

Project: Global Labs

April 2024

Global Labs

International Trade in the Circular Economy Paradigm

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Executive Summary

The circular economy model is a vision of an economic system designed to minimise waste and make the most of resources. It operates on the principles of designing out waste, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. Circular economy is highly aligned with but goes beyond the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 12 (UN SDG 12, "Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns"). Organisations such as the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) are strong advocates of the circular economy transition and have ramped up their circularity efforts ([UNEP, 2024](#)).

In this Policy Brief, seven authors co-created four visions for a future which puts circular economy as the basis for sustainable system change in the international trade paradigm. Their visions correspond to four levels of their respective application: Regional, plurilateral, multilateral, and utilisation of circular economy by companies.

The basis of their chapters was a workshop that was implemented in December 2023 on the same topic as this Policy Brief. The event and its subsequent publication of results is part of foraus' Global Labs series, which aims to connect students from Geneva and beyond with the International Geneva ecosystem, to foster innovative policy ideas. Through an exchange with professionals and by co-writing a policy brief, each Global Lab strives to strengthen students' set of hard skills (e.g. policy writing), soft skills (e.g. public speaking), and personal networks, while providing key multilateral fora with youth's inputs. ●

1. Introduction

Irène Ngah

Maximilian Rau

The contemporary economic paradigm, epitomised by the “take-make-dispose” approach, has wrought significant environmental degradation and human health concerns. With natural resource consumption tripling since 1970, issues such as biodiversity loss and water stress have become increasingly pervasive. Projections indicate an alarming rise in total resource consumption, with estimates suggesting a surge to 180 billion metric tons annually by 2050, far exceeding sustainable levels. The urgency to address these challenges is underscored by the United Nations Environment Programme’s (UNEP) forecasts, advocating for stringent measures including a carbon price of USD 573 per metric ton by 2050 alongside substantial technological innovation ([IRP, 2017](#)).

In response to the imperative for change, the circular economy (CE) paradigm has emerged as a promising alternative. Anchored in principles aimed at minimising waste through thoughtful design and resource optimization, CE offers a holistic framework for sustainable economic activity. Central to its ethos are the principles of designing out waste, prolonging product lifespan, and regenerating natural systems. However, despite considerable endeavours, global adoption of circular practices remains limited, with less than 8% of the economy operating within circular parameters and a worrying downward trend ([Circle Economy Foundation, 2024](#)).

The quest for a circular economy necessitates concerted efforts across multiple areas, including the regional, national, and multilateral policy level, as well as the introduction of CE standards by companies. Policy interventions spanning taxation, producer responsibility schemes, and green procurement initiatives have been brought forward to improve circularity through extending product lifespans and minimising waste.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the transition to a circular economy has the potential to disrupt global trade dynamics with multifaceted impacts, encompassing shifts in material flows, trade patterns, and the emergence of new economic opportunities. As the global community grapples with the challenge to embrace circularity, the role of regional and multilateral trade agreements, as well as regulatory framework changes on the national and company level should be fostered to prepare the world for a just transition towards a circular economy.

Global lab project: context and methodology

For this reason, foraus organised the participatory process “Global Lab: International trade in the circular economy paradigm” between December 2023 and April 2024 bringing together more than 25 young thinkers and professionals around the important topic of circular economy with the aim of generating innovative policy pathways. At the heart of this process was a one-day workshop organised in Geneva in December in the form of an interactive exchange between a cohort of students and professionals from the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), the Forum on Trade, Environment and the SDGs (TESS), and the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). During the workshops foraus’ policy crowdsourcing methodology, Policy Kitchen was used. The bold question asked to participants was: How can international trade policy be effectively designed to support and accelerate the transition to a circular economy, while addressing the challenges of global trade dynamics and ensuring a Just Transition? This Project Brief is the fruit of these discussions and presents four visions written by seven students and researchers from the University of Geneva and the Graduate Institute to introduce more sustainable and circular trade flows and practices by proposing better, more harmonised, yet inclusive (inter)national trade policies. The focus is put on four main action areas: regional agreements, national decisions, multilateral frameworks as well as company decisions using participatory foresight and backcasting methodologies.

Initially, **Joachim Monkelbaan** provides a necessary thematic overview to introduce the topic of circular economy and how the underlying movement can be characterised. In the following chapter, **Eve-Eugénia Cotton** and **Aishwarya Narayanan** propose regional trade agreements to support countries to effectively harmonise their trade policies to align with circular economy objectives, while allowing for regionalisation and ensuring a just and inclusive transition. Next, **Andreas Oeschger** envisions a High Ambition Coalition using nationally determined contributions to achieve CE targets to answer the question what countries can do to independently align circular economy principles in their trading relations. Afterwards, **Gereon Mewes** and **Renê Dióz Rodrigues** introduce the idea of Public Procurement Multilateral Agreements to craft a vision how circular economy objectives can be furthered in and through existing multilateral fora. Finally, **Jia-Ying Guan** tackles the question of what companies can do to better align their business operations and global value chains with circular economy principles and objectives by revolutionising fashion sustainability through a circular economy where 50% second-hand coverage is achieved.

