

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY. A REVIEW OF SOME PUBLIC AND PRIVATE INITIATIVES IN ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates Romania's position in the field of circular economy, as well as awareness of the concept and the impact of this approach on current societies. Among all the crucial topics discussed recently, a leading place should be occupied by the topic of the need to implement and maintain an efficient system of circular economy. For this study, we chose to consult several research works, including local initiatives, and the results show that Romania is on an upward slope when it comes to awareness of the importance of the circular economy. At the same time, a section of this paper is dedicated to social responsibility projects in local communities in Romania. Also, some examples of special initiatives for recycling, reuse, and recovery of waste in production are briefly presented.

KEYWORDS: *Circular Economy, Local Initiatives, Social Responsibility Projects, Local Communities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this new contemporary paradigm, there are more and more crucial challenges that will have a negative impact on societies if we fail to overcome them in a way that is conducive to the development and survival of humanity. From social inequities, poverty, demographic change, human trafficking to gender equality, discrimination, the future of the labor market, and growing climate change, these are all challenges that people cannot ignore.

Climate change is a phenomenon that has been known for several years when global temperatures have undergone significant changes due to the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The news of natural disasters is everywhere, and current environmental changes are at least as strong as the COVID-19 pandemic. In such a reality, leaders, civil society, heads of state, and relevant stakeholders need to understand that we need new behaviors and practices that capitalize and promote sustainable development. In this regard, a healthy solution to the global environmental crisis that affects the whole world is to encourage the circular economy.

The circular economy can be implemented in many important areas: from the food industry, to clothing, from energy to the automotive industry, from home appliances to the furniture industry. The absolute advantage for everyone is that the circular economy can replace the linear classic model, in which each item has a limited supply duration and can extend its lifespan (Bunea, 2021). At the same time, such a transition is strongly supported by technological advancements and social transformations, as the circular economy is able to even create new markets as an appropriate response to the shift from the conventional

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consumer systems to product usage, reuse, and sharing (Corbos et al., 2022). In addition, being an innovative model, the circular economy can help create new jobs and a new lifestyle, a sustainable style for local communities.

What is certain is that a large proportion of European citizens believe that this circular model generates close positive links between economic growth, job creation, and resource efficiency. According to Flash Eurobarometer 388, on "European attitudes towards waste management and resource efficiency", many respondents believe that a more efficient use of resources would have a positive effect on the quality of life in their country (86%), on economic growth (80%), and employment opportunities (78%) according to the Directorate General for Communication (2021). In fact, the circular economy in the European Union has been a crucial topic in recent years, according to the Circular Economy Package, the European Commission's Work Program 2017 and Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (European Commission, 2015, 2016).

Furthermore, the transition to the circular economy is an opportunity to transform the current economy into a more sustainable one, contributing to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda objectives and, in particular, the 12 objectives, which aim at responsible consumption and production (United Nations, 2021).

Thus, through this research, we propose to make a mapping of the notion of circular economy and to bring into discussion some examples of good practices and initiatives for sustainable development, which are found in local communities in Romania. We also want this topic to be more and more debated both in society and in academia, given the fact that, in our opinion, we have reached a critical point in the history of humanity.

2. CIRCULAR ECONOMY: THE CONCEPT

The circular economy has become a very popular and widely used concept in recent years. The circular economy is characterized as a healthy model of production and consumption, which aims at the production, use, and reuse of all recyclable raw materials, in order to put them back on the market and to facilitate their life-cycle as long as possible. The major advantage of this is that a much better quality of life is considered while addressing the issue of social equity in the linear economy.

