



Think Circular - community foundations and circular economy

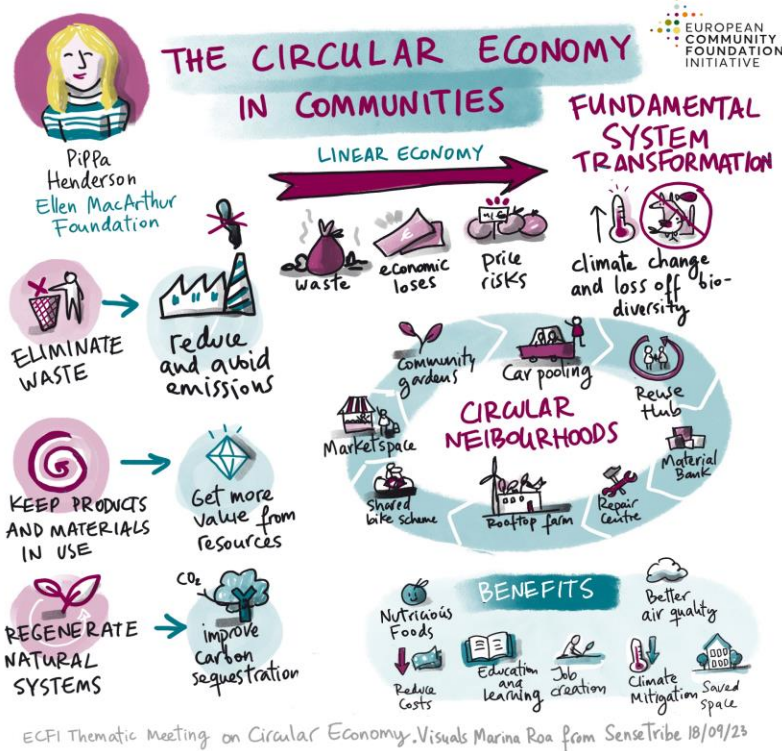
Online meeting - summary report
20 September, 11:00 CET - 12:30 CET



On 20 September 2023, ECFI hosted an online meeting on community foundations and circular economy. The meeting brought together representatives from community foundations and support organisations from across Europe. Discussions were prompted by presentations from two foundations with considerable experience in this area of work. This report provides a summary of key points arising from the presentations and discussions.

Pippa Henderson from the **Ellen MacArthur Foundation** introduced the topic of circular economy and the Foundation's work and spoke about their project on circular neighbourhoods. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation is a global charity committed to creating a circular economy. It creates evidence-based original research on the benefits of a circular economy and how it can contribute to solving global challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss.

Pippa is a policy analyst within the Institutions, Governments and Cities team at the Foundation. Her focus is on developing case studies and insights about how governments at all levels can support and drive the transition to a circular economy. Part of her work has been to research circular neighbourhoods - projects run for and by local communities.



Pippa introduced the concept of “linear economy” to describe the current dominant economic paradigm. The linear economy leads to enormous waste (e.g. food waste or textiles), economic losses and the underutilisation of assets (the average car in the EU spends 92% of its life parked), exposes us to price risks and supply chain volatility and impacts negatively on the environment, notably on biodiversity and climate.

The Ellen MacArthur Foundation concept of circular economy is based on three principles, all driven by design: Eliminate waste and pollution, keep products and materials in use, and regenerate natural systems. By transforming the way we design, make, and use products and food, a circular economy allows us to use less emission-intensive materials and store more carbon in the soil.

As part of the work on circular neighbourhoods, a number of initiative types were identified, many of which are already implemented/ supported by community foundations: community gardens, barter markets, reuse hubs, tool libraries, repair centres and others. The benefits to the communities are numerous: access to locally produced food, better air quality, climate mitigation and adaptation, job creation, community cohesion and others.

Pippa gave three examples of successful circular neighbourhoods: Circular Cleveland, La Machinerie in Grenoble and community-supported agriculture in China.

Pippa's presentation can be found [here](#).

It was noted in discussion that circular economy initiatives at neighbourhood level most often require collaboration between many stakeholders including the public sector along with civil society organisations. The examples given also showed the involvement of the private sector and research organisations.

Raising awareness of the relevance and value of local initiatives, for example repair cafes, sewing workshops for upcycling / repurposing, community gardens, is an essential first step to be followed by citizen engagement and making connections with other relevant stakeholders, notably local municipalities.

Where possible it was considered appropriate for foundations promoting the circular economy to walk the talk and to demonstrate how the principles are applied in their own organisations.

The second presentation came from **Deidre Duffy, Community Foundation Ireland, Director of Impact, Grants and Donor Care.**



ECFI Thematic Meeting on Circular Economy. Visuals Marina Roa from SenseTribe 18/09/23

The Community Foundation Ireland started its Circular Economy Fund in 2019. The foundation has had a longstanding focus on environment and nature and Climate

Action is a strategic priority due to its impact on inequality and the urgency of the need for transformation. The fund aims to encourage sustainable practices, tackle sustainability-related issues, and generate hyperlocal responses. Examples of supported initiatives include Refill Ireland (drinking water), Bouncebacka, a project run by the Galway Traveller Movement on upcycling, Spun Out, a project with a youth mental health charity to counter fast fashion and Recreate, a circular training programme for young people.

Key learnings and insights from the fund:

- Partnerships with the government are essential;
- There is significant demand for circular economy initiatives in communities;
- There is broad interest in society and local community organisations;
- Citizen empowerment projects can reduce climate anxiety at the grassroots level;
- A combination of financial and technical support (e.g. through an e-learning platform and by making connections to other relevant knowledge and experience) has enhanced the impact of the fund;
- The fund has encouraged participatory processes and has led to the inclusion of marginalised groups;
- The fund has been significantly oversubscribed, indicating growing demand (and the foundation uses this in an effort to lever resources and policy change by Government).

Deidre's presentation can be found [here](#).

Discussion around barriers and obstacles highlighted the challenges of transitioning from a linear to a circular economy. It was noted that involvement of other societal groups e.g. trades unions could help raise awareness and broaden the understanding of the circular economy. and its potential at local level. The complexity and magnitude of the climate crisis issues (causes and effects) means it can be difficult to engage donors in local action, however the multiple benefits of circular economy action can be attractive.

Group discussion gave participants the opportunity to exchange their knowledge and experience of the circular economy and to identify challenges and barriers.



Despite being small in scale, local circular economy initiatives can lead to multi-dimensional and cumulative environmental, social, and economic impact.

Overcoming the prevailing ‘linear’ system is a significant challenge. Partnerships, education, and donor engagement are critical in driving sustainability efforts.

There is a need to gather more examples and to share knowledge and experience to provide lessons for others interested in supporting local circular economy initiatives and to provide a body of evidence to policy makers and funders.

Kathrin Dombrowski, ECFI
27 September 2023