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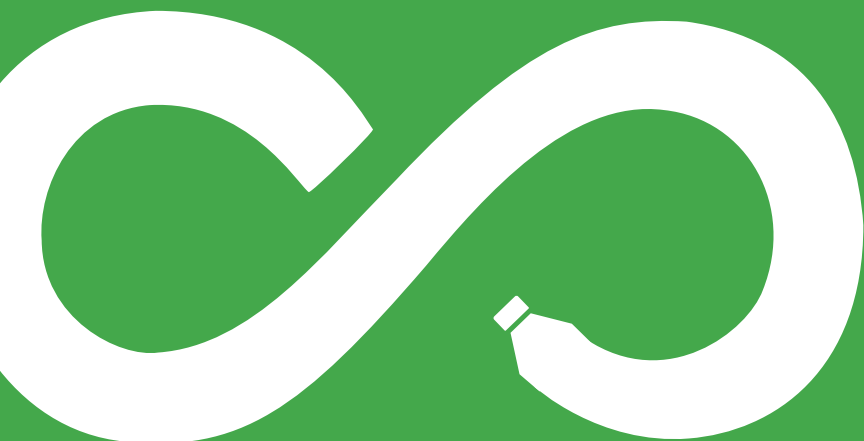


Closing the Loop

Advancing the Circular
Economy for Packaging

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Forewords

Foreword from the Director General of the Institute of International and European Affairs, Alex White.

The Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA) was pleased to work with Coca-Cola Ireland to produce this white paper entitled 'Closing the Loop: Advancing the Circular Economy for Packaging'. This paper comes at an important moment in Ireland's conversation on how to tackle the challenges posed by a warming planet and greater biodiversity loss.



In all areas of international affairs and public policy, the IIEA strives to share ideas and shape policy. In particular in matters relating to climate, which is the existential challenge of our time, the IIEA seeks to help lead the debate on how best to tackle climate change and biodiversity loss, how to implement the green transition, and how to make this transition a just one for everyone. Most importantly, this commitment is reflected in the IIEA's work programmes, generating bespoke research for policymakers and events to inform the public.

This paper has resulted from a roundtable conversation which took place under the Chatham House Rule, and which brought together leading experts from Irish civil society, policymaking, the civil service, academia, NGOs, and industry, for a discussion about how to make the Circular Economy for packaging a reality for Ireland and its people. This paper explores the present policy landscape, identifying where there are strengths, where there are gaps, and how to close them. It highlights the scale of change and the level of ambition which is required not just to make the Circular Economy a reality for Ireland, but to meet our climate commitments as a whole. This paper also emphasises the opportunities which a transition to a Circular Economy could provide for Irish policymakers, industry and society. Finally, it offers concrete recommendations which could help guide policy as we strive to make our economy more circular.

The Circular Economy offers enormous potential for Ireland to meet its climate objectives and allows every single one of us to play our part in making it a success. It demands that everyone – industry, government, NGO's, universities, and individuals know, understand, and take ownership of their role in this enormous undertaking. In that spirit it is a pleasure to present this paper to you.

Foreword from the Country Manager of Coca-Cola Ireland, Agnese Filippi.

As one of the world's largest drinks companies, Coca-Cola must constantly challenge itself to drive positive change. Our global scale means we are well placed to push for industry-wide change as well as reducing our environmental footprint.

World Without Waste is our ambitious global strategy, aimed at transforming our entire packaging lifecycle. By 2030, we aim to collect for recycling or reuse, one bottle or can for every one we sell. Across Europe, the countries with well-designed Deposit Return Schemes achieve the highest collection rates for containers, often exceeding 90% for beverage packaging.

We are delighted that Ireland has become the latest market in Europe to introduce this scheme and we commend all those who participated in making it a reality. Although the establishment of the scheme is an important milestone, further progress is required. Last year in Europe, only 72% of the equivalent bottles and cans that were introduced into the market were collected.

