

Circular Society Synthesis Project

Our Vision and Mission

We as the **Wyss Academy for Nature (WA)** aim for a just and sustainable world in which nature conservation and human wellbeing reinforce each other. Our mission is to catalyze solutions that transform interactions between people and nature. We use the power of knowledge and the creativity of engagement to empower agents of change.

- *We test novel pathways of systems transformation* towards environmental and social justice in concrete landscapes around the globe.
- *We engage with key decision makers* from academia, policy, business, finance and civil society to overcome blockages and create alliances to leverage systems transformation.
- *We employ rigorous science* to understand trade-offs and co-benefits within and between human-environment systems to achieve the indivisible goals of human wellbeing and nature conservation.
- *We strive to scale solutions beyond local landscapes* by learning from success and failure. Ultimately, our success will be measured by our impact on nature and people and the contribution to global policies and practices.

The Synthesis Center is a competence center that actively supports the mission and vision of the Wyss Academy as well as the units and activities of engagement, knowledge, and incubation by **preparing knowledge for action**.

The Circular Economy as a relevant topic for the Wyss Academy

In following our vision and mission, we **need to reflect upon popular concepts** which are promoted by various actors like government, private sector, or research, as solutions to solving the grand challenges of our time, such as climate change, or biodiversity loss. Synthesis projects **support identifying novel questions** as well as **finding our organizational perspective, position and approach** toward such concepts.

The topic of the circular economy is highly popular, especially with businesses and governments (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). This popularity builds on the premise that the circular economy is one possible solution to decouple resource use from economic growth or human wellbeing, while solving problems related to growing resource scarcity (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). Furthermore, it promises the creation of jobs and significant economic opportunities for businesses (Ellen MacArthur Foundation & McKinsey, 2015).

Criticism of the current conversation

However, the circular economy is being contested by various actors in academia as well as the private sector (Desing et al., 2020). The most common definition by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation refers to circular economy as an economy *“that is restorative and regenerative by design and aims to keep products, components, and materials at their highest utility and value at all times”* (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2015, p. 2). This definition already indicates a focus of the concept on the economy, rather than taking a systemic approach, and a focus on products, components, and materials rather than society or nature. However, such a radical concept as the transformation towards circularity, requires

radical, systemic approaches and solutions rather than incremental changes. Furthermore, the discussion around the circular economy mostly stems from Europe and North America, **lacking insights from the Global South** as well as the implications of circular societies for these regions.

Circular Societies: Our approach to the Circular Economy

To achieve just nature-people relations, the concept of circular economy as promoted by various actors for us does not represent a model that embraces the full complexity necessary for such a transformation. We aim to **lift the discussion to another level** and move towards a holistic understanding rather than a sole focus on economic aspects. Only by recognizing all dimensions of sustainability, a new social contract with nature can be enabled. Therefore, we chose the term **circular society** rather than circular economy, following Calisto Friant et al. (2020) that this term extends the understanding of circularity to include natural resources like climate, land, or biodiversity, but also immaterial resources such as knowledge, technology or even power. This approach reflects an understanding of sustainability including social, environmental, and economic dimensions and “*see circularity as a holistic transition, where issues of political empowerment and social justice also have to be addressed.*” Furthermore, the conversation on circularity needs to incorporate another aspect which is meaningful for just-nature people relations; given that cycles and circles are inherent to natural systems we need to extend the conversation and allow us to **learn from other knowledge systems and knowledge of actors previously being left out of the discussion** around circular economy, such as indigenous communities and their respective knowledge. Our approach and competences at the WA enable us to bring those perspective into the discussion by co-creating with and integrating actors from our southern Hubs. We aim to move the conversation away from a domination of actors in Europe and North America.

Main goal and questions

In considering our vision and mission as well as our unique perspective and competences, this synthesis projects aims at **exploring the possibilities of a circular society to enable just people-nature relations**. In this endeavor we will focus on aspects of circular societies that are at the **intersection of people and nature** with a strong focus on incorporating the perspective from our **Hubs**, especially our Hubs South.

Our focus is refined and co-created together with various internal and external partners throughout the process.

Project Content, Process, and Outcome

We aim to synthesize different angles and open questions around the topic of Circular Societies to be able to present a comprehensive view and perspective on the topic. This project serves as an **experiment**: what happens if a **variety of different perspectives is brought together**, aiming to **break the silos between different conversations** that are happening in parallel instead of jointly. To further this goal, the focus of this project is to **enable conversation** between different streams of research and types of knowledge, including practical and traditional, and **collaboratively working on a perspective on circular societies that leads to a new relationship between people and nature**.

