

Green and Circular Economy: Old Practices, New Nuances¹

Uddhab Pyakurel, PhD (Political Sociology)

*Dean, School of Arts
Kathmandu University, Nepal.
Email: uddhab.pyakurel@ku.edu.np*

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Abstract

This paper provides anecdotes and examples on a wide range of topics related to sustainability, circular economy, local governance, and community development in Nepal, and illustrates the disconnect between global concepts like the circular economy and the ground realities of rural Nepal. It discusses the origins of the circular economy concept, its benefits, and the challenges likely to be faced while transitioning from a linear model of production and consumption to one that is cyclical. The role of local governments in adopting new practices like waste management and the potential pitfalls of introducing modern solutions without considering traditional practices and local contexts have been analyzed within the complexities surrounding the circular economy, especially in relation to practicality in implementation in rural areas.

Being based on secondary literatures, and the author's own observation-based reflection, the article also discusses how imported ideas and practices, if not aligned with local traditions and resources, can lead to unintended consequences and challenges. The critique of initiatives that prioritize superficial modernization over addressing core issues like sustainable waste management or preserving traditional farming practices has also been discussed.

Keywords: Sustainability, Green and Circular Economy; Village Economy; Waste Management; Consumption and Production.

¹ This paper is a revised version of a book chapter titled, "Nepali Way' to dealing with the concept of green and circular economy: Some anecdotes," published in a book Green and Circular Economy: A Reader (Claudius Preville, C. and Pyakurel, U. eds. 2024).

Background

The concept of circular economy is not new but its practical applications in modern economic systems and industrial processes date back to the late 1970s or early 1980s. The cradle-to-cradle concept and certification process² were initiated in Germany long back. The design philosophy behind the concept is to consider all materials involved in industrial and commercial processes to be nutrients, in which two main categories are the actors: (a) technical, and (b) biological. The cradle-to-cradle framework focuses on design for effectiveness in terms of products with positive impact, and in reducing the negative impacts of commerce through efficiency. The safe and productive processes of nature's "biological metabolism" have been received in the cradle-to-cradle design leading to a model for developing a "technical metabolism" flow of industrial materials. It requires product/ components that can be designed for recovery and reutilization on a continual basis.

Over the years, the concept of circular economy has attracted much criticism on several grounds including for having different definitions. Yet the concept has had a broad appeal among the academic, policy, and business audiences (Vanner et al. 2014; Ghisellini et al. 2016). The one-way model of production and consumption has been dominating the globe and in the supply chain of this model, the goods are manufactured from raw materials are sold, used, and subsequently at the end of their lifetime they end up in landfills or are incinerated. The raw

materials are extracted from nature and the products are usually discarded after use. This model simply runs on a linear path and hence is sometimes termed as a linear model, which might not support environmental sustainability and resource efficiency.

All products, processes, and materials must be designed with lifecycles that are safe for both the environment and human health. The system should be developed to mobilize and recover the value of the materials of products after use. With continued growth in global population, urbanization and industrialization, growing demands of resources for consumption, and negative impacts on the environment, it is becoming increasingly apparent that business in a linear model cannot be continued for a sustainable future.

The concept of recirculation of resources was discussed in the Stockholm Conference in 1972³. Based on the concept, policy makers, researchers, major global companies and implementers began focusing on the transition from the existing linear model of economy to a circular one. The World Economic Forum 2012 in Davos, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) and McKinsey Company published a report which evaluates the potential benefits of the transition to a circular economy: It could create an opportunity of US\$ 630 billion a year for only a subset of the EU manufacturing sectors (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 2012, p. 5). Alongside the huge economic benefits, the EMF also pointed out the significant environmental and social benefits that could be derived from a circular economy.

² For details, see <https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/circular-economy/concept/schools-of-thought>, accessed on August 27, 2024

³ For details, see <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/stockholm1972>, accessed on August 27, 2024

The circular economy and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have a close relationship in many aspects as the latter can help in attaining the SDGs. Circular economy practices and related business models can help achieve several SDGs' targets. Such practices directly contribute towards achieving 21 SDG targets, and indirectly, to attaining another 28 targets. Targets in SDG 6, SDG 7, SDG 8, SDG 12, and SDG 15 have the strongest relationships with circular economy practices, which also offer the potential to create synergies between several SDGs, such as those promoting economic growth and jobs, eliminating poverty, ending hunger and sustainable food production, and biodiversity protection. Sustainable practices cannot solve all the issues the SDGs seek to address as at least 35 of the targets have no or little relationship with circular economy practices, which do have potential to serve as an implementation approach for specific SDG targets (Schroeder et al. 2019).

