

In search for circularity - minutes

House of the Dutch Provinces, Brussels, Belgium.

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Introduction

Welcome and introduction

Klaas Fokkinga, Member of the Provincial Council of Friesland and Alternate of the European Committee of the Regions.

Klaas Fokkinga underlined that the Province of Friesland supports the farmers' green transition. Indeed, the Province accompanies them to get their production sustainable. In this perspective, schools and universities have even been set up to advice farmers on sustainable production. Klaas Fokkinga stressed the regional willingness to lie ahead regarding circular economy. Therefore, the local actors are actively encouraged to adopt a circular approach.

Michel Terré, Président of HESAM Université

Michel Terré introduced the room to HESAM Université, which gathers 14 institutions in France representing more than 100 000 learners. These institutions are particularly active in the fields of arts, engineering sciences, fashion, social and human sciences. All these organisations are connected by the approach adopted towards research and teaching on circular economy. Therefore, HESAM Université decided in 2019 to develop a European project linking research and territories about circular economy.

In addition, HESAM Université is currently a lead coordinator of the [Upcell consortium](#) gathering European universities and industries on batteries for electric vehicles. These actors are working together to address the core issue of getting circular batteries.

HESAM Université views itself as a facilitator based on the expertise and cross-disciplinarity of its members, which is key regarding the circular transition. It indeed requires multiple actors such as training labs, industrials, policy regulators, higher education, research, public actors. HESAM Université is grateful for all the participants and speakers to have joined this event.

Interreg Europe, bridging research and communities on Circular Economy: outlook on Interreg Europe 2014-20 and perspective from the thematic objective Environment and resource efficiency.

Erwin Siweris, Programme Director, Interreg Europe

The director of the programme stressed in figures what Interreg Europe stood for between 2014-2020. In this programming period, 4 calls for projects were launched resulting in 258 projects financed. In addition, 90% of the European regions of Europe took part in an Interreg Europe project.

Interreg Europe is proud to announce that there is still an important leverage effect for cooperation programmes. Indeed, for each euro invested more than 4.6 euros were captured in the regions between 2014 and 2020. 11 projects addressed the topic of circular economy through different lenses such as SMES, civil procurement, citizens engagement, or connecting research and territories, as this is the case under COLOR CIRCLE.

The current programming period going from 2021 to 2027 offers a higher budget by 20 million than the former one (2014-2020). The scope counts 6 priorities: Smart, Green, Connected, Social, Citizens and Governance.

The first call under this new programming period took place in 2022, during which 72 projects were approved (meaning 52% success rate). The second call is expected to close on the 9th of June 2023. The programme shared with the room the first lessons learnt from the first call. Project consortium should be aware of the need for policy authority responsible for the policy instrument targeted to be part of the project. Then, the project ideas should at least include one investment for jobs and growth goal programme among the policy instruments addressed to pass the eligibility checks. Besides, this is not possible to follow-up on a previous project: all projects submitted to the Joint Secretariat have to be new, innovative. The Joint Secretariat would also like to remind that the programme relies on the cooperation between advantaged and less advantaged regions, which means that the geographical coverage beyond transnational cooperation remains one of the most important criteria.

Interreg Europe projects are required to feed the [Policy Learning Platform \(PLP\)](#) which is a database where local and regional authorities and any interested actors can find information about all the topics covered by the programme. The PLP is also a network where more than 20 000 stakeholders are willing to share and receive good ideas from others as well as benefit

from expert support to improve their policies. As of March 2023, more than 500 good practices on circular economy, 8 peer reviews and matchmaking are registered on the PLP.

Regarding the project COLOR CIRCLE itself, its strengths relied on a combination of factors. First, circular economy is a topic high on the EU agenda: measures taken in this area – on electronics and ICT, batteries and vehicles, packaging, plastics, textiles, construction and buildings, food, water, and nutrients - are considered as the main tools to implement the European Green Deal. COLOR CIRCLE appears to be a successful project as it focuses clearly on structural funds programmes, while more than 50% of the policies addressed have been already improved.

