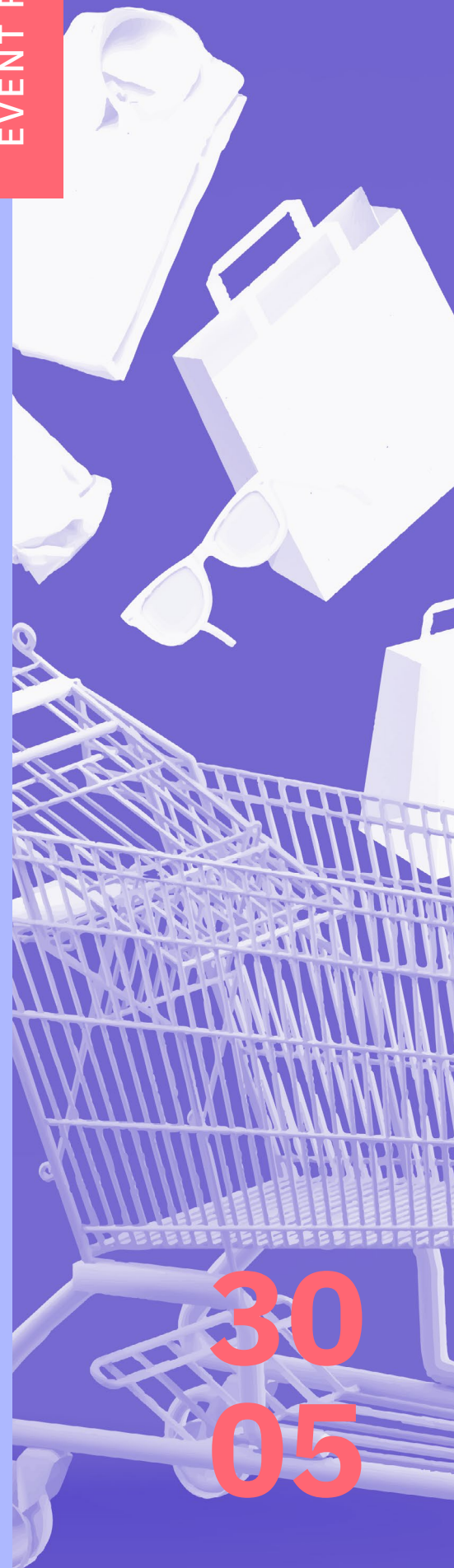




Missing pieces to a circular economy: closing the loop by reimagining consumption



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Traditional linear models of production based on the idea of take-make-consume-throw away patterns are putting the Earth's ecosystems under strain, as they buckle under insatiable demand for more natural resources. Moving to a circular economy in Europe is increasingly recognised as necessary to minimise environmental damage but also as a way to foster a resilient economy through innovation and job creation.

Taking place as part of the [SSH CENTRE](#) (Social Sciences and Humanities for Climate, Energy and Transport Research Excellence), a Horizon Europe project that aims to accelerate the EU's transition to carbon neutrality by strengthening social innovation, SSH-STEM collaboration and transdisciplinary policy advice, the event explored the current challenges that hinder a transition to a circular economy.

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Kertsy Hobson, Reader at Cardiff University School of Planning and Geography and a researcher in sustainable production and consumption

As a first step to closing the loop, there is the need to reflect on our basic assumption of consumption – and what we suggest when we say “empowering” consumers, noted Professor **Kertsy Hobson**, Reader at Cardiff University School of Planning and Geography and a researcher in sustainable production and consumption. Previous academic studies have highlighted that although consumers state willingness and desire to recycle and reuse, or to buy second-hand, their actions do not match this. “No matter what people say they value in a big picture [...] when it comes to actionable practices, we don't always act,” contended Hobson, and this value-action gap is visible in our consumption patterns.