Once a new concept is introduced in countries like Nepal, our dilemma is that whoever brings the alternative ideas i.e. sustainability or circular economy, are advocating as if it is something which was not practiced or developed within the society. And because the ideas have been largely developed elsewhere in a different context, they may not fit locally no matter how much we romanticize them. I narrate three anecdotes below.

Nepal became a federal polity following the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015. The first elected local government bodies began developing planning processes in 2017. I was invited by a rural municipality to attend its first ever planning meeting as an observer. It was a Magar-dominated village in Gorkha that had just

been named the headquarters of the newly established rural municipality or *gaonpalika*. While we were there to discuss local governance-related planning under the slogan "*ghar ghar ma singha durbar*" (Singhadurbar at every home) (Baskota & Pyakurel 2021), I could observe something that I had not imagined. There was a new seminar hall built using materials that had been brought from elsewhere or they were not local, and included plastic chairs.

It was very small village of Magars, who were very good wood carvers. There were large trees available in the jungle and even on private lands; bamboo was also available, and these were people with skills to make furniture. When I was asked to speak, I raised this issue saying, "it has become awkward for me to speak about any planning process... I had hoped that you all had been elected not to promote globalization but to make villages more independent. Rather your aim should have been to promote local skills and materials to create more jobs locally. Do you think the plastic chairs create jobs in the area where we have many people with skills to produce alternative furnishings? Do you think that the building we are using (made using steel and CGI sheets) helps villages to be sustainable?"

This intervention compelled many local representatives to rethink, while some attendees also tried to be defensive. However, it also indicated the mindset of both the elected leaders and public. The public do not see change unless they have so-called modern furniture or buildings as they have been taught that those materials are symbols of modernity. The role for leaders in the situation would have been to convince or educate locals about the importance of using local materials and supporting local skills for making

the community sustainable. It was also convenient for the leaders as using “modern” materials was the easiest and the least critical approach⁴.

Over the years the villagers had been told that using local forest products (Adhikari & Pyakurel, 2008; Pyakurel, 2013) was like a crime as it would be against forest protection. In fact, a “community forest” has been the most hyped conservation related development in Nepal by locals as well as international development partners. To popularize the idea, a slogan that translated as, “the green forest is the wealth of Nepal” was introduced. The idea behind conservation was to have at least 43 percent forest cover in order to maintain environmental balance. Those promoting community forestry said that the forest area, which was almost 45 percent in the 1960s, had decreased to 40 percent in 15 years after private forests were nationalized in 1956 (Chapagain & Aase 2020). That is why the new “community forestry program” was introduced in 1987 where the idea was to hand over a forest to the community for management. In 2023, Nepal had over 16,000 community forestry groups, or those that were affiliated with the Federation of Community Forestry Users.

Once it was initiated, people understood community forestry as a project to protect forests so that its proportion nationwide could be increased. This aligned with the state’s aim to increase forest cover “at any cost”. There was no alternative thinking. Further, as the name of the project itself was so people-friendly i.e.,

community forestry, people tried not to explore the negative sides of the idea even though it had been initiated without proper consultations with the rural communities.

On paper, community forests were said to be a tool for sustainable development that would create not only employment opportunities, but also help income generation from the sale of forest resources. It was said that a forest users’ group had to be an autonomous community organization not only for daily operations but also to generate resources for use in drinking water schemes, providing loans to indigenous people, public works, road construction, school management, and other purposes. In practice, the program was imposed on locals with a focus only on increasing forests, ignoring the sensitive aspects related to rural livelihoods.

The situation of villages in the hilly areas when the program was introduced was one where villagers were focused on producing food. They had very strong beliefs that they should grow some grains themselves for family/community survival. Relying on the market for basic food items, especially grain, was referred to as *besayera khanu* and was not considered good practice (Pyakurel, 2026). Even if households had good cash earnings, they had to engage in farming to produce grain. Only the communities i.e. Dalits (Pyakurel, 2022; Pyakurel, 2011; Pyakurel 2015; Pyakurel and Adhikari, 2013; Pyakurel 2025; Khanal, Gelpke and Pyakurel, 2012; Pyakurel 2025) were compelled to so as they were having no access to farm land for farming activities due to historical inequality. In a way this could be considered a productive nature of society, one that guaranteed it autonomy and food security. Further, people

⁴ If you make purchases from the stores, there will be proper invoices and there would be no questions whereas if the municipality used local materials and skills, there could be unnecessary questions during audit.

tended to store major grains for at least an extra year so that the people could survive a natural disaster. This rural ecosystem could help the community in case some households faced food crisis and insufficiency. It was, in fact, a community strategy to ensure food sovereignty and autonomy. As a result, Nepal used to export more food than what it imported until the early 1980s⁵.

