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## ► To cite this version:

Teresa Haukkala. The EU Circular Economy Action Plan: Key Assumptions and Strategic Risks. LIEPP Policy Brief n°79, 2025, pp.8. <hal-05087218>

**HAL Id: hal-05087218**

**<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-05087218v1>**

Submitted on 27 May 2025

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# The EU Circular Economy Action Plan: Key Assumptions and Strategic Risks

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## ABSTRACT

This Policy Brief analyzes the European Union's Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP) and its key assumptions for achieving 2030 objectives. Using the STEEP (Social, Technological, Economic, Ecological, Political) framework, it critically examines three core assumptions: increasing recycled content in products, empowering consumers and public buyers, and promoting new circular business models. While each offers potential for environmental and economic benefits, significant barriers remain, including technological limitations, consumer behavior challenges, and policy fragmentation. The brief offers concrete policy recommendations and public action leads to strengthen implementation, emphasizing the need for coordinated EU strategies, infrastructure investment, and inclusive transition measures to ensure the success of the circular economy shift.

## RÉSUMÉ

Ce Policy Brief analyse le Plan d'action de l'Union européenne pour une économie circulaire (PAEC) et ses principales hypothèses en vue des objectifs de 2030. En s'appuyant sur le cadre STEEP (Social, Technologique, Économique, Écologique, Politique), il examine trois hypothèses clés : l'augmentation de la teneur en matériaux recyclés, l'autonomisation des consommateurs et des acheteurs publics, ainsi que la promotion de nouveaux modèles d'économie circulaire. Malgré leur potentiel, plusieurs obstacles subsistent, notamment des limites technologiques, des comportements de consommateurs peu alignés et une fragmentation des politiques publiques. Le document propose des recommandations concrètes et des pistes d'action publique pour réussir la transition vers une économie circulaire durable.

*This contribution is a revised and modified version of the policy paper:*

HAUKKALA, T. 2025. *European sustainability targets and policy assumptions in 2030 and beyond: a foresight assessment for circular economy. A background study for a report ETC ST Report 2024/7: Foresight and Policy: Future-Proofing the Assumptions Behind Policies for a Greener Europe by the European Environment Agency (EEA).*

\*L'auteur adhère à la charte de déontologie du LIEPP disponible en ligne et n'a déclaré aucun conflit d'intérêt potentiel.

Comment citer cette publication :

Teresa Haukkala, The EU Circular Economy Action Plan: Key Assumptions and Strategic Risks, LIEPP Policy Brief, n°79, 2025-05-28.

## Introduction

Europe aims to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. To achieve this ambitious goal, the European Commission proposed the European Green Deal in 2019, a comprehensive plan to transform the European Union’s (EU) economy into one that is both fair and sustainable. The Green Deal seeks to ensure net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, decouple economic growth from resource use, and leave no person or place behind in this transformation (European Commission, 2019).

In March 2020, the European Commission introduced a new Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP), setting targets for 2030 and 2050. This plan builds on the initial action plan from 2015 and serves as a cornerstone of the European Green Deal. The updated plan outlines strategies to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 and decouple economic growth from resource use, developed collaboratively with economic actors, consumers, citizens, and civil society organizations. Key elements of the action plan include designing sustainable products and promoting sustainable services and business models as the norm, empowering consumers and public buyers to adopt consumption patterns that prevent waste generation, fostering circularity in production processes, with a focus on key product value chains such as electronics and information and communication technology (ICT), batteries and vehicles, packaging, plastics, textiles, construction, food, water, and nutrients, enhancing waste policies, promoting a toxic-free environment, and creating a functioning EU market for secondary raw materials, and addressing waste exports from the EU. The EU aspires to lead the global circular economy while ensuring the transition benefits people, regions, and cities alike (European Commission, 2020).

This policy brief highlights the EU-level policy framework that supports the development of objectives, the roadmap for achieving those objectives, and the key assumptions underpinning the 2030 goals. Whilst visions and roadmaps are always aiming at a desired future, it is necessary to critically examine how possible it is to reach the goals set in the visions. Therefore, this policy brief aims at answering the following research questions: 1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of

the key assumptions of the Circular Economy Action Plan for achieving the 2030 objectives? 2) What risks and challenges might occur in implementing the CEAP?

