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Comité économique et social européen  
European Economic and Social Committee

## SEMINAR REPORT

# The role of families in achieving the Circular Economy

### EESC 14 May 2019

*"Our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this planet... and we all cherish our children's future"*  
John F Kennedy

On 14th May, we celebrated the International Day of Families by hosting a seminar highlighting the importance of engaging mothers and families as changemakers for sustainable development. Policy makers, researchers, civil society representatives and other circular economy practitioners gathered at the European Economic and Social Committee in Brussels to discuss the role of families in achieving the circular economy.

The event was opened by **EESC President Luca Jahier**, by saying: 'Looking at the title of this seminar, you have decided to link two concepts which are, despite their multiple connections, not often reflected on jointly: the role of families and mothers in particular and the circular economy (CE) as part of the sustainable development'. Mr Jahier mentioned that families, as the cradles of the passing-on of cultures, traditions and behaviour to the next generation, have a key role to play here. Firstly, because parents focus naturally on the well-being of their children and this characteristic makes them natural candidates to pass on the message of sustainability.

Secondly, in view of the role of mothers specifically, in despite of shifts in society, more than a third of women in the EU still work for free while caring for their family members, and almost 80% of those working outside the home nonetheless cook or do the housework to a much larger extent than men. This means that, at least in the domestic domain, they are the ones deciding what to consume, and are thus primarily concerned when making more sustainable choices. Thirdly, still in view of the role of women: because, when working, women are still overrepresented in sectors such as healthcare, care and education, which are paramount for people's well-being, and they can use their position to push for sustainable options.

Women thus have a crucial role to play to implement the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and need to be especially made aware of this power and empowered to play it right.

Mr Jahier mentioned as well that the Circular Economy Model has the potential to reduce the environmental and social impacts of the current European economic model. He explained that alongside the climate emergency, other environmental challenges, such as biodiversity loss and air pollution, are of increasing concern and require urgent action.

He affirmed: 'we must stop living at the cost of our children. Instead, we must create frameworks for sustainable lifestyles - and we must act now'. He added that families focus naturally on the wellbeing of their children. In the domestic domain, despite shifts in society, women are still more often the ones choosing the products; they are at the center of the circular economy.

Mr Jahier explained that in order to achieve our goals, we must make sure that all are on board. A healthy and sustainable lifestyle must not be the privilege of the educated and wealthy. Social inequalities are rising in Europe and across the globe and nearly one third of children are at risk of poverty, and millions of young people cannot find a job to start shaping their adult life.



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He continued by mentioning that the Circular Economy can reduce the risks of price and supply shocks of imported goods; price and supply shocks which currently are having a detrimental impact on our everyday family budgets.

Mr Jahier described the different steps the European Commission and the EESC have undertaken towards this transition, starting with the adoption by the European Union of the Circular Economy Package in December 2015.

In practice, he explained, the EESC was and is actively engaged and invests strongly in the joint initiative with the European Commission: the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, a platform designed to boost networking and share knowledge to support the shift towards circularity.

On the policy front, he mentioned, the Committee is currently preparing a series of opinions on different aspects of the Circular Economy: consumers, national and regional strategies and the implementation report of the European Commission's Circular Economy Action Plan.

The role of consumers, he recalled, is recognised in the European Commission's Circular Economy Action Plan update report, where the need to empower consumers through accurate environmental information and consumer protection is included.

Mr Jahier illustrated by other examples the commitment of the Committee towards the transition to a circular economy. Through its ground-breaking opinion on "the need to tackle premature obsolescence in goods – the need to ensure our goods are long-lasting and provide us with true value for money". Or the creation, through the platform, of a special-purpose panel for gathering consumer insights, with the objective to address circular economy issues from the point of view of consumers.

He concluded his intervention by claiming that it is clear that 'more work needs to be done here to continue the empowerment of families as consumers- addressing the ones who are in touch with the young generation on a daily basis'.

**MMM President Anne-Claire de Liedekerke**, thanked the EESC and its President for hosting the event on Families and the Circular Economy. Make Mothers Matter has been working in collaboration with the EESC for a long time now and she acknowledged the proximity of the EESC to the EU citizens through organisations like hers. In particular she saluted the will of the EESC and of Mr Jahier to improve the life of families in the EU.

She explained the reasons why Make Mothers Matter is currently working in an EU circular economy project. In most households the mothers are responsible for the family's consumption. Not only do they act as the principal consumer, they also transmit behaviours to the rest of the family. She affirmed that mothers will go out of their way to make sure that the economic activity uses less of our natural resources; mothers will take along their families to leave the linear economy towards a circular economy.

They will embrace the transition if this transition is defined with the mothers. If they have a say in what it will entail for them, and how their everyday habits have to be changed or adapted.