Session 1 EUROPEAN PUBLIC POLICIES RELATED TO CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Keynote speeches

Emmanuelle Maire, European Commission, Head of Unit for Circular Economy, sustainable products and consumption, Directorate General for Environment (DG ENV)

Emmanuel Maire mapped the circular economy policy at the EU level. She confirmed that this topic remains high on the political agenda. Indeed, the head of states identified 9 pillars for the EU competitiveness with one of them being circular economy. In addition, circular economy is viewed as one of the building blocks – along with the strategy “Farm to Fork”, protecting biodiversity, promoting clean energy, leading the green change globally... - which are part of the European Green Deal. They do ensure the EU meets the challenge of climate neutrality by 2050.

The head of unit reminded the room that the EU Commission has the right of initiative, meaning that it can propose new laws and regulations. This includes several initiatives, such as the circular economy action plan adopted in March 2020. Its scope covers the full loop from production to consumption with the objective to limit materials extraction. The priority sectors of activities are electronics, ICT, batteries, plastics, textiles, building, food, nutrients, water.

Under the action plan, three phases have been defined. The first implementation phase in 2020 and 2021 foresaw a new regulatory framework on batteries, the Global Alliance on Circular economy and resource efficiency. In addition, two proposals were drafted, one to review EU rules on concentration limits of persistent organic pollutants in waste, while the second – a regulation - tackles waste shipments.

In the second phase, taking place in 2022, a so-called “spring package” was published, which encompassed a proposal on regulation on the Ecodesign for sustainable products, an EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles, updated consumer rules - to empower consumers for the green transition -, and a revision of the construction products regulation. The consultation on the Ecodesign is [open for feedback](#). This was followed by a so-called “autumn package”, which included a policy framework on the bio based biodegradable and compostable plastics, a revision of the packaging waste directive, and a proposal for a regulation on an EU certification for carbon removals. The third phase is due to take place in 2023 in different steps. Therefore, in March 2023 were published the critical raw material Act, the green claims initiative as well as the legislative proposal on the right to repair. Three revisions are expected in 2023 - revision of the monitoring framework for the circular economy, the Revision of rules on end-

of-life vehicles and the targeted revision of the waste framework directive-, while an initiative addressing unintentional release of microplastics is due to be published.

At the global level, the European Commission succeeded in starting negotiations on a global plastic agreement and pushing for circular economy in free trade agreements. This falls within the attempt to get a global circular economy.

The European Commission also shed the light on the platform dedicated to circular economy stakeholder engagement. The platform involves 24 partners and is responsible for organizing conferences.

Adrian Ovidiu Teban, Member of the European Committee of the Regions, Member of COTER Commission for Territorial Cohesion Policy and EU Budget, and Mayor of Cugir

The town of Cugir in Romania, which counts 25 000 inhabitants in the Alba Iulia County, stands for creating a system that allows for longevity, optimal use, refurbishment, remanufacturing and recycling of products and materials while maintaining a continuation of quality of products for the users. Moreover, these objectives have to be attained without loss of revenue or extra costs for the producers and the users. The municipality then started working with the Ernest Lupan institute to implement a circular economy-related strategy. Together, they decided to train people on waste separations. The first results show that the current rate of collection in urban areas is higher than in rural areas, 32% in urban areas vs to 23% in rural areas.

As a member of the European Committee of the Regions, Mr Teban underlined the added value of this institution. Indeed, it helps the EU to get the citizens and the whole communities involved, being made of elected representatives coming from different political levels – municipalities, regions... Echoing the cohesion policy, the European Committee of the Regions launched the initiative “Green Deal Going Local’ to enshrine the EU’s transition to climate neutrality in the European cities and regions and be sure to leave “no one behind” in the process. The European Committee of the Regions is working towards channeling the challenges that local and regional authorities may be facing while implementing the green transition locally. It also communicates their achievements and best practices to ensure they can be replicated across the European Union.

Besides, the Committee can raise awareness among the citizens about strategies, proposals. This is a tool for EU policies to be better known. The member reminded the room that the

process to climate neutrality might be long. Therefore, he invited the room and its counterparts at the EU and local levels to take into consideration local social issues, and to support financially balanced measures for the Green Deal policies to be duly accepted and understood at local level.

