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Detail of garment label by the upcycling  
Ghanaian brand Slum Studio, based in Accra.  
<http://www.theslumstudio.com/>  
Photo by Tora San Traoré

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# REPORTING ON AND ENGAGING AFRICAN MEDIA ON THE CIRCULAR ECONOMY: INSIGHTS, EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS

by Sören Bauer and Wanjohi Kabukuru

**S**o, what exactly is the circular economy?" This is a question that journalists often ask, including in Africa, as they aim to understand and explain a complex and still relatively new paradigm. In the winter of 2020 REVOLVE Circular, a not-for-profit organization based in Austria, investigated and published a "Spotlight on circularity in Africa", which looked at circularity in the African context. To make a long story short: the answer is and remains that "it depends on who you are asking". In this piece, REVOLVE Circular's President Sören Bauer and the editor of the blue economy-specialized Indian Ocean Observatory, Wanjohi Kabukuru, reflect about approaches for communicating and engaging the media on the circular economy and the challenges this model aims to address in Africa and elsewhere.

Journalism is ever evolving. The experiences of the last three decades have triggered significant milestones in the media sector. Newer platforms and distinctive storytelling styles are the new norm. data-driven journalism, social media trolling, long-form investigative writing, YouTube cameos, TikTok chats, and WhatsApp GIFs have become the main information channels for many edutainment planks, as social media redefine breaking news. All this has not happened in a vacuum: an avalanche of "fake news" - all with a mission of passing certain viewpoints and defining narratives - have also taken firm root in the global media landscape. The diversification of audiences is also an emerging

factor that led to the retooling of journalism. In the same length of time, the interdependencies and concerns of climate change, loss of biodiversity, water stress, overexploitation of natural resources, and other environmental challenges have become global issues.

In the African media topography, these issues - as well as alternative socio-economic models aiming to address them, such as the blue economy, green growth, a bio-based circular economy and others - remain major challenges, as they are still classified as specialist items and are still far from citizens' awareness.

Reporting on these subjects remains an area of concern for journalists, due in large measure to compartmentalization by media managers and newsroom gatekeepers. Even though the effects associated with climate change, the blue and circular economy have been around for close to three decades, it is only recently that the African media appear to have become engaging with them, giving them the attention they deserve. Moreover, while climate change and the blue economy have been around for a while, circular economy (CE) is the new kid on the block: it remains a major challenge, as it is still classified as an academic and specialist item warranting little space or none at all.

## How to address misperceptions?

In an interview with REVOLVE Circular entitled "How public finance supports Africa's circular transformation",<sup>1</sup> Dr Anthony Nyong explained:

The main challenges in establishing

more circular policies and practices (in Africa) are around: the understanding of the concept as most people easily equate it to waste collection and recycling, the lack of business support programs, availability of data and knowledge, adequate financing, access to technology and necessary infrastructure.

At the time of the interview, Dr. Nyong was Director of Climate Change and Green Growth at the African Development Bank (AfDB) and responsible for the secretariat of the African Circular Economy Alliance (ACEA), a government-led coalition of African nations and global partners committed to advancing the circular economy transition at the national, regional and continental levels. As an organization of journalists and communicators, REVOLVE Circular was intrigued by Nyong's equation of the circular economy with waste collection and recycling, and counterbalanced this narrow understanding with other frames: different perspectives on what a circular economy can be and why more circular thinking and businesses might be necessary, were provided. A press release distributed on 13 January 2021 to hundreds of African newsrooms stated:

Circular economy approaches can ensure affordable and eco-friendly infrastructure development, provide jobs for millions of Africans working in the informal economy, and help preserve the productive capacity of critical natural capital... one of the so-called "action imperatives" of the circular economy is

"Refuse" - with implications for different stakeholders: product designers refuse certain materials in the first place, to avoid waste; producers refuse the use of specific hazardous or toxic materials or any virgin material; consumers refuse certain products, choose to buy less, use less, or to reject packaging waste and shopping bags. Once all the action imperatives of the circular economy are better understood, people start realizing just how innovative and potentially disruptive the concept, and a "circular lifestyle", is. Circular economy's action imperatives support an easy understanding of some circular basics and were thus used throughout the press release:

In addition to recycling, at least two other action imperatives of circularity present big opportunities for Africa: remanufacturing and refurbishment. Remanufacturing hubs across the continent can be created in many African countries and would generate sustainable jobs. A network of remanufacturers in charge of restoring products back to their original state can satisfy local and regional demand or resell remanufactured products to Europe and the Middle East.