After identifying the main challenges in their respective areas, the authors develop visions of hypothetical realities in 2040 in which these challenges were addressed and propose policy plans with measures to be taken in 2024, 2026, 2030, and 2035 to reach the 2040 visions. The main policy recommendations that should be implemented by the global state community with the support of the private sector, academia and civil society organisations, and under the guidance of the WTO and other relevant international organisations, are detailed in the conclusion in the last chapter. ●

2. Thematic Overview

Joachim Monkelbaan

The “take-make-dispose” approach to economic growth has negative impacts on the environment and human health. Natural resource use has tripled since 1970, causing issues such as biodiversity loss and water stress. The total consumption of natural resources is expected to rise from 100 billion to 180 billion metric tons per year by 2050. For reference: The current sustainable level of resource use is about 50 billion metrics per year. UNEP’s International Resource Panel predicts a best-case scenario with a carbon price of USD 573 per metric ton by 2050, resource taxes, and rapid technological innovation of 132 billion metric tons ([IRP, 2017](#)).

The circular economy (CE) model builds on various schools of thought and brings together existing practices under a single framework. CE aims to reduce or eliminate waste through design and seeing remaining waste as a resource. It is characterised by three key principles: design-out waste, keep products/materials in use, and regenerate natural systems. A holistic approach to CE can be broken down into several levels and illustrated with different “R” concepts (Figure 1). This multi-R approach helps outline the CE structure. Despite major efforts, less than 9% of the global economy is circular, and this percentage is declining. Common measures in CE policies include different taxation levels for used, reused, or recycled products, reduced value-added tax for repair services, extended producer responsibility schemes, standards and labelling schemes, green public procurement, and extended legal warranties. The focus is often on extending the lifespan of products. Cross-stakeholder support for CE has led to a diverse policy landscape, with intersections in environmental health, waste trade, chemicals regulation, energy policy, and national climate plans.

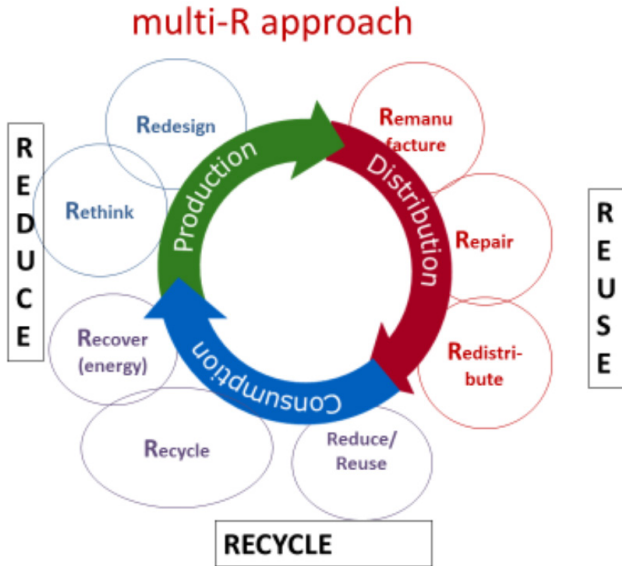


Figure 1. The multi-R approach ([ACR+, 2014](#)).

The overarching goal is to transition to a more sustainable economy by reducing reliance on primary raw materials and promoting reuse and recycling. A holistic approach involving stakeholders from various sectors is deemed necessary for effective CE plans. The role of policy is emphasised in addressing market failures, policy misalignments, and biases hindering the competitiveness of CE business models. This includes reflecting full environmental costs in market prices, improving collaboration across value chains, ensuring regulatory frameworks are fit for purpose, enhancing education on consumption consequences, and promoting circular products through eco-design standards and targeted research and development funding.

The impacts of transitioning to an inclusive circular economy go beyond waste management and recycling, encompassing broader economic incentives and opportunities.

CE approaches have implications for consumption drivers, job creation, low-carbon prosperity, energy savings, climate change mitigation, and health. A holistic approach across various policy areas is deemed necessary to realise these benefits.

The relation between trade and circular economy

The current focus of policy action on achieving material circularity is at the domestic level and suggests that such policies may not be sufficient for a global transition to a circular economy (CE). There are various impacts on trade along the product value chain, including reduced trade in primary raw materials, increased trade in secondary raw materials, materials and waste for recycling, new opportunities for services trade, a shift in trade towards circular economy standards, increased trade in second-hand goods, and potential opportunities for international trade through circular procurement by governments.

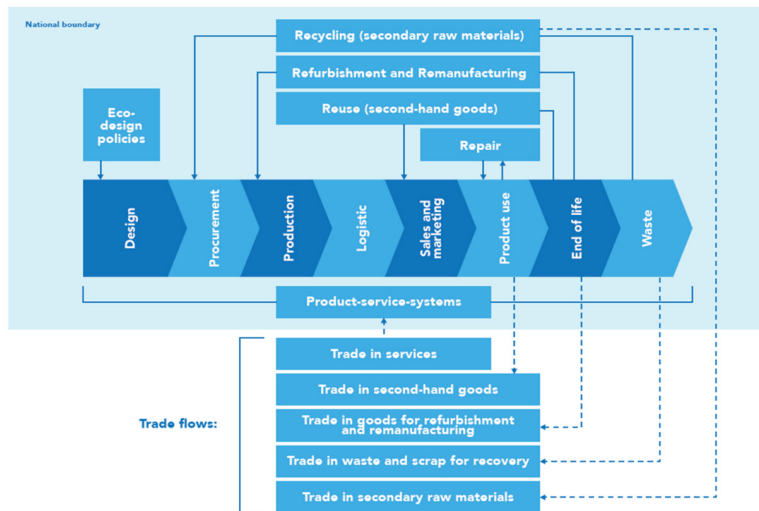


Figure 2. Value chain with CE activities and trade flows. Notes: The chevron arrows in the middle represent steps in the linear („take-make-discard“) economy. Solid lines then represent domestic flows and dotted lines represent international trade flows in support of CE (Sajous, 2019).

