

VIEWPOINT

IDENTIFYING THE RIGHT

circular vocabulary and stakeholders

Circular economy developments often focus on the technology, but to be successful we need to define a common vocabulary and involve the right stakeholders.

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While not entirely new in concept, the circular economy, in relation to water, is still in its infancy. Scientists, governments, water utilities and environmental professionals around the world are still figuring out what it means from a technical perspective.

As a result, we lack a common framing and related vocabulary when talking about the water in the circular economy. Many existing developments focus on the technologies as resulting products. However, water in a circular context is more than a product – it is a vector of energy, resources, and materials; it is an enabler. Because of these many functions granted by its unique properties, water is also difficult, if not sometimes impossible, to replace. Yet, the role of water is often misunderstood.

Instead, several environmental initiatives are being reframed and labelled with a circular badge as part of the anticipated “Great Reset”, or “Green Recovery” from the Covid-19 pandemic. We need to be careful here: just because we assign fancy labels or buzzwords, it does not mean all activities are truly circular.

IDENTIFYING A COMMON VOCABULARY

So, what needs to happen? With any collaboration, it is important to identify a common vocabulary and a shared understanding of the problems at hand. For example, for the EU Horizon 2020 B-WaterSmart project (grant ID: 869171), we

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are spending a lot of time building the concept of “water smartness”.

The project is highly transdisciplinary. It brings together different backgrounds, knowledge, cultures, social structures through a wide range of stakeholders in different European countries. As a result, it is important that we co-create a common concept. All stakeholders can then recognise their own perspectives in the central collaboration. From this foundation, we can work together, each one contributing with their own expertise across the four-year project.

This project, as other H2020 projects like ULTIMATE and Water Mining, offers an opportunity for water utilities to be involved at the very beginning in the co-design of circular economy solutions together with all relevant stakeholders, rather than simply implementing decisions made by others.

An understanding of the history and cultures where we aim to embed new, circular water solutions is also vital. For example, in some locations, effects from past events may continue to erode the trust of the local communities today. This, in turn, may affect the understanding and acceptance of new technologies and solutions, thus making it difficult for stakeholders to come to a shared vision and plan of actions.

The key is understanding your audience first, by listening. Who are you talking to? What are you trying to communicate in that location? What are their problems? And what is the background and a history of the people you are talking to? Once that has been established, you can build a shared understanding and related language to communicate effectively.

STAKEHOLDERS AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

As well as defining the common vocabulary and language, it is equally important to identify the right people to involve. After all, these stakeholders will accompany you on the journey for four years, in the context of the H2020 projects! There is a risk that if you do not engage with the relevant individuals from different sectors and societal domains (public organizations, businesses, scientific community, resource management professionals, NGOs, etc.) from the start, you may end up with the wrong final product, or taking the wrong path, or seeing the project products being rejected by those for which they were created in the first place.

An important stakeholder group is the public. Engagement with the public on circular water problems and solutions is still at an early stage. For communities, a key concern remains access to reliable, safe, and clean water from their taps. Energy and cost improvements or technological development, often associated with the circular economy, do not resonate

with the public so much, at least not just yet. To connect with the public, you need to demonstrate that new opportunities provided by the circular economy are underpinned by robust science and safe processes.

Storytelling is one of the most effective ways to communicate with the public, together with being empathetic. Once you know your audience, understand the fears or the doubts or the needs of the public, and then build a narrative and a story that connects. Use short videos and engaging infographics, which can be well received.

Of course, benefits from a circular approach go beyond safety and have wider advantages for the environment. So, who is speaking for nature? These stakeholders, including non-governmental officials (NGOs) also need to have a voice at the table.

We are at the start of a circular journey. Let us ensure that as we are putting together the scientific and technical puzzles, we are not ignoring the equally important vocabulary, people, and environmental pieces as well. www.wwa.eu

