P263 / Circular economy as public policy: Comparing design, capacity and outcomes across waste, water, and climate

Topic : Multilevel Governance and Local Policy

Chair : Miranda Schreurs (Technische Universität München)

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The circular economy has moved quickly from a design idea to a policy goal. Governments now promote it in solid waste management, recycling and reuse, wastewater and sanitation, and climate mitigation. Across these sectors, policy documents promise resource recovery, reduced waste and lower emissions. Much less is known about how these ambitions work in practice, particularly when they encounter existing institutions, budgets and labour arrangements. This panel approaches the circular economy as a public policy concern, rather than treating it only as a technical or business proposition.

The panel focuses on three related questions. The first concerns policy design. Governments promote circularity through regulation, extended producer responsibility, subsidies, public provision and mobilisation campaigns. How are these instruments selected, and how do they work together as policy mixes (Rogge and Reichardt 2016; Milios 2018)? The second concerns policy capacity. Circular systems often depend on the participation of dispersed units, including households, small processors and informal workers. What kinds of administrative and political capacity does this require of governments? How are responsibilities distributed across different tiers of government (Wu, Ramesh and Howlett 2015)? The third concerns policy mobility. Circular economy models have largely emerged from European policy debates but are now being adopted in very different settings. What aspects of these models travel, how are they adapted, and whose interests influence the process (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Peck and Theodore 2015)?

The panel also draws on critical work questioning whether circularity actually reduces costs or shifts them to other actors, and who bears the consequences (Gregson et al. 2015; Corvellec, Stowell and Johansson 2022). Labour, informality and equity are therefore central concerns. We welcome papers comparing sectors, countries and levels of government, with particular interest in comparisons between the Global North and Global South. Single case studies are also welcome where they contribute to a wider public policy debate.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Circular economy goals now feature in policies on waste, water, food and climate. This panel invites papers examining how governments translate these goals into programmes and policies, and what happens in the process. We are interested in the choices governments make, the institutions responsible for implementation, and the people whose work sustains these systems.

Papers may address any sector in which circularity has become a policy objective. In waste and recycling, possible themes include extended producer responsibility, restrictions on single use plastics, segregation at source, the integration of informal recyclers into formal systems, and the use of organic waste to produce compost for agriculture. In water and sanitation, papers might examine wastewater reuse, faecal sludge treatment, or the recovery of nutrients and energy. In climate policy, they might explore how circular economy approaches enter national and city climate plans and how their contribution is assessed. Papers examining connections between two or more sectors are particularly welcome.

We are interested in unsuccessful initiatives as much as those that have worked. Some circular programmes become established, while others lose momentum or collapse soon after their launch. In some cases, circular approaches compete with other policy choices, including waste to energy incineration and large centralised treatment plants. What explains these different trajectories? We welcome papers that examine the political, institutional and practical factors shaping such outcomes.

The panel encourages comparisons across countries, cities, levels of government and periods of time. Comparisons between the Global North and Global South are particularly welcome, given that much of the

thinking on the circular economy originated in high income settings. Single case studies are also invited where they address wider questions in public policy. We welcome qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research, including policy analysis and programme evaluation. Conceptual contributions that advance the understanding of the circular economy from a public policy perspective are also encouraged.

References

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· Milios, L. (2018). Advancing to a circular economy: Three essential ingredients for a comprehensive policy mix. Sustainability Science, 13(3), 861–878.

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