Pearce and Turner (1990) appear to be the first to employ the concept of circular economy in an economic model, who found that the traditional or linear economic model lacks the idea of recycling, which harms the functionality of the environment-economy relationship. According to Kirchherr et al. (2017), circular economy refers to the three 'R': reducing materials and waste, reusing products or their components, and recycling materials. Below, we have a table with the most relevant definitions of the circular economy idea:

Table 1. Definitions of the circular economy

SOURCE	DEFINITION
Preston (2012)	A circular economy is a strategy that would revolutionize the economic role of resources. Factory waste would become a useful input to another process, and items may be repaired, repurposed, or enhanced rather than discarded.
Bastein et al. (2013)	The shift to a circular economy is a necessary requirement for a robust industrial system that promotes new types of economic activity, enhances competitiveness, and provides jobs.

MacArthur (2013a; 2013b; 2015)	The circular economy is defined as "an industrial system that, by intention and design, is restorative or regenerative." It replaces the idea of end-of-life with restoration, moves toward the use of renewable energy, removes the use of harmful chemicals that affect reuse, and attempts to reduce waste via improved design of materials, products, systems, and business models within these. The overarching goal is to "allow effective transfers of materials, energy, labor, and information in order to rebuild natural and social capital."
ADEME (2014)	The circular economy seeks to lessen the economy's environmental effect, resource consumption, as well as raising social well-being.
EEA (2014)	The circular economy focuses on recycling, reducing and reusing physical inputs to the economy, and utilizing trash as a resource, resulting in a reduction in primary resource consumption.
Mitchell (2015)	A circular economy is an alternative to a classic linear economy (create, use, discard) in which we maintain resources in use for as long as feasible, extracting the most value from them while they are in use, and then recovering and reusing goods and materials.
European Commission (2015)	The circular economy is defined as one in which "the value of goods, materials, and resources is retained in the economy for as much as feasible, and waste creation is reduced." The shift to a more circular economy would "contribute significantly to the EU's attempts to establish a sustainable, low-carbon, resource-efficient, and competitive economy."
Sauvé et al. (2016)	The circular economy is defined as "the production and consumption of commodities via sealed material processes that absorb environmental externalities associated with the exploitation of virgin resources and the generation of trash" (including pollution).
EEA (2016)	A circular economy allows for the creation of well-being, growth, and employment while minimizing environmental concerns. In theory, the notion may be applied to all types of environmental assets, including both biotic and abiotic materials, water, and land.

Thus, the circular economy idea has emerged as a response to the desire for long-term growth in the setting of the growing pressures exerted by production and consumption on the planet's resources and environment. This form of economy necessitates a continual system of resource generation and waste reuse. In addition, when a product reaches the end of its useful life, the materials are kept in the circuit whenever possible.

The circular economy seeks to disrupt the traditional cycle of "raw materials - manufacturing - consumption - disposal.", a linear model in which every product has a finite lifespan. Its specific goal is to recover waste and reintroduce it into the manufacturing process. As a result, the cycle may look like this: "raw materials, production, consumption, waste reuse in manufacturing."

Ellen MacArthur Foundation is one of the organizations with the greatest involvement globally in the circular economy. To better understand the circular economy, below is a diagram developed by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