Circular models have the potential to optimise resources domestically and reshape traditional trade patterns. Growth may occur in services rather than goods, such as access-over-ownership models in a sharing economy. Increased circularity is expected to change production patterns, improve asset utilisation rates, and create value chains based on recycling and remanufacturing centres, leading to environmental benefits, lower carbon emissions, and the creation of jobs that cannot be outsourced. The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicts that transitioning to a circular economy could create around 6 million new jobs ([ILO, 2018](#)).

Domestic trade policies can encourage a transition to more circular approaches. Measures that governments can implement include energy efficiency requirements for imported second-hand vehicles, minimum recyclable content requirements for plastic waste, health and safety standards for recycled or recyclable products, and standards for remanufactured products. The classification of recyclable plastics is important to avoid importing hazardous waste. National measures may also focus on liberalising trade in environmental goods and services (EGS) related to the circular economy, such as reducing or removing import duties on primary goods used in recycling plants.

The negotiations on an Environmental Goods Agreement (EGA) within the World Trade Organization (WTO) aimed to remove trade barriers on EGS. The negotiations included categories relevant to the circular economy, such as environmentally preferable products, resource efficiency, and solid and hazardous waste management.

Another group of international measures involves technical classifications and definitions of secondary raw materials, waste, and hazardous waste to support the circular economy. Developing benchmarks and joint standards is critical to differentiate easy-to-recycle waste from challenging or unfit-for-recycling waste. The overall goal is to ensure that trade supports, rather than hampers, the circular economy. The free flow of secondary materials and used goods for up-cycling or repair in lower-cost countries is important in this respect.

There is a need for low tariffs and non-tariff measures on cross-border trade for the circular economy to function effectively. Additionally, products should meet material stewardship standards, and countries should have the ability to ban imports of products that do not adhere to set standards.

Impacts of the CE on trade are nuanced. As economies increasingly rely on reuse, remanufacturing, and recycling, lower volumes of raw materials may be needed, but the impact on the value of trade is less straightforward. There could be an increase in the value of traded secondary materials, and the emergence of remanufacturing and reprocessing hubs in certain regions is possible. However, there are many uncertainties, such as the global trade in used lithium-ion batteries, and potential scenarios that may affect trade dynamics.

Lastly, there are concerns and disputes arising from promoting CE at the national level, including trade barriers and disputes at the World Trade Organization (WTO). China's import policies affecting the global waste recycling supply chain and the launch of the "Informal Dialogue on Plastics Pollution" at the WTO to address environmental, health, and economic costs of plastics pollution highlight the WTO's role in seeking coherence with efforts in other international and regional organisations.

Taking into account developing countries' interests for a just and equitable circular economy

There is a need for a feasible and sustainable transition to a circular economy that supports current populations while addressing environmental challenges. The interconnectedness of environmental, economic, and social sustainability needs to be better taken into account, emphasising the importance of a just transition. Social considerations, such as job losses, workers' health and safety, and reskilling, must not be overlooked in the global push toward circular practices. The impact of circular economy pathways on developing countries' economies needs to be better understood, including potential effects on exports, emerging sectors, and the informal waste sector.

Conclusions: Ways forward

This chapter has emphasised the crucial connection between the Circular Economy (CE) and international trade, emphasising the need for supportive policy and regulatory frameworks. It asserts that the current trade regime is not adequately equipped for a circular economy and proposes ways for World Trade Organization (WTO) members to enhance the positive impact of trade on circular practices. These include improving understanding, building trust, opening trade in key circular economy areas, and supporting developing countries.

A rights-based approach is deemed essential for successful negotiations and implementation of CE policies, emphasising empowerment, participation, and transparency. The Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD) is a platform in the WTO to advance the circular economy agenda. The possibility of a plurilateral agreement, akin to the WTO's information technology agreement, could be one way forward.

Despite uncertainties, we advocate for proactive measures and policy packages to mitigate negative consequences and leverage opportunities in the transition to a circular economy. We underscore the critical role of international trade agreements, the WTO, and the TESSD in addressing technical challenges and ensuring an inclusive, just, and environmentally sound shift to a circular economy. ●

3. Four visions for 2040

3.1. Vision 1: Regional trade agreements to drive changes in consumer habits

Eve-Eugénia Cotton

Aishwarya Narayanan

Background

As drivers of economic demand, people's consumption habits are a major component of the circular economy. While circularity is an important component for all consumer goods, there are certain sectors and industries where the need for circularity is most pressing. Two key areas pertain to the toxicity of e-waste and its prominence as the fastest-growing waste stream, and plastic waste which is established as a major problem due to the low recycling rate and often inefficient or nonexistent garbage collection systems in many developing countries ([Parker, 2024](#)).

While consumer habits are a key driver of market demand and can act as a facilitator for supply side adjustments, there is a need for concerted co-ordination at the governmental and international levels to bring about sustainable and systematic change. Given the complexity of arriving at consensus on the international level, we consider the regional dimension as a space for coordination and cooperation with lesser barriers. While regional cooperation on circularity must encompass general principles applicable to all sectors of the economy, our focus is limited to the priority areas of electronic goods and plastics.