The question then becomes: how do we make a value actionable? A way to tackle this issue is to look into how salient the paradigm of the circular economy is to citizens as a whole and the discourse that is associated with it. Nowadays, the value of the circular economy is widely resting upon the idea of consumer sovereignty and freedom, as well as the opportunity of choice, pointed out Hobson, adding that “especially for consumers in the Global North, going to shop in supermarkets surrounded by walls of materials and abundance, effectively the opposite of the circular economy, this [discourse] does not resonate.”

When tackling critical issues such as the necessary move to a circular economy to avoid further environmental damage and eventually socio-economic collapse, policy should concern itself as to whether it lies in a discourse that is correctly framed and salient to people. “It's more than just a business model. It's about a very clear imperative of resource constraints and very immediate one,” argued Hobson.

Proposals, plans, policies

Regarding current policies, the European Commission has put forward a range of legislative and non-legislative proposals to keep its resource consumption within planetary boundaries by significantly reducing its consumption footprint and doubling its circular material use rate in this decade.

“ It’s more than just a business model

Kertsy Hobson

Beyond the myriad of positive direct and indirect benefits of the move to a circular economy for human and environmental health, the Commission also expects economic and business benefits to accrue from a closed-loop model. It argues that a shift from linear to circular modes of production and consumption will strengthen the EU’s industrial competitiveness, foster business creation and entrepreneurship amongst SMEs, and create 700,000 jobs in Europe.

Along with the production and business aspects, the strategy of the EU institutions in the circular economy action plan lies in targeting two other pillars: the way we consume and then how we dispose of our goods, explained **Malgorzata Golebiewska**, Team Leader for Environmental Footprint at the European Commission Directorate-General for the Environment (DG ENV).

“The consumer has an important role to play, but is not the most important player at first because the consumers will only choose from what is available to them and they also have to base their decisions on the information they’re being given to compare,” she explained. For this reason, high priorities in the mix of policies include looking at how products can be designed according to circular criteria and ensuring that consumers get the information they need to make informed decisions.

Reinforcing the Right to Repair

Reflections on the role of the consumers and whether they need to be ‘empowered’ also surfaced when discussing more precise aspects of a circular economy, for instance, in relation to the Right to Repair. In fact, the logic behind repair is clear: as most of the environmental impact of our electronic devices happens during the manufacturing phase, the longer they are used, the longer the impact is diluted over time, leading also to less extraction and production.

In the latest Eurobarometer survey, almost 80% of people were in favour of repair. Going back to the value action gap, there are a lot of existing barriers that discourage users from pursuing the repair option. According to Cristina Ganapini, Campaign Coordinator at Right to Repair Europe, this issue comes from the supply side rather than demand: “If we don’t have a large mainstream offer, it’s going to be very hard to

find repair solutions and very expensive.” Legally-permitted anti-repair practices and affordability are also detrimental to extending the lifecycle of products. Ultimately, “if the manufacturers are in a linear economy mentality and not in a circular one, they’re going to make it very expensive so that you buy a new device,” she affirmed.

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Cristina Ganapini, Campaign Coordinator at Right to Repair Europe

To ensure the success and widespread adoption of a circular economy, it is imperative to make it accessible to all. This involves designing products according to circular criteria, providing consumers with the necessary information to make informed decisions and addressing barriers that hinder repair and product longevity. By prioritising these aspects as part of a wider discourse on the need to shift to a circular economy in order to tackle both inequalities and the climate crisis, policymakers can create an environment in which circular practices are not only encouraged but also easily accessible to individuals, thereby fostering a more sustainable and resilient economy for all.

Recommendations

- Reframe the circular economy discourse in policy by integrating the climate emergency and accessibility needs as a central focus.
- Recognise the limitations of consumer ‘empowerment’ as a policy strategy and emphasise the role of producers and, more widely, consumption habits.
- Strengthen the legislative Right to Repair, so that it becomes more feasible and economically interesting for both consumers and producers to repair devices.



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