

Circular economy - greenwash and/or transition?

Ecopreneurship and social  
entrepreneurship in a Circular Economy

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# Circular economy - greenwash and/or transition?

Studying social and ecological entrepreneurship in Sweden



# Research in progress

- Formas-funded project: *Practising green futures? Ecopreneurship and Social entrepreneurship in a Circular Economy*
- 2018-2021, 50% per researcher
- Research team: Martin Hultman, Chalmers University, Anna Kaijser, Linköping University, Malin Henriksson, VTI



# Our contributions

- Advance analysis of dominant CE narratives (Article in progress analyzing reports and policy recommendations)
- Add to and extend the research field on CE by showing how CE is understood and used by different types of actors
- Include more actors/agents in the narrative of CE (Social- and ecological entrepreneurs)
- Explore whether CE can have a potential for pushing systemic transitions, beyond greenwashing
- Explore how institutional contexts can foster/impede different kinds of CE initiatives through policies and regulations, thereby hopefully making it more inclusive

# Circular economy – a common definition

*” Looking beyond the current take-make-dispose extractive industrial model, a circular economy aims to redefine growth, focusing on positive society-wide benefits. It entails gradually decoupling economic activity from the consumption of finite resources, and designing waste out of the system. Underpinned by a transition to renewable energy sources, the circular model builds economic, natural, and social capital.”*

- Ellen MacArthur Foundation

## OUTLINE OF A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

### PRINCIPLE

1

Preserve and enhance natural capital by controlling finite stocks and balancing renewable resource flows  
ReSOLVE levers: regenerate, virtualise, exchange

### PRINCIPLE

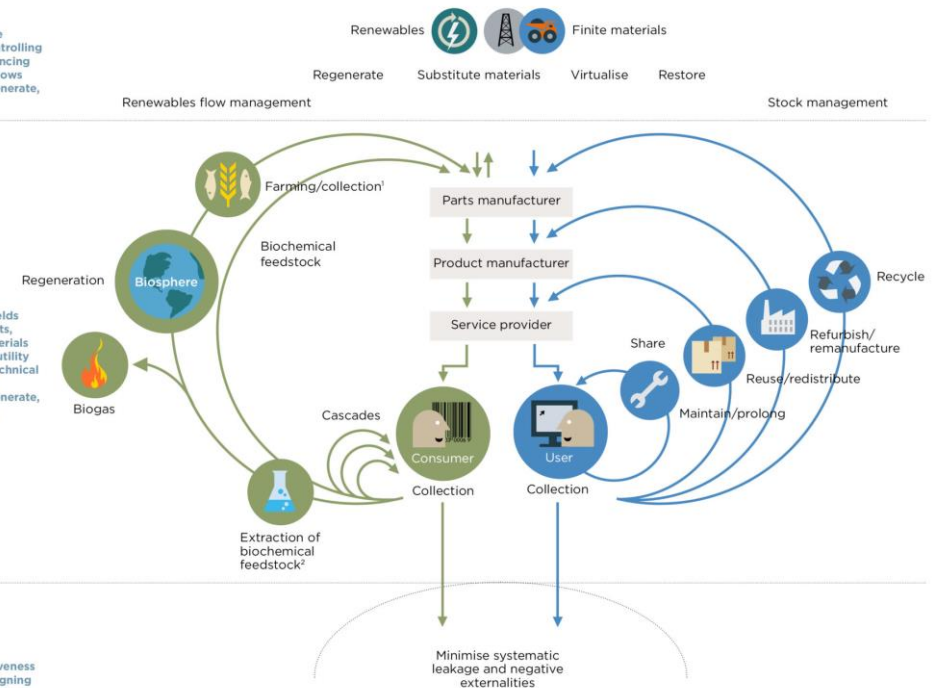
2

Optimise resource yields by circulating products, components and materials in use at the highest utility at all times in both technical and biological cycles  
ReSOLVE levers: regenerate, share, optimise, loop

### PRINCIPLE

3

Foster system effectiveness by revealing and designing out negative externalities  
All ReSOLVE levers



1. Hunting and fishing  
2. Can take both post-harvest and post-consumer waste as an input  
Source: Ellen MacArthur Foundation, S&P, and McKinsey Center for Business and Environment; Drawing from Braungart & McDonough, Cradle to Cradle (C2C).

# The 'success' story of CE

- Recent buzzword in policy and industry
- Like sustainability: vaguely defined but everyone is in favor
- Increasingly adopted as strategy in state economic policies (e.g. China, Japan, NL. EU).
- Recognized as priority area by Swedish government.  
SOU 2017, special delegation appointed 2018

# Dominant CE discourse and state of research

- Economic growth as basic assumption
- CE framed as business opportunity
- Ecomodern narrative with focus on technical innovation and policy tools
- Governments and large industry posed as main actors/agents
- What's new? Compare with "kretsloppssamhälle" in the 1990s
- Previous research mainly in business/industry literature, drawing on these same premises

# Some critical reflections on CE-policy/research

- Energy is neglected
- Focus on recycling waste and use it as resource, not reducing and eliminating waste
- Downstream solutions
- Few upstream laws or regulations
- Few discussions about the negative impacts of extractivism



# Project design and research activities

Case studies of five actors in the transport and food sectors:  
Smaller and larger companies and non-profit initiatives

	Food sector	Transport sector
<b>Companies</b>	Oatly	Cykelpoolen
	Swedish Temptations	
<b>Non-profit initiatives</b>	Matcentralen (Stockholms Stadsmission)	Cykelkök (bike kitchen)

# Research activities so far

- Interviews
- Study visits
- Document analysis



# Upcoming workshops, related publications

## Workshops 2019-2020

- Research workshop: researchers from various disciplines (e.g. design, planning, environmental science) as well as artists
- Stakeholder workshops: representatives from the cases, policy-makers, decision-makers
- Publications:

Hultman, M., Bonnedahl, K. J., & O'Neill, K. J. (2016). Unsustainable societies–sustainable businesses? Introduction to special issue of small enterprise research on transitional Ecopreneurs. *Small Enterprise Research*, 23(1), 1-9.

Galkina, T., & Hultman, M. (2016). Ecopreneurship–Assessing the field and outlining the research potential. *Small Enterprise Research*, 23(1), 58-72.

Hultman, M. (2011). Ecopreneurship and small scale energy technology. Towards a new understanding of sustainable innovation processes. In *Proceedings of the Social Innovation & Entrepreneurship Conference Extending Theory, Integrating Practice, Massey University Albany Campus 1-3 December 2011*. New Zealand Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Research Centre, Massey University.



*That's all Folks!*