CIRCULAR ECONOMY AS A TOOL FOR TACKLING LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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The over-exploitation of natural resources coupled with climate change are destroying natural habitats resulting in an unprecedented loss of biodiversity. In recent years, we have witnessed an increased number of natural disasters severely affecting not only nature but people as well. Unfortunately, often our capacity to react in such situations is limited, leading to humanitarian crises, putting the economy, livelihoods and well-being at risk. Therefore, it is our call to minimise wasting resources. If we manage to transform the way we produce, use, and consume products that will help to eliminate waste and pollution, will enable products and materials to circulate, and will regenerate nature, then biodiversity can "survive". The circular economy can provide a framework for such a transformation.

Biodiversity and natural resources at risk

Nature is providing numerous resources and services to people on which our life depends - from air, soil, water to fish, mushrooms and wood. The standard of living we enjoy entirely depends on the availability of natural resources. Having in mind the free delivered resources and services from nature, we are obliged to protect them, to further sustain the provided flow.

The largest material flows in the global economy are natural resources. Over half of global GDP depends on nature and the services provided. At the same time, one of the main drivers of biodiversity loss, soil degradation, water shortages, limited ecosystem functions and climate change is the way how we extract and how much we extract the natural resources. The heavy pressure on the natural resources is not only compromising the established balance in nature but it is also making future pandemics more likely. There is a need to decrease the use of raw natural materials, those not previously used or treated, and increase the recovery, reuse and recycling of products already produced.

Such approaches have never been more urgent than now. Timely action to avoid, reduce and reverse landcover and water ecosystem degradation can increase food and water security and will contribute to resilient ecosystems that can mitigate climate change impacts.

Circular economy can contribute to nature conservation

Three key economic sectors construction, agriculture and food and drink exploit natural resources, such as land, water, nutrients and energy for food production. Food production is by far the largest user of global freshwater supplies, with agriculture being responsible for 70 % of water consumption. Food production accounts for 60 % of global terrestrial biodiversity loss and accounts for more than 25 % of global greenhouse gas emissions. Feeding the population of the world sustainably in the coming decades is a challenge. Food systems globally are affected due to the increasingly interconnected challenges of natural resource scarcity, climate change, and population growth. Although we are highly dependable on the services provided by nature, the linear consumption in the traditional economy that we are mostly practising is severely affecting them.

In contrast, circular economy makes direct positive contribution to biodiversity conservation in protecting natural habitats and forests from land conversion for agriculture through reduced food waste or diversified diets. In that sense, circular economy solutions are not going to prevent biodiversity collapse by themselves, however, will strongly contribute to a much-needed reduction of the pressure. Circular economy by tackling the fundamental causes of biodiversity loss and getting more value from what we already have can be considered as an effective tool in nature conservation. What does this mean? Circular economy aims to reduce the overall level of resource consumption and waste output by getting more value from the resources we already use. To keep the product's value in the economy for as long as possible owning products should be switched to using services. In a circular economy, everyone can use, create and benefit financially from services that are based on sharing, renting and recycling. This to be said in other words, the economic growth and well-being can no longer be based on the wasteful use of natural resources and on buying and owning more new products, rather on models that will transform the consumption and will make it more sustainable. These actions on rethinking how we produce and consume and manage products will inevitably reduce pressure on natural resources and biodiversity, will improve our well-being and will contribute to economic prosperity.

Disposed at the landfill instead of recycled – the faith of the natural beauty in the Western Balkan countries

The poor waste management in the Western Balkan (WB) countries is degrading the immense natural beauty and value of the region. Rivers and riparian areas are especially at risk. In the rural areas often, those areas are seen as a “suitable place” for disposing waste. Although waste generation in the Western Balkans region is around 1000 kg per capita which is lower than the EU average of 1700 kg per capita, the recycling rates of below 3% in comparison to the EU average of 44%, results in a high amount of waste disposed in the landfill. Precisely landfill waste disposal remains the most commonly used one leading to public health risk due to hazardous waste and groundwater contamination, endangering important habitats such as riparian areas and rivers, as well as eroding the aesthetic value of the landscapes. Even though the WB countries have started to improve or change the waste management legislation, the problem is becoming more complex when implementation should take place. It should be mentioned that the WB countries differ between each-other in the legislation and implementation process being some more successful than the others. The overview on the legislation, policy and circular economy progress is given in the report - Underpinning circular economy progress in the Western Balkan countries through a comprehensive policy implementation analysis.

Take-home messages

- Fundamental transformation is needed on the way how we produce, use, and consume products.
- How we extract and the extracted amount of natural materials is one of the leading factors not only to nature degradation but to degraded human well-being.
- Circular economy by promoting more value from what is already delivered on the market is tackling the root causes of biodiversity and natural resources loss.
- The economic growth and well-being models can no longer sustain wasteful use of natural resources and buying and owning more new goods, rather they should be focused on circular economy models - sharing, renting and recycling.
- Waste generation in WB remains lower as compared to EU however lack of recycling along with legislation enforcement pose a threat to the nature in the region.

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