Regional efforts to promote a circular economy over the course of this decade may draw inspiration from the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade and Sustainability (ACCTS) negotiations, which envisage the liberalisation of environmental goods and services and development of eco-labelling programmes. The measures are designed to target demand side dynamics through inducing changes in consumer habits and behaviours, supply side dynamics by incentivising circular production, and targeted government intervention to better streamline the market. The vision and timelines are set out below.

Vision for 2040

In the year 2040, the trade of viable plastics and electronic goods is flourishing without any obstacles from tariffs. This growth is further catalysed by the liberalisation of repair and related services. The regional trade agreement has expanded its membership and has been successfully replicated in other areas. Moreover, a comprehensive multilateral agreement centred on circularity is currently in the final stages of development. The circularity agreement is built upon the sturdy foundation of the Agreement on Climate Change, Trade, and Sustainability (ACCTS). Its purpose is to serve as a vital instrument for advancing sustainable development objectives across multiple industries. The positive strides taken towards the finalisation of this agreement demonstrate the global community's unwavering dedication to addressing sustainable development challenges. A unified production and labelling system underpins the entire process, playing a pivotal role in shaping consumer habits and driving the adoption of circular practices in these sectors.

Policy Plan

Objectives 2024

1. Information campaign

In order to initiate a shift in consumer behaviour towards supporting the circular economy and improving the management of e-waste and plastics, it is crucial to empower consumers through the dissemination of comprehensive information ([Shi et al., 2023](#)). This entails providing clear and easily accessible details about the products available in the market and educating consumers about the detrimental impact of overconsumption. Departments such as SECO and DETEC will play a key role in ensuring that consumers have access to accurate information about the products they purchase and raising awareness about the environmental consequences of their consumption choices. By doing so, consumers can make informed decisions that contribute to sustainable and responsible consumption practices in line with the circular economy.

Research plays a crucial role in the consumer decision-making process by providing comprehensive data on the environmental impact of products. This data empowers consumers to make informed decisions, leading to more sustainable choices. Furthermore, research facilitates the development of materials that are not only environmentally friendly but also readily recyclable, contributing to a more sustainable product lifecycle. By emphasising the importance of information accessibility and the consequences of consumer choices, the DEFR implements a strategy aiming to instil a heightened awareness among consumers, ultimately steering them towards sustainable practices and behaviours.

2. Labelling

The implementation of a well-defined and uniform labelling system can facilitate the decision-making process for consumers, by emphasising products that adhere to the standards of a circular economy ([Jaiswal et al., 2015](#)). To accomplish this objective, the SECO and the FDFA have joined forces to integrate such labelling into the global ISO standardisation process. By doing so, the aforementioned entities aim to create an international consensus around the implementation of a labelling system. This collaborative effort aims to provide consumers as well as private sector and countries with clear and concise information, enabling them to make informed decisions when interacting with products.

Through information dissemination, research and labelling, consumers will be better informed and encouraged to make conscious choices in favour of sustainability, thus promoting a circular economy. This is likely to have a direct impact on the supply side of the market, by creating a demand for more sustainable products.

Objectives 2026

1. Harmonisation

On the supply side, the creation of harmonised standards across the region is crucial for facilitating the transition towards a circular economy, with inputs from both governments and industry players. Harmonisation helps to clearly identify the types of goods that are regulated, specify product characteristics that must be satisfied for goods to be placed on the regional market, and create a level playing field by disincentivizing practices that may vest certain countries or companies with an unfair competitive advantage ([Kumar; Rawat, 2018](#)). For plastics, the harmonisation exercise would require the identification and phase out of the most harmful types of plastics, followed by strict regulation of less harmful plastics by harmonising raw materials and components, product features such as thickness, composition and durability, and their end-of-life usability. For electronics, the harmonisation exercise would be targeted at the product level, as a means to drive down excess demand by ensuring interoperability of products across brands and jurisdictions.

2. Facilitating repair

Repair and reuse of electronic products is key to ensuring durability and longevity. Despite this, the availability of cost- and time-efficient repair services is very limited in advanced economies ([Bridgens et al.; 2017](#)). As a means of encouraging the provision and use of repair services, economic facilitation can be provided by governments at the regional level, by setting up a common fund that covers costs such as transportation and logistics, as well as labour charges. Contributions to the fund may be drawn from both manufacturers and consumers, as a fraction of the sale price, along with inputs from the governments.

3. Joint investment

The development of harmonised standards must be accompanied by joint research and investment at the regional level to develop

safer technologies and facilitate information-sharing amongst member countries. This could take the form of research collaboration at the regional level, targeted investment in better technologies and capacity building support for countries and industries that most need it.

Objectives 2030

1. Elimination of tariffs

The success of regional efforts at promoting circularity will hinge on the elimination of tariff barriers by participating member states. For electronic goods, we envisage the simultaneous and reciprocal removal of tariffs on products across various stages of the value chain, including parts and components, final products, extras and replacements, e-waste and end-of-life products. A similar phasing out of tariffs would be applicable to plastics as well, covering the production, consumption and waste management stages.

2. Liberalisation of services

Extending the lifetime and usability of products needs fast, easy and reliable access to repair services. In order to ensure economies of scale in the repairs sector, the services sector will need to be liberalised by participating member states, both in terms of their cross-border provision and the cross-border movement of service providers. This will ensure that consumers in typically high income countries have access to the services of skilled workers and technologies from typically low-to-middle income countries.

Policy recommendations

- Development of an information and labelling campaign to generate consumer awareness around circularity.
- Harmonisation of standards in the plastics and electronic goods sectors, coupled with joint research and investment.
- Elimination of tariff barriers and liberalisation of repair services.

