

Talking Circular Economy: World Circular Economy Forum 2024 Unveiled

by Anjali Taneja and Piotr Barczak.

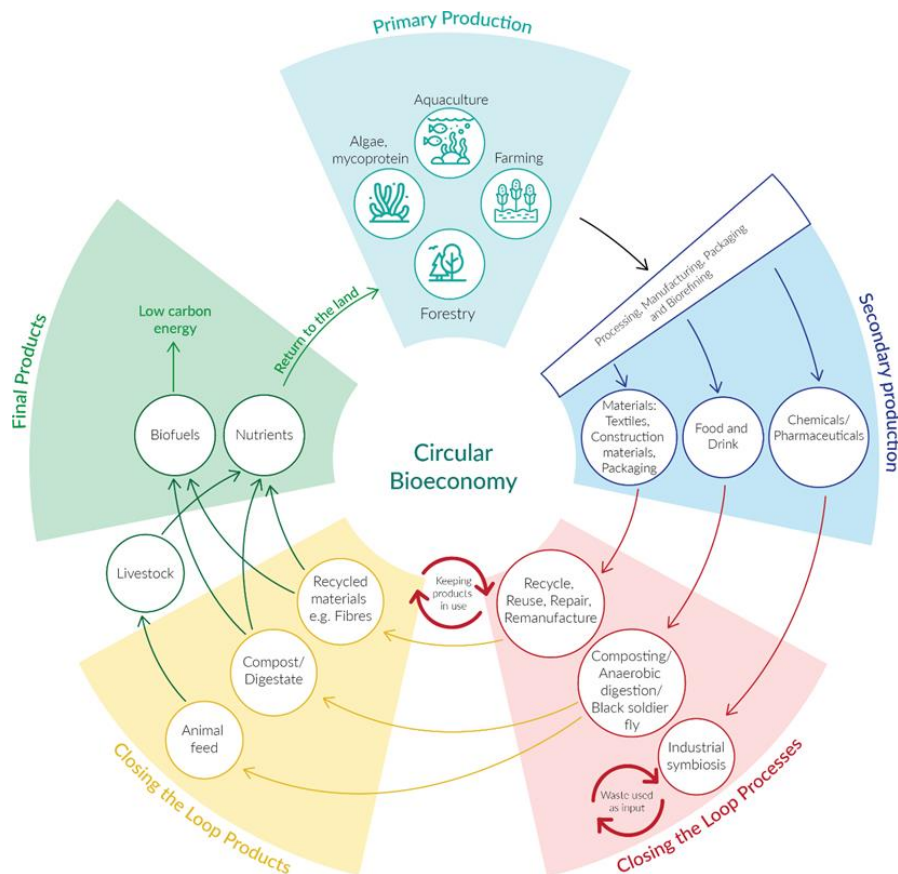
The first blog delved into the principles and relevance of circular economy (CE) in reducing the overconsumption of finite resources. In this concluding blog, we share our experiences from the World Circular Economy Forum (WCEF) 2024, held during the beginning of the financial year 2024–25 in Brussels, the capital of Belgium and a hub of policymaking in Europe.

The WCEF 2024 gathered over 1,500 people from nearly 168 countries and more than 9,800 viewers online. Over 4 days, the forum brought together players from all sectors of the economy, representatives of municipalities, and policymakers from around the world. Further, 160 speakers shared their perspectives and key insights across 4 plenaries and 16 parallel sessions. On the sidelines, 11 workshops and 55 accelerator sessions were hosted by the forum partners and collaborators on diverse topics with circularity at its core.

Learnings and experiences

The WCEF 2024 was a complete package of interesting discourses, great insights, and diverse experiences. Here, we reflect on some of our key learnings.

1. It is well acknowledged that the transformation to a CE is a systemic change that cannot happen overnight with just some magic wand. Therefore, consistent policies or strategies driving CE must be formulated and enforced bearing in mind longevity, offering a level playing field for circular businesses to thrive, and ensuring overall sustainability in the long run. The key takeaway is to ensure that the linear economy is disincentivised and circular practices are nudged both economically and by regulation.
2. Investing in circularity is imperative to reap long-term benefits from circular practices. In other words, green finance is the way forward for circular models to be successful. Moreover, the industry needs to carefully examine and consider the long-term 'real costs' (that include social and environmental costs) in the financial evaluations of its projects to embrace sustainability in the truest sense.
3. Nature-based or circular bioeconomy solutions also occupied some room for discourse and discussions for the first time in this year's WCEF. A bioeconomy that is circular and regenerative in nature could attenuate the effects of climate change while increasing food security, income generation capacity, and jobs, apart from safeguarding the wider economic and social well-being of the population. A [white paper](#) on circular bioeconomy, released at WCEF 2024, underscores its drivers and benefits, especially in the context of the Global South. It presents a framework — consisting of four building blocks — to enable a smooth transition to a circular bioeconomy and describes a comprehensive roadmap for informed decision-making and real action.



