

BUILDING A RESILIENT SOCIETY THROUGH CIRCULAR ECONOMY

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Our actions 'today' have a great economic, societal and environmental impact 'tomorrow'. It is our duty to be responsible for ourselves and future generations and to live more sustainably. We should be adaptable to transformations from linear to circular approaches as the already established way of life and daily routine is posing severe consequences around us. It is an unavoidable fact that transformation is needed!

The society we live in

Our daily actions on how we produce, use, distribute and dispose products have a strong impact on our economy, society and environment resulting in long-lasting consequences. Often it is a case that the products we are using are not optimised to be repaired, reused or remanufactured. Consequently, the full value of the products is not used and they are being disposed earlier than they should. From such a linear use of the products, at the end of their service life if they do not re-enter the market, is leading to valuable resources being wasted. One particular reason for such a wasteful action can be seen is that the prices of products do not always reflect their environmental and societal costs, which reduces the incentives to produce and consume sustainably.



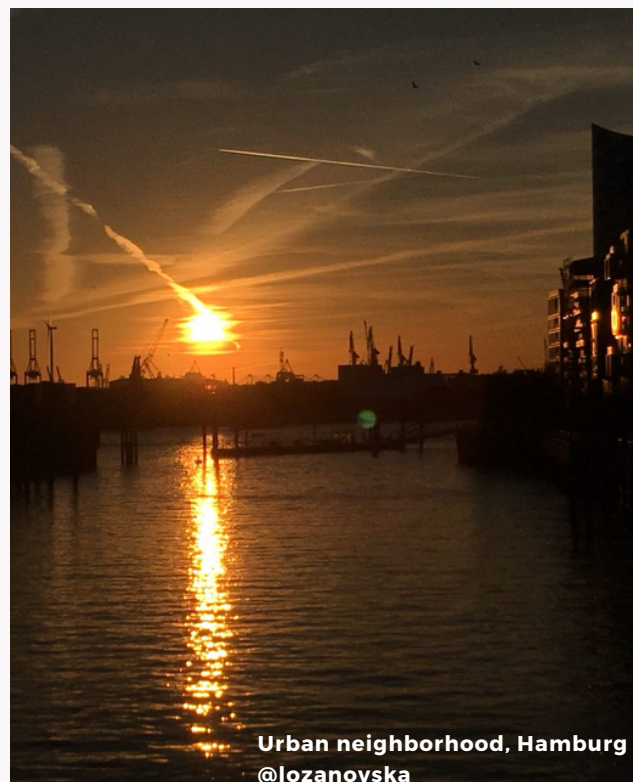
To put it in other words, it is easier and cheaper to buy something new instead of trying to repair it. But if we instead of that linear use of the products - produce, sell, consume and dispose, turn towards the circular approach in which the disposed product is becoming a source again or it shortens the cycle and enters the market being repaired and resold, there will be a great benefit for people, our planet and our prosperity.

The circular economy can close the gap toward a resilient society

How does the circular economy work? The rationale behind a circular economy is that products maintain their potential to create value for as long as possible. That means the products should be circulating among us for a long time. This aim is to be achieved with several steps. First, products have a long lifetime, due to a durable design. Second, if a product breaks, it is repaired. Third, when a product is no longer needed from one person, it is passed on and reused by another person. In that sense, products after their first economical lifecycle are not discarded, instead, they are updated or refurbished and begin another lifecycle.

In case it is not possible to bring back the full economic value of the products then at least their materials are recycled. By doing this, we omit resources waste or it is brought to a minimum. A few examples can be given, recycling materials for instance. Resources and materials can be recycled, returned to the economy and used again. What was once considered waste can become a valuable resource, increasing resource efficiency. Re-bringing these materials into the beginning of the product lifecycle reduces environmental impact and costs of production.

With those actions, society will have access to high quality and affordable raw materials, making our economy more competitive in the context of unpredictable resource prices and resource scarcity. Textiles is another field with great environmental negative impact where the circular economy can play role. The fast-changing fashion in clothing means their first use is often short. Once discarded, textiles can be collected for reuse or recycling, contributing to longer use of clothing. Overall, those actions will result in less use of new resources, less waste, more jobs in the repair and recycling sectors, while maintaining the services provided by the products. A circular economy can also strengthen business sector by reducing dependencies on global markets, promoting regional value and jobs creation.



Reducing dependencies without compromising social needs can be achieved through: narrowing (maximized use of products), slowing (durable and repairable goods), closing (reused components and recycled materials), and regenerating (renewable materials and energy). Decentralised production, or put in another words production within the country, will offer more jobs. Overall, this ensures higher regional economic growth and access of the population to reliable and high-quality products, even in times of crisis.

Western Balkan (WB) countries within the loop

The importance of circular economy has also been recognized by the countries in the Western Balkan (WB) region (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, N. Macedonia and Serbia), however the transition towards it is in development stages. If recycling is taken for instance, countries from European Union (EU) recycle in average 46% in comparison to the countries of WB where the recycling range is between 0.29-18%. This means what is considered in EU as a “resource”, it is still not perceived as something “valuable” in WB. Lack of appropriate legislation and implementation is one of the reasons, along with a partial understanding of what a circular economy means and how we can make use of it. Another also very important reason is the lack of focus on the topic. Sporadically initiatives and some guiding documents do exist but genuine commitment and implementation are missing or are very rudimentary. Therefore, more initiatives, advocacy and campaigns should take place to raise awareness on the “common people” and policy-makers about the importance of the circular economy concept and the benefits that arise from it. It is also important to mention that on a local or individual level in the WB some circular economy activities exist. Overview of the actions, local small business ideas and initiatives are given in the report - Underpinning circular economy progress in the Western Balkan countries through a comprehensive policy implementation analysis.

Take-home messages

- Linear use of products – produce, sell, use and dispose results in environmental, societal and economic negative consequences therefore transformation is needed.
- Keeping the value of the products as long as possible meaning products reparation, reusing or remanufacturing instead of disposing, creates more jobs in repair and recycling sectors and brings monetary savings.

- Turning waste into a valuable resource reduces environmental impact and costs of production while providing access to high quality and affordable raw materials in times of unpredictable resource prices.
- Circular economy by reducing dependencies, promoting regional value and jobs creation can strengthen business resilience.
- In WB advocacy, initiatives and campaigns for circular economy on a national level should be encouraged as the region is lacking focus on the topic.

References

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