

Social Enterprise and the Circular Economy

There is no single definition of a circular economy. At its simplest level, it is based on the concept of reusing and recycling materials and products for as long as possible. But it also encompasses the elimination of waste and pollution, the regeneration of the natural environment and the building of sustainable communities. It can be viewed from economic, political, social and environmental perspectives.

Growing up in rural Ireland in the 1960's, I saw how a circular economy worked from an economic, social and practical perspective. In our village, there were no refuse collections simply because most people produced very little waste. There was no such thing as a sell-by date. If the milk was sour my mother made soda bread. Clothes were recycled within families and between families. My father was a dab hand at fixing and mending anything that needed fixing. Even if something was beyond fixing it was kept in case parts were needed for something else. People provided help and resources to their neighbours because they knew they could rely on them to reciprocate, even if they didn't particularly like each other! This way of life was not based on a philosophy or a value system. It was simple pragmatism. Its sustainability was also premised on the harsh reality that a significant proportion of young people moved on to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

In the 1980's and 90's, the linear economy kicked in. Goods were now designed and produced to be used and thrown away. Mountains of waste were produced and dumped with no understanding or regard for the environment. Even today, with the realization that we are well into a climate and environmental emergency, there is powerful resistance to any attempts to challenge the status quo. A lot of money is being made from rampant consumerism.

Despite this depressing backdrop, there is evidence that change is beginning to happen. Governments and Big Business around the world are finally formulating and implementing policies that will nurture the development of circular economies. At a social and community level, there is a heightened awareness of the need to break the unsustainable habits and assumptions that have built up for more than a generation. Social Enterprise¹ has an important role to play, and there are now many great examples in Ireland of Social Enterprises that are based on innovative solutions that make good business sense. Here are a few examples:

The Rediscovery Centre

The Rediscovery Centre is based in the old boiler house of the now demolished Ballymun flats complex in Dublin. It is a creative space, where reuse is seen as an opportunity. Recycling initiatives include: furniture repair and restoration; fashion and accessory redesign and repurposing; collection and remixing of old paint for resale; repair and reconditioning of bicycles. These initiatives also provide opportunities for community training and employment. There are also event spaces, public workshops, retail outlets, a café and hot desking.

Grow Dome

Grow Dome is an innovative and high-tech greenhouse that provides space for sustainable food production as well as social and educational activities for the community. Currently there are two domes in Dublin, one in Flanagan's Field Community Garden in Fatima, and the other in the DCU Community Garden in Glasnevin. Community activities include breakfast clubs and homework clubs for disadvantaged children. People from the area can also meet and work together in the garden and

¹ A Social Enterprise is an enterprise whose objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact, rather than maximising profit for its owners or shareholders. It pursues its objectives by trading on an ongoing basis through the provision of goods and/or services, and by reinvesting surpluses into achieving social objectives. (National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland 2019-2022)

greenhouse. The plan is to roll out this initiative to communities across Ireland and to turn derelict sites into focal points for local people.

Tech for Good Dublin

Tech for Good Dublin designs and runs events to highlight projects with purpose and showcase how people are using technology to solve everyday problems. They share stories of real people making change happen. Examples include a geography teacher who introduced Virtual Reality into classrooms to help students get engaged with the natural world, a team who built a platform to help charity shops sell donated books, an app to help children with Dyslexia with their education and connecting with other people, and an intelligent bike light which is helping city planners to improve cycling infrastructure.

Galway's Living Bog

Galway's Living Bog is based at Carrownagappul Bog, one of the last remaining intact raised bogs in Ireland. It is rich in biodiversity and an important carbon sink. The project involves restoration and management of the bog and facilitating visits by students, the local community and the general public. There is an interpretive centre and cafe, as well as guided tours and educational activities.

Dunhill Eco Park

Based on Waterford's Copper Coast, Dunhill Eco Park is a social enterprise that accommodates a range of businesses and services including artisan food, plant hire, hairdressing and child play therapy. It includes job creation initiatives, hot desking and a café. It also manages a community garden, an apiary and a wetland wastewater treatment facility.

All of the above examples and many more, were born within communities of like-minded people who saw the potential to change things for the better. We are living in a rapidly changing world, where we need creative and flexible solutions to problems. As a social enterprise itself, Carmichael is in a unique position to provide social enterprise supports, including the provision of training and consultancy. Currently we provide eLearning specifically for Social Enterprise, covering: Marketing; HR; Income and Impact Strategy; Finance; Business Development and Governance. For these and other eLearning and scheduled training courses, check out [Courses | Carmichael Ireland](#).