
WHAT DOES THE NOTION OF A 'CIRCULAR ECONOMY' MEAN TO YOU? AND WHY?

CONTEXT FOR THE ACTIVITY

The emergence of the circular economy and the opportunities it presents have captured the interest of business leaders motivated by profit and business resilience, closely followed by policy makers, academics and educational leaders. The circular economy appears to offer a positive systemic model or framework for addressing some of the serious global and local economic and wider societal challenges confronting us in the 21st century – in ways that make sense. But, in reality, everybody understands and deals with a circular economy in a different way. The roots of these differences often lie in our personal values. In turn, personal values are influenced by 'worldview,' how we think the world works, how society is idealised and how we see our place in it. This, according to George Lakoff (2004), gives our basic framing or framework for thinking. In addition, since almost all abstract thought is metaphorical, a 'worldview' reveals many of the roots of thought and action. This activity helps to clarify differing personal interpretations of a circular economy.

RESOURCES AVAILABLE

- 7:R1a Intro PPT slide
- 7:R1 Ten discussion cards
- 7:R2 One interpretation of a circular economy

ORGANISATION

- Plenary for introduction and briefing
- Small groups (6-8) around card prompts
- Plenary debrief

TASK(S) AND RUNNING ORDER

- 1) Plenary briefing by the facilitator and split up in groups of ideally 6-8 participants
- 2) Discussion using the cards. Take about 15 minutes per card. Pick a new card when the discussion could

benefit from new input again. In the wrap up, ask the groups to write down three main 'takeaways' from their discussion and bring these statements to plenary

3) In a plenary debrief, cluster and elaborate on the group feedback

TIMINGS

Overall approximately 60 minutes. Task 1: 5 mins; Task 2: 40 mins; Task 3: 15 mins.

AIM OF THE ACTIVITY

To use a series of discussion cards to explore the values and worldviews that underpin different people's perceptions/interpretations of a circular economy.

TASK

1

Pre-set up all the tables and divide the card sets over the tables, preferably one card set per 6-8 participants. Prepare small stacks of large post-its and pens for the debrief session. Use the Context section above to brief the participants and split up in groups of ideally 6-8 participants to discuss the card sets.

TASK

2

When the participants are comfortable and settled in, the facilitator should explain that multiple cards will be discussed during the workshop. To set an example, take out one card, read it out loud and start answering it. It is important to indicate that there is no right or wrong answer, the card is a prompt for a discussion. After the facilitator sets the scene with the first card, the participants can react to this and the discussion in small groups can start.

Groups should take about 15 minutes for the discussions around each card, but keep a sense about how the discussion is progressing. Pick a new card when the discussion starts to flag. Return the existing card to the pack. Make sure that the participants appreciate that while there is no right or wrong answer it is important to stay within the scope of the discussion cards since comparing and contrasting is part of the plenary debrief. The discussion should flow in the direction the participants feel comfortable with and remember that not all discussion cards have to be discussed - it is all about the quality of the discussion. In the dialogue and facilitation work with the participants try to identify tension fields/topics or disagreement in the discussion.

Indicate to groups at the start of this task that they need to write down three main 'takeaways' from their discussion and bring these statements to plenary.

Note that in this activity it is not about the facilitator (or participants) having in-depth knowledge around the issues and topics identified on the cards. It is more about values clarification amongst the participants using the card issues as prompts for this process. However, the short briefing notes below might be useful for clarification and discussion amongst the groups and in the plenary debrief work:

'A CIRCULAR ECONOMY AS PART OF A WORLDVIEW' CARD

This card was authored to prompt the groups to focus on the idea of 'shifting worldviews'The Enlightenment brought a scientific worldview, one which emphasised rationality. It modelled the world as a mechanism, with the laws of Nature echoed in the economic and social world. It led to the specialisation and reductive approaches which still shape our attitudes and expectations and often keeps apart the disciplines. It also reinforces a mechanistic view of the economy driven by the circular flow of income but using a linear approach to resources and waste, and where efficiency (productivity) is the key to wealth. Feedback outside the monetary flow is, by definition, an externality.

