

The circular economy

An economic and environmental opportunity
for Switzerland?



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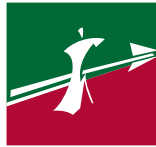
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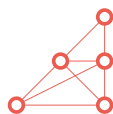
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This special report was produced by CleantechAlps in close collaboration with Sofies.
Rytec Circular has also contributed to this document.

The circular economy: unparalleled societal growth



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Planet Earth is a finite resource. For nearly two and a half centuries, we have been building an 'unnatural' world, consuming this resource with no thought to its protection and preservation for the future. In the first quarter of the 21st century, we find ourselves at a crossroads with unprecedented potential for growth. We must renew, reconstruct and continue to build a world that will provide a safe home for existing and future generations.

To take up the opportunities that present themselves to humanity, we must commit to an unfaltering transition to a sustainable economy. This radical change requires us to find the answers to issues of many kinds: political, industrial, environmental and social. And if we are to succeed in this evolution, we must change our perception and our mindset too.

Our impact on the development of human society does not end with the last link in the production/consumption chain; it goes back to the origin of every component of this chain and throughout the transformation it undergoes. Now that we know our space is finite, we are all too aware of the inescapable necessity of thinking in terms of a circular economy. The raw materials that we start with, both in terms of the finished products they make and the manufacturing residue and end-of-life waste they generate, demand a fresh approach, reallocating them to repeated cycles of transformation and consumption.

The circular economy leads to a reduction in waste, inefficiency, built-in obsolescence and the depletion of resources. It creates new jobs and fosters the development of new industries while protecting the environment. It offers us as yet unexplored horizons with a positive impact on society that we must encourage at all costs.

The lifeblood of success is finance. It is imperative that it is allowed to return to the natural pace of the real economy. It is essential that we offer investors ad hoc investment vehicles.

«This will be a small, closed, limited, planetary society, almost certainly dependent on solar energy for its input or power, and it will have to recycle virtually all its materials into a circular economy, in which the dumps become the mines¹ .

It was with this sentence that the British-born American economist Kenneth E. Boulding put forward

the concept of the circular economy in 1972, comparing Planet Earth to a spaceship with limited resources. Today, the circular economy presents itself as a sustainable alternative to the linear economy, the sole economic model in place since the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. Kenneth E. Boulding's pioneering vision lies at the heart of numerous organisations such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and World Economic Forum, organisations that are promoting the circular economy and the potential for economic growth that it represents.

The aim of this special report is to show how the circular economy can benefit the key sectors of the economy. Switzerland may not be a circular economy pioneer, but a multitude of circular economy good practices exist and thrive here. It is our responsibility to share and pass on these good practices and to develop the framework conditions that will enable us to meet the current and future challenges we face in consuming our natural resources.

In 2020, the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting unprecedented worldwide economic crisis have pushed the circular economy into the limelight. Numerous studies all over the world indicate that a closed-circuit economy reduces the risks and negative impacts of health or environmental crises. This is because a circular economy improves security of supply of raw materials and considerably reduces dependence on imported goods.

The first part of this report, which provides an overview of the circular economy concept, its advantages and its limits, is followed by a second chapter describing the current political and economic climate in Switzerland. The main part then focuses on seven sectors of the Swiss economy: food production, construction, consumer goods, the machinery industry, luxury goods and watchmaking, finance and tourism. While more progress has been made in some sectors than in others, innovative examples are to be found in each of them. There is still a long way to go, but the way ahead is clear. In developing and fostering good practices, Switzerland can draw inspiration from those already in motion at home and around the world.