Content-wise we will focus our discussions around three areas that are particularly relevant to our vision, mission, and best reflect our internal competences:

1. *Understanding the Implications of a Transformation Toward Circular Societies*

Only by addressing the underlying dynamics of the current system and by breaking with the conventions, a **paradigm shift** can be enabled that does not simply treat the symptoms but addresses the root causes of an ever-rising resource consumption.

In this part of the project, we aim to discuss the implications that arise out of the transformation toward a circular society for the economy and society. We aim to understand which economic and societal transformations are necessary to promote circular societies, if we can we achieve circularity in a world where demand (e.g., for renewable energies) keeps increasing, which levers need to be addressed in the transition, and which barriers hinder the transformation, may it be underlying paradigms, institutions and actors, governments, or values.

2. *Aiming for a Just Transformation*

The discussion on the circular economy is defined mostly by Global North, addressing topics that are predominantly relevant for actors there, such as resource scarcity. Opportunities and threats of circular approaches for the Global South, as well as long existing circular approaches from those regions are rarely considered in the conversation. However, indigenous and traditional knowledge often rely on **nature's principles of circularity**.

Furthermore, countries in the Global South often depend on resource-intensive, linear industries, such as mining, forestry, textiles, manufacturing of disposable consumer goods, and agriculture (Schröder, 2020). A transition to a circular society will heavily affect those industries and therefore also those countries disproportionately. There must be a way to redistribute the positive effects from this transition to benefit the affected countries as well and to avoid creating or aggravating further inequalities.

Therefore, our work is guided by the **principles of a just transformation** (see Schröder (2020)):

- 1) *Distributive justice* and the *recognition of rights* ensures that all relevant actors are given access and rights to resources, and benefits and burdens of the transformation are equally distributed. We as the WA aim to account for distributive justice through our Regional Stewardship Hubs and local incubation projects that are guided by this principle.
- 2) *Procedural justice* ensures that all affected stakeholders are integrated into decision processes from an early stage, enable them to bring in their expertise and knowledge but also raise concerns. Incorporating the perspectives from the Regional Stewardship Hubs and its stakeholders, including ecosystems and marginalized groups, is a unique opportunity to position ourselves as a voice that makes those perspectives heard.

In this part of the project, we aim to understand what we as the WA can bring to the table to ensure a just transformation, how we can empower actors that were previously left out of the discussion to participate, and how we can ensure that the burdens of the transformation toward Circular Societies do not disproportionately affect the most vulnerable.

Our Hubs build important **entry points** and provide access to local knowledge to integrate the needs and perspectives from the Global South as well as social justice in the discussion on the circular society.

3. *Natural Resources*

Closing material and resource loops will not suffice to transform our societies and economy for all people to live well and within the planetary boundaries. Reflecting on the strategic goals of the Wyss Academy, a circular society also must consider **potential interdependencies with natural resources** such as **biodiversity and ecosystems, land, or climate**. Therefore, this focus topic will look at interactions between humans and nature and a transformation to circular societies.

One example of such an interaction is a substitution of non-renewable resources through renewable resources. For instance, the use of palm oil as biofuel is known to be responsible for monocultures and deforestation, especially in Indonesia.

In our approach we need to focus not only on causing less harm and using less resources, i.e., be less unsustainable, but focus on positive value creation. Therefore, **regenerative** and **restoring** aspects need to accompany circular efforts, moving from value preservation to restoration and regeneration (Jonker & Faber, 2019).

In this part of the project, we aim to look at questions like how we can move towards a circular society while ensuring sustainable land use, what are possible negative implications of circular societies for sustainable land use, how we could avoid them and how we can enforce win-win situations, does making societies more circular provide climate mitigation benefit, or how a circular society can enhance biodiversity.

Workshops

This approach builds on the premise that people with very different backgrounds and perspectives are brought together to challenge their views but also our thesis on circular societies, collectively developing a vision for a transformation toward a circular society. There is an absolute need to include voices from the Global South, for example by exploring how traditional knowledge could support technology within circular societies.

The *WA Theses on Circular Societies* build the foundation of the project. The aim is to let the theses be challenged by a variety of actors and experts during a series of workshops, discussing necessary transformations toward circular societies. The project will follow an approach of **participatory leadership**, meaning that we **co-create** the content together with those actors.

