



**NO
SUSTAINABLE FUTURE
WITHOUT
A JUST, SUFFICIENT,
AND CIRCULAR
TRANSITION**

A blueprint for action
towards 2030 and beyond

Foreword

Recent years have seen the acceleration of climate change and its impact on our daily lives. Drought, forest fires, floods and other phenomena are becoming increasingly frequent and/or extreme. It is clearer than ever that safeguarding a liveable planet today and tomorrow means on the one hand to cut greenhouse gases emissions sharply and rapidly and on the other hand to prepare for future impacts of climate change¹. To put the EU in the right direction with the necessary speed to secure climate neutrality by 2050, a climate target for 2040 has been set in early 2024. Reaching this target is a mission for all of us, no matter our level of influence.

More than that, we need to realise that climate change is only one element of the environmental crisis we are facing: climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution. It not possible anymore to look at this crisis only through the prism of reducing CO₂ emissions. We urgently need to put the sustainable management of material resources at the top of the political agenda and at the heart of our actions, in the same way as energy. Without an ambitious resources strategy with clear objectives and indicators where we revise how we extract, process, consume and discard our resources, we put our future in danger.

After various proposed definitions, it is now well accepted that the term of “circular economy” refers to the concept of preserving the value of products, materials, and resources for as long as possible and minimising waste.

For nearly 15 years, resource efficiency has been on the EU’s political agenda. In March 2010, the Commission published the Europe 2020 strategy. In 2011, it is the “*Resource Efficient Europe*” roadmap, an initiative to make economic growth sustainable by decoupling it from the use of resources. In 2014, the Commission adopted the idea of circular economy in its communication for the first time, with the so-called circular economy package 1.0. Between 2015 and 2020, the EU has adopted several pieces of law, invested nearly EUR80 billion in R&I², dedicated EUR4.3 billion of cohesion policy to waste prevention, reuse and recycling and EUR1.5 billion in environmentally friendly production processes and resource efficiency³. Efforts have been made but we are far away from a complete implementation of the European 2020 circular economy action plan.

Projections on waste production are pessimistic, with waste generation not likely to decrease seeing the return to economic growth (the decrease noted between 2010 and 2020 is recent (2018-2020) and due to the pandemic.)⁴. We are still deeply dependent on raw material importation. As a striking example, the EU only produces around 3% of the primary raw materials necessary to meet the growing demand for metals⁵. Most importantly, we are still missing a clear connection between CO₂ emissions and circular economy and, in general, all the benefits that circular economy can bring to sustainability and to improve our environment.

In 2019, ACR+ launched its campaign “*More Circularity, Less Carbon*”, highlighting the local carbon footprint of material resources and waste. Five years after shedding light on the link between circular economy and climate mitigation, we want to go further. We want to promote new indicators at local, regional, and European level that integrate circular economy benefits to monitor our progress towards our joint goals of mitigating climate change, strengthening biodiversity, and guaranteeing well-being, prosperity, and health for all. We want to make decision-makers aware of the need to adopt a holistic approach, to push for more integrated and circular policies as a solution to the challenges threatening our planet and future.

It is time for cities and regions to lead the game. We hope to inspire them to drive their environmental policies towards sustainable consumption and production models, respecting the planet boundaries and ensuring everyone’s basic needs. Because once again, it is about joining forces, working together and complementing each other in an ever-shorter timeframe to ensure a sustainable future.

This new strategy is our call to action for a just, sufficient, and circular transition.

1. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Sixth Assessment Report, Synthesis report; Climate change (2023)

2. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_24_461

3. https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/policy/themes/environment/circular_economy_en

4. <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/analysis/indicators/waste-generation-and-decoupling-in-europe>

5. Richard Claxton, Lucy Garland, Lewis Blannin (Aether Ltd.), ETC CM report 2024/01: Climate change mitigation through policies on waste – intersectoral analysis (2024)

ACR+ from its origins to now

Everything started with a Directive on packaging and packaging waste

In 1994, the European Commission adopted a directive⁶ setting specific targets to be achieved on the recycling of packaging waste: in particular paper, glass, aluminium and a certain type of plastic. At that time, EU local public administrations had little experience of separate waste collection. To overcome this obstacle (and to promote recycling rather than construct a new incinerator), the Director General of the Environment Department of the Brussels Region decided to initiate the creation of a European network of public authorities to exchange knowledge and good practices. Following a series of meetings and study visits, the Association of Cities for Recycling (AVR-ACR) was established in May 1994, during an international conference in Pamplona (Spain).