The policy brief is based on a policy paper prepared by the author for the European Environment Agency (EEA). The material consists of a desk study on the CEAP and other material on the European Commission’s website. The key assumptions of the CEAP are analysed by the STEEP framework, which evaluates the social, technological, economic, ecological, and political dimensions (Table 1). This comprehensive approach allows for a balanced assessment of how these assumptions may contribute to the circular economy’s goals, while also identifying possible risks and alternative outcomes.

## Circular economy: policies, priorities, and contexts

A circular economy is a business model that aims to eliminate waste and make the most of resources. The objectives of the Circular Economy Action Plan aim to protect the environment by addressing critical issues such as slowing down the depletion of natural resources, reducing total annual greenhouse gas emissions, minimizing waste generation, decreasing dependency on raw materials, creating jobs, and saving consumers money (European Parliament, 2023).

To achieve these goals, the plan outlines various measures, including stricter recycling regulations and binding targets for material use and consumption (European Parliament, 2023). The focus shifts from recycling to prioritizing design, reuse, sharing, durability, and repair. Key priorities in the plan include addressing essential product value chains, implementing additional measures to reduce waste, enhancing waste management responsibilities within the EU, and ensuring a well-functioning internal market for high-quality secondary raw materials (European Commission, 2020).

The objectives align with the European Green Deal and are consistent with several global sustainability goals. For instance, one of the eight United Nations Millennium Development Goals is to

Table 1: STEEP analysis framework

Social	Technological	Economic	Ecological	Political
Social changes (demographic change, change of people, behaviour and lifestyle)	Technological advance and integration (innovations and product development trends)	Economic environments (overall economic growth, interest, income, market and competitor)	Ecological impacts of products and/or services, both physically and biologically	Political changes involving laws, regulations and policies (development goals, incentives or policy burdens)

ensure environmental sustainability, a key focus of the circular economy. Additionally, the circular economy promotes other goals, such as fostering Global Partnerships for Development. Close collaboration among EU countries could create opportunities to build strong global partnerships and extend circular economy efforts to support countries outside the EU.

### 1.1. Achieving EU circular economy goals: policies and strategies

The European Green Deal outlines a roadmap to transform the EU's economy into a sustainable model by advancing the circular economy while ensuring a fair and inclusive transition for all. The CEAP introduces a range of policy instruments and strategies to meet these objectives. The combined use of the policy instruments and targeted measures ensures a comprehensive approach to achieving the EU's circular economy objectives, promoting sustainability across sectors while encouraging innovation and collaboration. In this action plan, circularity is considered essential for achieving climate neutrality. The European Commission aims to assess how circularity impacts climate change mitigation and adaptation, improve greenhouse gas emission reduction models, and strengthen the role of circularity in climate policies. The Commission has also taken steps to incorporate circular economy objectives into the EU Taxonomy Regulation and EU Ecolabel for financial products, while promoting economic tools such as environmental taxation. For businesses, the transition is supported by investments in research, innovation, and digitalization (European Commission, 2020).

### 1.2. Sectoral priorities and value chain transformation

The CEAP 2020 focuses on four main themes: 1) making sustainable products the norm in the EU, 2) empowering consumers, 3) enhancing product lifetime through sector-specific actions, and 4) reducing waste. The action plan also focuses on several key value chains — electronics and ICT, vehicles and batteries, packaging, plastics, textiles, construction, buildings, food, and water. Across these sectors, key measures include extending product lifetimes, increasing reuse and recycling, promoting sustainable sourcing and labelling, improving data collection and harmonization, and encouraging the use of bio-based materials.