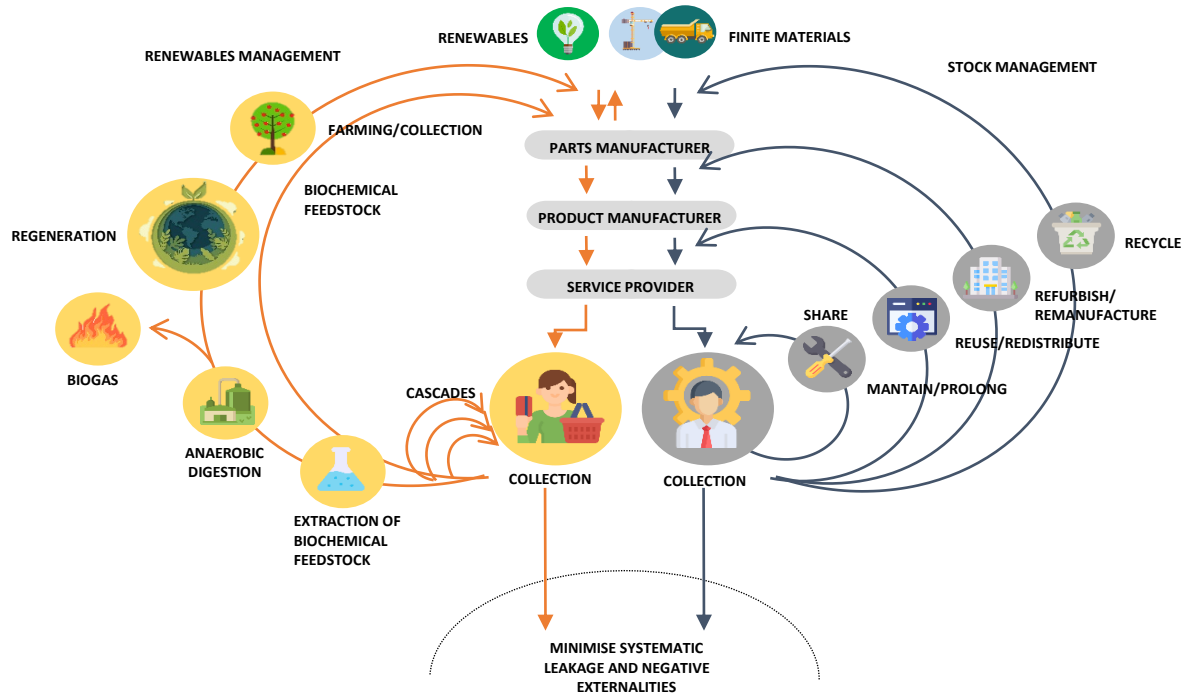


Figure 1. Circular economy systems diagram

Source: MacArthur, 2019

As can be seen in Figure 1, with the transition to a circular economy, the focus shifts to the reuse, repair, reconditioning, and recycling of existing materials and products. In this sense, what is considered 'waste' can become a rich and practical resource.

However, according to Rizos et al. (2017), transforming the linear economic paradigm that has dominated since the start of the industrial revolution, is a complex and challenging task that requires a transformation of existing production and consumption patterns. This can be seen as a threat by some involved stakeholders and an opportunity by others.

3. THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY'S IMPACT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The shift to a circular economy is not uniform and varies depending on a number of factors, such as the degree of industrialization, level of technological development, availability of qualified human resources, access to finance, etc. This underscores the importance of personalized and context-relevant strategies and plans, especially at the local level.

As mentioned above, the model on which the circular economy is based is one that involves repairing and reusing objects and then recycling them to recover materials. Thus, only a small part of the products ends up in the garbage. The impact on the country's development is considerable, because through the circular economy: the life cycle of objects is extended, recyclable materials become resources for new products, the amount of raw materials extracted from nature is reduced to make products from scratch, energy consumption and emissions carbon are reduced, and waste is minimized. These are just some of the benefits of the circular economy. It should be noted that when a product approaches the end of its useful life, part of the materials used to make it are recycled, stored and reused in the circular economy, thus contributing to sustainable development.

3.1. Examples of Initiatives in Local Communities in Romania

An example of enhancing the image of the local circular economy is the „circular school" project in Buzau. In 2021, the largest school in Buzau was General School no. 11, officially became the first 100% eco school and the first 'circular school' in Romania. In the school, the energy consumed is produced by the photovoltaic panels mounted on the building and the waste is collected selectively. The energy produced and not consumed, especially during the holidays, is delivered to the national electricity network, bringing money to the school budget. In fact, the first Romanian school of this kind managed to draw attention to Buzau, as European officials were interested in the model (Greennews, 2021). In addition to this initiative, the authorities of Buzau have developed a strategy for the transition to the circular economy, in partnership with the Institute of Research in the Circular Economy and Environment 'Ernest Lupan', in Cluj-Napoca (Primăria Municipiului Buzău, 2019). In this sense, by 2030, it is hoped that circularity will become an essential practice in the community, and the reduction of resource consumption is a major goal, and while achieving this goal, the authorities aim to create between 500 and 1700 jobs, which will contribute directly to the circular economy.