The following years saw AVR-ACR developing and growing, but always keeping at its core the exchange of expertise in solutions to issues around “waste-products-resources”.

The network underwent two main changes in its name, testimonies of its evolution and adaptation to the developments in the field. At the beginning of the 2000s, it became the Association of Cities and Regions for Recycling and Sustainable Resource Management and adopted the acronym ACR+, with the R+ representing the hierarchical approach to waste (the so-called multi-R approach). On turning 20, ACR+ published its “new” vision, including its activities on waste management and prevention in a broader economic context and above all anchoring itself in the concept of circular economy. In its new vision, ACR+ advocated for decentralised material resource policies based on a strict application of the waste hierarchy, where local solutions are preferred and new business models promoted in a shared governance model.

Then in 2015, “recycling” was removed to better reflect the network’s priorities and to highlight that, more than recycling, resource efficiency requires waste prevention actions, re-use and repair initiatives, the support of eco-design, the implementation of legal and economic instruments, and many other measures at different levels.

6. European Packaging and packaging waste directive 94/62/EC



The ACR+ we know

Today, the network consists of around a hundred members, gathering more than one thousand local authorities working on waste management and the circular economy. Although it has roots in Belgium, ACR+ is represented in around 23 countries of the European Union, with a particular high incidence southern countries (e.g. Spain, Portugal, Italy, France). The continuous growth of the network proves that the idea of exchanging expertise, solutions, and good practices is more than ever relevant to public authorities. It also demonstrates the willingness and commitment of public authorities within the network to support each other, to share information and experiences, and to improve their own performances in order to ultimately work together for a better environment.

ACR+ has a peer-to-peer approach, promoting a continuous exchange between the members of the network to find solutions to common problems, and to stand as a strong voice in the international arena and in the dialogue with the European institutions. ACR+ promotes capacity building of decentralised governments, informing them of the main news and decisions at European level, and disseminating reports on the various experiences of cities and regions.

Through its activities and network of experts, ACR+ provides guidance and good practices on material resource management and waste management to help members improving their expertise. ACR+ examines the different possible systems (their benefits and drawbacks, the necessary accompanying measures to ensure their effectiveness, etc.) and provides data to determine what the most appropriate instruments could be, in link with set objectives. The support offered to members is, above all, operational: for example, there are thirty-two international projects currently carried out by ACR+ with EU co-funding (e.g. H2020, Life, Interreg Europe, Interreg MED, COSME, Erasmus+). ACR+ always actively involves its members to develop pilot actions and frontrunning initiatives such as the European Week for Waste Reduction.

Environment without borders

Cooperation with countries of the European Neighbourhood and Enlargement Policies is another very important aspect of ACR+ work. The network strives to enhance capacity building of local administrators, to help local administrations draft project funding applications for various EU funding calls and, when relevant, to acquire new technologies.

Links with Southern Mediterranean territories, initiated early in the Millennium, have been strengthened since 2011. Over the last decades, the environment in the Mediterranean region has been increasingly degraded. Poorly managed waste discharges, insufficiently controlled and fast urbanisation, together with unsustainable development of industry, agriculture and tourism and with increasing shipping traffic have resulted in significant pressure on coastal and marine environments. ACR+ is convinced that a shared vision of the future based on the depollution of the Mediterranean Sea and on the natural environmental capital of the region cannot be achieved except through close cooperation between public and private actors on all of its coasts. ACR+ has, over the years, acquired specific expertise in analysing and containing marine litter in the Mediterranean.

Our vision for circular cities and regions

Vibrant cities and regions where the economic and the ecological systems go hand in hand, through policies aimed at a fair distribution of wealth and resources, a fair access to public services, while guaranteeing positive effects on the environment and public health.



**No green ambitions
will be achieved
without circular
economy**



**The transition we
need is a just
transition driven by
the sufficiency
principle**



**Cities and regions
are at the heart of
sustainability action**

In the current context (as described fully in the foreword), the above three principles are essential and non-negotiable in realising our vision.

