

Social dimensions of the circular economy: Consumer perspectives and the politics of care in industrial agriculture

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Promoting collaboration
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Outline

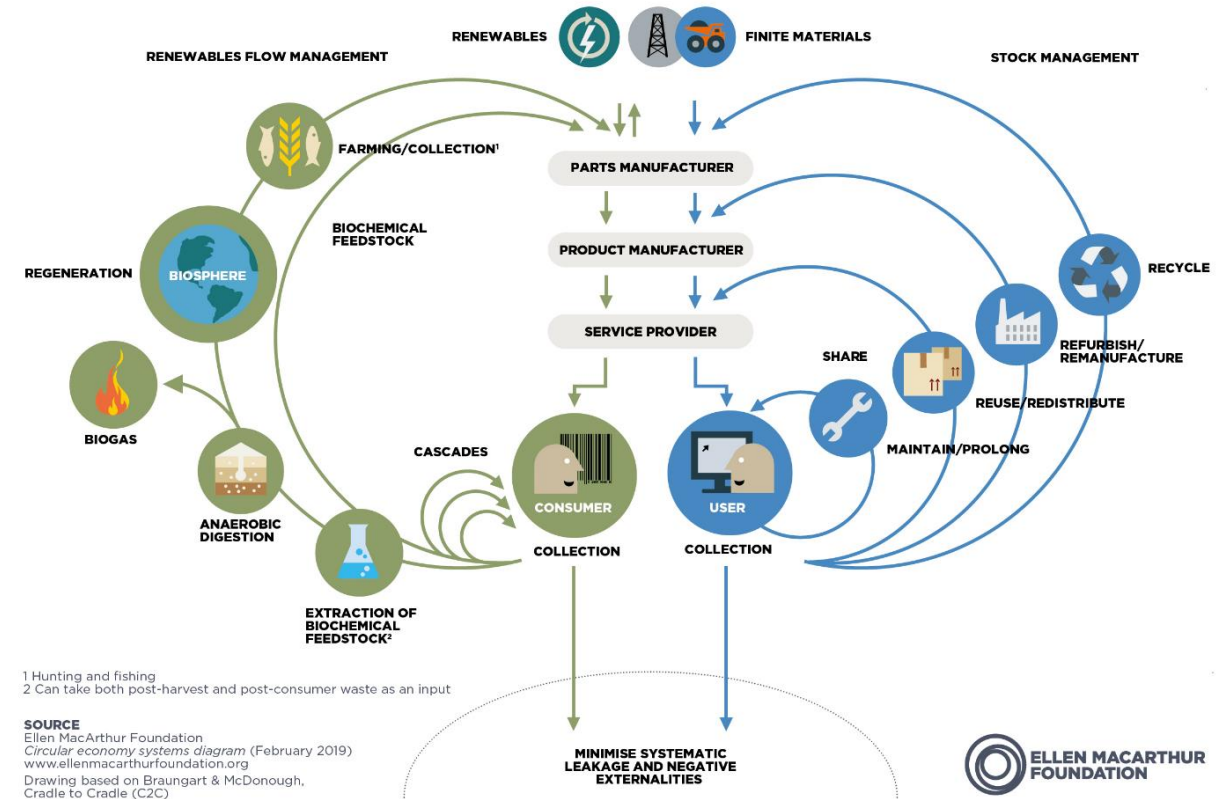
- Overview of the CIRCLE study of consumer perspectives on the circular economy in the region:
 - How do the consumers and general public understand their place in the circular economy?
- Challenges of care in the circularity-based industrial agriculture

Circular economy

The circular economy is “an **industrial** system that is **restorative** or **regenerative** by intention and design” (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013, 7).

Closing the loop

- Elimination of waste through “the superior design of materials, products, systems and business models” (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2013: 2).



Gap in the scholarship

- Top-down, industry- and business-centered approaches exclude the public from meaningful participation in both policymaking and circularity practices (Morrow and Davies 2020, Hobson 2016, Hobson and Lynch 2016, Calisto Friant et al. 2020, Millar et al. 2019, and Murreau et al. 2017)

How do the consumers and general public understand their place in the circular economy?

- How do consumers engage with the circular economy in their behaviors, particularly in relation to bioeconomy?
- How do they understand the concept of circular economy as it is presented in media debates and policy documents?
- What are the key drivers and roadblocks to practicing circularity at an individual/household level?

Notable findings

- Circular practices are popular among the consumers, irrespective of familiarity with the term itself.
 - Practices include composting, recycling, waste sorting and management, and sustainable consumption practices
- The circular economy is associated with sustainability, responsible consumption, practical sense, high-quality products, good taste, and local food.
- The main motivation for engagement is 1) care about nature and health of family members and 2) responsibility for oneself, family, distant others and non-human nature.
- Concern with greenwashing and deceptive marketing.
- Sources of information of the circular economy include traditional media, company websites, social media, and influencers, but also peer pressure and learning from family members.
- Lack of convenient infrastructures

Two methodological approaches

- Conducting 6-8 interviews with consumers in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Ukraine.
- Organizing focus group discussions involving 4-5 stakeholders, with one discussion in each of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway

Definitions: Consumer

- Complexity of defining the consumer:
 - Active participant, not a passive shopper: recycling, repairing, refurbishing requires additional work on the consumers' part
 - Most companies participating in the circular business model do not have "consumers"
- A **consumer** is a person who purchases or intends to purchase goods and/or services for personal use, including individual, social, family, and household use that involve circularity-based business models (based on Giese and Cote 2000; "Consumer" n.d.).