If we want to change our consumption patterns towards a circular economy we have to listen to the stakeholders, consumers, in this case a majority of them being mothers as far as families are concerned.

Ms Liedekerke underlined the important role parents play in the family in that they usually transfer their environmental and sustainable consumption patterns onto their children. By including MMM in a



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research project on the circular economy, the European Union recognizes that working not only for mothers but with mothers can generate systemic changes, because mothers when informed, recognized, supported and listened to, are changemakers.

**Hugo Schally, from DG Environment at the European Commission**, presented the state of play in the implementation of the EU Circular Economy Action Plan and gave some indication of possible future policy orientations. He in particular mentioned how the social inclusion aspect will be a future focus of the circular economy. Growth must be accompanied by social inclusion and equal opportunities policies enabling sustainable lifestyles. Families need to be heard and consulted in the design of these policies to make them relevant and affordable to them. He stressed the need to empower consumers to make thoughtful and responsible choices.

He presented the well-known limitations of the linear economy such as loss of the value of materials and products, the contribution to pressure on and scarcity of resources, the exposure of the economy to volatile prices of resources, waste generation and contribution to climate change. A circular economy reduces waste, boosts competitiveness, brings economic, social and environmental gains and maintains value. The transition to a circular economy therefore has a massive potential as a cost effective way to protect resources, tackle climate change and reduce our environmental footprint, while boosting economic growth, employment and development.

Right policies could cut the use of natural resources by up to 28% and greenhouse gas emissions by around 74%. He illustrated different strategies the Commission is currently working on to protect and help citizens in this transition. To fight for example against premature obsolescence, by asking the companies to give information on the durability of their products (changing the burden of proof of the warranty), or mechanisms to simplify the environmental footprint information of products, making it comparable and transparent, by using a scoring system with a harmonized methodology validating the environmental claims products have so that consumers understand the impact their acts and purchasing decisions have on the planet and on people.

The European consumer needs to understand that the best deal is not always the cheapest one, explained Mr Schally. Consumers should be provided with better services and better quality and these need to be inclusive thus not leaving any citizen behind.

He encourages the civil society to make use of a new tool: the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform, which aims at promoting the transition to a circular economy, by facilitating the dialogue among stakeholders and the exchange and dissemination of information and good practices in the field. He invited MMM to join the stakeholder platform.

The European Union provides different legal mechanisms to enable consumers to make the right choices and to be an active part of the consumption process. The European Commission foresees monitoring systems to measure progress and the adoption of new standards and procedures. This year there will be a final report on circular economy. Mr Schally already announces that after the work done on plastics the next sector to address in this transition is textiles.

Mr Schally highlighted that we need to move towards an economy where waste does not exist anymore as it is either reduced or eliminated through prevention measures or products or materials become secondary raw materials. Mothers and families as the core component of society can and should play a very important role in this transition.



**Olalla Michelena, Director of MMM's EU Delegation**, advocated for a better participation of families as consumers and the recognition of the pivotal role they play in transitioning to a circular economy. Families have to understand that caring for the planet is not just a priority for those who can afford it but crucial for all families. Societies need to train and encourage parents in sustainable practices such as reducing waste, recycling and reuse, eco-friendly habits, use of energy-efficient products, consuming local, sustainable consumption, second hand buying, etc. This knowledge in turn would be transferred to the families and communities they live in. She also presented the ongoing Horizon 2020 CIRC4life research project MMM is partner in charge of communication and dissemination of and how consumers are integrated in it.

Even though the European statistics show that the environment is important for 94% of the citizens and that 87% agree that they can play a role on this, they are not sufficiently involved in the circular economy.

In order to change this situation, the CIRC4life project proposes a number of solutions in order to improve this:

- Identify the real needs of families (via surveys, living labs and other adequate ICT tools);
- Segment target groups (such as families) and develop tailored solutions;
- Compile good practices and benefits integrating consumer insights into CE strategies;
- Take concrete actions where all actors are invited to participate (not only a top down approach);
- Change the narrative: make it relevant, accessible and affordable for all families.

