

## **Consumer Actions as a Factor Intensifying Development of the Circular Economy**

Continuous and, in indeed, unrestricted economic development and unprecedented population growth are the main factors behind the emergence of a major threat to our planet, namely the climate crisis. The intense exploitation, and sometimes downright plundering of natural resources and minerals that began over a century ago has led to such a serious degradation of the natural environment that we as humanity are faced with perhaps our greatest challenge yet – how to limit excessive economic growth and check uncontrolled population increase.

If we recognize unrestricted economic growth as the "main culprit" responsible for environmental destruction, then the logical human response should be to slow down this unchecked phenomenon. According to researchers, it takes nature at least one and a half years to replenish the natural resources (air, water, raw materials, etc.) consumed by humans each year. Thus, maintaining economic growth at the current level means, firstly, that our debt to nature will grow with each year, and secondly, that if we do not introduce appropriate solutions in the near future, it may turn out that such replenishment will become impossible. Therefore, in response to these threats, the United Nations recently adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. The adoption of 17 sustainable development goals is undoubtedly a milestone, aimed at slowing down the relentless pace of economic growth by setting not only the main goals of sustainable development but also outlining the directions for further activities in this area. Nevertheless, the Agenda is insufficient on its own to combat the problem. It is in this context that the concept of the circular economy (CE) first emerged on the market of new ideas. The concept itself involves replacing linear economic growth with a circular model in which planning, procurement, sourcing, production and reprocessing are designed and managed, both as a process and as a result. The objective is to maximize the functioning of the ecosystem and human well-being. In other words, further economic activity should be planned in such a way as to reduce the consumption of all resources, but at the same time make use of all the waste produced by this activity, and even skilfully exploit all resources not fully used up in the consumption process. The most popular equivalent of the circular economy idea is the slogan of 'zero waste'. However, if the implementation of the principles of this form of management are to yield the appropriate results, all stakeholders must actively participate in this battle. Besides the companies that have already taken quite extensive steps to reduce their consumption of resources in the production process, a second group of important stakeholders in this endeavour are consumers, whose participation is absolutely crucial. It is they who, through their responsible purchasing choices in the face of today's "morbid shopping frenzy", their skilful use of purchased goods, and their intelligent support for recycling activities, can reinforce the steps taken by entrepreneurs, encouraging the latter with their appropriate shopping choices and expectations of further pro-ecological solutions. However, the research and activities undertaken so far to promote the CE have primarily focused on the implementation of CE principles at the enterprise level, while interest in consumer actions has been negligible. As a consequence, the main focus of interest of the project's authors is consumers and their decisions as a factor potentially accelerating the development of CE.

The project assumes that significant changes in consumer attitudes favouring the implementation of CE principles are possible, on the one hand, through "education for the future" and, on the other, by introducing appropriate public policies. Education for the future should not only contain a soft pro-ecological message, but also instil elements that help build pro-ecological competences among future consumers. On the other hand, appropriate public policy should introduce systemic motivators (in the form of various benefits) that will encourage increasingly pro-ecological consumer attitudes.

The outcome of this project will be a model of consumer engagement in the development of CE as well as a set of recommendations for education for the future, with a particular emphasis on shaping consumer competences in the CE and recommendations for decision-makers with regard to implementing appropriate public policies (e.g., economic, industrial, educational, scientific, environmental / ecological) and determining which activities have the greatest impact on consumer decisions. With this aim in mind, a catalogue of these policies (e.g., economic, industrial, educational, scientific, environmental / ecological) will be prepared and those activities that have the strongest impact on consumers' decisions identified. Next, within the framework of these specific policies, specific areas will be singled out together with the instruments used in them that promote the development of the CE by motivating consumers to act.