

Citizens' Participation in Climate Action and the Circular Economy: Sisters in Urban Sustainability

By Dr. Eleni Feleki, ad hoc expert of COPE URBACT APN and lead expert of Let's Go Circular! Paving the way for circular cities URBACT APN

In the face of escalating environmental challenges, cities worldwide are increasingly turning to citizens for solutions. Citizens' participation in climate action and the circular economy is emerging as a crucial element in shaping urban sustainability. While these two concepts may appear distinct—climate action primarily focusing on reducing carbon emissions and mitigating climate change, and the circular economy centered on waste reduction and resource optimization—they are inextricably linked. When combined, they form a powerful force for fostering urban resilience, promoting environmental stewardship, and creating sustainable cities for future generations.



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The Role of Citizens in Climate Action

Climate action is the collective effort to combat the causes and consequences of climate change, which is undoubtedly one of the most pressing global challenges. While governments and businesses play a critical role in establishing policies and

infrastructures, citizens are essential to driving change on the ground. The actions of individuals—ranging from reducing energy consumption and adopting low-carbon transport to supporting climate-friendly policies—are foundational to the success of any climate strategy.

In urban areas, citizens can contribute in several ways:

1. **Engagement in Local Climate Initiatives:** Many cities have developed local climate action plans, focusing on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate risks. Citizens can actively participate in these initiatives by attending community consultations, joining environmental organizations, or advocating for sustainable policies.
2. **Behavioral Shifts:** Simple actions such as reducing waste, using public transportation, supporting renewable energy, and purchasing sustainable goods can collectively lead to a significant impact. Citizens' everyday choices influence demand for green products and services, shaping market trends and encouraging businesses to adopt sustainable practices.
3. **Climate Education and Awareness:** As awareness of climate change increases, so does the demand for informed citizen engagement. By participating in climate education programs, citizens can better understand climate science and the urgency of taking action, furthering their involvement in advocacy and policymaking.



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The Circular Economy and Citizen Participation

The circular economy represents a transformative shift from the traditional "take-make-dispose" linear model to a system where resources are reused, recycled, and

regenerated to extend their lifecycle. This approach minimizes waste and maximizes the utility of resources, promoting sustainability at the core of economic and industrial practices.

Citizens are at the heart of the circular economy, with their everyday decisions playing a pivotal role in shaping the demand for sustainable products and services. Several ways citizens can participate in the circular economy include:

1. **Adopting Circular Practices:** Citizens can contribute to the circular economy by adopting practices such as recycling, upcycling, reusing, repairing, repurposing items and sharing services. By reducing consumption, reusing products, and opting for second-hand goods, individuals help to reduce demand for new resources and minimize waste.
2. **Supporting Sustainable Businesses:** Citizens can drive the circular economy by supporting businesses that operate sustainably. This includes purchasing products that are designed for longevity, repairability, and recyclability, as well as patronizing companies that offer repair services, rental models, and product take-back schemes.
3. **Community-based Circular Initiatives:** Citizens can foster circularity through initiatives such as community tool-sharing programs, clothing swaps, and food sharing. These grassroots movements encourage resource sharing and reduce overall consumption, promoting a more sustainable and equitable economy.
4. **Advocating for Policy Changes:** Just as with climate action, citizens can advocate for policies that promote circular economy principles. By lobbying for extended producer responsibility (EPR), improved waste management systems, and incentives for circular business models, citizens can help accelerate the transition to a circular economy at the urban and national levels.

A Symbiotic Relationship: Climate Action, Circular Economy and citizen participation

Understanding Citizen Participation in the Circular Economy

Citizen participation encompasses the ways in which individuals and communities engage in decision-making processes, adopt sustainable practices, and contribute

to shaping the socio-economic landscape. In the context of the circular economy, this participation may include:

1. **Conscious Consumption:** Making informed choices to buy durable, repairable, or sustainably sourced products.
2. **Recycling and Waste Management:** Actively segregating waste and contributing to recycling programs.
3. **Community Initiatives:** Collaborating on local repair cafes, sharing platforms, and urban composting projects.
4. **Advocacy and Policy Influence:** Supporting policies that promote circular practices and holding businesses accountable.

The symbiotic relationship between climate action and circular economy

While climate action and the circular economy have their own distinct goals, they complement each other in numerous ways. Addressing climate change requires a drastic reduction in resource consumption, which can be achieved through the circular economy's emphasis on reusing and recycling materials. Citizens hold the key to addressing both challenges simultaneously, leveraging their roles in the following ways:

1. Promoting Localized Resource Loops

Citizens can champion initiatives that close resource loops at the community level. For example, urban agriculture projects using compost derived from local food waste not only reduce emissions but also create self-sustaining food systems.

2. Participating in Renewable Energy Projects

Circular economy principles align with renewable energy goals. Citizens who support local solar cooperatives or invest in community wind farms actively contribute to decarbonizing energy systems while promoting circular investments in sustainable technologies.

3. Shaping Low-Carbon Consumption Patterns

Choosing refurbished or second-hand goods, sharing mobility solutions, and participating in product-as-a-service models help reduce the carbon footprint associated with production and disposal.

4. Co-Designing Public Spaces for Sustainability

One of the most impactful areas for citizen involvement lies in the co-design of public spaces. By collaborating with local governments, citizens can help create multifunctional urban areas that prioritize green infrastructure, resource-efficient construction, and spaces for recycling and sharing economies. Examples include designing parks that incorporate composting hubs or establishing repair stations within community centers

An example of co-design public space for Sustainability: Interactive workshop with COPE APN partners

An example of creative and participatory vision for integrating circular economy principles in an action that initially is meant to transform a street with soft mobility measures, was held in the frame of an interactive workshop with the COPE URBACT APN partners, in November 29th 2024.