Definitions: Stakeholder

- A **stakeholder** is a person or a group that relates, identifies and/or is involved with an organization or activity and therefore has an interest in its success (Crane and Ruebottom 2011; “Stakeholder” n.d.). In the context of the circular economy, stakeholders are relevant constituencies that are directly and indirectly invested in circularity:
 - Representatives of governmental and policy-making institutions at the supra-national, national, regional, municipal, and community levels
 - Scientists and representatives of educational institutions
 - Representatives of companies participating in the CBI (preferably linked to CIRLCE case studies)
 - Representatives of non-governmental organizations, consumer associations, local communities, and individual activists
 - Legal scholars and practitioners
 - Journalists, representatives of media organizations, and notable social media actors (influencers)

Methodology and data

- When possible, the selection of interviewees aimed to represent all WP3 case studies.
- Non-random probability sampling methods were employed. This involved recruitment through researchers' social networks, social media, word of mouth, or the snowballing methodology (existing study participants help recruit additional participants). Every effort was made to create a sample that represented diverse age, gender, and educational background groups.

Interview question categories

- 1) Consumer awareness of CE
- 2) Factors and values motivating consumer participation in CE
- 3) Barriers to practicing CE
- 4) Possible solutions for increasing consumer awareness and participation in CE

Consumer interviews: Sample

- **N=36** in five countries: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Ukraine.

Age bracket	Number of respondents
18-25	7
26-35	10
36-45	8
46-55	6
56-65	4
65+	1

Table 1: Respondents by age:

Consumer interviews: Sample

Gender	Number of respondents
F	30
M	6

Table 2: Respondents by gender

Education level	Number of respondents
Secondary	2
Vocational	4
Student	4
University/college degree obtained	11
Post-grad student	2
Post-graduate degree obtained	13

Table 3: Respondents by education

Stakeholder focus group composition

One focus group in each of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway:

Position within an institution	Number of participants
Academia based researchers focusing on CE	4
Ministry/government representatives directly involved in managing CE	3
Project managers in academic and public sectors focusing on CE	2
Representative of supranational governance institution focusing on Nordic development	1
Doctoral student studying CE	1
Representative of an NGO advocating for public participation in CE	1
General manager of a company practicing CE	1
Financial adviser at a company supporting CE projects	1
Business manager at a municipality focusing on CE	1
Industry developer working on the regional level to promote CE	1

Findings: Circularity practices

CE practices	Number of respondents
Waste management (sorting and recycling)	25
Composting	15
Avoiding single-use products and packaging	14
Buying/acquiring second-hand products or selling/giving away (incl. clothes)	12
Reusing single-use products	8
Avoiding food waste	8
Repairing clothes and other products (incl. upcycling)	7
Abstinence from buying new things and investing in long lasting products	5
Volunteering for sustainability/circularity related events	5
Picking up litter	5
Using organic chemicals	3
Using organic fertilizers	3
Using reusable food packaging	3
Buying local food products	2
Choosing sustainable transportation	2

Findings: Barriers to adopting/practicing CE

- Information about circular products and practices is confusing and sometimes conflicting
- Public concerns with greenwashing
- Affordability
- Limited availability and consumer experiences of poor product quality
- Routines and habits
- Lack convenient infrastructure

Findings: Motivations

- The most frequently cited factors and values motivating consumers' engagement with the circular economy emphasize **care**:
 - Care for the health of one's family and future generations;
 - Concern regarding consumerism and waste;
 - Concern about the negative impact of human activity on the environment, including climate change, pollution, wildlife habitat destruction, and animal welfare issues;
 - Personal and collective responsibilities stemming from a sense of belonging to the global ecosystem and a shared future.
- Skills acquired within families and peer pressure are significant drivers for practicing CE.
- Values of empathy and care for humanity, along with concerns for justice, translated into action.

Care in the circular economy

- Consumers care as individuals through their relationships to others, both human and nonhuman
- How do industries care?

Care in industrial agriculture

- Economies of scale lead to consolidation and intensification (e.g., Fairbairn and Reisman 2024):
 - Financial incentives support technological solutions → technology for technology's sake → care outsourced or reduced to easily measurable benchmarks
- Technology disrupts care by changing interactions and moral dispositions (e.g., robotic milking machines (Bear and Holloway 2019; Driessen and Heutinck 2015)):
 - Limited human-nonhuman interactions → less empathy → less understanding of needs → less responsibility → reduced care
 - Can sometimes open possibilities for different engagements (e.g., sensors, Krzywoszynska 2019)

Care in industrial agriculture: Missing dimensions

- **Situatedness** of the circular economy model in the particular political, economic, social and colonial histories (i.e., the Global North):
- **Already existing** agri-care practices:
 - Alternative agro food economies (e.g., smallholder agriculture)
- **Gendered** dimension of care work:
 - Women are 3 times more likely to be owners and managers of non-productivist farms

Q and A