3.2. Vision 2: A High Ambition Coalition using Nationally Determined Contributions to achieve Circular Economy Targets

Andreas Oeschger

Relying on past experience in environmental policymaking to counter collective action problems.

While CE might be a relatively new issue/concept in environmental policymaking, policymakers have the benefit of already being able to profit from the vast experiences of more than a century of international policymaking for other environmental issues. I suggest that this knowledge trove can in particular be utilised to tackle three of the most common collective action problems when it comes to environmental issues: 1. the “priority problem” – the fact that CE (such as other environmental issues were in the past) might not be already on the priority list for many policymakers, 2. the “one-size-fits-all problem” – the problem that not all policy actions can be replicated 1:1 for countries with differing national conditions for the same level of efficacy, and 3. the “frontrunner problem” – the issue that can arise when there are costs involved in being a frontrunner to a specific policy issue, placing them in a comparatively disadvantaged position vis-à-vis others.

The “**priority**” problem refers to the fact that many environmental issues, especially more abstract ones, have a harder time making it to the priority action list of policymakers. However, for the most pressing environmental challenges, such as the transition to a circular economy, the time to act is now. The “priority problem” hence consists of all kinds of specific obstacles which lead to a specific policy issue not to be considered a priority issue for action. In the example of climate change, despite clear scientific evidence and early wide-spread activism, it took decades for the issue to land on the priority list for many policy makers, and even nowadays it is still not on the priority list for some. As a reaction, proposals such as “climate clubs” have been put forward, which outline the benefits of starting out with a high ambition coalition of the “willing” among countries that wish to adopt more stringent climate mitigation policies.

The idea behind is that a few countries that take the initiative first, may pave the way for others to follow later. In order for this to materialise, it is vital for the coalition to build on an inclusive membership model, which not only facilitates but also incentivises others to join the coalition as quickly as possible later on.

The “one-size-fits-all” problem describes a situation where countries try to implement the same action, using the same means, to achieve a shared objective, which leads to different outcomes, because the specific domestic preconditions have not been taken account of. As policymaking efforts on climate mitigation have made evident, a one-size-for-all strategy is especially problematic for more complex environmental policy issues. Countries have differing levels of development, differing structures of their national economies, differing political cultures (to name but a few). What is meant by the “one-size-fits-all-problem” is hence that a given action plan cannot be replicated 1:1 to any kind of specific domestic precondition with the same level of efficacy. However, although the means for most effectively achieving a given target might differ, the underlying objective doesn't need to. A good solution of how this conundrum has been utilised in the past are the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), which form a key component of the Paris Agreement. NDCs are countries' self-defined national climate commitments to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. While these national climate change action plans include policies, measures and roadmaps that are specifically tailored around a country's unique domestic conditions, priorities and strategies, they all serve the same underlying objective: to contribute to achieving the global mitigation targets set out in the Paris Agreement.

The “frontrunner” problem essentially spells out the fact that there are often costs involved when being the first or most ambitious actor to push for a certain policy, compared to others. One could also speak of a comparative disadvantage. In the context of climate change mitigation, this materialised in the issue of “carbon leakage”, which occurs when one country implements more stringent climate policies thereby raising the costs of production, production may shift to another country with less stringent and costly policies.

This could potentially lead to a situation where global emissions remain unchanged or even increase. To tackle the issue of carbon leakage, countries are nowadays increasingly reacting with implementing or at least discussing carbon pricing systems coupled with carbon border adjustment mechanisms (CBAMs), which are essentially tariffs or taxes on imported goods based on their carbon content. CBAMs thereby aim to ensure that domestic industries that face a certain carbon price due to stringent climate policies are not disadvantaged by competing imports from regions with weaker climate policies.

To counter these collective action problems, this section intends to provide a strategy building on existing solutions within the environmental policy toolbox, such as the idea of coupling high-ambition climate clubs with a collective carbon pricing system, which was propagated by Nobel Prize-laureate William Nordhaus ([Nordhaus, 2015](#)).

Vision for 2040

It is 2040 and the initial members of a high-ambition coalition of “willing” frontrunner countries have met the commonly defined international CE target. They have each put forward and successfully implemented tailored national objectives and roadmaps called CE-NDCs, similar to the NDCs under the Paris Agreement. They have also established a common pricing system for non-circular goods and services. In the last 10 years, membership of the coalition has expanded significantly, notably by offering “in-club incentives” coupled with “out-club disincentives”, most notably a border tax for non-circular goods and services imported from non-Coalition members.

Policy plan

In 2024:

- Establishment of a high-ambition coalition with the aim to elaborate an ambitious and specific, yet ambiguous international CE objective, which has to be achieved by 2040. To start out, the role of the “Secretariat” of this coalition could be taken by two member countries,

which facilitate the coordination process until the next United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-7). Having a couple of “willing” actors pave the way for others to follow soon is meant as a way out of the “priority problem”.

- Simultaneously, members of the coalition start research on best practices and guidelines for the implementation of CE strategies.
- Coalition members further start negotiations to define a measurement system resp. scale to differentiate between circular and non-circular goods and services. They build on best available scientific evidence and conduct an inclusive process, i.a. by regularly updating non-Coalition members.

