LINK Parliamentary Briefing:

5 Things to Know About: a Circular Economy

May 2021

Introduction

Nature is in crisis. Our destructive linear economy is driving dramatic declines in nature and polluting the environment, affecting the livelihoods of people around the globe. The Dasgupta review – a landmark review of the economics of biodiversity – states that 'The solution starts with understanding and accepting a simple truth: our economies are embedded within nature'.[1] The scale and urgency of what is required to deliver real improvements for people and nature mean we need to see bold ambition from Scotland's decision makers. Critically, we need to see Scotland adopt a circular economy in order to reduce nature loss and set Scotland on track to meeting our ambitious net-zero targets. Moving to a circular economy has the potential to make Scotland more resilient to future global crises by reducing our reliance on global supply chains and creating more local sustainable jobs. **This briefing sets out five key things you need to know about a circular economy and why it is essential to tackling the nature and climate emergencies.**

1) Scotland uses more than our fair share of resources

We need a more circular economy to address the climate and nature emergencies, and the inequities and unsustainable levels of natural resource consumption.

- **If everyone on the planet lived like the population of UK we would need about 3 Earths to sustain ourselves** according to ecological footprint data.[2]
- Over **80% of Scotland's carbon footprint comes from the goods we use and consume**, such as food, furniture, computers and vehicles.
- **90% of global biodiversity loss** is caused by resource extraction and the activities that take place to process them.

2) Why is our impact so large?

Although we do recycle some of our waste, we basically have a linear economy, where we extract raw materials, make products, use products and then discard them. Currently in this linear model, new raw materials are extracted for each product and far too much is wasted as items are quickly thrown away. We disturb and pollute marine, terrestrial and freshwater habitats around the world and produce carbon and other emissions at each stage of the lifecycle of products. From the mining of minerals and clearing of land for plantations, to the transportation of materials, and managing waste; the impact of each product adds up.

3) To reduce our impact on nature and climate, we need a more circular economy

[1] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/957629/Dasgupta_Review_-_Headline_Messages.pdf, p. 2

[2] https://data.footprintnetwork.org/?_ga=2.189791149.761092198.1580906071-1075653858.1573138714#/

We need to redesign our linear economic model to one that is more circular, which uses natural resources more wisely. If we do this, we will reduce our carbon emissions and our impact on biodiversity. **A more circular economy is based on three principles:**

- **Designing out waste and pollution.** The way that products are designed and the materials that are used is vitally important – products must be designed without the use of harmful chemicals and in such a way that their life-cycle environmental impact is minimised; so that they can be used and re-used for as long as possible; and so that, if there is any 'waste', it can be recycled and become a resource – such as recycled scrap steel to replace iron ore or compost to replenish our soil.
- **Keeping products and materials in use.** We need the systems and infrastructure so that products, such as buildings, cars, furniture, clothes or electronic goods, are easy to repair and reuse, and materials are recycled and kept in use. Products that are typically idle much of the time, such as private cars or tools, are better shared, through clubs or libraries; and leasing models can work better than private ownership.
- **Regenerating natural systems.** Instead of being extractive and polluting, our economy must be regenerative, and pay particular attention to the condition of our soil. Agriculture and other land uses must be regenerative, returning carbon and other nutrients to the soil, whilst ensuring anything spread to land is free of harmful chemicals. Transformation in fisheries management and aquaculture is also urgently needed to help recover seabed and pelagic ecosystem health.

4) The public wants a more circular economy

The idea of wasting less, increased re-use and bans on environmentally harmful single-use items are popular with the public. Our survey in May 2020 showed that over 75% of the public supported many aspects of a more circular economy, including that the Government should introduce a target and a plan on how to reduce the amount of raw materials used (78% agreed).[3] Increased awareness over marine litter and single use plastic has led to a demand for change. There have been high levels of support for circular economy measures that the Scottish Government has consulted on to-date and often respondents have asked for more ambition.[4]

5) Scotland needs a Circular Economy Bill

Activity to move towards a circular economy in Scotland includes the establishment of the Scottish Institute for Remanufacturing hosted at the University of Strathclyde and an investment programme supporting circular enterprises. However, the approach has tended to be piecemeal and lacked the strategic oversight needed if it is to address our nature and climate crises. Scotland's Material Flow Accounts should soon be published for the first time. These accounts show the flow of resources in and out of our economy, highlighting what we extract, import, use and export and will be helpful in informing policy.

Scottish Environment LINK and supporting organisations across Scotland are calling for the **introduction of a Circular Economy Bill, with headline targets on reducing our overall consumption of raw materials (as in the Netherlands and called for by the European Parliament) and our carbon footprint; and a duty to produce 'Resource Reduction Plans' which map out how to reduce our**

[3] https://www.scotlink.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/CE-survey-report-May-2020.pdf
[4] https://www.gov.scot/publications/public-consultations-about-climate-change-circular-economy-sppn7-2019/

footprints, obligations on different sectors and how to address problematic materials. More information on LINK's recommendations for legislation can be found here.

This response is supported by the following LINK member organisations:
Association for the Protection of Rural Scotland
Fidra
Friends of the Earth Scotland
Marine Conservation Society
Scottish Wildlife Trust

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

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