This approach meant to enlighten journalists and other readers on the broad scope of the circular economy as an umbrella concept and to trigger requests for further information or interviews.

## How pineapple leather and plastic buildings might explain what circularity is about

The Yaletite Enterprise Group of Ivory Coast TYEGRO-CI produces, among other things, vegan leather from pineapple leaves. In the same country, the originally Colombian company Conceptos Plásticos has built a first-of-its-kind factory that converts plastic waste into easy-to-assemble, durable bricks for schools and other types of "plastic buildings".

The "Spotlight on circularity in Africa" pinpointed such circular businesses across several African countries, showing that circular practices have always existed on the African continent, without necessarily being referred to as "circular". Secondly, such practices and business models are now gaining traction due to economic necessity, waste management challenges, and a predom-

inantly young population that is always looking for innovative ideas to make a living and is not afraid of experimenting. A map of Africa showing a broad range of "circular" businesses illustrated what circular thinking can do in terms of creating business models and providing people with a living. The following paragraphs provide some examples.

In Cameroon, the AMABO company produces near indestructible, cost-efficient, eco-responsible and 100% recyclable roof tiles by blending mixed, post-consumer plastic waste with sand. In the span of a few years, the company has become extremely successful in the Cameroonian construction industry.

Barloworld-Caterpillar in South Africa is one of the largest remanufacturing

plants in the world. The company's approach proves that "remanufacturing" is an important circular economy action imperative, highly relevant in the African context.

While industrial symbiosis is largely absent in Africa, Kenya has established policy initiatives for three eco-industrial parks and research into circular retrofitting of an industrial zone in Nairobi, which looks into cascading waste streams and industrial symbiosis as a new approach.

## Circular economy reporting examples from Nigeria and Ghana

REVOLVE Circular's press releases and live-streams on YouTube resulted in some interview requests and coverage across the continent. In the article "Linear-Circular Economy Debate",<sup>2</sup> Ghanaian journalist Mohammed Abu from *The African Development Magazine* in Accra focused on the linear vs. circular economy debate and wrote:

According to the most recent Circularity Gap Reports by the Dutch group Circle Economy, the world is less than ten percent circular as consumption and production continue to increase the pressure on planet earth's limited resources. In other words: the world economy is still more than ninety percent linear.

His analytical article, based on an interview with Sören Bauer, remains at a theoretical level and aims at explaining the key differences between a linear and a circular economic model. It states:

Politics continue to support the linear economy, despite increasing

environmental impairment - they have a lot of work to do to fulfil their commitments. Having said that, circularity also provides a clear opportunity for entrepreneurs to rethink their business models: can my waste be the resource for another industry? Can I extend the life cycle of my products by offering higher quality and extend my business model by offering to repair high quality products with a long life cycle? And even create more jobs due to an investment into repurposing, repairing, remanufacturing, recycling and other circular practices all of which have a positive impact on resource management - and result in new job opportunities.

A completely different story, entitled "Nigeria lacks proper e-waste management", was developed by Nigerian journalist Martin Ekpeke at *IT Pulse*. Ekpeke focused on the importance of electronic waste and the lack of proper e-waste management in the country. Quoting Professor Walter Vermeulen of Utrecht University in the Netherlands, he wrote: «With the huge imports of usable electronic equipment that come to Nigeria, a systematic local infrastructure for waste collection is lacking. Thus, making a large share of waste management depends on the informal sector, where the waste ends up on the street, ditches and gutters». The story in *IT Pulse* went further by explaining that imports of «usable electronic equipment» are a big market in Nigeria, while the weak e-waste management infrastructure leads to thousands of workers being exposed to serious health threats from used computers, which are refurbished and sold on the second-hand market. This story illustrated very well the international dimensions of a circular economy related to electronics and its potential impact on African workers.

The circular economy is a partnership based on mutual trust and benefits. The dissemination of its message rests on how it makes an association with communities. How communities benefit and improve their quality of life and their surroundings is a major entry point for the circular economy.