In 2026:

- Each coalition member has to submit specific national objectives and roadmaps as the so-called CE-NDCs, similar to the NDCs under the Paris Agreement. CE-NDCs should be tailored to the respective domestic contexts of coalition members and serve to mainstream CE objectives into the domestic level of policy making. CE-NDCs in this context should not be confused with calls for including CE objectives in the Paris NDCs but entirely new and different national action plans to achieve the specific CE objectives agreed to in 2024. This step is meant to circumvent the “one-size-fits-all problem” ([UNEP et al., 2023](#)).
- The Coalition members set up a formal Secretariat with the aim to launch a monitoring system for their CE-NDCs.
- Efforts commence within the coalition to set up a common pricing system on non-circular goods and services by 2030 as well as a collective border tax for imported non-circular goods and services from non-coalition members.

In 2030:

- After the first four years of the CE-NDCs in place, the first wave of monitoring reports takes place which leads to a subsequent revision of CE-NDCs.
- Coalition members establish a common pricing system on non-circular goods and services. The income from this pillar will be redistributed to support members in achieving their CE-NDCs. This is part of an array of “in-club incentives” such as cooperation, technical

assistance and longer transition periods for new members joining the coalition. Simultaneously coalition members implement a collective border tax for imported non-circular goods and services from non-coalition members as “out-club disincentives”. These steps are means to prevent the “frontrunner problem”.

Policy recommendations

- **The establishment of a high-ambition coalition** of “willing” like-minded frontrunner countries with the specific objective to settle on an ambitious and specific but still ambiguous international CE target, which can subsequently be reached in different ways. The coalition should pave the way for other countries to join soon.
- **The elaboration of self-determined CE-NDCs** will allow coalition members to determine their own objectives and action plans, tailored around their unique domestic preconditions, priorities and strategies.
- **A coordinated pricing system for non-circular goods and services** facilitate and harmonise the trade of goods and services between coalition members. Coalition members benefit from lower transaction costs and supportive measures.
- **In-club incentives** are implemented for making the membership in the coalition more beneficial to existing coalition members, for example through cooperation and technical assistance, as well as for new members, by offering longer transitional periods.
- **Out-club disincentives** including a collective border tax for non-circular goods and services for imports of non-coalition members make freeriding and non-membership in the coalition increasingly costly.

3.3. Vision 3: Scaling Up Circular Economy through Public Procurement Multilateral Agreements

Gereon Mewes

Renê Dióz Rodrigues

Governments have two powers that are currently not sufficiently exploited to boost the green transition: the purchasing power of what they procure and their ability to collaborate. This section explores the potential of Circular Public Procurement (CPP) as a catalyst for sustainability, while specifically considering the possible role of multilateral or regional agreements to standardise practices across borders and influence the dynamics in the private sector.

Public procurement is a powerful tool to support sustainability by utilising government purchasing power to influence market dynamics ([UNCTAD, 2020](#)). If public entities decide, for example, to only buy electrical equipment that conforms to a high energy efficiency standard, this can significantly influence the market demand and encourage suppliers to innovate towards more energy-efficient products. Thus, the concept of CPP embodies the synergy between the goals of a circular economy (CE) and the mechanism of public procurement. CPP not only supports environmental and social objectives but also offers a pathway to global sustainability by encouraging innovation.

Public procurement makes up an average of 15% of national GDP ([IISD, 2024](#)), though this figure might even be higher, which shows the potential impact of policy changes ([Hafsa et al., 2021](#)). Considering the potential of CE systems and the pivotal role of public entities in fostering sustainable practices, the implementation of internationally common obligations on CPP should be strongly considered.

While still in its early stages of practice, CPP is not a novel concept for public authorities, as it has garnered increasing attention in recent years as a potent lever for driving sustainable development in line with UN SDG 12.7 (“Promote sustainable public procurement practices”). On a municipal level, the Circular PP Project in Latvia, Denmark, and Sweden experimented with various projects to develop concrete CPP guidelines ([Circular PP, 2020](#)).

The city of Salvador, Brazil, has included CE principles in its guidelines for public procurement until 2049 ([Municipal City Government of Salvador, 2020](#)). Also, Lisbon, Portugal, created a platform to keep track of the departments' needs for goods and services, which will help identify sustainable measures in following tenders and implement the ISO 20400 standard on sustainable procurement ([Lisbon City Council, 2024](#)).

On a broader scale, the European Union's Action Plan for the Circular Economy (2015) already addresses CPP as a key driver in the economic transition ([European Commission, 2020](#)), and the World Bank has praised CPP's potential role in supporting environmental and social policy goals ([The World Bank, 2022](#)). These initiatives reaffirm the role of CPP policies in providing a stable and predictable demand for innovators and entrepreneurs to implement CE solutions.

However, CE arrangements on a national level can hardly cover all goods and services in a given geographical context due to complex global supply chains: a national public administration might not be able to establish circular standards for all the goods and services it requires. Local suppliers often don't meet the desired standards as they have limited control over their upstream supply chain, and might not find providers that allow them to comply. On the other hand, being a supplier of goods and services for public administrations (from municipal to national levels) is a significant field of business for companies; encouraging this competition to meet CE standards is an opportunity for governments to influence the private sector.

An international agreement on CPP would generate a new legal framework to be followed and internalised by public entities. Thus, by changing the potential demands from public entities for goods and services, companies willing to continue sourcing for the public sector in these States would have an economic incentive to adapt to CE standards provided internationally.

Exercising a pragmatic view on the matter, the goal here is not to produce a centralised global arrangement dedicated to CPP; what we envision is the gradual development of a complex scenario,

comprising a diversity of scattered regional and multilateral agreements in the global landscape, in line with the idea of global action through polycentric systems ([Ostrom, 2010](#)).