Those workshops are organized according to the three general themes of the theses: **1) societal and economic transformation, 2) just transformation, and 3) natural resources**. For each of these themes, we invite several experts to reflect on the theses beforehand. The experts will be asked to write a short position paper or essay on our approach toward Circular Societies and are explicitly asked to add to and edit the theses. Those inputs then will be discussed in a workshop. After conducting three workshops on the different themes, we will bring together all perspectives in a bigger event. The insights from these events and the respective discussions will be summarized in a short report and lead to refined **WA Theses on Circular Societies**.

Process

The general aim is to **bring together different perspectives** from different disciplines to foster exchange between actors that did not engage in a discussion before and combine their perspectives to a unique view on circular societies that leads to just people-nature relationships.

1st Phase (September 2022)

In order to collaboratively develop the container for the three workshops, the Wyss Academy will convene a small core team to design this work. The design will consist of a three-hour design workshop on the **7th of September at 4:00pm CET** to explore needs and outcomes, to craft a coherent invitation for the work and to determine how to tie the work together.

In this meeting we will cover

- The need and purpose of the workshops.
- The desired outputs from the workshops and the architecture of implementation to support them.
- The workshop concept.
- The roles of each expert within this project.

2nd Phase: Exploring the topics (November/December 2022)

In the second phase of the work, we will explore three key topic areas (see “workshops”) and generate safe-to-fail probes to explore these topics further through the Wyss Academy Hub partnerships. The basis of these three workshops are our Theses on Circular Societies, which will be challenged by the inputs of our experts and the other participants. The outputs of this work are intended to explore different approaches and ideas through design and experimentation.

3rd Phase: Checking in with the core team on progress (January 2023)

The workshop phase will conclude with a check-in event with the core team and others which will weave together the learnings and results of the experiments generated in the workshops. Design for this meeting will proceed after the workshop designs are clear. The outcomes of this event will be to prepare for projects that address circular society initiatives through 2023.

4th Phase: Testing the theses in our Hubs (Early to mid-2023)

The ultimate goal of a synthesis project goes beyond gathering and synthesizing knowledge. Therefore, we aim to use the insights from this project to enable action and test them in potential incubators in our Hub regions. This phase will be further specified during the co-creation process with our partners as well as our Hubs.

Wyss Academy Theses on Circular Societies

This unique view currently manifests in the nine *Wyss Academy Theses on Circular Societies*, grouped into three different sections, which we want to challenge and further develop with different actors during the project:

Societal and Economic Transformation

- To enable sustainable transformation, we must look at transforming our societies, rather than simply focusing on changing the economic system.

- We need to reduce overall resource consumption and quantity of materials in use, as resources cannot be re-used indefinitely, but with each cycle, their quality and quantity degrade.
- Only by reimagining our understanding of growth and human wellbeing, can humanity live in a manner that is well within the planetary boundaries and evolve toward the development of circular societies.

Global and Social Justice

- The conversation about circular societies must be approached with a global perspective and aim to bridge the silos between North and South.
- Social and global justice, also reflecting core Values of the Wyss Academy, are essential if the transformation towards a circular society is to succeed. We must find a way to distribute the positive and negative effects of such a transition in an equitable manner, in order to avoid creating further inequalities, or aggravating those that already exist.
- Indigenous and local knowledge provide invaluable insights to support a transformation toward circular societies and should inform and support our efforts.

Natural Resources

- The conversation must lay a focus on the effects that a transition towards a circular society has on natural resources, such as climate, biodiversity, and land.
- Regenerative and restorative aspects need to accompany circular efforts, in order to move away from simple value preservation.
- A circular society must consider the trade-off for ecosystems and land-use when replacing non-renewable resources with renewable resources, and find solutions to those challenges.

Outcome

With this project we aim to achieve two goals by the end of 2023:

1. **Develop a clear, consolidated position towards multi-faceted topics:** Our goal of breaking the silos of different disciplines, actors and perspectives requires a unique approach to discuss controversial topics. Through this project we will develop a participatory approach that enables us to consolidate different perspectives, especially within the Wyss Academy, to position ourselves within complex debates such as postgrowth.
2. **Test the Theses within a Solutionscape:** By the end of 2022, the Wyss Academy will have identified 12 Solutionscapes. A Solutionscape reflects the systemic understanding that enables us to develop solutions to improve the outcomes for nature and people within a certain scope, such as a particular region or for a specific sustainability challenge. Within one such Solutionscape we aim to test our theses on a more practical level. Therefore, we will conduct an idea competition to identify possible incubators within a Circular Societies Solutionscape in one or more of our Hubs. The winning project(s) will be supported through the expertise we gained throughout the synthesis project and other knowledge present within the Wyss Academy.

Sources

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