In Ireland, together with our bottling partner, Coca-Cola HBC, we continue to invest in sustainable packaging and in our operations, and communication. This included the introduction of 100% recycled plastic bottles across all our soft drinks portfolio in Ireland and Northern Ireland in October 2023. But this only takes us so far.

As we all look to redouble our attention on eliminating packaging waste, one thing is clear. If we are to truly close the loop and build a circular economy for plastic packaging, it's vital that all stakeholders work together. This is the most impactful way to address the societal challenge of waste, and to help realise the Government's Climate Action Plan and Waste Action Plan's ambition to build a more sustainable future for our environment.

Real Talk roundtables provide an important opportunity to engage a wide range of stakeholders in open and honest discussion. The latest Real Talk roundtable, held in partnership with the IIEA, addressed both the opportunities and the barriers to closing the loop for packaging within Ireland's food and drink sector.

By providing a forum for conversation among policymakers, industry representatives, academics and civil society, we hope to foster a comprehensive understanding of the key steps that need to be taken to promote the development of the circular economy in Ireland.

Sharing these practical and actionable recommendations more widely with industry, policymakers and across society is a key next step to inform future policy discussions and advance the circular economy for packaging in Ireland.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who participated in the roundtable and for sharing their views, particularly the IIEA for their support in convening this important discussion. We understand that packaging can have more than one life – many, in fact. I hope that everyone, from industry to policymakers, and beyond, will consider the recommendations from the roundtable and continue to collaborate and work together to achieve our goal of making packaging waste a problem of the past.



Executive Summary

On Tuesday, 30 January 2024 the Institute of International and European Affairs (IIEA), in conjunction with Coca-Cola Ireland, hosted a private roundtable discussion on the subject of *Closing the Loop: Advancing the Circular Economy for Packaging*. The roundtable brought together more than two dozen senior representatives and experts from Irish civil society, policymaking, the civil service, academia, Non-Government Organisations, and industry to discuss how to advance the prospects of the Circular Economy for packaging in Ireland. This event took place at IIEA headquarters in Central Dublin against the backdrop of the introduction of Ireland's Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) for plastic bottles and aluminium cans on 01 February 2024. The meeting took place under the Chatham House rule meaning that participants are free to use the information received during the meeting, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. This short note which the IIEA has prepared sets out a record of the discussions which ensued at this meeting. Contributions have been anonymised, in keeping with the Chatham House rule. This note ends with a list of practical and actionable recommendations that can be gleaned from the discussion and which should be of interest to policymakers.

The roundtable included two sessions. The first session was entitled on *The Circular Economy in Ireland: A Policy Perspective*, which focused on the Irish policy landscape surround the Circular Economy and how Ireland's approach to the Circular Economy could be augmented through greater engagement with the European Union and with a sectoral approach to implementation of the Circular Economy.

The second session was entitled *Making the Circular Economy for Packaging a Reality*, which focused on some of the practical opportunities, impediments, and deficits when it comes to the implementation of the Circular Economy in Ireland. This panel discussed the need to find complementarity between the systems that are ultimately needed to reduce, reuse, and recycle waste in the new circularity economy.

A number of recommendations have been drawn from the discussions which ensued at the roundtable. These include (i) the need for a sectoral approach to government policy on the Circular Economy in order to achieve the best pathway to success, (ii) that Ireland should explore partnerships with the EU and with the UK to generate economies-of-scale in meeting its Circular Economy objectives, and (iii) that the Government should engage in greater information sharing initiatives to create 'buy-in' to the transition to a Circular Economy. Furthermore, this paper also recommends that opportunities and finally that the Irish Government will need to increase its attention on the opportunities emerging from the circular economy.