Finally, Mr Teban stressed the importance of research. He even pointed out that research is the starting point for the green transition. Academia could support the need analysis of each town. Indeed, local needs and resources differ from a territory to another. Therefore, copy-pasting solutions may not be effective. Every town or region should first start identifying their own challenges to determine what the transition towards circular economy could look like. Then, they could launch small, experimental projects that could be scaled up and translated into policy.

Attendees were invited to look at [the campaign's activities which structure the initiative "Green Deal Going local"](#):

- **European Green Deal debates** at the institutional, national, regional and local level – debates at all levels that feed into the European Green Deal.
- **My Green Story** – mapping, promoting, and sharing climate commitments and actions and local and regional best practices on the European Green Deal.
- **Handbook for Local and Regional Governments** – a living resource hub on accessing support to develop and implement Green Deal policies and projects.
- **Trees For Life** – promoting commitment and facilitating action on reforestation and urban greening, contributing to the EU's plan to plant three billion trees.
- **Green Our Mobility** – promoting the EU's priorities on sustainable mobility and local and regional efforts to decarbonise the transport sector.
- **Facilitating access to funds** – sharing information on financing key areas of the green transition, including webinars and conferences.

Conversations about the role of European Regions in the implementation of the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan and the European Green Deal

Conversation 1 - Launching a circular living lab, the Fjildlab

Emiel Elferink, Professor in Sustainable Soil Management, Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences

Emiel Elferink described Friesland as an agricultural area, where challenges are mostly related to population decline. Therefore, new solutions are needed to find new business models. In this perspective, circular economy and collaboration appear to be useful tools for the territory.

The Province and the University have developed the *Fjildlab*, a living lab since 2019. This tool strengthens the circular economy in the area and supports the green and sustainable transition of the local agricultural sector. In this framework, local stakeholders are invited to express their opinions and share their expertise on several topics and with several stakeholders. This relies on a bottom-up approach. By 2025, this scheme is expected to have supported 100 circular economy-related projects.

Ovidia Simona Caba, Director of Regional Policies and Programs Unit, Regional Development Agency Centru

The area is facing similar challenges regarding both circular economy and decrease in population (by 60% in the area). The local authorities are putting extra effort on managing the industrial landscape. The community is also working on reaching the energy efficiency targets of the European Green Deal. Therefore, 30 % of the funds within the regional programme target green priorities. COLOR CIRCLE was key to consolidate the capacity of local stakeholders in strategic and integrated planning, while supporting models of collaboration on energy efficiency, urban regeneration, green infrastructure, blue infrastructure, green spaces.

Under COLOR CIRCLE, RDA Centru and VHL organised bilateral meetings with VHL to support RDA Centru creating 5 working groups on: 1. promoting energy efficiency and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. 2. Green infrastructures. 3. Blue infrastructure. 4. Green and recreational spaces. 5. Urban regeneration. The set up was based on the Fjildlab methodology as part of the action plan of the Centru Region. The next steps include setting up an open innovation platform which targets cities on topics such as energy efficiency etc.

For more information about [the Dutch circular living lab](#) and [its adaptation in Romania](#).

Conversation 2 – Supporting SMEs in adopting circular principles

Justine Bettinger, policy officer responsible for cross-cutting projects and partnerships, Bourgogne-Franche-Comté Region

The Bourgogne-Franche-Comté Region, together with the regional branch of the State Agency for the ecological transition (ADEME) have developed a regional call for proposals to support local circular economy projects: the “circular economy project booster”. The call for proposals accelerates the identification and implementation of projects related to circular economy and waste prevention, develops synergies between different regional actors. Since 2018, 188 projects have been supported from private organisations, associations and local authorities.

The system is flexible enough for providing personalised support to project holders. The format allows the region to adapt and develop innovative ways to act fostering circular economy. The Region shared with the room the lessons learnt from the project booster: improved governance, help for structuring sectors and clarification of the regional council's positioning on waste.

The Bourgogne-Franche-Comté Region is now planning to evaluate the booster's impact on its territories, regarding employment, materials savings, and waste reduction.