Recent research shows that Nepal has become a net importer of food. I see a very strong connection between Nepal's dependency on food items and the way the state implemented the new community forest policy. When the forests were accessible to everyone, the villages were lively with animal husbandry and organic farming and the younger generation was also in the village helping families with subsistence farming.

Theoretically speaking, there was space for locals in the organizational structure. But it was organized in such a way that the structure could, by default, be under the control of a few local elites. There was space created for marginalized communities, especially for women (Pyakurel, 2025) who wanted to be active. However, the assigned and expected roles to the members often discouraged the poorest of the poor and marginalized settlers in the village to participate, and the expected role from committee members was largely against these groups. The obvious result was that the marginalized majority was outside the process (Pyakurel, 2015) or was a passive participant, even if they had membership

in the community forestry group. The program provided opportunities for local elites to lead a section of society in the name of forest users' group.

One may ask how did the local elite-government nexus happen? Kathmandu, with the only objective to increase the proportion of forests with Western backing, was in search of local implementation partners. It was a time when the government-owned radio, TV and newspapers were the channels for discriminating information, and these channels were accessible to only a few rural households. The situation was easy for government and its partners to do something new. There was no need to convince every household about the new idea being introduced; if a few active male members were convinced, others could join automatically. That is how the government convinced locals by presenting community forestry as an opportunity for those who had an ambition to play a role in the locality as a leader.

The name of the program – community forestry – itself was good slogan for local leaders and the concept was popularized saying that local forests needed to be under the control of locals, and it had to be managed by the community. The idea was to let us first preserve the forest and enjoy the fruits of labor in the future. Because preservation rather than management was motto, only the locally well-off with sufficient land and trees under their control could be the leaders of the community forests. The locals who had to use the forest products for meeting daily needs opted to follow, even if they also had an interest to lead the village.

Preserving forests by denying access to human beings was not a good idea as there were many

⁵ For details, <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2022/02/02/how-a-country-of-farmers-became-a-food-importer#:~:text=Nepal%20exported%20more%20food%20than,percent%20of%20the%20available%20food.%E2%80%9D>, accessed on August 27, 2024.

renewable items in the forest, which could have been used not only for the community but also for the good of the forest itself. Regular management of forest, which is called *godemel* (clipping, trimming), could have helped quick growth in line with the objective of community forestry.

Some of the communities had plans to allow villagers to use forest products, but it was not made accessible as per the need of marginalized farmers. The marginalized groups needed forest products to feed their domesticated animals daily, but the community forests could be opened for clipping and trimming only once in six months or more. The social reality was such that hardly anyone could survive in rural areas without having access to forest products. This conflict emerged in the early days and it could have been addressed but the program remained unchanged as there was no one to talk about the whole ecosystem of using forests for fodder to feed animals, and the linkages to traditional subsistence farming using renewable resources and avoiding fertilizers and pesticides. I recall some of the occasions where forest users were punished by the local forest guards for collecting and using firewood and fodder from the forest. Those women and children who had gone there to collect *syaula* (leafy twigs) and *sotar* (bedding for cattle) were punished with fines. The local forest guards also harassed them not only by chasing them away but by also confiscating the tools they used to collect forest products i.e. *doko*, *hasiya* and *namlo* (baskets, sickles and ropes). Those sanctioned usually came from the neediest groups and there was no one to speak out against the sanctions or to demand for access to forest resources.

The social structure at the time had clear gendered roles, and most women and children were assigned to animal husbandry-related works (Pyakurel 2011). That had created a sort of conflict within households. The males did not have to fight with forest guards to collect fodder and bedding material for domesticated animals and they supported the forestry initiatives as they were influenced by the discourse of saving forests, while for their own family members it was a constant struggle for survival. In fact, most of the male members even made fun of the victims saying, “he/she should have obeyed the rules which were made locally”. There were no pro-people media that the victims could access to express themselves and of course there was no social media. This had made the people victimized by community forestry voiceless.

