

The Potential of Local and Regional Authorities for Circular Economy: Focus on communication tools

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The circular economy is an economy where “the value of products, materials and resources is maintained in the economy for as long as possible, and the generation of waste is minimised” (European Commission, 2015). In terms of material resources, this means that the circular economy aims to reduce resources consumption and put back by-products and waste as secondary raw material in the process at each stage of the life-cycle.

It is crucial to work at an appropriate level of intervention when developing new circular strategies. In this regard, public authorities have a responsibility to ensure the sustainable development of our societies. Indeed, it is the local and regional authorities (LRAs) whose scope of competence is the closest to the relevant stakeholders. They are thus in a position to give the circular economy a concrete form.

ACR+, the Association of Cities and Regions for sustainable Resource management, strives to support LRAs in adopting aspiring and ambitious circular economy strategies within their territories. In order to reach its objectives, ACR+ launched a specific initiative on circular economy planning for cities and regions: the Circular Europe Network (CEN). This network gathers ACR+ members who are committed to improve their resource use and conservation strategies and to strengthen the sustainable development of their territory. The CEN builds on the expertise of European front runners within the ACR+ network in order to gather, analyse and exchange information on efficient circular economy strategies implemented by cities and regions.

To this end, the CEN website was launched in 2015, featuring a comprehensive database of best practices on circular economy from cities and regions. The CEN database already includes 150 cases. Each good practice is summarised in a factsheet classified according to different criteria – Instruments, Business models and Resources. These cases are a useful and concrete addition to the CEN's Guidelines on circular economy strategies by local and regional authorities that are available in different languages.

One of the instruments highlighted within the CEN database is entitled “Research, Education and Communication”. At LRAs level, this is an essential tool to focus on, as one of the significant issues faced by the LRAs is a lack of awareness of the population regarding waste prevention, which influences the citizens' production and consumption patterns, as well as their environmental behaviours towards waste generation and sorting at source. Efficient communication is considered to be a key element that is needed to accompany any kind of new measure or policy on a local level.

The biggest Europe-wide communication campaign on waste, the European Week for Waste Reduction (EWWR), is a great example to further explain the potential of communication actions to encourage behavioural changes. ACR+ is the European coordinator of this project which promotes the implementation of awareness-raising actions about sustainable resource and waste management. The project is co-financed by the European Commission's LIFE+ programme, and coordinated by local, regional and national authorities competent in the field of waste reduction. In 2016, more than 12.200 actions were carried out in 32 EU and non-EU countries.

Since its first edition in 2009, the aim of the EWWR has always been to put the concept of the 3Rs - Reduce waste, Reuse products and Recycle materials – in the centre of European attention during one week. A key indicator highlighting the significant results of the EWWR is the large audience that the project reaches. In 2015, according to the EWWR annual evaluation, 32,000,000 participants were directly involved in an action and around 200,000,000 participants were indirectly reached. The same evaluation shows that, on average, more than 80% of the EWWR participants now declare to better understand the difference between waste prevention and recycling, and are willing to act more environmentally friendly (Brussels Environment, 2016).

By involving such a wide range of actors (citizens, administrations, private organisations, NGOs, etc.), the project thereby contributes to the improvement of municipal waste management and to the overall reduction of municipal waste generation. Indeed, in the 2015 edition only, an estimation of 70,000 tonnes of waste was prevented, reused or recycled. These excellent numbers clearly demonstrate the efficiency of such a project and

its usefulness to encourage the transition towards a circular economy following a bottom-up approach. The awareness of citizens is undeniably a determinant factor in any European and local strategy.

List of references

Brussels Environment, *EWWR 2015: Evaluation Report* (2016). Accessed on January 26, 2017. www.ewwr.eu/docs/ewwr/Evaluation_Report_EWWR_2015.pdf.

European Commission, *Closing the loop – An EU action plan for the Circular Economy* (2015). Accessed on January 26, 2017. http://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:8a8ef5e8-99a0-11e5-b3b7-01aa75ed71a1.0012.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

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The Association of Cities and Regions for sustainable Resource management was created in 1994. It is an international network of members who share the common aim of promoting smart resource consumption and waste management through prevention at the source, reuse and recycling. It is composed of nearly 100 members, mainly local and regional authorities.

Circular Europe Network

The CEN is an ACR+ initiative to support local and regional authorities in being ambitious on circular economy. It gathers ACR+ members committed to improve their resource strategies and strengthen the sustainable development of their territory. The CEN builds on the expertise of European front runners within the ACR+ network in order to gather, analyse and exchange information on efficient circular economy strategies implemented by cities and regions.

The European Week for Waste Reduction

The EWWR is a LIFE+ project that aims to raise awareness about waste prevention in Europe. It encourages a wide range of audiences (public authorities, private companies, civil society as well as citizens themselves) to get involved and to implement awareness-raising actions about sustainable resource and waste management during a single week. Every year, volunteers implement awareness-raising actions all over Europe and beyond. Since its first edition in 2009, more than 73,800 EWWR actions have been organised.