As a matter of example, the call supported the construction of an exemplary building in a cradle-to-cradle approach, using reused, local and bio sourced materials. The project relied in particular on the following building characteristics: a reinforced building envelope, renewable energy, the elimination of plastics, glues, toxic products, construction processes allowing dismantling at end of life, the use of recycled materials, rainwater recovery device, the conservation of trees and revegetation of the site.

Jakub Pechlat, Regional Innovation Strategy Manager, the Central Bohemian Innovation Center

The Central Bohemian Innovation Center included circular economy in their strategy based on the current COLOR CIRCLE project. In addition, they improved their consultancy programme for SMEs called “Platinn programme” by adding a “circular economy” component. Under the “Platinn programme”, regional entrepreneurs get advisory services in areas of business development, organisation, cooperation, and finances. The Central Bohemian Innovation Center through its “SIC Platinn for Circular Economy” programme therefore supports SMEs

with a training on circular economy or helps them turn their business model into a circular one. As of now, 4 companies have already benefited from the scheme.

For more information about [the circular economy project booster](#) and about the [Platinn programme](#).

Conversation 3 - Enabling students to match the research needs of academic institutions with the priorities of territories.

Hanna Uma Laufer, Project leader “1000 doctorants”, HESAM Université

The programme “1000 doctoral students for the territories” aims at connecting local authorities and PhD students (academic field) for them to be involved in the long-term transition. The legal framework is the grant Cifre, which was opened at the beginning of the 2000's for social sciences, after being initially created for technical and scientific fields. The amount is 42 000 € for a three-year period.

The programme is responsible for following up every project led by a local authority, a laboratory, or a PhD student. These projects then allow doctoral students to tackle challenges at the local level. Examples include a doctoral student working with a waste management authority. This sociologist supports its cooperation with citizens to tackle the waste management challenge in a rural area near Bordeaux.

Trinidad Manrique de Lara Vilchez, Technician on European Projects, Provincial Council of Granada

The Province is characterised by depopulation and ageing, especially in rural areas, and an unbalanced distribution of population between urban and rural areas. Therefore, the local authority works on bringing together territorial needs and expert knowledge, paying attention to circular economy approach, to improve urban agendas of the province of Granada. The County Council then targeted the policy instrument related to urban agendas in the framework of sustainable goals.

Two actions were inspired by 1000 doctoral students for the territories: an internship programme for master's degree students in public authorities and a platform connecting towns and researchers. The third edition of the traineeship programme has recently been launched. The platform and the internship programme act as tools to allow a closer collaboration between the University of Granada and its territory. Indeed, the rural territory requires to be more connected to research institutions to benefit from its outputs. Students and researchers can therefore play a key role for the circular transition of isolated areas. The programmes give

local actors a better access to information and allow them to play a greater role in the introduction of the circular economy approach.

Therefore, it supports a new territorial governance where university and other centers of knowledge can play a role in the design of public policies.

For more information about [“the 1000 doctoral students for the territories” programme](#) and about [Puentes](#).

Comments and questions

A lot of entrepreneurs make building materials but have troubles getting certified. Therefore, there is a need for circularity to be pushed in building materials and building. Some tools do exist in architecture, such as LEVELS in the conception of buildings, but should be expanded. The room assumed that safety of construction materials and circularity of materials should go hand in hand. In addition, the room acknowledged that the European Commission pushed for the revision of construction materials regulation.

The room identified one of the difficulties related to replicating insights and outputs from European projects, more specifically from a Horizon Europe project. As cities are diverse and integrate differently circular economy principles, there might be mismatches between legislations and stakeholders. Therefore, more efforts are requested to both involve cities in the transition and to boost the circular economy in cities. In addition, it was noted that certain sectors, already identified by the EU Commission as a challenge for the transition, should require more input. In the case of textiles, we do need more research and innovation activities to grant textiles a second life. Local authorities are ready to be part of the process, since some of them are already collecting textiles, but an increasing support from research institutions would facilitate their second life.

Session 2: CREATING AN ECOSYSTEM INVOLVING ALL STAKEHOLDERS TO IMPLEMENT CIRCULAR ECONOMY

The discussions were organised as a round table.