More recently, science has moved on and the model of the 'machine world' has been superceded by a different worldview in which there is feedback everywhere and relationships are primarily non-linear. This means that they are not proportionate - small changes can have big effects and big changes small effects as the system iterates. The world is therefore much more dynamic and interconnected than we ever imagined and this more sophisticated systems view demands a different approach to knowledge and to the aims of any intervention: efficiency is traded off for more resilience (less risk) and optimisation is within the system as a whole rather than one component. There are no externalities because it is not possible to answer the question "external to what?" (all flows matter and are therefore accounted for). Energy of course dissipates during this process. The metaphors associated with these complex adaptive systems are typically inspired by living systems: gardens; forests; murmurations (flocks of starlings); the human body; or, more prosaically, weather and ocean systems.



Murmuration

IMAGE: SHUTTERSTOCK.

'ACCESS OVER OWNERSHIP' CARD

Use this card to try to get groups to reflect on what might be needed to allow people to be comfortable and secure around giving up 'ownership' for 'access' in various forms. What would it take to make the consumer become a user, and especially consider the notion of 'user protection'? Rights as a property owner – e.g. owning a house – are much better than the rights accorded to people renting/paying for access on demand. What will the enabling conditions look like for an economy, a society where 'usership' is much more predominant?

'PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE' CARD

Note that planned obsolescence means that a product is designed with a limited useful lifespan. The idea of planned obsolescence could be nicely explained through the example of the history of lightbulbs – see References and Further Reading section for the video entitled *The lightbulb conspiracy: the untold story of planned obsolescence*.

TASK

3

Focus the debriefing on being able to share and expand the discussion via the three 'take away' statements provided by each group. Use the statements to ask further questions which elucidate and expand. Why was that important? Can you say more? Does this look like a pattern is building up? Is this about the same as ...? This statement is unique, we need to find out more... (or addressing plenary) What is the grouping here? Why similarities/differences? What difference does it make to action or being practical? What is this perhaps telling us about ourselves? Use R2 as a stimulus if the time is right.

POSSIBLE EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Extend the discussion from personal to organisational interpretations of the circular economy. Invite participants to research/comment on different organisational perspectives e.g. Ellen MacArthur Foundation, European Union and business organisation such as Unilever, Danone, Philips

and Renault.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES

R2 could be a useful resource as a handout during the task 3 debrief or at the end of the activity. R2 provides just one interpretation of a circular economy. Ask participants to suggest what might be the predominant worldview/values underlying this particular interpretation of a circular economy.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Clancy, F. (2017) One of our favourite words: Usership. Riversimple website. Article available at: <http://www.riversimple.com/category/sustainability/>

The Riversimple perspective on 'Usership'

Ellen MacArthur Foundation and IDEO (2016) *The circular design guide*. Available at: <https://www.circulardesignguide.com>

Lakoff, G. (2004) *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*. Chelsea Green

Raworth, K. (2017) Doughnut Economics. Renegade Inc. Available at: <https://renegadeinc.com/renegade-inc-doughnut-economics/>

Kate Raworth in discussion with Ross Ashworth of Renegade Inc. around the idea of an economy and the circular economy, using metaphor and image

The lightbulb conspiracy: the untold story of planned obsolescence. 3 minute video. Available at: <http://www.videoproject.com/Light-Bulb-Conspiracy-The.html>

Webster, K. (2017) *The Circular Economy – a wealth of flows*. 2nd edition. Ellen MacArthur Foundation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Particular thanks to Prof. David Peck at TU Delft for his insight and guidance on the development of this discussion card activity.

THUMBNAIL RESOURCES

CLICK TO DOWNLOAD HIGH RESOLUTION VERSIONS FROM BELOW

7:R1a Intro PPT slide

7:R1a ACTIVITY 07: VALUES IN A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

KEY ENQUIRY
What does the notion of a 'circular economy' mean to you? And why?

TASK(S)
1) Plenary briefing by the facilitator and split up in groups of ideally 6-8 participants (Time)
2) Discussion using the cards. Take about 15 minutes per card. Pick a new card when the discussion could benefit from new input again. In the wrap up, ask the groups to write down three main 'takeaways' from their discussion and bring these statements to plenary (Time)
3) In a plenary debrief, cluster and elaborate on the group feedback (Time)

7:R1 Ten discussion cards

PLANNED OBSOLESCENCE

Which statement do you identify with the most?

