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Concept

What is a circular economy? A framework for an economy that is restorative and regenerative by design

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Circular economy [Concept](#)

What is a circular economy?

Looking beyond the current take-make-waste 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. It is based on three principles:

- Design out waste and pollution
- Keep products and materials in use
- Regenerate natural systems

View the [circular economy system diagram](#)

Explaining the Circular Economy and How Society Can Re-think Progress | ...



Re-thinking Progress: The Circular Economy

There's a world of opportunity to rethink and redesign the way we make stuff. 'Re-Thinking Progress' explores how through a change in perspective we can re-design the way our economy works - designing products that can be 'made to be made again' and powering the system with renewable energy. It questions whether with creativity and innovation we can build a restorative economy.

The concept of a circular economy

In a circular economy, economic activity builds and rebuilds overall system health. The concept recognises the importance of the economy needing to work effectively at all scales – for large and small businesses, for organisations and individuals, globally and locally.

Transitioning to a circular economy does not only amount to adjustments aimed at reducing the negative impacts of the linear economy. Rather, it represents a systemic shift that builds long-term resilience, generates business and economic opportunities, and provides environmental and societal benefits.

Technical and biological cycles

The model distinguishes between [technical and biological cycles](#). Consumption happens only in biological cycles, where food and biologically-based materials (such as cotton or wood) are designed to feed back into the system through processes like composting and anaerobic digestion. These cycles regenerate living systems, such as soil, which provide renewable resources for the economy. Technical cycles recover and restore products, components, and materials through strategies like reuse, repair, remanufacture or (in the last resort) recycling.

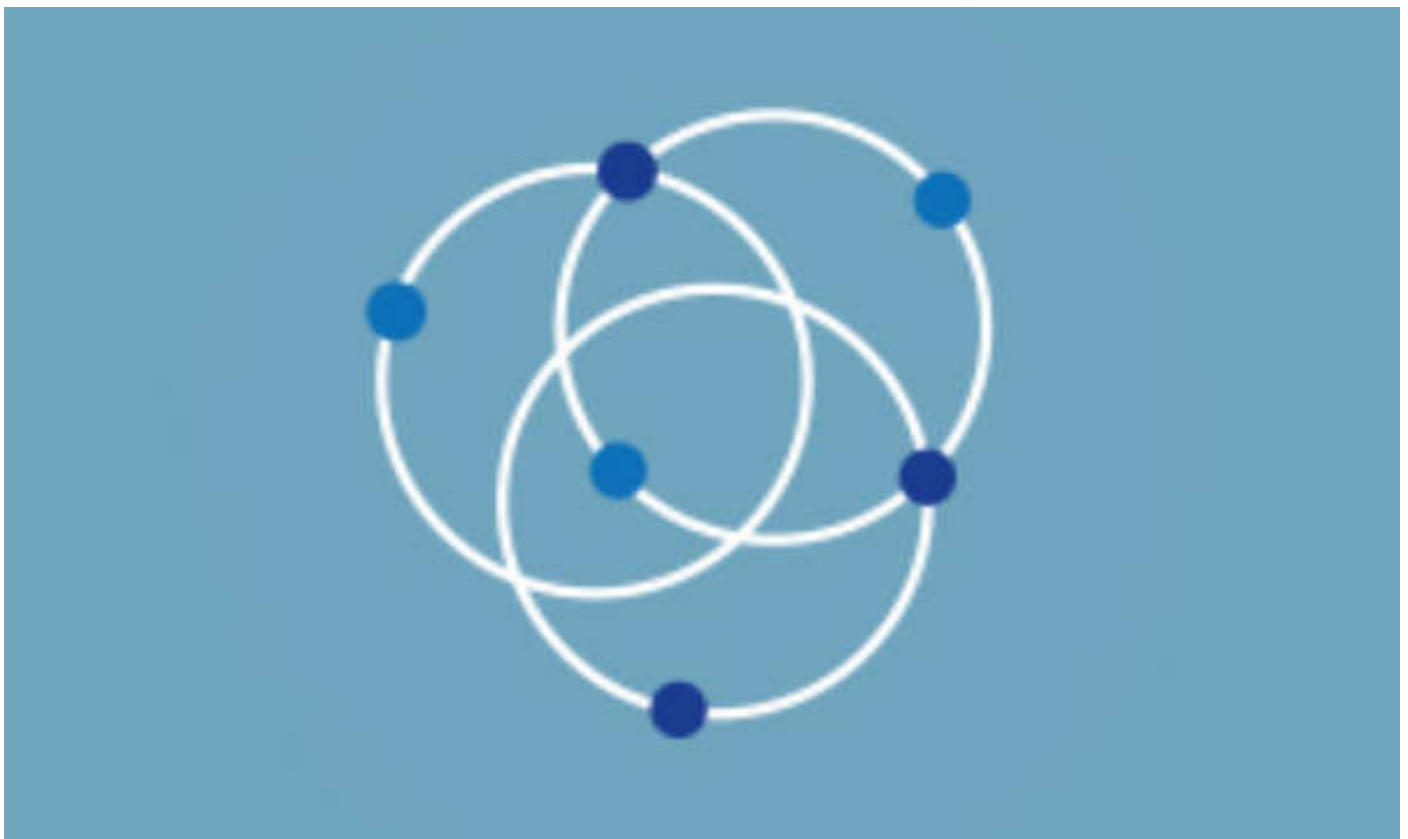
Origins of the circular economy concept

The notion of circularity has deep historical and philosophical origins. The idea of feedback, of cycles in real-world systems, is ancient and has echoes in various schools of philosophy. It enjoyed a revival in industrialised countries after World War II when the advent of computer-based studies of non-linear systems unambiguously revealed the complex, interrelated, and therefore unpredictable nature of the world we live in – more akin to a metabolism than a machine. With current advances, digital technology has the power to support the transition to a circular economy

by radically increasing virtualisation, de-materialisation, transparency, and feedback-driven intelligence.

Circular economy schools of thought

The circular economy model synthesises several major [schools of thought](#). They include the functional service economy (performance economy) of Walter Stahel; the Cradle to Cradle design philosophy of William McDonough and Michael Braungart; biomimicry as articulated by Janine Benyus; the industrial ecology of Reid Lifset and Thomas Graedel; natural capitalism by Amory and Hunter Lovins and Paul Hawken; and the blue economy systems approach described by Gunter Pauli.



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