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Perspective

## Towards circular justice: A proposition

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There is an elephant in the room which is: The social impacts of the circular economy (CE) on low- to upper-middle-income countries. CE has been heralded as a perpetual motion machine for many years now, allegedly bringing about economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social equity at the same time. While only relatively few have studied the social implications of CE so far, those who have focused on them have been unequivocal in their judgement: There will be more and better jobs in the CE. For instance, estimates for CE-induced net job creation potential in the European Union (EU) reach from 580,000 to up to 2 million jobs; one calculation even outlines that the Netherlands alone may generate up to 710,000 jobs with CE (Repp et al., 2021).

This may be true. Yet CE-induced job creation is not always a win-win-game. Consider the example of a circular textiles industry. A world in which each jeans is leased and ultra-durable, in which vintage shops replace fast fashion, is a world with far fewer textiles jobs in low- to upper-middle-income countries. It is the take-make-use-dispose mentality of Western consumers that keeps the garment factories in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal up and running. Indeed, Repp et al. (2021) estimate that up to 85,000 jobs in the textiles industry may be gained in the EU by going circular; at the same time, up to 756,000 jobs may be lost in low- to upper-middle income countries. These are explosive figures.

Arguably, these garment factories do not provide what the International Labor Organization (ILO) calls decent jobs. But they do provide jobs and with them income, livelihoods – at times even some kind of opportunity. It is our very task as academicians to contribute to a discourse that acknowledges the trade-offs and complexity that are brought about by transitioning to a CE. This includes providing figures on possible CE-induced job losses in the Global South. We academicians need to finally stop being the cheerleaders of CE. We can leave the cheering to the policymakers and businesses who are anyways much better at it than we are.

I ended up as a circular economy scholar by chance. Indeed, I started my academic career as a social scientist studying the social impacts of hydropower dams in Southeast Asia – a topic so exciting, but also so niche that only a pivot to CE would provide some employment for me in

the academy. Yet I owe to this early research my interest in the social questions of sustainability transitions. After all, there are only very few scholars in the energy transitions community that do not have social sustainability on the top of their minds.

However, energy scholars have also been blind for many years regarding the social sustainability dimension. The energy transition was solely about, well, shifting to renewable energies – at times at all costs and at the greatest speed possible. Only recently this community started paying attention to the socioeconomic implications of this transition. These are now studied under the concept of energy justice – a concept embracing recognitional, procedural and distributional justice (Jenkins et al. 2015). The concept asks: Who is possibly ignored in the energy transition? Is there a fair process for all stakeholders? Where are the injustices? Much work, for instance, has been developed under this concept now on how to deal with renewable energy transition-induced rising energy costs for low-income consumers.

Echoing the scholarship on energy justice, I propose the concept of *circular justice* in this commentary. This is not meant to only add another buzzword to the discourse. Rather, it hopes to inspire the CE community to follow the journey of the energy transitions community towards social sustainability. Just like energy justice, *circular justice* is about recognitional, procedural and distributional justice. Accordingly, I propose that *circular justice* refers to, as also depicted in Figure 1: recognizing the full breadth of communities impacted by (shifting to) a circular economy – in particular communities of the Global South; fairly incorporating in particular marginalized communities into relevant decision-making processes; equitably distributing the benefits and costs of (shifting towards) a circular economy. (This definition is meant as a tentative. I encourage our scholarly community to only consider it as a starting point for work on this topic.)

The journey of the CE community towards social sustainability and a just transition starts with recognition. Thus far, 95% of scholarly works on CE have focused on developed economies (Friant et al., 2020). This urgently needs to change if we want the scholarly CE community to contribute to a just transition. While some papers have been published recently on CE implementation in Southeast Asia or South America,

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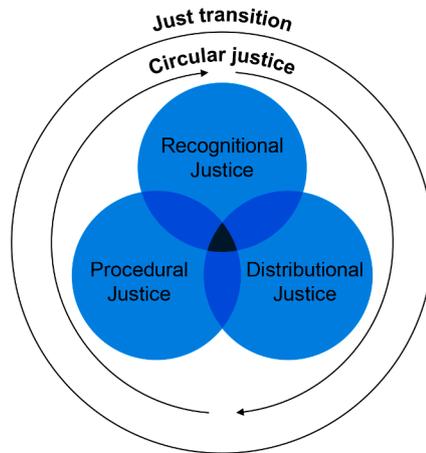


Fig. 1. Conceptualizing Circular Justice.

### Recognitional Justice

Recognize the full breadth of communities impacted by (shifting towards) a circular economy

### Procedural Justice

Fairly incorporate in particular marginalized communities into relevant decision-making processes

### Distributive Justice

Equitably distribute the benefits and costs of (shifting towards) a circular economy

these are all too easily missed in the vast amounts of Western-centric CE scholarship churned out every day. Only once the perspectives of those in the Global South are recognized, we can start defining processes and suggesting distributions that create a CE that is a win-win for all involved.

While the negative impacts of CE on the textiles sector in low- to upper-middle-income countries are intuitive, there may be many more sectors out there where similar negative impacts are to be found. For instance, what will happen to employment if the electronics industry goes circular? What about tourism? And what about the logistics industry, arguably a core underlying CE enabler, where the mantra of 'reverse logistics for CE' is oftentimes preached, but barely practiced so far? Who will lose, who will gain? What are the unintended consequences on the global labor markets? At this stage, we do not even know what we do not know.

There are many reasons to be utterly frustrated with the scholarly field of CE – a field which is possibly the most vibrant field right now in the realms of sustainability research (Geissdoerfer et al., 2017). The main reason I am frustrated these days with our field is, though, its utter negligence of CE's social impacts.

My article on the 114 definitions of CE unleashed much research on the definitional nuances of this hyped concept. I hoped it helped to provide a common footing for the literature. Similarly, I now hope that this commentary proposing the concept of *circular justice* will unleash

much research on the manifold social impacts of CE. We as a community have argued for a long time that the field is ignoring CE's social impacts. Yet works on the social impacts of CE remain far and few between. Maybe the term *circular justice* can provide the focal point for scholars to unite behind. In any case: I cannot see a single additional paper conceptualizing CE.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

There are no interests to declare.

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