Perhaps the most well-known circular economy program in Romania is the 'Rabla' program, an initiative that began in 2005 in the automobile industry and then moved into the home appliance business. The general objective of the car scrapping program is to improve the quality of the environment and reduce emissions by renewing the national car fleet. On the home appliance side, the goal is to stimulate the replacement of old home appliances and electronics, which consume many resources, with new, more efficient ones. Thousands of people have participated in this program run by the Environmental Fund Administration, and new editions are organized every year in which many individuals participate (AFM, 2021).

Last but not least, we think it is important to discuss the fact that, in the summer of 2021, the Bucharest City Hall, in partnership with an NGO, started the "Re-BeInvolved" project, which opens the first integrated Center for Circular Economy, with humanitarian support from Bucharest, intended for all people in vulnerable situations. The Integrated Circular Economy Center is a humanitarian center for collecting, sorting, sanitizing, and distributing various products, such as clothing and footwear for children and adults, electronics and appliances, furniture, all from donations (Economedia.ro, 2021).

3.2. Examples of Private Social Responsibility Projects Involving Circular Economy

As we noted earlier, Romania is slowly but surely discovering the field of circular economy. Romanian initiatives have only sprouted in recent years, although they have existed in many EU countries for a long time.

This reality is also found in the clothing industry. By simplifying shopping, choosing the products we really need, buying clothes that have been worn before (second-hand) and by changing the perspective on the consumer society, we can contribute to a sustainable future. In this sense, initiatives to revitalize clothes are becoming more common. One of the first such actions belonged to the Swedes from H&M and dates back to 2013 (Godelnilk, 2012). In Romania, the French retailer Auchan launched, in 2021, the Circular Clothes Economy Program, entitled 'A New Life by Auchan'. In the stores included in the program, customers find, in addition to the clothing collections offered by the stores, a selection of worn clothes, in perfect condition, through a partnership with the Cluj chain of LaMajole fashion stores (Auchan, 2021). Thus, Auchan Romania became the first local retailer to implement a social responsibility project focused on the circular economy of clothing, a project already existing in many Western countries. In addition, the brand stands out through other social responsibility projects, such as the collection and recycling of used oil, or the recycling of batteries and light bulbs.

Another French retailer, Decathlon, started a while ago to organize Trocathlon, a unique second-hand product fair in Romania. According to the rules of the program, the owners bring the products they want to enter Trocathlon to the store and consult with a Decathlon employee to establish the sale price. The items remain in the store throughout the fair, but are also displayed in the online catalog, while the service is free. Those who sell their products at the fair receive a voucher equivalent to the sale price with which they can buy a new product, but only from Decathlon stores (Olteanu, 2020). In 2021, Decathlon also implemented the "RO Bike Valley" circular economy program. It aims to increase local production over the entire life cycle of the bicycle: from local production of components and raw materials to product expansion, and related services for use, extension of life, repair and recycling of bicycles, a number of initiatives will be implemented or extended directly by Decathlon (such as repair or buyback service, Trocathlon), but the program representatives want to attract partners and entrepreneurs with whom to develop the local economic chain (Pascal, 2021).

Another special and significant Romanian project for this period is called 'Let's give a Byte of Help', dedicated to reducing the IT gap between rural and urban areas, the association so far donating over 17.000 refurbished computers to schools, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of social services, for the implementation of educational projects whose beneficiaries are young people and children from disadvantaged communities (Sodexo, 2020). Similar projects are underway in the furniture sector, for example, with some workshops resurrecting antique wooden items, or even the shop that sold them, and become modern furniture items. The buy back and resale system implemented by IKEA and customer support for the repair, reuse, and recycling of old furniture are good examples of this.