Introduction and Opening Remarks

The roundtable included two sessions. The first session was entitled on *The Circular Economy in Ireland: A Policy Perspective*, which focused on the Irish policy landscape surround the Circular Economy and how Irish Circular Economy policy may be improved. The second session was entitled *Making the Circular Economy for Packaging a Reality* - focused on some of the practical opportunities, impediments, and deficits when it comes to the implementation of the Circular Economy in Ireland. The roundtable commenced with a set of introductory remarks by the chair. These touched on the necessity to bring policymakers and decision makers together to address the clear challenges posed by climate change, and what can be done to make the Circular Economy a reality for Irish people. It was noted that this was also a chance for industry to lend its perspective to how this might be achieved, with a view to ensuring good policy and laws are developed to sustain workable solutions to the problems associated with packaging waste and consumption. It was noted that industry would like to be part of the solution to the problem, and that it would like to play an active role in achieving the Government's Climate Action Plan and Waste Action Plan. The recently introduced DRS was cited as an example of public-private cooperation that can precipitate and support the development of the Circular Economy. It was also stressed, including by representatives from industry, that the development of the Circular Economy should take place in as open and transparent a manner as possible.

Session One: The Circular Economy in Ireland: A Policy Perspective

The first panel commenced with short introductory presentations from four roundtable attendees drawn from industry, public policy, and the legal profession, each of whom reflected on the present state of the Irish policy landscape regarding the Circular Economy. A representative from the legal profession emphasised the role of Extended Producer Responsibility policy, and the requirement that suppliers of packaged goods, amongst other products, must be responsible for the life cycle of a product. Effective recycling and recovery systems are crucial to achieving this requirement. In Ireland, this is predominantly facilitated through membership of Repak. It was noted that in the Extended Producer Responsibility scheme, specific waste streams have been targeted such as single-use plastic. The legislative requirement under the Single Use Plastics Directive to attach caps to plastic bottles and the newly established DRS were cited as examples of the latest initiatives to increase producer responsibility for single-use plastic. Specifically on the DRS, it was noted that one of the primary aims of the system is to change consumer behaviour, the goal being to shift consumers to adopt a new habit of recycling separation when it comes to disposal of PET plastic bottles and aluminium cans, and to financially incentivise consumers to become 'part of the solution' to achieve better recycling of these materials.

Another contributor representing a government agency offered some reflections on the growing importance of sustainability in Ireland's food and drink sector among Ireland's largest export sector in terms of employment and volume. In the Irish Government's *White Paper on Enterprise*, sustainability is now on an equal footing with the creation of jobs. However, it was noted that despite this ambition, the Circular Economy has not been afforded enough of a priority and that industry could benefit from greater assistance in developing more sustainable packaging solutions, for example. From these remarks, it is hoped that government assistance and financial supports to industry, such as through the provision and extension of grants and incentives would greatly help to build circularity into business models. SMEs in particular are often time-pressed and an example was given that funding could be used to retain external consultants to evaluate sustainability in supply chains. The need to ensure greater access to government assistance in developing more sustainable packaging and through the adoption of disruptive technologies to support the transition to more sustainable practices may enable greater engagement with the Circular Economy and to also de-risk investment in this area. Notably, this

participant did say that one of the key challenges faced in the sustainability of packaging formats relates to maintaining standards of food safety while avoiding any increase in waste.

A leading public representative, with knowledge of the issues, reflected on the societal implications of a shift to a more Circular Economy. They noted that the Circular Economy will play a crucial role in Ireland's long-term competitiveness and social cohesion. They expressed that the attraction of the Circular Economy to policymakers is that it addresses all areas of the environment, taking in the entire supply chain. They stressed that Ireland's strategy for making the Circular Economy a reality will need to be decidedly sectoral in nature, taking in questions of how food waste is managed, how people and goods travel, and even up to the level of occupancy in Irish households. The speaker they noted that 60% of Irish homes are 'underoccupied' which presents opportunities for efficient gains in energy use. In stressing the importance of a sectoral approach, the speaker cited the positive example of the 2024 Paris Olympics, which has pledged to eliminate single-use plastics from the event and to double the amount of plant-based food available to attendees, as a case-study in how public procurement could be completely transformed to a more circular approach.