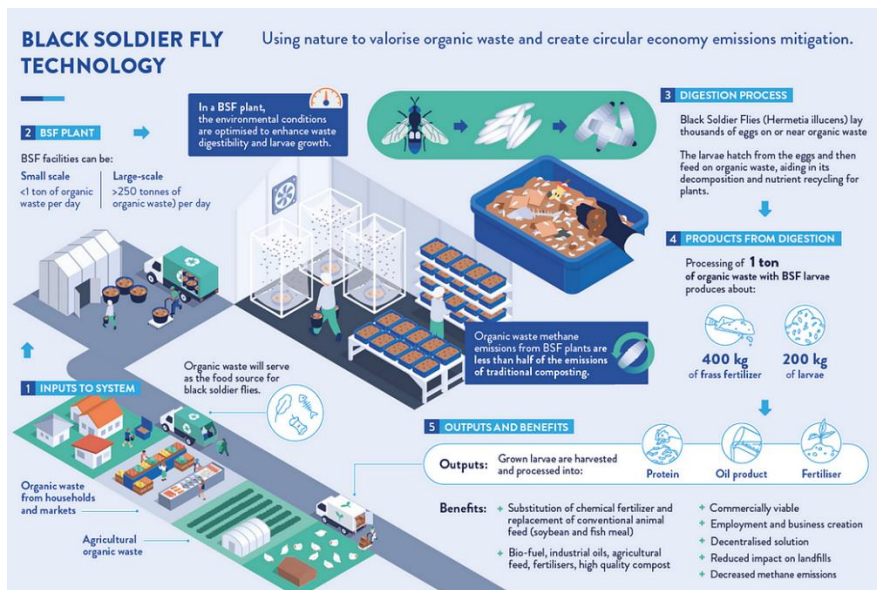
Defining a circular bioeconomy (source: Center for Study of Science, Technology and Policy [CSTEP])



A roadmap to achieve a circular bioeconomy (source: CSTEP)

4. In developing countries, waste management presents challenges, particularly with landfilling mixed waste, which emits methane and harms the climate. However, addressing organic waste by separating it at the source and treating it through various techniques is a straightforward solution with significant impact. Further, given the large proportion of organic waste in the overall waste stream, this approach is highly effective. In addition, composting with Black Soldier Fly (BSF) technology offers valuable outputs such as proteins, oils, and concentrated natural fertilizer. Before being used, this fertilizer can be anaerobically digested, generating biomethane that can be used as a fuel. The ACEN Foundation, which is currently

implementing [BSF projects](#) in three African countries, presented briefly at the WCEF 2024 session ‘Unveiling bio-based solutions from the Global South’.



Black Soldier Fly technology (source: Climate and Clean Air Coalition [CCAC])

5. Amidst the ongoing debates surrounding human-induced climate change, the carbon footprint of materials remains a challenge yet to be appropriately addressed. At the WCEF, plenty of knowledge exchanges revolved around preventing e-waste and exploring circularity solutions for critical raw materials (CRMs). Discussions covered topics such as enhancing the recycling rates of CRMs, prioritising the use of alternative materials or reducing demand, examining the implementation of policies directed towards extending the products’ lifecycle, and encouraging the adoption of business models (e.g. material-as-a-service or product-as-a-service model) that change the ownership.

6. Thought-provoking sessions were held on managing textile and apparel waste and streamlining policies around it. Discussions were centred around rediscovering the value of discarded textile and apparel waste, keeping the legislative processes inclusive of all relevant stakeholders, streamlining Extended Producer Responsibility guidelines for defining accountability or responsibility of handling waste, ensuring organised value chains to avoid waste leakages at different levels, and promoting sustainable innovation beyond traditional recycling.

7. Another interesting discussion was featured around identifying mechanisms for sustainable urban development. The key message was that sustainable urban development is now an ‘immediate mandate’ rather than just an aspiration. Further, it includes the Global South, where much of the infrastructure is yet to be built. Reflections were made on urban design, spatial and land-use planning, suitable public infrastructure development to prioritise access over ownership, and various regulations to promote urban innovations.

8. Reflections on our past are imperative to drive our future. Transitioning to a CE requires innovative collaborations that are not only regional or domestic but also inter-regional and multi-sectoral — among government, industries, academia, civil society, etc. Leveraging the expertise of different economies could be extremely beneficial for a greener and more sustainable planet.

Where are we heading?

Whatever new and old technologies were discussed at WCEF, the key message is clear: the CE must prioritise sufficiency as a key principle. Well, we strongly believe that our present choices as consumers, business leaders, researchers, decision-makers, and policy-makers have a direct impact on our future. So, let us make the future liveable and sustainable.

Taking our learning from this year's WCEF, we feel that future forums could also consider discourses surrounding foresight or future thinking (i.e. developing enough capacities in the present for future preparedness), inter-generational balances to ensure the needed transformation in mindsets and behaviours, ways to create more circular jobs, and finally, solutions to reinforce greater collaborations between the Global North and Global South, capitalising on each other's comparative advantages.

As we walk the talk, let us not forget that each of our actions could together either 'make' or 'break' circularity. It is up to us to make the right choice to have the kind of world we would want to live in.

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