific policies towards food will benefit not only the local communities but also wider systems change. Unpacking this concept reveals that the key weakness of legislation on the food sector is its lack of precision regarding the member states. For a systemic change in the food sector to arise, policies at the European level must be geared towards delegating decisions and thus empowering local agents of change who are more familiar with the context and can make the right decisions with regards to allocating subsidies and funding to the food sector.

Tailor made policies and reflections on the importance of context, are key to an efficient transition towards circular food models. Youth activism comes into play here, as platforms that connect young Europeans can be harnessed to bring to light the specific needs of all, differentiating between what is needed in for example in Portugal vs what is needed in Ireland.

The issues of the food sector are intertwined with the climate crises, as rising forest fires and degrading biodiversity will influence some nations more than others – thus reinforcing the need for context specific and intersectional policy that seeks to address the climate crisis as well as food production.

Energy

Major obstacles to a transition into a circular system:

- Legal barriers
- Powerful economic lobbies

What can young people do to support the circular economy?

- Raise awareness through campaigns
- Name and shame companies hostile to the green transition

Energy and circular economy: why does it matter?

The energy sector is known as a worldwide polluting industry that goes hand in hand with the lobbying industry to create obstacles that resist changes to make the sector greener and more sustainable. One of the most common issues in the energy transition is the Energy Charter Treaty (ECT). The ECT is a powerful tool in the hands of hegemonic oil, gas, and coal companies to discourage governments from transitioning to clean energy.

This International Agreement, signed by 56 countries – including all EU member states except Italy, and also the European Union itself, allows foreign investors to bring a claim against states before international arbitrators when they take decisions which go against their financial interests.

As long as we invest in fossil fuels, there can be no circular economy within the energy sector. This is the fundamental principle that will launch the transition towards renewable energy. We can never talk about a more sustainable, greener society if the basis of this transition is still linked with fossil fuels. Whatever we undertake, in whatever sector, if this runs on fossil fuels, this means there is an inherent conflict with the goals of a circular economy.

What would be a circular energy system?

In a circular economy, our energy consumption would be as reduced as possible, which requires strong energy efficiency measures. Remaining energetic needs would be answered as much as possible with renewable sources of energy.

However, renewable energies come with a new challenge: energy storage. The generated amount of energy needs to equalise the simultaneous demand for energy. Yet, it is impossible to completely control the electricity produced by renewables as we have no say over the weather, the strength of the wind nor the solar radiation. Therefore, the circular transition is highly dependent on technological progress with respect to energy storage.

What can the youth do?

Whether the actions of the youth have direct results or not, it is important to notice that every action matters and can have an impact on the transition. Throughout the last years, the rise of the climate voices did make a difference and increased awareness in the political sphere. The ECT is a good example.

The campaigners from civil society, of which Generation Climate Europe was part of, increased the visibility of the ECT issue. Certain governments, such as the French government, have begun demonstrating their position for an ambitious modernisation, and call for the others to follow the lead.

Although the youth, and more generally civil society campaigners, have already seized opportunities to raise awareness on the urgency to change the energetic system, there is still work to be done. Civil society should be part of the dialogue on energy, on the same basis as the corporate sector is.

What are the obstacles to advocacy in this sector, and how to counter them

One of the most important obstacles towards a circular energy sector are the legal barriers. Once again, the ECT is a good illustration. By protecting fossil fuels investment, the Treaty is an obstacle for governments to implement an ambitious environment strategy.

The energy sector is also known for the strength of the powerful lobbies which crush down legislative attempts towards a greener energy sector. Given that the energy sector is embedded in major economic interests, opposition forces are silenced. As long as this society will be focused on the power of money, big companies will remain an obstacle in the green transition. However, the power of knowledge is on the side of civil society. Naming and shaming is a powerful tool the civil society has. It definitely raises awareness on different levels and convinces of the urgency to change the economic system.

It is important to notice that we all are responsible for the transition of each link of the supply chain. The smaller projects that are driven by civil society are as important as tackling the political incentives. This needs to happen all at the same time and needs to go hand in hand.

It is impossible to give the responsibility to one specific group or sector in the supply chain. We need to work together on solutions that will enable the green transition. It is crucial not only for ourselves, the youth, but also for the next generation.

Conclusion

In the four areas discussed during this circular talk, there are clear opportunities as well as room for improvement. The youth definitely has a role to play in promoting the green transition as the face of the next generation of consumers, employees, entrepreneurs, policymakers, and simply, citizens of the new world that is being handed to them in need of repair.

Another clear conclusion from these diverse groups of actors coming together was the need for collaboration from all sectors. Circularity is a multidisciplinary and intersectional issue that cannot be tackled in one direction only. The need for involvement of all kinds of actors is evident. The existence of platforms that allow exchange of views and opinions is essential in the way forward. This means not only implicating people from different professional backgrounds, but also varied academic, cultural and age representation is essential. After all, the circular economy is beneficial at a business and economical level as well as at societal and environmental level.

Nevertheless, the circular economy, although promising, does not come without issues and complications, and is evidently not a one-fits-all solution. A sustainable future requires a combination of solutions designed through a constructive dialogue between citizens, politicians, and scientists. Moreover, before we can achieve a fully circular economy and society, we must lay the groundwork through the rethinking of our current systems and extraordinary mindset change.

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