The conversation also included a reflection on the issue of data and the prospects of the Circular Economy in Ireland. It was noted by a senior civil servant that there are gaps in the data when it comes to the extent to which Ireland is succeeding or not in its circularity objectives. It was expressed during this reflection that initiatives such as the Deposit Return Scheme and the hot beverage single use disposable cup levy known colloquially as the 'latte levy' are seen as game-changing for Ireland's Circular Economy goals on packaging, though requiring significant consumer acceptance. However, greater attention to data collection and analysis will become ever more important as Ireland seeks to identify where opportunities and challenges exist.

Following the conclusion of the opening reflections, the discussion was opened to the other participants. It was generally agreed in the discussion that a sectoral and integrated approach to implementing Ireland's Circular Economy targets would be optimal. In an example shared from a different sector outside the food and beverage sector, it was noted in Ireland's construction sector, that the rate of circularity is especially poor and that there must be a review of how the design and construction of the built environment is delivered, in particular with regard to repurposing buildings as opposed to demolishing them. It was noted that there is significant need to get the large construction firms in Ireland on board with Ireland's Circular Economy objectives to incentivise innovation, given the ambitious targets in the Government's 'Housing for All' policy, as well as given the projected growth in the country's population.

A senior civil servant stressed that the scale of the transformation required should not be underestimated, highlighting how culturally, politically, and economically everything needs to change, sometimes in fundamental ways. Additionally, a senior figure, with knowledge of the implementation of the DRS, expressed that there is a clear information deficit when it comes to the Circular Economy in Ireland, and that to achieve the scale of the change necessary to achieve the Irish Government's Circular Economy objectives, requires that everyone should know about the Circular Economy and their role in it. Thus, the role of public education and effective public communications will be paramount. Moreover, the speaker highlighted that industry itself clearly must be an active participant in the Circular Economy and should take ownership of circularity, instead of waiting for legislation to catch up.

However, a senior figure from industry expressed concern that one of the biggest obstacles to industry engaging with the Circular Economy does not relate to financial cost, but to time and to the overall capabilities and resources available within businesses to make the transformation to circularity. Meanwhile, a representative from a government agency highlighted how many firms in

Ireland do not have team members who are directly responsible for sustainability and measures must be taken within firms to ensure that sustainability and the Circular Economy stays at the forefront of the conversation.

A representative from an NGO active in the sector concurred that information deficits relating to the Circular Economy present a major challenge to businesses and citizens engaging with sustainability and the Circular Economy. The group agreed generally that gaps in Ireland's data when it comes circularity poses a serious challenge in the spirit of the saying 'if you can't measure, you can't manage'. Thus, it was stressed that the capacity to understand and scrutinise trends relating to the Circular Economy through the availability of accessible and relevant data by businesses and citizens must be improved in order to support the development of the Circular Economy and also to establish a set of baselines indicators. This could also help to benchmark Ireland's performance relative to other European and global economies when it comes to sustainability. It was also noted that 80% of packaging in Ireland originates from outside the State and a greater understanding of the global packaging industry, and the nature of best and worst practices in places that Irish packagers do businesses, is essential to understanding Ireland's role within the global Circular Economy.

However, a senior figure, with knowledge of the implementation of the Deposit Return Scheme, argued that the new proposed EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulations, which brings new targets for industry and would take effect from 2026,¹ will add further complexity to business and remains to be seen whether it will make the desired impact, emphasising how packaging accounts for less than 1% of Ireland's carbon footprint.² They argued that a pragmatic evidence-based approach will be necessary to bring businesses and all levels of society together to support the Circular Economy.

Meanwhile, it was noted that there is a growing need to move from discussing recycling, and there will have to be a greater emphasis on the role of refillable or re-useable packaging. A participant from another NGO expressed frustration at the limited conversation thus far about the role of refillable packaging in achieving Ireland's Circular Economy objectives, highlighting that they see an over-emphasis on recycling. They compared this overvaluation of recycling in Ireland's Circular Economy conversation as attempting to '*flex a straight line into a circle*'. They argued that this requires a deep change in how we think about the economy, and that stakeholders still need to be persuaded and incentivised to embrace the Circular Economy. This speaker noted that it took 20 years to achieve the DRS, and that there will need to be deep buy-in and creative policy solution to support the development of the Circular Economy. Industry and citizens must be deeply invested, and not just government, in working together to make the Circular Economy a reality.