## People and communities first: Ourite lessons

*Ourite* is octopus fishing in Rodrigues, deep in the Indian Ocean in the Mauri-

## Circular Economy in African Cities: Industrialized Country Approaches Might Simply Not Work

One underreported topic is the relevance and importance of circular policies and practices for Africa's rapid urbanization. REVOLVE Circular's article "Is circularity the solution to Africa's rapid urbanization?"<sup>1</sup> analysed and summarised a discussion paper on the circular economy in African cities by more than 35 co-authors and contributors, mainly from the Africa branch of ICLEI – Local Governments for Sustainability – and the African Circular Economy Network ACEN. The paper is based on a broad and holistic analysis, combined with the authors' recommendations, addressing Africa's urbanization challenges with circular policies and practices.

Estimates from 2020 project Africa to be the continent with the fastest urban growth rate, with its cities counting an additional 950 million people by 2050. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which established and maintains the geo-spatial database africapolis.org covering 7,600 urban agglomerations in fifty African countries, much of this growth is taking place outside of the big cities, making Africa's urban transition one that offers great opportunities, as well as significant challenges. Yet, OECD explains that there is a disconnect in the way urban agglomerations are «developing most often without the benefit of policies or investments able to meet these challenges»<sup>2</sup>.

The research leading to this article was triggered by the fact that "circular cities and regions", as a relatively new approach, are rapidly gaining popularity and followers. Dozens of not-for-profit organizations, urban authorities and other stakeholders in the industrialized world are looking into and working on concepts to make their cities more "circular". One of them is OECD, an organization that is often criticized for serving the interests of developed nations and for its narrow membership counting only thirty wealthy countries (excluding giants like Nigeria, Brazil, India, China and Russia). Its recent report on the circular economy in cities, "The Circular Economy in Cities and Regions", says that cities and regions have a key role to play as "promoters, facilitators and enablers" of the circular economy. However, this report focuses almost exclusively on cities in the northern hemisphere. It is based on findings from fifty one cities and regions in the industrialized world, and on lessons learned from policy dialogues in six cities in the Netherlands, Sweden, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Ireland.

But what about cities in less industrialized regions, such as in Africa? The co-authors of the ICLEI / ACEN discussion paper insist that circular economy principles need to be tailored to address pressing African developmental challenges. The paper claims: «In Africa circular economy is typically promoted by external actors supporting development in African contexts but has yet to become a mainstream concept internally in urban development». The authors identify seven key considerations that require specific attention, seven resource systems to be looked at in depth, and seven key actions that are needed to improve the viability of circular strategies in Africa's cities. They explain: «[T]he starting point [...] should be citizen-focused, implemented with attention to social equity, quality of life, alternative infrastructure design, and service

delivery». For African cities to become more liveable and sustainable, circular practices have a lot to offer, with seven key considerations requiring specific attention:

1. to promote collaboration and appreciative co-learning;
2. to link circular strategies with existing service delivery mandates;
3. to implement circular economy principles within a social justice framework;
4. to acknowledge and support existing practices;
5. to invest in natural regeneration;
6. to align circular activities with governance frameworks;
7. to improve access to finance

The discussion paper expands on those seven considerations examining seven resource systems and their respective "circular opportunities":

1. Water & Sanitation;
2. Waste;
3. Food;
4. Energy
5. Buildings & Construction;
6. Mobility;
7. Industrial Systems.

For each of these seven systems, the authors identify and explore barriers, enablers and opportunities. In the "Buildings & Construction Systems in African cities", for example, it provides concrete cases from South Africa, Egypt, Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, in which existing policies pose a systemic barrier to more circular and sustainable approaches. Yet, there are still issues with leadership. While governments are the biggest developers in African cities, most government systems and processes of procurement do not promote sustainable practices in doing so. The discussion paper suggests a multitude of possible solutions and opportunities for each resource system – identifying and elaborating seven key actions that are actually needed to improve the viability of circular economy strategies in African cities:

1. data collection and development of 'Systems of Strategic Intelligence';
2. research programs & pilot projects;
3. mapping key industries and sectors;
4. collaboration platforms;
5. incubation and clustering of circular businesses and industries;
6. awareness and training on circular practice;
7. investment and outreach initiatives.

A final version of the discussion paper is expected for 2021.