The project's main activities focus on developing business models based on co-creation with end-users, sustainable consumption and collaborative recycling and reuse. In order to bring end-users closer to the production and design phases, it is necessary to identify consumer's preferences (via big-data mining product reviews, living labs to customise the end user needs, innovation camps). MMM will also be responsible for conducting Consumer Surveys:

- Feedback and preferences on the developed products
- Attitudes and understanding on the eco-point calculation

**Sustainable consumption** will be encouraged by developing a method to calculate eco-points of products. Eco-points are a cumulative value, which accounts for an aggregate of the environmental and health impacts throughout the product's whole value chain. Life cycle impact assessment is being used to calculate the eco-points of products by:

- Assessing the Product Environmental Footprints
- Creating a Traceability solution to monitor product's sustainability along the value chain
- Supporting end-users and stakeholders to actively implement the circular economy via awareness raising and knowledge sharing activities

The collaborative **recycling and reuse model** will develop a system for stakeholders to interact with each other, facilitating recycling and reusing of end-of-life products and to reduce waste. It will implement the eco-credits awarding scheme to encourage people to recycle/reuse and carry out consumer Surveys on attitudes to recycling/reuse practices and Product End of Life information.

**Eline Boon, Senior Policy analyst from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation**, pointed out that we need systemic change, collaboration to stop working in silos and multi-stakeholder engagement. She called for innovation in the production so that only what consumer really needs is created and that all materials



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must be circular and designed to be safely used, reused, recycled or composted. She stressed out the necessity of eliminating unnecessary materials and the urgent need of circulating raw materials in order to be sure that we create and have the right system, because in the right system we cannot make wrong choices.

**Jörg Adamczewski, Board member of Zero Waste France** presented their holistic approach to waste. Concerning consumers, they have a programme to accompany families in a substantial and measured reduction of waste over a defined period of time. Their aim is to reduce household waste by 50 to 80% and make some savings.

By this approach, they create a nuclei that radiate the message to their surroundings. One participating family reaches out to 30 to 40 people. The challenge of Zero Waste is to set ambitious and achievable objectives that are easily understood by families. Normally 50% of residual waste can be achieved. They published a guide online that explains the good practices to follow. Zero Waste also has an education program in schools. In primary schools it is called Zero Waste Heroes and in the secondary Zero Waste, the challenge.

Zero Waste France aims at reaching 100.000 people in 2019; last year they had 15.000 participants. This is an innovative and new way of consumption: the consumers reflect before any purchase of any item. He concluded that prevention is the highest in the waste hierarchy and that 'overconsumption, resource use and waste are societal and political challenges. Citizens and families cannot be asked to hold the baby alone'.

**Sylvie Droulans** presented her **Zero Carabistouille** initiative in Belgium to make her family life zero waste, by producing one jar (more or less 1 litre) of waste per year for 4 persons. She highlighted how we all have to become "Consum'actors" by taking 5 steps: Composting, Refusing (waste prevention), Reducing, Reusing and Recycling.

She encourages citizens to, among others, consume otherwise, buying bulk, local and seasonal, more vegetables, second hand, sustainable. Consumers should instead of using disposable products, turn to other alternatives, or homemade articles or use rental, second hand etc.

She affirmed that this process that she started with her family has given purpose to her life, it impacted what and how she purchases and uses products. Now she also promotes her sustainable lifestyle in schools and universities. Through talks, a blog and her book she tries to bring this successful new way of consuming to all kind of audiences.

**Aurelien Marino, cofounder of the Happy Hours Market**, a new initiative in Brussels to fight food waste, due to the current statistics showing the extent of the problem. A third of the world's food production is thrown away; once a year Europe's surface is cultivated unnecessarily and 7 tons of food per minute are wasted in Belgium!

The initiative was created in order to provide an easy and convenient solution using ICT tools. He explained that universal access to affordable and healthy food is a key challenge in today's society. On the other hand, food overproduction is continually depleting our planet's resources while one-third of global production is being discarded.

Happy Hours Market works by collecting, in a refrigerated truck, unsold fresh products from shops and then selling them in the evening at a reduced price to its customers. Unsold products are brought to charities. This model combines technology (mobile based website for consumers) and the social aspect



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(unsold products are offered to charities). It allows consumers to “save” fresh products that will be normally wasted.

The event finally concluded that the focus should not be on replacing the purchase of certain goods or services by more sustainable ones but about transforming consumption patterns by enabling more sustainable lifestyles promoting the implementation of a circular economy.

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*The European Economic and Social Committee is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. The Committee has 350 members from across Europe, who are appointed by the Council of the European Union. It represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process.*

*Make Mothers Matter (MMM) is an international apolitical and non-denominational NGO founded in 1947 at UNESCO with UN General Consultative Status. Its mission is to promote and support the essential role of mothers for peace and for the social, economic and cultural development of societies.*

*MMM promotes the universality and importance of the economic, social and cultural role of mothers, based on their skills and responsibility as primary educators of their children. MMM articulates its action around two areas: field work via its network and advocacy. In collaboration with its member associations working in the field MMM acts at international level to influence policy and public opinion in order to bring about positive changes in the lives of mothers. Working for and with mothers by involving them in development projects, has beneficial effects on their children, their families and more broadly on societies.*

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