At the same time, an industry figure noted that moving to a re-use model, rather than a recycling model, would be the optimal way forward. However, it was also noted that it is hard to do re-use on your own and that while some firms may wish to pursue solutions with refillable vessels, some within industry overall are resisting the re-use model at present. Moreover, a separate industry figure noted that consumers also need to be persuaded and facilitated to re-use. Clearly, a re-use system would

1. The EU's Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive proposes new measures to limit packaging waste and to promote the re-use and recycling of packaging with an overall view to promote a greater circularity in Europe. More information about the Directive can be found in Ragonnaud G. (2024) *Revision of the Packaging Waste Directive*. EPRS. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/745707/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)745707_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/745707/EPRS_BRI(2023)745707_EN.pdf); and European Parliament (2022) *Proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on packaging and packaging waste, amending Regulation (EU) 2019/1020 and Directive (EU) 2019/904, and repealing Directive 94/62/EC*. Eur-Lex. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52022PC0677>.

2. Carbon emissions from plastic packaging is estimated to be approximately 0.55% of Ireland's total carbon emissions according to most recent available data. In 2022, Ireland's carbon emissions totalled 60.76 million tonnes. Meanwhile, 2020 figures indicated that 331,962 tonnes of carbon were released into the atmosphere due to packaging and its disposal in Ireland. For more information see: EPA (2022) *Latest Emissions Data*. Available at: <https://www.epa.ie/our-services/monitoring--assessment/climate-change/ghg/latest-emissions-data/>; and EPA (2022) *Packaging Waste in Ireland in 2020*. Available at: <https://www.epa.ie/publications/monitoring--assessment/waste/national-waste-statistics/EPA-Packaging-Info-FINAL.pdf>.

have to provide value to the consumer, either in the experience of the product or in improving the value of the product, through convenience, and enhanced functionality or design.

During the concluding remarks, the conversation turned to how the Circular Economy ought to be regulated and supported by government. It was noted that regulation would have to be dynamic and predictable. It was emphasised once more that a sectoral approach to regulation will be important to ensure that people are not left unprepared or stranded in a new regulatory environment that does not work in the same way across sectors. Another participant noted that in an ideal world, industry would move first. However, as the climate and the environment deteriorates at pace it will be necessary for regulation to become more proactive and ambitious.

Closing thoughts reflected on new and more sustainable materials for packaging and the need to keep an open mind as new materials become available.

Session Two: Making the Circular Economy for Packaging a Reality

The second session of the day commenced with a set of opening reflections from selected industry representatives before a wider discussion. Each speaker reflected on how their business has sought to increase their contribution to circularity and towards becoming more sustainable. The first speaker representing a large multinational player in the food and drinks sector, echoing some of the remarks in the first panel, noting that Ireland will need to shift the balance from relying on recycling systems towards re-usable systems of packaging. Indeed, the speaker highlighted the need for greater exploration and trialling of what a re-usable/refillable packaging system in Ireland might look like, learning from examples of best practice in other markets in Europe. The speaker noted that a move from single-use plastics and cans to glass could offer a way forward, but the focus must be on glass receptacles that can be refilled rather than recycled. They highlighted the role of the DRS in changing consumer behaviour to focus on 'returning' packages when possible, but that ongoing efforts to inspire consumers to participate in this initiative will be required for its adoption and success.

The next speaker, also from the food and drinks sector, discussed the challenges associated with the use of glass packaging and the energy intensive nature of recycling it. The speaker discussed their own internal efforts to increase sustainability efforts including via a project that uses biomass to provide the energy that is required to recycle glass. They also stressed that when it comes to sustainability and circularity, often there is no limit to the ambition for large-scale projects, but only limited resources and knowledge. However, the speaker also highlighted that there can be regulatory or legislative barriers which can be obstructive to attempts within industry to become more sustainable.