## Assessing the core assumptions of the EU Circular Economy Action Plan toward 2030 goals

This chapter critically examines the key assumptions underlying the CEAP and highlights three essential assumptions for further analysis. The three selected assumptions for achieving the 2030 targets are: 1) increasing recycled content in products, 2) empowering consumers and public

buyers, and 3) adopting new business models. Next, each assumption's strengths and weaknesses are briefly explored applying a STEEP analysis.

### 2.1 Increasing recycled content in products

The primary strength of increasing recycled content in products is its potential to reduce waste and material consumption. Circular product design promotes longevity, repairability, and recyclability of materials. For this to be effective, designers must be trained in circular design principles and involved from the initial stages of raw material selection and production. Collaboration with technical experts is essential to optimize production processes and ensure product sustainability.

However, this assumption also has significant weaknesses. The quality of collected materials may be inconsistent or poor, and not all materials are suitable for recycling. Additionally, the cost gap between recycled and virgin materials has narrowed, making recycled materials less economically attractive. A growing demand for recycled materials could drive up their prices, and in some cases, using recycled materials may even result in a larger carbon footprint (Lakhan, 2021). Transparency in material flows is often lacking (Pantzar and Suljada, 2020), and without proper oversight, recycling could increase exposure to harmful chemical substances present in used materials (OECD, 2018).

Critics of the circular economy argue that achieving a future with closed material loops — where waste is eliminated, and materials are infinitely recycled — is practically impossible. Corvellec et al. (2022) highlight the concept of “dissipation and entropy” meaning that every cycle results in physical material losses and degradation of material quality (Cullen, 2017). To sustain any material loop, new materials and energy must be continually introduced.

Technological and economic limitations make completely closed material loops unattainable (Lazarevic and Valve, 2017). Thus, increasing recycled content in products will not necessarily guarantee less waste, as some materials simply cannot be recycled. Furthermore, it is uncertain whether using recycled materials will consistently result in a smaller carbon footprint. The idea of eliminating waste entirely may not be feasible.

Consumers may feel hesitant about purchasing products made from recycled materials, often perceiving them as lower quality. On the other hand, such products align well with the values and lifestyles of environmentally conscious consumers. Despite growing environmental awareness, it has not yet significantly influenced consumer choices. More efforts are needed to raise awareness, starting from early education with children to shift mindsets. In times of crisis, consumers also tend to prioritize safety and financial security over environmental concerns.

Innovation plays a crucial role in ensuring that products made from recycled materials have a

comparable lifespan and quality to those made from virgin materials. Circular design practices are still limited and need to be significantly strengthened. Providing financial support for developing innovative solutions and creating platforms for technological advancements is essential. Collaboration between industries and universities, incentivized through funding, can foster creativity and produce valuable results. Investment in education, creative problem-solving, and coaching can help generate new solutions. However, without adequate funding, there is a risk that these initiatives will not materialize. Conversely, proper investment can lead to long-term benefits such as new collaborations and environmentally friendly innovations. Differences in national waste management systems may also affect industries' ability to adopt circular production practices.

If recycled materials have a larger carbon footprint than virgin materials, they may contribute to climate change rather than mitigate it. The high energy demands associated with recycling can be problematic. However, reducing resource consumption remains critical in a world facing resource scarcity. Insufficient recycling infrastructure and services present additional challenges. Building these systems requires significant time, money, and resources.

While virgin material prices have traditionally been low, the cost gap between virgin and recycled materials is narrowing. This could encourage greater use of recycled materials, but businesses may still prefer virgin materials if they remain cheaper. High upfront investment costs act as a barrier to adopting recycled materials (Kirchherr et al., 2018). Government tax incentives could encourage businesses to choose recycled materials and make more sustainable decisions.

Stable political decisions are essential for companies to plan and implement changes effectively. Companies need sufficient time to adapt to new regulations — otherwise, only large corporations may have the resources to comply. Integrating circular economy principles into industrial strategies and offering workshops can support businesses in the transition. Providing practical advice and free resources for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) would be especially helpful. It is also important to assess whether current support measures are adequate or if penalties should be considered for areas such as production and recycling to encourage compliance.