### NOTES

1 - <https://revolve.media/circular/is-circularity-the-solution-to-africas-rapid-urbanization/>

2 - See also Africapolis (africapolis.org), a research and data visualisation platform which maps and analyses urbanisation and urban growth in Africa.

tian Archipelago. In 1986, IUCN recognized Rodrigues - an 18 by 8 km island in Mauritius - as a complete write off as a biodiversity hotspot, having the most devastated flora and fauna. Thirty five years later, Rodrigues has become symbol of "successful community conservation", with a thriving fishing industry. Reforestation and removal of plastics and fisheries quotas enabled Rodrigues to become a symbol of what well-structured community initiatives can achieve. The circular economy boasts less successes and shies from sharing its narratives of triumph, the critical elements that secure front pages and build narratives. It thus needs its *Ourite* moment. Endangered species, such as the Seychelles Magpie Robin, could be saved thanks to effective communication supporting conservation. The success of the circular economy rests on effective communication.

Just like only a few people know about the Sea-cow (*Dugong* or *Ngwa* in Swahili), the same can be said of the circular economy: it is not well articulated; it lacks local language expressions; it has neither a political spokesperson, nor a flagship species to push its message across.

### Lessons learned. Unpacking and unbundling the circular economy

What has REVOLVE Circular learned from investigating circularity in Africa, writing about it and engaging with African journalists?

Unbundling the Circular Economy remains the best option for all stakeholders to reach their respective publics. There are three important questions to be asked:

- What has the circular economy done, which is at the heart of the development nexus of the continent, to lack visibility on popular media?
- What does journalism need to do to harness the knowledge of Africa's circular economy specialists to break down the circular economy narrative?
- How can the circular economy academic community claim space to shape its narrative for the Sustainable Development Goals?

And here are possible answers to these three key circular economy queries:

- For the circular economy to secure a permanent place in Africa's public

sphere, schools, journalists and scientists must find a common ground that seeks to demystify and elevate it to prime time news and front pages in Africa.

- The best place to start is as the old journalism motto: «if you can't explain it to your granny, then you most probably don't know it well».
- A well-planned, organized systematic and consistent induction of journalists and media personnel into the circular economy is crucial.

Indeed, journalists in Africa and elsewhere might first need to learn about the predominant linear economic model and its consequences: how did we end up in a world in which waste is not a resource and increases continuously? Which resource challenges do different industries - and humanity - face already and why might a circular approach help resolve them? What are the legal and other barriers to implement a more circular economy?

Subsequently, the understanding of a new terminology is necessary: what do terms like "life cycle extension" or "extended producer responsibility" mean, and why are they important? In the African context, it might be particularly important for journalists to understand how to inform media consumers about the evolution from a circular economy of scarcity to one of abundance - without going through consumer society, which is still the preferred model exemplified by the "developed" world. Journalists in Africa and beyond have the opportunity to select an almost infinite number of frames for reporting on circularity - while they first need to understand the impact of their chosen frame on their audiences. Which topics or industries will African journalists highlight and link with a circular economy? How will they influence how people view reality? Will they put the circular economy in a context of growth vs. reduction? "Economic" growth or other forms of growth: which media consumers need to understand and reflect? To which extent will stories of waste management and recycling dominate the "circular narrative", as opposed to stories about waste reduction, designing out waste or new circular business models which are beneficial for people and the planet?

The journey of "circular economy reporting" in Africa may have only just started - and it is indeed a long journey, not a destination.

### NOTES

1 - <https://revolve.media/how-public-finance-supports-africas-circular-transformation/>

2 - <https://africandevmag.net/2021/05/07/linear-circular-economy-debate/>

### ABSTRACT | ITA



In questo articolo il presidente di REVOLVE Circular, Sören Bauer, e il direttore dell'Indian Ocean Observatory, Wanjohi Kabukuru, riflettono su come si possa comunicare l'economia circolare, e su come coinvolgere i media in modo che comprendano (e sappiano poi raccontare) questo paradigma complesso e ancora relativamente nuovo. In particolare, in Africa questo argomento è percepito come specialistico e accademico e, se non si trovano modelli comunicativi efficaci, rischia di rimanere escluso dalla copertura mediatica.

### Sören Bauer

is a communication strategist and part-time journalist with twenty years of experience in multi-stakeholder communication in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. He worked mainly for international non-profits and development banks such as the World Bank, the African Development Bank, GIZ and others. Sören is the President of the non-profit REVOLVE Circular advocating for a systemic shift away from a linear to a more circular economy and society. He holds an MSc in Sustainability Management, an MA in Development Studies as well as a diploma in Knowledge Management and a certificate in strategic communication for governance reform.

### Wanjohi Kabukuru

is a multiple award winning Environment Journalist. He worked many years for the *New African Magazine* and is now editor of the Indian Ocean Observatory. Wanjohi is based in Diani, Kenya.