We thus propose a collective public effort of State entities to develop regional or multilateral agreements on CPP, establishing common duties and responsibilities among them in a way that triggers the commitment of States and, lastly, prompts economic incentives for the adaptation of the private sector.

Such cooperation would provide a legal framework able to align policies across countries. The agreement would also provide common standards and criteria for circular products and services, making it easier for governments to identify and procure them, enhancing efficiency and safety, and contributing to increased consumer trust and environmental protection. In the context of a CPP international agreement, such standards would play a critical role as a “common language” to harmonise the practices of diverse State entities.

Vision for 2040

There is a diverse global scenario of regional and multilateral agreements among States establishing CPP common policies for different segments of goods and services. In response, a broad movement of companies in participating states is attempting to adapt their supply chains and are committing to becoming “fully circular”.

Policy Plan

- In 2024: States seeking to include CPP in their sustainability agendas initiate procedures aiming at regional and multilateral agreements, including the establishment of mandates for their negotiators.
- In 2026: After internal consultations, States identified the segments of goods and services they want to address, international standards, and technical specificities within the public entities concerned. They are now deliberating international mechanisms for governing the treaty, review clauses, and enforcement mechanisms for the draft.

● In 2030: Countries have gone through the necessary rounds of domestic discussions, and can finally sign an international treaty on CPP. In 2030: Countries have gone through the necessary rounds of domestic discussions, and can finally sign an international treaty on CPP.

Policy Recommendations

- States should first map those segments of goods and services that could serve as the starting point for multilateral collaboration on CPP standards.
- States should identify the potential signatory Parties to start negotiations with, considering regional and frequent cooperation arrangements.
- States should make use of the frequent environment and climate change-related fora, such as the annual UNFCCC's COPs, to promote the initiative and call for the engagement of other States.

3.4 Vision 4: Revolutionising Fashion Sustainability - A Circular Economy Approach with 50% Second-Hand Coverage

Jia-Ying Guan

Introduction and Environmental Impacts

The global fashion industry, renowned for its economic dynamism and cultural influence, confronts significant environmental and social challenges. Accounting for approximately 10% of all carbon emissions and ranking as the second-largest consumer of the world's water supply, the industry's linear "take-make-dispose" model fuels over-consumption and waste: Around 92 million tons of textile waste are generated annually, predominantly ending up in landfills or incinerators ([Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017](#)).

Fast fashion's environmental toll extends to its massive water footprint, with a single cotton shirt requiring about 2,700 litres of water—equivalent to 2.5 years of drinking water for an individual ([European Parliament, 2024](#)). Brands like Shein, Primark, and H&M have fueled a doubling of apparel consumption since 2000, with projections estimating 102 million tons of clothing consumed annually by 2030 ([Van Keulen, 2024](#)).

Beyond carbon emissions, the fashion industry is the second-largest water consumer globally, with dyeing and treatment processes alone using 93 billion cubic metres of water annually ([European Parliament, 2020](#)). Furthermore, the industry generates vast amounts of waste, with less than 1% of used garments recycled into new clothing ([Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017](#)). Synthetic fabrics in fast fashion release microplastics into the ocean, contributing to pollution and threatening marine life.

Vision for 2040

By 2040, we envision a circular fashion economy where sustainability guides industry practices. We aim to achieve 50% coverage of second-hand fashion purchases, reducing demand for new clothing and minimising waste. We strive to empower consumers to make environmentally conscious choices while ensuring that the fashion industry

Details of the Vision

1. Implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Schemes:

By 2025: Enact strict regulations requiring fashion brands to manage the entire lifecycle of their products, including accountability for waste management and recycling initiatives.

By 2030: Expand EPR schemes to incentivize companies to adopt sustainable practices, such as tax breaks and subsidies for eco-friendly production methods.

2. Introduction of Eco-design Requirements and Incentives:

By 2026: Develop and implement eco-design standards mandating the use of sustainable materials and production processes.

By 2030: Offer financial incentives and support for companies that innovate in eco-friendly design, such as grants for research and development of sustainable materials.

3. Establishment of Textile Waste Collection and Recycling Infrastructure:

By 2027: Invest in the development of comprehensive textile waste collection and recycling infrastructure, including setting up collection points and sorting facilities.

By 2035: Collaborate with waste management companies and industry stakeholders to create efficient recycling programs and invest in recycling technologies.

4. Promotion of Consumer Awareness and Education Campaigns:

By 2025: Launch widespread consumer awareness campaigns to educate the public about the environmental impact of fast fashion and the benefits of sustainable consumption.

By 2030: Integrate sustainability education into school curricula to instil lifelong habits of responsible consumption.

5. Collaboration between Governments, Industry Stakeholders, and Civil Society:

By 2024: Foster collaboration and dialogue between governments, industry stakeholders, NGOs, and civil society organisations to develop comprehensive policies and initiatives.

By 2030: Establish multi-stakeholder platforms and working groups to address key challenges and opportunities in the transition to a circular fashion economy.