## 2.2 Empowering consumers and public buyers

The European Commission aims to revise EU consumer law to provide consumers with reliable and relevant product information while enhancing protection against greenwashing (European Commission, 2020).

The main strength of empowering consumers and public buyers lies in the belief that while both top-down and bottom-up approaches are essential for driving change, the motivation and initiative from consumers are particularly significant. Consumer-driven change can lead to long-term adjustments in behavior and consumption habits.

However, relying solely on consumers to make sustainable choices may not always result in the desired changes. If consumers are unwilling to modify their behavior, companies are not obliged to adjust their production practices. Additionally, economic growth at a societal level is still largely dependent on increasing material consumption, which may hinder progress toward circularity. Without sufficient motivation, peer pressure, or incentives, the necessary behavioral changes may not occur on the required scale. Consumers face numerous trade-offs and difficult choices, which can create an overwhelming burden. It is unrealistic to expect consumers alone to shoulder the responsibility for driving the transition toward a circular economy. The assumption relies on the

***“Circular economy success relies on policy coordination, public support, and steady investment.”***

belief that people care about mitigating climate change and are willing to support the circular economy. However, it can be challenging to shift people's mindsets —

many may resist purchasing recycled products in favor of new ones. Building trust and changing values are necessary for long-term success.

Technological solutions can also help empower consumers and influence behavior. For example, offering incentives to return used devices to stores for recycling could encourage consumers to act more sustainably. However, there is currently a lack of sufficient repair services and businesses in the repair sector to meet consumer needs. Developing more accessible repair systems is crucial. Cities should be required to develop comprehensive recycling plans and provide easily accessible recycling facilities. Introducing a deposit system for recycling could increase participation. Without adequate infrastructure, consumers have limited opportunities to recycle effectively.

Economic incentives play a key role in encouraging people to change their consumption habits. Offering financial benefits, such as discounts for returning used products or tax breaks for purchasing circular products, can promote behavioral change. Empowering consumers follows a bottom-up approach, which has the potential to influence policy shifts over time. However, in times of crisis price and safety take priority over sustainability. New policies must be designed to address these challenges. For example, creating laws that mandate a product return policy for faulty or short-lived items could be beneficial. Implementing mandatory recycling plans for companies could

ensure that consumers have options to return and recycle products if personal recycling is not feasible. Without updated policies, the risk of the CEAP failing to meet its goals increases.

### 2.3 New business models

Circular business models represent alternative ways of doing business. These models focus on reducing the use of virgin materials by replacing them with recycled materials or repurposing waste into raw materials for new products. They may also be based on extending product life, sharing resources, or offering services instead of physical products. The core advantage of these new business models is the shift from ownership to access. Consumers become users, and products are transformed into services, resulting in lower resource consumption and increased efficiency.

However, these business models are often experimental and require creativity and innovation. Not all consumers are ready to embrace concepts like renting, leasing, and sharing. Furthermore, businesses may need to collaborate with external partners to fill gaps in expertise. Market conditions also play a significant role in determining the environmental impact of circular business models. According to OECD (2018), recycling, remanufacturing, repair, and service-based models account for only about 15% of production in most sectors.

Businesses adopt varying approaches to circularity, but numerous obstacles hinder the development of circular business models. Barriers include a) technical barriers (inadequate technology or lack of technical support and training), b) economic barriers (high initial costs, uncertain returns, or capital requirements), c) institutional and regulatory barriers (lack of supportive legal frameworks or institutional structures), and d) social and cultural barriers (consumer reluctance and rigid business routines) (de Jesus & Mendonça, 2018, 78).

Even when implemented, new business models may not guarantee circularity or a reduced carbon footprint. For instance, online service-based business models might consume significant amounts of energy, even if they reduce material use. “Immaterial growth” can be highly energy-intensive, making it uncertain whether circular systems are more sustainable than linear ones (Brandão et al., 2020).

Raising awareness about new business models is crucial. Government-supported information centers could help educate companies and consumers. Developing accessible platforms that promote collaboration between non-governmental organizations and businesses would increase engagement. Without support, the risk of failure grows.

