

Closing the Loop: A Key Business Model for SDG12

By Prof. Dr Wayne Visser

“Unless we go to Circular it's game over for the planet; it's game over for society”. These are the opening words of the world’s first feature-length documentary film on the circular economy, called *Closing the Loop*, due for public release¹ on Earth Day, 22 April 2018. Going “circular” refers to the necessary change from our current take-make-waste linear economy to a borrow-use-return circular economy (sometimes also referred to as the zero-waste or cradle-to-cradle economy).

The circular economy is a key business model that will help us to achieve SDG 12 on Responsible Consumption and Production. But what does the circular economy really mean? The documentary explores five key strategies - the 5Rs for achieving circularity: reduce, reuse, recycle, renew and reinvent - by showcasing examples from Europe, Latin America and Africa. For example:

- *Reduce*: This is a strategy adopted by Interface, a U.S. carpet manufacturer with an ambitious Mission Zero plan for eliminating negative environmental impacts by 2020, especially by cutting down their dependence on non-renewable raw materials.
- *Reuse*: This is a strategy pursued by Barloworld, a South African industrial conglomerate, with the second-largest Caterpillar equipment remanufacturing plant in the world, which saves customers 20%-60% compared to buying new parts.
- *Recycle*: This is a strategy embraced by Dutch Awearness, a pioneer in circular textiles from The Netherlands, including workwear and suits made from polyester that can be recycled 8 times and then finally used as a construction material.
- *Renew*: This is a strategy demonstrated by Biogen, a UK renewable energy company that generates all its energy and bio-fertiliser from food waste and Novamont, an Italian bio-plastics company, renowned for making the Lavazza compostable coffee capsule.
- *Reinvent*: This is a strategy epitomised by REDISA, a South Africa tyre recycling project, which empowers numerous entrepreneurs to turn waste tyres into new products, from road paving and sports surfaces to plastics and fuels²;

All of these strategies are visible in another case featured in the documentary, which is Quito City, with solutions ranging from Tetrapak up-cycling and zero-waste car assembly to sustainable farming and eco-tourism in the tropical cloud-forests.

As the presenter of the film, I worked with a two-time Telly® Award and Emmy® Award winning filmmaker Graham Sheldon. Despite some dire warnings – John Elkington, famous for coining the “triple bottom line” of sustainability says in the film: “if we continue with the linear economy, we are, to use a technical term, totally screwed” – I made sure that the film

¹ The film will be available for download or streaming via Amazon on Demand and other media channels

² The REDISA project is no longer running in South Africa, but remains an excellent case of what is possible

is ultimately about innovative solutions, supported by experts from the likes of the World Economic Forum and the Universities of Cambridge and Harvard, and practitioners like Mike Barry, Director of Sustainable Business (Plan A) for Marks and Spencer and Christopher Davis, International Director of Corporate Responsibility and Campaigns for The Body Shop.

The key takeaway message from *Closing the Loop* is that moving to a circular economy is not only essential and urgent, but also entirely possible, if we take inspiration from the pioneers, such as those featured in the film, and scale up similar business models, product innovations and customer solutions around the world. As I say in the film:

“If I look at the speed and the scale of the changes that are happening and I look at the people working on these problems and I look at the breakthroughs in technology that we’re seeing right now, it’s very hard not to be optimistic. [But] the only thing that’s enough is redesigning the industrial system – literally a new Industrial Revolution, closing the loop. This is no longer a dream, this is no longer a fantasy. We’re not talking about a utopia, we’re talking about something that is absolutely happening right now.”

It will not be easy – and there is no “one size fits all” approach, as the varied experiences across three continents show – but the circular economy revolution is imperative. As I remind the audience: “If we don’t solve this one problem [i.e. moving from a linear to a circular economy], everything else we do, no matter how well-intentioned it is, will be like shifting deck chairs on the Titanic.”

After years spent working on sustainability, I am convinced that we are on the cusp of a major revolution. The time for fear-mongering and demonizing companies has past. Now is the time for innovative solutions and positive action. This is nowhere more true than in the do-or-die challenge of creating a circular economy.

I am immensely proud of *Closing The Loop*. At a time when the world is desperate to turn the tide on numerous sustainability crises, we show not only what is possible, but what is already happening, thanks to pioneers around the world.

We still have much work to do, but our task could not be more clear. So get inspired and, to quote Gandhi - a sustainability luminary before his time – be the change you want to see in the world.

More information about the film and upcoming screening events can be found at: www.closingtheloopfilm.com. Screenings are already being planned for Belgium, Cambodia, Croatia, Ecuador, Germany, Indonesia Laos, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Thailand, UAE and the UK, with more to follow. Permission for free screenings events can be arranged by contacting Dr Wayne Visser via the website.