The moderator Jordana Harriss explained the genesis of the project and reminded the room its impact for the local and regional authorities looking for support from research entities in their circular transition. She apologized on behalf of Ludek Benes the deputy mayor of the municipality Dymokur in the Czech Republic that should have participated in the meeting, had the strikes in France not affected the air transport. She then passed the message he wanted the room to listen to. Even though his town only counts 1000 inhabitants, research and innovation do act as leverages for the territorial development, especially on circularity-related topics. Therefore, rural areas have to be included in the circular transition: as key players, they have a role to endorse to facilitate the green transition. Besides, these territories should be more connected to research and innovation institutions: rural areas are laboratories for these institutions, while they do benefit from the outputs. COLOR CIRCLE has been demonstrating for 4 years the importance of connecting research and local territories. The discussions that followed adopted a broader perspective, going further research and focusing on creating an ecosystem where local authorities, SMEs, universities could cooperate for the circular transition to happen.

Speakers highlighted the importance of initial and life-long education on circular economy. **Iryna Veryzhenko**, a researcher at Le Cnam in France, underlined that training institutions should focus on developing dedicated courses for the citizens to get the skills requested. However, she also made clear that the teachers themselves need to be trained and to keep-up-to date. Indeed, including circularity in courses appears to be a true challenge: it relies on multidisciplinary from economy to geography and on a continuous renewed knowledge. The circular subjects should also be more promoted by education institutions which could stress the economic advantages for graduates. Skills in the area could highly improve students' employability as the "circular market" will stand for 1.8 trillion of euros in EU by 2030. In addition, new education schemes could be developed for the citizens and workers under life-long education, such as micro-certifications. **Esteban Romero-Frías**, director for participation and social innovation and of the research laboratory for digital culture and society at the University of Granada in Spain, reminded that both research and teaching should be more connected to the territory of the research and education institution: it should address actual

local needs and rely on a service-learning approach. Research agenda is expected to be aligned with global and political agendas. These actors have to be connected in a systematic way, which implies the creation of dedicated instruments. The latter would enable dialogues between research institutions and public authorities. Moreover, research and teaching are due to have an impact on the territory and be meaningful for its citizens. In this perspective, the University of Granada with the County Council of Granada implemented the above-mentioned programme Puentes, which connects research and rural areas via students.

The discussions then focused on the challenges that lie ahead before the ecosystem turns to circularity. First, **Jerome Friedrichs**, policy officer, the European Association of Development Agencies, stressed that public authorities and citizens should be convinced of turning to circularity. This is about sharing a positive view of circularity and creating an involvement of all, which relies partly on education, as seen above. In addition, he underlined that local and regional authorities face different situations and might encounter some economic difficulties when it comes to circularity. Therefore, they should be accompanied and supported in their transition. Cross-border cooperation – such as COLOR CIRCLE - appears as a useful tool to disseminate the knowledge. For the EU to become circular, it is then stressed that the policies and attention should mostly target areas and authorities which are still outside of the process.

Finally, the speakers tackled the **topic of empowerment**. Private actors, public authorities, citizens should be given the keys to adopt a circular approach. **Pieter van der Valk**, entrepreneur in the Netherlands, explained the importance for private actors, farmers in this case, to be involved in the green transition. They can disseminate good practices and knowledge to end-users, while also raising awareness of public authorities. Farmers have the specific role to play and can be game changers. He then stressed that farmers could act on their own and have an impact on their ecosystem by creating a dynamic, which in turn will get the public authorities and the citizens to be involved in the circular process. **Raluca Rijnita**, researcher at IRCEM - Institute for Research in Circular Economy and Environment “Ernest Lupan” in Romania showed the role awareness-activities play for the young generation. She herself discovered the circular economy *via* a hackathon and then decided to act. With her colleagues, she is now looking for the tools which may empower young entrepreneurs, small companies and more broadly the young generation to become circular. They do consider the importance of business in local areas regarding the circular transition. By helping them, the whole ecosystem may change.

Closing speech

Michel Terré, President of HESAM Université, thanked all the participants for joining the event and the speakers for their insights into circular economy.