Government-driven technological units promoting global cooperation across industries could help generate innovative solutions. Creating

internet-based platforms for knowledge exchange and idea-sharing would encourage open innovation. Without these supports, there is a high risk that new business models will not succeed.

Facilitating units staffed with innovation experts could help companies generate creative solutions. Easy access to such resources at a low cost would lower entry barriers. Additionally, there is a risk that initial demand for new, eco-friendly materials may exceed supply. This makes sustained support essential for the successful implementation of circular business models.

Government incentives for hiring consultants, researchers, and experts to help businesses design circular models would reduce entry barriers. In some countries, there may be a lack of expertise in these areas, which could further hinder implementation without adequate support.

Tax incentives and simplified funding procedures are critical for promoting new business models. Reducing bureaucracy and creating more accessible funding channels would encourage innovation. Political will is necessary to ensure the plan’s success. Strategic planning and the sharing of best practices across EU countries would enhance long-term implementation and reduce the risk of failure.

### Synthesis of findings

The strength of increasing recycled content in products can reduce waste and material consumption, with circular design promoting longevity, repairability, and recyclability. For this to succeed, designers must adopt circular principles early in the process and collaborate with experts to optimize production and sustainability. However, challenges include inconsistent material quality, limited recyclability, and potential higher carbon footprints. Rising demand for recycled materials may increase costs and using them is not always environmentally superior to virgin materials.

Technological and economic limitations make fully closed material loops unrealistic, as material degradation and loss are inevitable. Consumer perceptions of recycled products as lower quality, limited innovation, and insufficient recycling infrastructure further hinder progress. Stronger investments in education, innovation, and industry collaboration are needed. Differences in national waste management systems and political stability also affect adoption. Tax incentives and clear, long-term policies can support businesses, especially Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in making the transition to a more sustainable circular economy.

Empowering consumers and public buyers are key to promoting circular solutions. The strength of consumer-driven change can create long-term shifts in behavior, while public procurement can encourage adoption of sustainable practices. However, relying solely on consumers is insufficient,

as behavioral change requires motivation, incentives, and adequate infrastructure.

Circular business models aim to reduce the use of virgin materials by promoting recycling, repurposing waste, extending product life, and shifting from ownership to access through services like renting or leasing. The strength of these models is that they offer increased efficiency and lower resource consumption. However, they remain experimental and face significant barriers, including technical limitations, high initial costs, regulatory gaps, and consumer reluctance. Even with adoption, circular business models may not always reduce carbon footprints, as energy-intensive online services can offset material savings. Without sustained support, the risk of failure is high due to limited expertise, high costs, and fluctuating demand for eco-friendly materials. Political commitment and strategic planning across EU countries are crucial for long-term success.

The circular economy objectives are closely aligned with several overarching sustainability challenges in the EU. The transition to a circular economy overlaps with other sustainability efforts, such as reducing pollution, investing in renewable and sustainable energy, strengthening energy independence, enhancing product and industrial safety, promoting responsible research and development, lobbying for environmental policy change, and accelerating the transition to clean food systems and sustainable food chains. Achieving these objectives is challenging due to the diversity of the EU member states. Challenges include funding and policy support where significant investment is required to enable companies to adopt sustainable practices, uneven commitment, as some EU countries are more engaged in promoting circularity than others. Economic disparities between nations affect their ability to prioritize and fund environmental initiatives. Public awareness is one key issue as the mindset towards recycling and resource efficiency varies across countries and even between urban and rural areas. Lack of expertise and infrastructure is a real challenge, as many regions face a shortage of experts and inadequate waste management systems. Reliable data collection and comparable reporting across countries are still underdeveloped.

There is also a need for incentives for businesses. Taxation policies and other incentives for promoting sustainability need further development to encourage companies to innovate and adopt circular practices. To overcome these challenges, there is a need for greater cooperation and the development of tools for monitoring and evaluation that are tailored to fit each country's context. Shared experiences, expertise, and best practices are essential for effective planning and implementation.

