

# **Circular Economy Solutions Dialogues (CESD)**

## **on Behavioural Change**

### **Empowering Transformation: Behavioural Change in the Circular Economy**

*November 2024 – March 2025, always between 12:00 – 13:30 CET*

#### **Final synthesis report**

The Circular Economy Solutions Dialogues (CESD) brought together experts across sectors to explore the role of behavioural change in driving a circular transition. Over the course of four sessions held between November 2024 and March 2025, the series investigated conceptual foundations, stakeholder dynamics, the role of policy, and the potential of technologies and methods to enable more sustainable behaviours. Through rich dialogue, the sessions provided clarity on what drives behavioural change, the barriers to action, and how these can be overcome in practice.

#### **Understanding behaviour**

The first session introduced foundational behavioural science insights, highlighting the need to move beyond awareness campaigns and focus on how behaviours are shaped by context, social norms, and system design. The discussions demonstrated that simple interventions, such as setting sustainable choices as defaults or using social proof, can effectively nudge behaviour. However, their long-term impact is limited without broader supportive structures.

Language was highlighted as a powerful tool in shaping public perception and motivation. The strategic framing of climate issues influences emotional responses and political will. Replacing passive or misleading terminology with emotionally resonant, direct language, while coupling it with actionable solutions, was proposed as a key strategy for mobilising behaviour. Furthermore, the disproportionate focus on individual action was criticised, with calls to address systemic contributors such as fossil fuel subsidies, overconsumption, and policy inaction.

#### **Designing for stakeholder behaviour**

The second session dived deeper into multi-stakeholder perspectives, with a particular emphasis on how behavioural plasticity, rebound effects, and contextual barriers influence adoption. The importance of prioritising upstream actions, such as refuse, reduce, and reuse, over end-of-pipe solutions like recycling was strongly emphasised. Case studies illustrated how locally-tailored strategies, community engagement, and coordinated policy measures can significantly improve resource management outcomes even under difficult infrastructural constraints.

The discussion offered a reminder that stakeholder alignment and long-term political commitment are essential. Short-term initiatives often fail without continued support and integration with wider environmental agendas. Local champions, such as women and youth, were shown to be especially influential in sustaining household and community-level change.

### **From individual choices to systemic transition**

Session three brought into focus the role of policymakers in enabling behaviour change at scale. Drawing on the IPCC's 2022 assessment, participants discussed the considerable emission reduction potential of behavioural shifts in areas such as mobility, food, and energy. However, analysis revealed that only a fraction of this potential is currently being realised due to infrastructural, economic, and social barriers.

The session dismantled common behavioural myths, such as the idea that more information naturally leads to better choices, and called for a shift in strategy from isolated nudges to system-wide transformations. A needs-based approach to behaviour, which considers how consumption satisfies deeper human needs under real-world constraints, was proposed as a more effective entry point for both policy and communication. The "Sustainability Compass" framework was introduced as a way to identify locally-relevant, high-impact interventions.

### **Methods, technologies and the "Challenge of delay"**

The final session introduced practical tools and technologies that support behavioural change. A key focus was the application of behaviour-centred design, as demonstrated through a regenerative agriculture programme in Colombia. This model stressed the need to intentionally design interventions based on an understanding of psychological and social drivers, tailored to target audiences. Effective approaches combined messaging, social proof, and community-led action to shift norms and practices.

Attention then turned to policy tools, such as repair vouchers, which have shown potential in increasing product longevity. Yet, without addressing structural design barriers, such as inaccessible spare parts or restrictive software, these incentives risk being ineffective. A similar systemic perspective was adopted in the discussion on SMEs. Here, internal leadership commitment, ecosystem partnerships, and digitalisation were all highlighted as critical enablers for embedding circular practices in business models.

A final critical reflection addressed the behavioural dimension of climate delay. The transition is not only hindered by ignorance or opposition but also by well-crafted narratives that appear rational while promoting inertia. Recognising, exposing, and countering these narratives was identified as an essential task in preserving the momentum for change.

### **Forward looking**

Across the four sessions, the CESD series demonstrated that behavioural change in the circular economy is both a matter of individual effort and systemic design. High-impact behaviours exist, but unlocking their full potential requires supportive policies, equitable access, and enabling environments. Context matters, whether urban or rural, individual or institutional, and the most effective interventions are those that respect real-world constraints while creating new possibilities.

The dialogues also acknowledged that addressing the root causes of overconsumption, particularly in high-income societies and among the global elite, is essential to achieving meaningful reductions in environmental impact. This includes confronting drivers linked to urbanisation and perceived lifestyles. A recurring proposal was the redesigning of both production and consumption in a needs-based context, focusing policy and practice not only on what is produced and consumed, but why, and under what conditions these behaviours are shaped.

Digital tools, including community-led monitoring systems, were recognised for their role in enabling transparent, data-driven progress while also empowering local actors to take ownership of sustainability efforts.

The dialogues validated that behavioural change is not an add-on to circular policy but a critical lever for transformation that must be backed by evidence, driven by collaboration, and designed with purpose.

Join us and continue the discussion on Behavioural Change and other topics in our [Green Tech Knowledge Hub](#).