Another speaker, drawn from the waste sector, discussed the state of Ireland's waste industry and how greater circularity can be achieved. The speaker noted that Ireland is unusual in that it has privatised waste collection from households, which is not typical across Europe. The speaker also set out how the nature of waste in Ireland has changed over recent years. For example, display units and packaging have in many cases moved from plastic to cardboard or paper. They stressed that paper and fibre has provided a more sustainable financial model for packaging which has been shown to work. They also argued that policymakers ought to take care to ensure that sustainability policies are themselves financially viable. Indeed, on the DRS, the speaker noted that they are unsure as to the potential for its ultimate success. The speaker highlighted the fact that Ireland currently does not have a substantial plastic reprocessing facility on the island to capacity or economy of scale for recycle. It is hoped the advent of the DRS will create the business case for such a facility on the island in the near future. The speaker argued that in the interim, Ireland

should not be afraid to access the Single Market and export its plastic to be recycled within the EU, where there would be greater financial viability for such waste projects. Though it was countered that this is not an optimum solution from a transport emissions perspective.

The final speaker was drawn from a domestic SME in the food and beverage industry. The speaker set out some of the challenges which smaller firms face when it comes to sustainability. In particular time constraint, tight management of resources, and business capacity were cited as deterrents when it comes to trying to achieve circularity and doing something meaningful about it. The speaker argued that legislation and information about the Circular Economy has not been sufficiently communicated to small businesses. They argued that SMEs require clear evidence-based solutions relating to the sustainability of packaging. They also contended that the widespread adoption of reusable glass would have to wait for some time in the future, suggesting that perhaps the EU could legislate for the introduction of standardised glass containers, which could be returned anywhere, washed, and reintroduced into circulation.

Following the conclusion of the opening sets of remarks, the discussion was opened up to the wider group. Initial remarks focused on the need for up-to-date research into circular solutions. It was noted by a representative from a leading research and technology organisation that while academia, policymakers, and industry figures are collaborating, gaps persist. Moreover, contributors from across these sectors remarked that although many firms are engaging with networks that focus on sustainable solutions, there are often concerns when it comes to sharing data, disclosing a lack of progress or errors publicly can lead to reputational damage. Yet, the genuine need to share knowledge with one another was stressed by all those participating in the discussion.

The conversation then returned to the need for better standardisation within the circular economy for packaging -for example, a harmonised EU-wide DRS logo or packaging that could be used and re-used by manufacturers in the food and drinks sector. Participants further endorsed the prospect of harmonised solutions to the creation of a fully European circular economy. Others, in particular a speaker from the food and beverages sector, highlighted the requirement to find alignment with the United Kingdom in legislating for circularity, given the integrated nature of Ireland and Northern Ireland's food and drink sectors, and given how tightly linked the packaging economies of these island are.

The importance of state assistance was emphasised by a number of participants. However, it was noted by a senior figure, with knowledge of the implementation of the Deposit Return Scheme, that there was something of a jaundiced view of existing government funding for sustainability projects due to the typically long lead in time that accompany such ventures. It was recommended that capital allowances for circular initiatives be accelerated. It was further noted that it would be important to identify a 'champion' within government preferably at Cabinet level, to lead the charge to pull all aspects of the Circular Economy together in a coherent way. The role of international investment in this regard was also stressed. However, the obstacles posed by long wait times for planning and licencing makes Ireland less attractive as a venue for foreign direct investment in the Circular Economy by investors from outside the State. It was also noted that planning has been reformed to attract investment into Irish renewable energy initiatives and that similar reforms should be considered for the waste sector.

Some participants noted that there is a large amount of regulation set to come into effect in the broad Circular Economy arena. A speaker from a leading technology and research organisation noted that while the business case for increasing sustainability or circularity may not be present now, such regulation may incentivise greater investment by industry in the Circular Economy in the future. Additionally, it was noted that the Irish Government must also do more to accelerate

the transition. Amongst the challenges cited by those at the table was the risk associated with the pivot to a more circular model of doing business more generally. It was expressed by a senior figure, with knowledge of the implementation of the Deposit Return Scheme, that producers of waste, under the Extended Producer Responsibility policy, have themselves funded much of the private waste collection of the country. While this has got us to where we are, it may potentially have to be reformed somewhat to ensure that this works better for industry and for society, in this new regulatory environment.