Specific measurement tools for individual industries or countries could help assess progress and ensure accountability. These disparities create obstacles to achieving the common circular economy goals across the EU. Without adequate support, the CEAP risks becoming merely a theoretical strategy without practical outcomes.

The plan's success is critical for the future of the EU and the planet. While it presents opportunities for businesses and research institutions, the proposed timeline may put excessive pressure on consumers, companies, industries, and even governments. Processes such as education, training, research, evaluation, and monitoring take time and require consistent funding and resources to ensure their successful implementation.

The circular economy must also contend with broader uncertainties. Issues such as inflation, war, epidemics, cyber-attacks, criminal activity, and greenwashing pose unpredictable risks that can disrupt progress. Furthermore, the speed of research and development (R&D) is difficult to predict. Advancements in developing environmentally friendly materials, improving product designs for durability and recyclability, and scaling new business models may not occur fast enough to meet the established targets.

The circular economy is consistent with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes the importance of sustainable consumption and production, responsible resource management, and urgent climate action to protect future generations. However, achieving these global targets is particularly challenging. The 2030 Agenda applies to countries across the globe, including those with extreme poverty, post-conflict regions, and areas without sufficient infrastructure. These global challenges mirror some of the issues faced within the EU — albeit on a less severe scale. Economic inequality, differing levels of technological infrastructure, and varying mindsets towards sustainability complicate efforts to establish a cohesive circular economy.

## Conclusions and recommendations

In conclusion, while the EU's circular economy objectives are well-aligned with broader sustainability goals — such as climate neutrality, resource efficiency, and environmental resilience — their successful implementation hinges on coordinated governance, sustained investment, and long-term strategic planning. Without comprehensive support and alignment across sectors and member states, there is a significant risk that these objectives will not reach their intended impact.

***“Circularity is key to climate neutrality but faces social, economic, and technological hurdles.”***

To strengthen the CEAP and ensure its delivery by 2030, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

**1. Strengthen circular product design** by mandating circular design principles at the EU level, with clear eco-design regulations across product value chains, by investing in education and training for designers and engineers on circularity, and by requiring lifecycle assessments and product labelling on recycled content and recyclability.

**2. Create stronger economic incentives** by offering tax incentives and subsidies for companies using recycled materials, by developing standardized financial incentives across EU countries (e.g., grants for circular innovation, R&D, start-up support), and introducing penalties for non-compliance with circular economy targets (e.g., overproduction, non-recyclable products).

**3. Revise and harmonize regulatory frameworks** by updating consumer protection laws to counter greenwashing and providing reliable circular product info, by standardizing recycling definitions and reporting across the EU to enhance traceability and comparability and supporting SMEs through simplified funding channels and reduced bureaucracy for circular initiatives.

**4. Make green public procurement mandatory**, prioritizing circular products and services, and developing model procurement criteria for municipalities and public agencies to adopt easily.

**5. Support development of circular business models** by funding pilot programs and incubators for circular service models (e.g., sharing, leasing, product-as-a-service), by supporting industry-academia collaboration platforms for co-innovation, by creating national and EU-level knowledge and innovation hubs for circular economy guidance.

**6. Improve recycling and repair infrastructure** by mandating local government recycling and repair strategies.

To further support the success of the CEAP, institutional actors and policymakers should consider promoting early education on sustainability, establishing EU-wide awareness campaigns to shift consumer behavior by introducing return schemes, deposit-refund systems, and repair incentives (e.g., vouchers, tax breaks), launching digital platforms to connect public and private circular economy actors, and ensuring a fair, inclusive transition with regional support and job retraining programs.

Together, these actions can help transform the EU's circular vision into practical, lasting change — benefiting people, the planet, and the economy alike.

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***Le LIEPP (laboratoire interdisciplinaire d'évaluation des politiques publiques) est un laboratoire d'excellence (Labex) distingué par le jury scientifique international désigné par l'Agence nationale de la recherche (ANR).***

***Il est financé dans le cadre des investissements d'avenir de l'IdEx Université Paris Cité (ANR-18-IDEX-0001).***

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