No green ambitions will be achieved without circular economy

We currently face a triple environmental crisis as we are experiencing the effects of climate change, increasing pollution, and diminishing biodiversity. Our lifestyles, a trademark of the “anthropocene era”, are at the root of our problems: i.e. unsustainable production and over-consumption requiring excessive extraction and use of material resources beyond the planet boundaries. The initial focus on the climate change crisis, leaving aside the overall reduction of resource consumption, is not a viable solution. Currently, the global material footprint is already beyond ecological limits, above 100 billion tonnes per year and it does not look like consumption growth will stop any time soon. Against this backdrop, we must act to meet human needs with less material resources.

The EU's material footprint of 14.1 tonnes per capita in 2021 is about 40-70% higher than available estimates of sustainable levels that can be considered broadly consistent with limiting environmental pressure within planetary boundaries.

OECD, *Global Material Resources Outlook to 2060: Economic Drivers and Environmental Consequences* (2019)

The observation of the European Commission in its communication on Europe's 2040 climate target⁷ is clear. *“The Impact Assessment shows that up until 2040, the circular economy will become increasingly important to achieve both climate ambition and a new prosperity model for Europe. It is key to wed action against climate change and excessive resources use with new economic opportunities and greater EU autonomy.”*

This leaves us no alternative. We need to accelerate the circular economy transition to address unsustainable trends and find adequate solutions towards a green recovery. This is echoed in the audit report of the European Court of auditors⁸ and in *“The missing piece of the EU Green Deal: The case for an EU resources law”*⁹ a report published by OVAM, the Flemish Public Waste Agency, which mentions the need for a quicker and better implementation of the Circular Economy Action Plan. Therefore, we must work simultaneously on decarbonisation and dematerialisation¹⁰, connecting the different EU environmental policies, and developing material footprint indicators like Raw Material Consumption beside the now traditional CO₂ emissions.

7. European Commission, COM/2024/63 final (2024)

8. European Court of Auditors, *Our activities in 2022* (2023)

9. OVAM, *The missing piece of the EU Green Deal: The case for an EU resources law* (2023)

Household consumption volumes in the EU increased by over one quarter (26%) between 2000 and 2019. Volumes grew by as much as 47% for the consumption area of household goods and services (household equipment, appliances, and information and communications technology (ICT)) and 43% for consumption of services (health, education, finance, recreation and other).

European Environment Agency, *Consumption and the environment: Consumption driving environmental pressures in Europe* (2019)

From a more geopolitical point of view, circular economy has beneficial impacts as it is certain to reduce our dependence on imports of critical raw materials, reduce natural resource extraction and reduce consumption. Repairing, reusing, recycling as well as innovative business models – like product-as-a-service, shared economy or on-demand production – will all contribute to decreasing our primary raw material use. In addition, we are likely to see a global drive towards the development and promotion of environmentally friendly innovative materials and biobased materials by both research institutions and business.

10. UNEP defines dematerialization as the reduction of the throughput of materials in human societies. *UNEP, ABC Of SCP* (2010)

The transition we need is a just transition driven by the sufficiency principle

In the midst of the triple planetary crisis, there is no longer a question as to whether we need to change our resource consumption and production. The challenge, and only way forward, now is how to create, as soon as possible, the conditions for that transition and how to ensure that it is a just transition. Unfortunately, recent trends – consequences of geopolitical and economic instability and insecurities – are worrying: increases in cost of living, growing wealth and income inequality, severe climate change consequences. Faced with a questioning of its political competence, the EU must react and choose. Either it continues in this direction, or it adopts a sufficiency-driven approach to address all these challenges.

The latter is obviously the only possible path to deliver well-being and protection for all. In addition to speeding up the just transition, policymakers should adopt a holistic approach with the sufficiency principle overarching all policies. To fully achieve its goals of significant resource conservation and environmental impact reduction without giving way to rebound effects with unintended consequences, the circular transition should not be limited to recirculating resources but also ensuring that resource consumption remains within planetary boundaries.

In reducing the demand for energy, materials, land, water, and other natural resources, sufficiency policies increase autonomy, strengthen resilience, and reduce the impact of external events. In a sufficiency-based society, the delivery of products and services necessary to our well-being is guaranteed while the supporting infrastructure is optimised.