Furthermore, the largest cosmetics manufacturer in Romania and one of the most important in Southeastern Europe, the Farmec company, has launched a campaign entitled 'Take care of nature as you take care of yourself'. Through this social responsibility approach for the recycling of product packaging from Farmec's portfolio, the organization received positive feedback from customers and many appreciations on social media. At the same time, to encourage the recycling of as many packages as possible, for every four packages of products brought in the Farmec portfolio, customers receive a gift product from the company. The process can be seen in Figure 2 and is similar to the Carrefour initiative, which we will present below. Through this marketing campaign, the Farmec company managed to attract other customers, especially the public thirsty for environmental care (Piața, 2021).



Figure 2. Farmec campaign process

Source: adapted from Garbo (2021)

In 2019, Carrefour Romania carried out 'Putting Price on Plastic', a circular economy program aimed at reducing the amount of plastic packaging and introducing plastic in a responsible circuit, through reduction, reuse, and recycling. The "We value plastic" program proposed concrete actions and models to reduce, reuse, and recycle plastic and other waste. Carrefour has also launched two campaigns: 'Pay with PET' (see Figure 3) and 'Come home with your casserole!'. This year is the third year in a row that the two campaigns have been a real success, and at 'Pay with PET', people come to bring many plastic bottles because in exchange for a bottle, they receive a fruit or a vegetable. The action of doing good for the environment is thus rewarded, in order to reach as larger segment of people as possible. The logic is simple: You do this, you receive this, and the result is immediate. In this way, people become aware and understand the phenomenon of circular economy (Ciobanu, 2019).



Figure 3. Pay-with-PET campaign

Source: adapted from Carrefour (2021)

Last but not least, in the fall of 2021, the Dorna brand promoted as part of its long-term commitment to sustainable development. The campaign that transformed Dorna into the „Water that takes care of water" will be carried out in various phases, and will include the installation of advanced trash collection systems in waterways. The initial part of this program focuses on two of Romania's most important rivers, Ialomița and Dâmbovița. It is important to note that Dorna is part of the Coca-Cola System, which aims to recover a quantity of packaging equal to the one it puts on the market by 2030 (dupanoi.ro, 2021).

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DEBATE TOPICS

In light of this, we can conclude that the circular economy is an imperative for every contemporary society, and Romania is beginning to take courage when it comes to this topic. Although it can be said that we are lagging at the macro level and there is still no national strategy on circular economy, recent years have shown that this topic has become increasingly popular among relevant actors and the population, and many initiatives are being capitalized on.

At the same time, regarding the concept of circular economy, we consider that the Romanian specialized literature needs to be enriched, as there are not many publications in this field. Through this paper, we wanted to briefly highlight the concept of circular economy and to bring to the attention of the public some initiatives and projects of social responsibility, which are found locally.

In 2020, the Enel Foundation and The European House - Ambrosetti, in collaboration with Enel and Enel X, performed a research to present a thorough picture of each country's degree of circularity, paying special attention to the three countries of interest of the study: Italy, Romania, and Spain. Italy and Spain have a medium-high degree of development, whereas Romania ranks worst. However, this study also measured performance over time, over a predetermined period, and here Romania has improved the most

in the last five years, followed by Spain, which made intermediate progress, as Italy has evolved more slowly in the transition to the circular model (The European House Ambrosetti & Enel Foundation, 2020).

A poll of 300 European business executives regarding the need to apply circular measures in enterprises completed the circular assessment of the 27 EU states and the United Kingdom. 95% of respondents believe the circular economy is a strategic option for their organization.

Using particular case studies and hypothetical scenarios, the paper highlights how the circular economy, in addition to being economically advantageous, generates, especially, important benefits for the environment.

From a debate topics point of view, thus, we believe that innovation alone is not enough to move to a circular economy. New structures, processes, strategies, studies, and behavioral patterns are essential, and for all these to happen, alarm signals must be constantly raised. The circular economy should become a catalyst for the common good and should also be a major goal for societies that want to thrive and be sustainable in the new contemporary paradigm.

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