The action titled: “And what if this street was pedonal” is among the ones being designed by the City of Pombal, one of the COPE APN partners. The main aim of the action is to fight illegal parking and decrease the number of cars that cross the city’s historic centre.

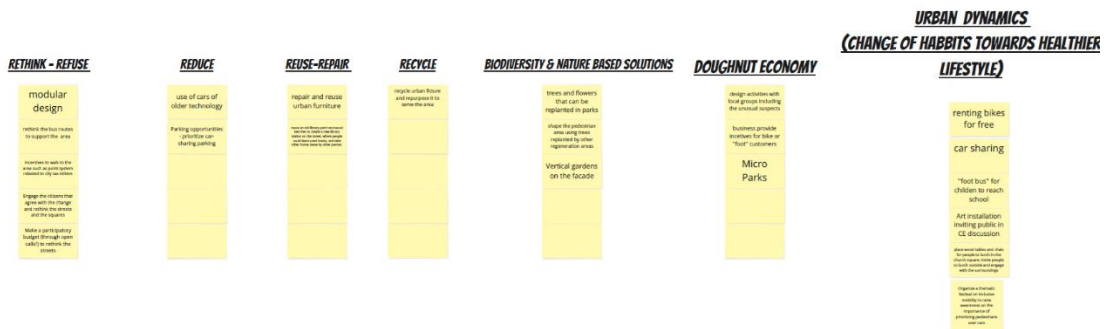
NOVEMBER 29TH 2024

CIRCULAR ECONOMY - LET’S CO-DESIGN AN INTEGRATED ACTION

EXAMPLE OF ACTION: WHAT IF THIS STREET WAS PEDONAL?

AIM: FIGHT ILLEGAL PARKING AND DECREASE THE NUMBER OF CARS THAT CROSS THE HISTORIC CENTRE

WHERE DOES CE FIT? AKA WHAT CAN WE TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION WHEN DESIGNING THE ACTION TO MAXIMISE CE IMPACT?





(Photo: Øystein Leonardsen)

The interaction was designed using Miro digital participation platform. The outcome, presented above, outlines key ideas that include activities reflecting different R-strategies, ie rethink and refuse, reduce, reuse and share, recycle, as well as cross-cutting topics like biodiversity enhancement & nature based solutions, doughnut economy and change of habits towards healthier lifestyles. These categories had been identified previously by the COPE URBACT APN partners, as fields of interest to further exploit synergies between climate action and circular economy at local level.

Key ideas that were discussed include:

1. Public Space Co-Design: Citizens and local groups can transform urban areas by:
 - Repurposing materials (e.g., old library points into street libraries).
 - Enhancing biodiversity (e.g., planting trees and flowers to be later replanted in parks).
 - Incorporating features like vertical gardens and micro-parks.

2. **Sustainable Mobility:** Suggestions include organizing "foot buses" for children, promoting bike rentals, car-sharing incentives, and prioritizing pedestrian zones.
3. **Participatory Budgeting:** Citizens are encouraged to participate in open calls to rethink streets and squares, aligning public spaces with circular and inclusive goals.
4. **Cultural Engagement:** Art installations and thematic festivals invite public involvement and raise awareness of circular economy priorities.
5. **Cross-Sector Solutions:** Addressing illegal parking, redesigning bus routes, and incentivizing walking as part of broader urban dynamics fostering healthier lifestyles.

Success Stories of Citizen Participation in Circular Economy, through the “Let’s Go Circular! Paving the way for circular cities” URBACT APN

1. The Zero Waste Movement

Guimaraes, Portugal, has pioneered zero-waste programs by engaging citizens in waste reduction practices. Educational campaigns and community events have been central to their success.

2. Second-hand or pre-loved and repair cafes

Originating in the Netherlands, repair cafes have a practice in Munich, Germany. These volunteer-run spaces allow citizens to fix items, learn repair skills, and reduce waste. This opportunity is provided to citizens regularly, for example in Hall 2, the second-hand goods department store of the city of Munich that offers well-preserved second-hand goods and exclusive individual pieces at reasonable prices in its approximately 1000 square meter large.

3. Sharing Platforms

Digital Platforms like Platform lietovelreiz.lv enable citizens to share goods in Latvia and in Riga particularly, reducing waste and fostering community connections.

4. Urban Composting Initiatives

Lisbon, Portugal, has implemented food waste collection and composting programs that rely on citizen participation. These initiatives have diverted significant organic waste from landfills.

5. Citizen Science for Circular Solutions

Projects like the newly designed Resource Hub in Malmo, Sweden and the Circular Economy Arena in Oulu, Finland, engage citizens and business owners in exchanging and innovating, but most importantly in awareness raising on circular economy.

The road ahead

As the world grapples with environmental degradation and resource depletion, the circular economy offers a beacon of hope. However, its success hinges on the collective effort of governments, businesses, and citizens. Empowering individuals to participate actively in circular practices can unlock immense potential for sustainability, resilience, and social cohesion.

By addressing barriers and fostering inclusive, accessible, and engaging opportunities, the power of citizen participation in the circular economy can be fully realized. As communities come together to rethink and reshape their relationship with resources, they contribute to a future where prosperity aligns with the planet's well-being.

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