The goal of this sufficiency-based circular economy is to close the loops, reduce waste, reuse resources and restore ecosystems alongside long-term recovery measures for more resilient, sustainable and thriving societies. To avoid unintended consequences of their policies, policymakers must connect urban, environment, citizens, and wealth. Developing integrated policies (including clear and common indicators) to reduce resource use is a safety barrier to avoid discrepancies and poor efficiency of these policies. An important consideration in this discussion is the growing concern expressed by citizens about overconsumption¹¹. In other words, there would not be any legitimacy issue for public authorities to implement sufficiency policies. Research shows that in average citizens approve sufficiency policies, especially regulatory policies (followed by fiscal and economic instruments)¹², so such measures are likely to have good support among the citizenry.

11. Antoine Lucic, Bartosz Brzezinski and Jesus Urios, Our material consumption is soaring, but the Earth cannot afford Black Friday'. Policy briefing by the Institute for European Environmental Policy (2020)

12. Lage et. al., Citizens call for sufficiency and regulation — A comparison of European citizen assemblies and National Energy and Climate Plans (2023)

Sufficiency policies are a set of measures and daily practices that avoid demand for energy, materials, land and water while delivering human wellbeing-for-all within planetary boundaries .

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Sixth Assessment Report (2023)

EU citizens, when well informed of its potential, are strongly calling for sufficiency: sufficiency measures represent around 40% of all measures recommended by Climate Citizens Assemblies across the EU.





Cities and regions are in the heart of sustainability action

During the last decade, decentralised authorities, such as regions, cities, and municipalities, have proven their strategical importance, especially in relation to resilience. When it comes to developing a circular economy, such decentralised authorities are particularly well placed to lead the transition.¹³ They implement 70% of EU legislation (including the European Green Deal), handle one-third of public spending, and manage two-thirds of public investment.¹⁴ Moreover, regions, cities, and municipalities are the closest public authority to people and business. This means that they are not only instrumental to get the adhesion of the population and its commitment in public policies but also able to enter into strong partnership with the private sector to accompany circular changes there. It is thus crucial to recognise and enhance local and regional authorities' enabling role in the sustainable transition by providing them with the right instruments and resources.

13. OECD, The Circular Economy in Cities and Regions (2020)

This includes strengthening their capacities but also taking into consideration their specificities and local context which often are not echoed at national level. A more comprehensive approach should be taken at European level. For example, a lot of regional and urban initiatives have been led by the EU over the last years but, often, they lack connection between each other, are poorly monitored, or fail to involve directly public authorities. Decentralised authorities must play a significant and meaningful role in the decision-making process about policies relating to circular economy and a just transition. They are important and reliable actors across EU and international politics and administration.

Working towards circularity at local level is important and useful for many reasons. First, it reduces environmental impacts, such as those involved in transport, for instance, and lets the local economy flourish. Second, smaller territories make perfect laboratories to test innovative approaches combining natural and technological loops and connecting rural and urban. Third, but not least, local, bottom-up approaches allow sustainability to be tackled holistically while allowing the application of the principle of multi-governance. In many instances, a cultural shift towards a more resourceful and less wasteful society is easier to conduct on a smaller scale, before being extended to national and supra-national levels.

By 2050, 68% of the world population is projected to live in urban areas.

United Nations, World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision (2019)

We believe that applying the concept of territorial hierarchy (prioritising local solutions when possible) will both place cities and regions back at the centre of the chessboard and diminish the negative environmental impacts of our lifestyles. We are working towards a new way of producing and consuming while reducing the amount of resources used. This can be achieved through effective eco-design, the strict application of the waste and territorial hierarchies.

14. European Innovation Council and SMEs European Innovation Council and SMEs Executive Agency (EISMEA) and others, Local Green Deals: A Blueprint for Action: The European Commission's 100 Intelligent Cities Challenge. (2023)

What does it take to unlock the potential of circular economy in cities and regions? According to the OECD, it requires putting the necessary governance in place to create incentives (legal, financial), stimulating innovation (technical, social, institutional) and generating information (data, knowledge, capacities)¹⁵. Local and regional authorities should be encouraged and supported to include circular economy to the priorities of their "green agenda" together with mobility, clean energy and water. Transitioning to a circular economy cannot rely on national and European strategies alone.

15. OECD, The Circular Economy in Cities and Regions (2020)

Making the vision a reality: our mission

Our mission is to provide our members with concrete tools and approaches to enact the transition towards waste-free circular systems in their territories and beyond.