"The consequences of planned obsolescence are restricting for the users, not enabling them to use the product optimally. Therefore, planned obsolescence does not fit a circular economy."

Or

"Planned obsolescence became defined use periods, it empowers consumers to keep products in more effective loops, in a more manageable way. Therefore, these defined use periods fit in a circular economy."

! Planned obsolescence means that a product is designed with a limited useful lifespan.

ACCESS OVER OWNERSHIP

Regarding access over ownership models, which statement do you identify with the most?

"First priority in access models are the rights of the user."

Or

"First priority in access models are the rights of the owner."

! What is the balance between rights and obligations when it comes to the purchase of access to products or services?

A CIRCULAR ECONOMY AS PART OF A WORLDVIEW

Should we see a circular economy as a shift in how we view the world? In other words: part of a worldview?

Or

Can a circular economy operate independently from how we view the world?

THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS

Which statement do you identify with the most?

"Having a circular economy work on all levels in society is the most important for me."

Or

"The first priority of a circular economy is economic growth and prosperity which also spins off social and environmental benefits."

EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS

Which statement do you identify with the most?

"A circular economy only means an economy that slows down resource consumption, because there is more natural wealth."

Or

"A circular economy is a regenerative economy that balances like a forest to feed itself. It breaks the individual tree effect, in turn, feeds the forest."

CLOSING THE LOOP

Which statement do you identify with the most?

"The main aim of a circular economy is about recovering material and making new use out of it."

Or

"The main aim of a circular economy is to reduce natural and social capital."

LOGISTICS IN A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Which statement do you identify with the most?

"I believe that humanity will be able to redesign global logistics in a way that generates less impact."

Or

"I believe that true resourceness lies in localising production and eliminating the need for transportation."

! The cycling of products, components and materials could cause an increase in transport and other logistics.

DESIGN FROM WASTE

Regarding design initiatives that use waste materials and transform these into new designer products, which statement do you identify with the most?

"Change from waste fit is a circular economy because they slow down the rate of waste creation."

Or

"Change from waste do not fit is a circular economy because they are ultimately downcycled."

THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

Which role of digital technology do you think is the most important in a circular economy?

"Digital technology re-energises business models around the recovery of materials and promotes products of service."

Or

"Digital technology is boosting the efficiency of materials and allows the production of more with less."

RECYCLING

Which statement do you identify with the most?

"Processing recycling is a high priority in any circular economy."

Or

"Recycling is less important than maintaining products and components at a high value, at all times."

7:R2 One interpretation of a circular economy

7:R2 ONE INTERPRETATION OF A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

"Built increasingly on the endless flow of energy from the sun (**energy in surplus**) is an economy which transforms materials into useful goods and services endlessly (**waste = food**). It **builds capital** and maintains it. Money is information which stimulates and coordinates the exchange of all things at all levels and so material is transformed **money as primarily a medium of exchange**. To do this, **prices act as messages** and - like the need for materials to flow cleanly, uncommodated, for them to become food for new cycles - prices need to **reflect the full costs** to do their job. Like all living systems, a circular economy is dynamic but adaptive and if enduring, it will be **effective**, neither courting disaster by over-extending efficiency (**brittleness**) or too resistant to change (**stagnation**). It celebrates **diversity** - of scale, culture, place, connection and time - because a dynamic system is full of change, by definition. And thriving in such an environment requires diversity as a form of **creative adaption**, a means of **resilience**, a source of redundancy or back-up. A circular economy is led by **business for a profit** within the 'rules of the game' decided by **an active citizenship in a flourishing democracy**."

REGENERATIVE ECONOMY
CIRCULAR

BIORROW CONSUME ENRICH
NATURAL CAPITAL

USE MAINTAIN, REUSE OR RECYCLE
MAKE
TECHNICAL CAPITAL

MONETARY CAPITAL

ADAPTED FROM: THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY - A VALUE TO GO PLAIN & SIMPLE BY ELLEN MACARTHUR FOUNDATION 2017