A representative from the food and beverage sector highlighted the lack of the infrastructure that is needed to facilitate greater circularity. In the arena of the re-use of cooking oils to fuel delivery vehicles, for example. panellists highlighted the lack of the infrastructure that is needed to support this and the limited assistance coming from government to construct this. Meanwhile, it was also noted that while there is consensus around the importance of the introduction of refillable packaging, the potential labour, water usage and energy costs of collecting, washing, and repurposing of packaging may prove prohibitive for some industries and local grids.

While much of the discussion focused on the need for greater integration of Ireland's Circular Economy efforts with those of the EU, the discussion also highlighted to need to tap into the power of local actors to achieve Ireland's sustainability goals as well. It was noted that a new Government Waste Management Plan set to be released in 2024 will focus on greater inclusion of local initiatives to meet Ireland's Circular Economy objectives.

Moreover, the need for the Irish Government to devote more bandwidth overall to the Circular Economy was noted by many. The roundtable agreed that while attention to the energy sector and renewables is indeed important, a senior civil servant with knowledge of the issues noted that the Circular Economy is slipping down the agenda somewhat. It was argued that industry should seek to see the Circular Economy becoming more 'mainstreamed' in their interactions with Government Ministers and that consideration should be given to seeing responsibility for the Circular Economy move from a Minister of State to a senior ministerial portfolio.

As the discussion concluded, it was noted that sustainability has changed from an ancillary function of business in the past, to a core part of how many firms now do business which was welcomed by the group. Sustainability is now viewed as a driver of growth, and industry, the State, and the citizenry alike will need to embrace new ways of producing, consuming, and returning in order to realise and sustain the Circular Economy.

Rapporteur Comments and Summary

To close the discussion, the rapporteur thanked all those who participated for their contributions. Coca-Cola, Ireland was thanked for sponsoring this roundtable discussion with the IIEA. Finally, the rapporteur concluded that while there is often a risk when discussing complex challenges such as the Circular Economy that the discussion can become nebulous or inconclusive, the roundtable achieved what it set out to do – to advance the conversation about how Government, academia, think-tanks, NGO's, civil society, and industry can make the Circular Economy a reality for Ireland.

Recommendations

This section sets out some practical and actionable recommendations that can be gleaned from the discussion and which should be of interest to policymakers. These recommendations should also serve to inform future discussions regarding the Circular Economy and Ireland and further afield.

1. A Sectoral Approach to Government Policy on the Circular Economy Offers the Best Pathway to Success

While the challenges posed by Climate Change are well-documented, the extent and nature of the pace of change and adaptation that will be needed across all levels of society remains a point of concern and debate. It is clear the best way to successfully implement the changes required to meet Ireland's Circular Economy objectives is through a sectoral approach, with the drafting of tailored strategies on a sector-by-sector basis. This should be combined with integrated, cohesive policy thinking that is working to identify synergies and efficiencies, and ensure that efforts to improve circularity in one area, do not inadvertently lead to inefficiencies or increased waste elsewhere. At present, the two relevant strategies, *A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy and the Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2022-2023* focus on waste streams themselves, such as plastic packaging, and how to make them more circular.³ While this provides a strong foundation for Ireland's circularity goals, individually tailored sectoral strategies which focus on how such waste streams are generated in the first place would provide greater clarity and could make the future policy landscape more predictable and sustainable for industry and society alike.

