

ISWA 2021 World Congress

From waste management to circular economy – The road ahead

Athens, 4-7 October 2021

VIAN Speech

Dear Secretary General of the Ministry of Environment and Energy, European Parliament member and distinguished guests,

Dear Presidents of the International Solid Waste Association and the Hellenic Solid Waste Management Association,

Dear participants, ladies and gentlemen,

We wish to warmly thank the organizers, the International Solid Waste Association and its Hellenic Branch, for giving us the opportunity to participate in the opening session of the conference and address an international audience of esteemed professionals and experts.

The international dialogue on how to raise the importance of circular economy and build the “road ahead” is of considerable value to the future of our planet, our societies and of course our capacity to secure growth for business and the economy. And it is for these reasons that it is with great honor that we place this conference under our auspices.

Our organization, SEV Business Council for Sustainable Development is a legal entity, with the Hellenic Federation of Enterprises being our major stakeholder, with a mission to elevate the actual business case of sustainable development across the Greek business community and actively promote the necessary stakeholders’ engagement on sustainability issues.

We are particularly concerned with enabling our national economy and industry to address the global environmental challenges and keep pace with international and regional developments in this regard.

Circular economy lies in the core of our agenda, since 2015.

For us, the headline under the chapter Circular Economy is that it represents *“the biggest opportunity to transform production and consumption since the First Industrial Revolution”*. It’s the exact words that WBCSD is using to describe both the challenge but mainly the opportunities behind shifting from a linear to a circular economic model.

This is attributed to two main grounds:

First, circular economy represents a holistic, new economic model for growth – where developing better waste management is vital for business as well, but only part of the necessary transformation

Businesses do have a significant role in decoupling growth from resource use, counter-balance natural resources depletion and reverse the still growing trends of unsustainable production and consumption patterns¹, but are not able to deploy the full potential of Circular economy unless solid alliances between business and society are built .

Second, it is beyond doubt that circular economy is fundamental for delivering climate mitigation and neutrality aspirations. Maintaining a linear economic model is a major holdback from meeting the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal goals.

According to United Nations Development Program almost two thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions are associated with material management². The synergies between circular economy and climate policies are more prominent than ever.

Today, achieving carbon neutrality has been growing into a commonly shared global vision with the EU being the pioneer and other countries adding up to more than 70 per cent of the world economy being committed to achieve net zero emissions by 2050^{3,4}.

In order to become the first Carbon neutral continent by 2050, Europe has also developed a circular economy strategy, to emphasise the priority towards transforming its economy from linear to circular, with its latest relevant action plan -announced in March 2020- being currently at implementation phase.

But let’s quantify the challenge and the potential of CE with some indicative numbers:

doubling the current 8,6% global circularity rate is enough to restrain global warming increase below 2 degrees, as depicted by the 2021 Circularity Gap report.

EU’s 2nd Circular Economy Action Plan refers to the potential of an EU GDP increase by an additional 0.5% by 2030, creating around 700.000 new jobs, whereas WBCSD connects CE with a \$4.5 trillion USD opportunity.

But do we really live in a world where circular economy flourishes? obviously not, and defining our road ahead is becoming increasingly critical, since time unfortunately has no circular characteristics.

Despite the obvious advantages of CE, we still struggle to accelerate the shift. Businesses are already moving on that direction and we are more than happy to see representatives of

¹ UN SDG Report 2021: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-12/>

² <https://www.undp.org/publications/circular-economy-strategies-lao-pdr#modal-publication-download>

³ See UN Secretary General Statement in December 2020: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/articles/2020-12-11/carbon-neutrality-2050-the-world%E2%80%99s-most-urgent-mission>

⁴

CEMBEREAU – the European Cement Association or of the Alliance to end Plastic Waste, as speakers right after our break.

For sure they will provide better insights on what I'm arguing for. The EU CE stakeholders platform also provides for further reference, summing up to 115 good practices, 63 of them coming from various business sectors

But as said we are at the beginning of the journey. To accelerate we need to address four types of barriers together, since they are highly interlinked and interrelated, namely :

Market barriers

Cultural barriers

Regulatory barriers and last but not least

technological barriers

Market barriers identify with the lack of economic viability of circular economy business models and are closely linked with cultural barriers, expressing the lack of consumer interest and awareness or reflecting a hesitant company culture to engage with circular economy,

Regulatory ones represent failure to provide the necessary framework to support such a transition or create a market. A typical example here is the Green Public Procurement initiative where an actual shift towards "buying Green" will boom the market for circular economy products or services, since at least in EU, public authorities are major consumers.

And of course, just similar to the decarbonization transition, not all technical solutions are in place, or available at large scale and at a reasonable cost. Shifting production processes is a complicated process for many sectors, including high CAPEX or OPEX but also stranded costs during the actual transition phase.

We are confident that the outcome of the congress will provide for better addressing all barriers on "Our way ahead".

To us, SEVBCSD, promoting the unique case of circularity as a model for growth requires action in three dimensions:

first, by pursuing active and impactful intervention in public dialogue for establishing a favorable regulatory and financing framework, That's why we were and continue to be active at all public consultations, Working groups or National Councils engaged in promoting the case of circular economy.

second, by sharing best practices, informing and enabling business to identify and make good use of circular economy opportunities. We have introduced the concept and the potential of Circular Economy to the Hellenic business community back in 2016 and presented the investment opportunity 4 years later at open events. Recently we developed a Circular Economy observatory,

aligned to the Eurostat Circular Economy Monitoring Framework and comprised by 46 indicators since we strongly believe that continuous improvement can only be achieved via reliable data and a Plan – DO – Check – Act approach.

third, by building alliances and influencing business and non business audiences at large, to adopt circularity as the economic model for sustainable growth. This is why we are very happy to address you all today, or keep a sound link with the Hellenic solid Waste Management Association, along with other respectful organizations from the stakeholders universe.

Dear Mr Presidents of ISWA and HSWMA, esteemed audience,

For business, the transition towards circular economy entails significant transformation and investment costs, which may even put to test a sector's viability. In parallel, consumer awareness and demand for circular solutions should intensify, along with the efficiency of available infrastructure and access to secondary materials market.

Our common road ahead should deploy wider synergies among policy makers, business and civil society to encourage a mentality shift towards responsible conduct, as well as to educate consumers on the basis of transparent and reliable information.

Last but not least deliver the solid regulatory ground and governance framework we all need to step on. This is not only the case of turning linear economy more expensive than circular buy also two more key areas should be carefully addressed:

- a) The development of the necessary specs and standards for secondary material or fuels used and
- b) preserving a level playing field via regular monitoring and performing adequate environmental inspections to verify compliance with specs and environmental protection terms applied.

My closing remark today is that CE is a global challenge The road of advancing circular economy is certainly an international one, however access to and the benefits from this progress are not equally shared.

Progress towards promoting sustainable consumption and production remains uneven, we've seen the slides presented earlier by the president of ISWA. Many countries around the globe still lagging in developing the strategies necessary to support this shift (as the UN SDG 2021 report shows).

As we are entering yet another year into the global pandemic, we cannot afford to delay further the transition to a greener, sustainable economy. The key for staying well on track is to secure that this transition will be inclusive for everyone and international in scope.

Thank you for your attention and best wishes for a successful conference.

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