Policy Plan

- By 2024: Introduce mandatory Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes and eco-design requirements. Simultaneously, implement policies to promote second-hand fashion markets and incentivize consumers to purchase pre-owned clothing.
- By 2026: Establish textile waste collection and recycling infrastructure. This step includes expanding second-hand clothing infrastructure and availability to make it more accessible and appealing to a broader audience.
- By 2030: Launch consumer awareness campaigns and incentivize second-hand shopping through financial incentives and educational initiatives. The goal is to normalise second-hand fashion as a mainstream choice, fostering widespread acceptance and adoption across demographics.
- By 2035: Enforce comprehensive policy frameworks, including regulations on waste reduction and sustainable consumption practices. These measures will accelerate the transition towards a circular fashion economy.
- By 2040: Achieve 50% coverage of second-hand fashion purchases. This milestone signals a significant shift towards circularity in the fashion industry and reflects our commitment to sustainability.

Policy Recommendations

● Implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Schemes:

Lead: National Governments, Fashion Industry Associations

● Action: Enforce strict regulations mandating fashion brands to manage the entire lifecycle of their products, from production to disposal.

● Introduction of Eco-design Requirements and Incentives:

Lead: Environmental Agencies, Fashion Industry Innovation Consortia (eg. Fashion for Good, Global Fashion Agenda, Sustainable Apparel Coalition, Circular Fashion Partnership, etc.)

Action: Develop and implement eco-design standards and incentivize companies to produce durable, repairable, and recyclable clothing.

● Establishment of Textile Waste Collection and Recycling Infrastructure:

Lead: Municipal Governments, Waste Management Companies, Fashion Industry Partnerships

Action: Invest in infrastructure for efficient textile waste collection and recycling, including establishing recycling facilities and promoting collaboration between stakeholders.

● Promotion of Consumer Awareness and Education Campaigns:

Lead: Non-Governmental Organisations, Fashion Brands, Educational Institutions

Action: Launch educational campaigns to raise awareness about the environmental impact of fast fashion and promote sustainable consumption habits, including second-hand shopping.

● Enforcement of Comprehensive Policy Frameworks:

Lead: Legislative Bodies, Regulatory Agencies, International Organisations

Action: Enact and enforce comprehensive policy frameworks to support the transition towards circular fashion, including regulations on waste management, sustainable production practices, and consumer rights.

Conclusion:

Transitioning to circular fashion is imperative for addressing the industry's environmental impact and ensuring a sustainable future. Through collaborative efforts and comprehensive policy interventions, we can realise our vision for a circular fashion economy by 2040. ●

4. Conclusion

Policy recommendations:



Regional Level:

- **Development of an information and labelling campaign** to generate consumer awareness around circularity.
- **Harmonisation of standards** in the plastics and electronic goods sectors, coupled with joint research and investment.
- **Elimination of tariff barriers** and liberalisation of repair services.



Plurilateral/National Level:

- **The establishment of a high-ambition coalition** of “willing” like-minded frontrunner countries with the specific objective to settle on an ambitious and specific but still ambiguous international CE target, which can subsequently be reached in different ways. The coalition should pave the way for other countries to join soon.
- **The elaboration of self-determined CE-NDCs** will allow coalition members to determine their own objectives and action plans, tailored around their unique domestic preconditions, priorities and strategies.
- **A coordinated pricing system for non-circular goods and services** facilitate and harmonise the trade of goods and services between coalition members. Coalition members benefit from lower transaction costs and supportive measures.
- **In-club incentives** are implemented for making the membership in the coalition more beneficial to existing coalition members, for example through cooperation and technical assistance, as well as for new members, by offering longer transitional periods.
- **Out-club disincentives including a collective border tax for non-circular goods and services** for imports of non-coalition members make freeriding and non-membership in the coalition increasingly costly.



Multilateral Level:

- **Determination of starting point:** States should first map those segments of goods and services that could serve as the starting point for multilateral collaboration on CPP standards.
- **Stakeholder Analysis:** States should identify the potential signatory Parties to start negotiations with, considering regional and frequent cooperation arrangements.
- **Use annual fora wisely:** States should make use of the frequent environment and climate change-related fora, such as the annual UN-FCCC's COPs, to promote the initiative and call for the engagement of other States.



Company Level:

- **Implementation of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Schemes** through National Governments and Fashion Industry Associations to enforce strict regulations mandating fashion brands to manage the entire lifecycle of their products, from production to disposal.
- **Introduction of Eco-design Requirements and Incentives** through Environmental Agencies and Fashion Industry Innovation Consortia (eg. Fashion for Good, Global Fashion Agenda, Sustainable Apparel Coalition, Circular Fashion Partnership, etc.) to develop and implement eco-design standards and incentivise companies to produce durable, repairable, and recyclable clothing.
- **Establishment of Textile Waste Collection and Recycling Infrastructure** through Municipal Governments, Waste Management Companies, and in partnership with the Fashion Industry to invest in infrastructure for efficient textile waste collection and recycling, including establishing recycling facilities and promoting collaboration between stakeholders.
- **Promotion of Consumer Awareness and Education Campaigns** through Non-Governmental Organisations, Fashion Brands, and Educational Institutions to launch educational campaigns to raise awareness about the environmental impact of fast fashion and promote sustainable consumption habits, including second-hand shopping.

- **Enforcement of Comprehensive Policy Frameworks** through legislative Bodies, Regulatory Agencies, and International Organisations to enact and enforce comprehensive policy frameworks to support the transition towards circular fashion, including regulations on waste management, sustainable production practices, and consumer rights.

The recommendations presented in this work show that to attain such goals, a major shift in thinking, as well as in the way we organise our lives, interact with the ecosystems that surround us, and manage international trade systems, is needed. The tools presented request a demanding effort, however in the future, they can serve as a way to avoid future crises. ●

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We would like to thank all participants for their active contribution to the content of this brief during and after the workshop.

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