

Circular Economy no panacea – but a step in the right direction



Anders Wijkman has been Assistant Secretary-General of the UN, and as an EU parliamentarian he was one of the driving forces behind the EU's development of a climate action plan. Now he is a diligent public debater who is often seen and heard in current debates, often on the theme of ecological sustainability, circularity and resource efficiency. Since the autumn of 2020, Anders has been connected to Mistra REES.

He has participated in the major international climate conferences since 1995. In the mid-1990s, he was appointed Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and a few years later became a Member of the European Parliament for the Christian Democrats. There he was one of the driving forces behind the EU's development of a climate action plan and the efforts to limit the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Africa.

– Yes, I'm probably some kind of multi-tasker, with both social and ecological sustainability as my starting point. I worked for the Red Cross for 10 years; I have not let go of the humanitarian commitment, even though it does not occupy my time as much today, says Anders Wijkman. He has extensive experience in international politics and administration. Material and resource efficiency issues have become a major priority in recent years, but interest was aroused as early as the 1970s, not least through the Limits to Growth report by the Club of Rome on the risk that resource scarcity and pollution eventually would bring the world economy down – unless conventional growth policies were changed.

Anders emphasizes the need for increased research and innovation into resource efficiency. Priority should be given to material-intensive sectors, such as construction, infrastructure, textiles, plastics, and electronics. The financial sector has an important role to play in the shift from a linear to a circular production model, not least when it comes to supporting the development of new business models. Moreover, public procurement ought to play a lead role in its demand for products and services that are inspired by circular economy principles. He is clear that material efficiency must be given priority in climate mitigation.

– The circular economy must be addressed primarily by up-stream measures. Most important will be to change the cost structure of the economy. It is most often less expensive to use virgin materials as compared to secondary materials. This could be changed through a comprehensive tax reform, lowering taxes on labor and higher taxation on the use of natural resources. The design of products must be changed. Products should be designed for a long product life and for reuse and recycling. One proposal could be to set requirements to increase the proportion of recycled materials in new products. There is also a need for measures to promote a move from selling products to the offering of services. We do not need to own the products we use.

Lastly but not the least, EU Member States have to become more proactive in their work on resource efficiency and circularity. Sweden has fallen a bit behind, even though the new strategy for the circular economy is an important step in the right direction. Both Finland and the Netherlands have come much further than we have. Sweden ought to strengthen co-operation with the other Nordic countries in order to develop the circular economy and drive development in the EU, Anders concludes.