2. Ireland's Should Explore Partnerships to Increase the State's Recycling & Reprocessing Capacity

Ireland's recycling and reprocessing capacity and infrastructure could be enhanced by exploring prospects for greater engagement with the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan and for durable partnership with relevant actors in the EU and UK waste management sectors. The financial model for fibre and paper-based recycling in Ireland has been proven to be viable. Yet, Ireland could take further steps to generate the economies-of-scale needed to achieve circularity in plastic and glass waste streams. Clearly, the State's recycling and reprocessing capacity, and the transition to a Circular Economy could be greatly augmented through enhanced North-South Cooperation to develop an all-island Circular Economy. This could provide opportunities for the whole island of Ireland to leverage resources both in the EU and the UK to realise an all-island circular economy with potentially greater efficiencies in managing waste streams and a reduction in the carbon footprint of the overall recycling process. Achieving this requires a proactive position on interoperability. With this in mind, Ireland should consider the development of an all-island Circular Economy strategy to consider the opportunities which such an initiative might present.

3. Greater Information Sharing to Generate 'buy-in' with the Circular Economy

The Government and government agencies should focus on information sharing to enhance engagement with the Circular Economy by both large and small enterprises as well as by the citizenry at large. Many SMEs in Ireland's food and beverages sector simply do not have the resources required to focus on sustainability and often lack dedicated personnel such as function-leads on Sustainability to undertake this work. In particular, 'time poverty' was noted as a barrier to engagement with the Circular Economy as a concept. While small enterprises often want to be

3. See Government of Ireland (2020) *A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy: Ireland's National Waste Policy 2020-2025*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/4221c-waste-action-plan-for-a-circular-economy/>; and Government of Ireland (2022) *Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2022-2023*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b542d-whole-of-government-circular-economy-strategy-2022-2023-living-more-using-less/>

more sustainable for environmental and commercial reasons, many feel that they do not have easy or sufficient access to evidence-based advice relating to sustainability across their businesses' activities. Government agencies do have existing programmes to assist individual firms in becoming more sustainable, but drawing greater attention to these resources, and providing more advisory services to SMEs encourage all levels of industry – small, medium and large enterprises - to actively participate in the development of the Circular Economy.

4. Re-Using Offers the Greatest Potential and Opportunities for the Circular Economy for Packaging
Opportunities to 're-use' presents the most appropriate long-term opportunity to support the creation of a Circular Economy for packaging, as part of Ireland's circularity mix which will also need to include reducing packaging waste and recycling materials where appropriate. While the DRS has enabled the first steps to be taken to promote a change in consumer behaviour from a 'purchase, consume, dispose' model to a 'purchase, consume, and return' model; re-usable and refillable containers - which can be washed and put back into circulation instead of being recycled - offers a clear pathway to ensure that materials are kept in use at their highest value. Due to the nature of the supply chains for packaging beverages, no single organisation in this sector would be capable of moving to a refillable model on its own. However, Government could facilitate and incentivise this transition by considering an expansion of the DRS to include re-fillable and re-usable containers which could be put back into circulation after use. Austria provides an excellent example in this regard.

5. Government Needs to Increase Attention on the Opportunities Emerging from the Circular Economy and Consider Creation of Senior Ministerial Role for the Circular Economy

Large organisations in Ireland's food and beverages sector have increasingly come to view sustainability as a core part of their business and as a driver of growth. Government should increase its focus and attention on the opportunities which the Circular Economy may provide for Ireland. Collecting and analysing high quality data on the circularity of Ireland's economy would not only provide metrics for the state to better understand its progress on achieving its stated objectives in the *Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2022-2023* of reducing Ireland's carbon impact and protecting the environment,⁴ but also will help to identify new opportunities for Ireland and Irish enterprise. While the growing importance of renewable energy, in particular offshore wind energy generation and green hydrogen, has become a central part of Ireland's political agenda, the Circular Economy has not achieved the same attention.

Given the scale of the challenges and the enormity of the social and economic reorganisation required to meet Ireland's waste management and circularity objectives, the Government should devote increased political attention to the Circular Economy's growing importance, possibly through the creation of a dedicated senior ministerial role for the Circular Economy to manage the transition.

4. See Government of Ireland (2022) *Whole of Government Circular Economy Strategy 2022-2023*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b542d-whole-of-government-circular-economy-strategy-2022-2023-living-more-using-less/>

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