ACR+ is at the service of its members

ACR+ exists for and through its members. The goal is to empower them in their capacity to manage local resources, to promote efficiency of public institutions, to instigate public-private partnership, and to build trust for both citizens and the business community. The needs expressed by ACR+ members in this regard (to overcome the gaps preventing them fulfilling their key missions) determine the activities of the network. To address these needs, ACR+ is consolidating a strong pool of knowledge and technical expertise centred around five Thematic Areas (Sustainable Food Systems, Built Environment, Waste and Material Flows, Circular Lifestyles, Policy and Governance). Through these communities of practice, ACR+ streamlines its efforts in delivering impact on sustainable resources management and building empirical knowledge on key sectoral areas of relevance for members.

ACR+ is the voice of decentralised authorities

Sharing its vision and advocating for the cause of decentralised authorities is an important chapter of ACR+ activities. This entails cooperating with all the other actors and their representatives (networks, interest groups, federation, etc.) called to interact with decentralised authorities. We are especially representing the proposals of our network and defending public authorities' role and interests in the dialogue with the European and international institutions. For example, we follow the initiative work of the Commission and monitor the adoption process of new EU legislations and international initiatives under the umbrella of the SDGs concerning circular economy and material resources management.

ACR+ is a gateway to technical data

We deliver technical information to our members, thus enabling them to implement concrete actions in order to reach their sustainable objectives. A key activity in this regard is benchmarking, as it gives access to and analyses a wide range of practices to determine the most appropriate solutions to specific challenges. It is a duty for the ACR+ Secretariat to keep itself up-to-date in terms of practices and knowledge, which is done through the participation in projects and innovative as well as to share its technical expertise, which is done mainly through reports and events.

Support the adoption of a EU material resources law

23 Member States and several decentralised authorities have adopted a circular economy strategy, even without any official obligation set at EU level. It is an encouraging step but not enough. Recent reports underline that without legally binding targets environmental strategies like circular economy plans are not always effective. Without a minimum common rule, good intentions may not translate into long-lasting action. For example, most of the progress achieved regarding climate mitigation is due to the existence of coordinated legally binding climate targets overarched by the EU climate law adopted in 2020. Based on this experience and the approaches already in place in several EU Member States, we fully share the conclusions of the report "*The missing piece of the EU Green Deal: The case for an EU resources law*".

By 2030, we want to see the adoption of an EU material resources law covering biomass, fossil fuels, minerals and metals.

Following the recommendations laid down in the report "*The missing piece of the EU Green Deal: The case for an EU resources law*", a resources law should contain at least:

- A material resource consumption target, sector specific targets and specific EU MS targets, coupled with indicators;
- A requirement to establish an independent scientific body focused on material resources;
- A requirement for EU MS to adopt national material resource consumption reduction plans;
- A reference to sector-specific plans;
- A monitoring mechanism.

Push each ACR+ member to develop a circular economy strategy

We are convinced that the next step for public authorities to move forward in the just and sustainable transition is to integrate a circular economy strategy to their climate and environmental policies. Thus, we will work towards making this a condition of ACR+ membership, in order to translate our vision into concrete actions. As a first step, we will assist our members in developing such a strategy and, in time, extend our assistance to helping our members with implementation activities.

By 2030, we want 50% of the (relevant) ACR+ members to have adopted a circular economy strategy and the other half to be working in this direction.

Through the activities of our Thematic Areas, we will support our members to build elements of this strategy. In a co-creation process with ACR+ members, we will develop a suite of concrete circular economy targets.

Our objectives for 2030

By 2030, ACR+ intends to be the go-to source of information and resources for decentralised authorities wishing to achieve and accelerate a just transition to a circular economy.

Break all the "silos"

Despite the urgency, responses to the challenge of climate change are still largely fragmented. This is at odds with the often-acknowledged central role of collaboration with regard to a circular economy. ACR+ aims to break all the "silos" that are slowing down the just and sustainable transition. This includes, not just silos of specialty or field, but also those created by geographical divisions. We want to create more bridges between topics, people, and countries. It starts with our own way of working.

By 2030, we will instigate more partnerships with other key actors/sectors, develop the network in other geographical areas, and support our members in better connecting their own services, fostering cooperation across departments.



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