Strategically, the local forest guards were chosen from marginalized communities, usually people with no family and no domesticated animals so that he (usually a male) had no relations with forest products other than using firewood to cook. The strategy allowed community forestry groups to use one member of a marginalized community to prevent members from the same groups from obtaining forest products. The restrictions on access to forest products made it difficult for people dependent on forests to continue their traditional lifestyles. Rather they were compelled to find alternatives. Here it can be said that the shift of rural Nepali farmers from production-oriented and sustainable subsistence farming to a consumer society was caused by the unfavorable social environment created by the government-local elite nexus.

While the sustainable eco-system (Pyakurel 2009; Thapa Magar & Pyakurel 2018) was being

destroyed by new initiatives, the government succeeded in establishing road links to the villages with external assistance. The roads that symbolized “modernity” and promised political power, economic growth, and cultural status. The government-local elites-external donor nexus have made roads as an important political symbol in the aspiration for progress, development and freedom. This is also evidenced in the outcome – an increase by 1200% of the local road network from 1998 to 2016. Nepal had a total of 7,000 kms of roads in 1990, including rough roads⁶.

Having a road network is not bad for mobility, but roads also helped villagers to access markets and escape from the lifestyle that involved production in the self-reliance-oriented rural economy. This situation became fortunate for the advocates of the market and unfortunate for those who believed in a sustainable, eco-friendly and self-reliant economy. The import of grains have grown over time: it was around 1.3 percent of the available food in 2001; the food import bill had ballooned by 78 times by 2021⁷.

Another anecdote is from my own ward⁸ – Ward No 10 – of Bidur municipality. Some months after my encounter in the Gorkha village, I went to my birthplace to celebrate Dashain in 2018 with my parents. The recently-elected ward chairperson came to meet me to talk about his

plans. He was thinking of introducing garbage collection trucks. Even though the village had been converted into a ward of the local municipality, the lifestyle was still very rural and the reason having garbage collection was, again, “modernity”. He was in search of ideas for image building and if garbage trucks functioned locally, to him it would provide an “urban image”, and he would be credited for the initiative.

I had to react against his proposal as to me it was a wrong approach. My argument was that he is trying to create not only a financial burden for his voters but also convert some areas where the garbage would be dumped into pollution centers, as was the case in other municipalities. I had a study (ADB 2013) in mind, while I made the statement. According to the study, only six municipalities used sanitary landfills for final waste disposal in Nepal, and 45 were practicing open dumping, along rivers and roads. In all, 37% of the municipal solid waste (MSW) in Nepal was disposed of in sanitary landfills, although not necessarily in sanitary ways. Our ward had a low population density and hardly any commercial activity. And the nature of MSW was as same as in other rural areas, where villagers used most of the organic waste for feeding cattle, resulting in low waste generation. In fact, the village tradition was to decompose organic waste, such as food and paper waste in the backyard along with livestock and agricultural waste to produce compost.

Initially the ward chair tried to defend his idea saying that he needed to create jobs and trucks would employ at least four people. Creating jobs also meant taking people away from their household activities but people preferred them because employment in the formal sector also has

⁶ Data is used from an informal document as prepared by Jiae Yoo for International Monetary Fund, available at <https://www.elibrary.imf.org/downloadpdf/journals/002/2020/097/article-A002-en.xml>, accessed on August 27, 2024.

⁷ For details, see: <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2022/02/02/how-a-country-of-farmers-became-a-food-importer>, accessed on August 27, 2024.

⁸ A ward is the smallest administrative unit of each municipality.

social standing. I provided him my views explaining the current household solid waste generation and management and that could change after his idea was implemented. I told him his idea would compel villagers to pay monthly charges and require them to buy different buckets to segregate waste and that would have financial and environmental impacts as there was no sanitary landfill for disposal. I also explained that such a project could reduce production of compost, increase environmental degradation by increasing more plastic products, and also increase the monthly cash payment burden of the villagers.

Thankfully there is no truck mobilized to collect garbage in the Ward as of now-June 2026. Had the project planned by the ward chairperson gone ahead, there could have been more projects to support the “modern” ideas such as non-governmental organizations coming in to distribute plastic buckets for waste collection and organizing trainings on how to segregate waste.

Something like this could easily be possible because it would serve elected leaders who could spend money on solutions available in the market and also allow them to provide jobs to their supporters. A similar situation was observed in Ghandruk (Adhikari et.al., 2024) after waste management was introduced: previously organic waste dominated the waste stream later the proportion of recyclables, such as glass and plastics, had increased.

This leads to the argument that people who talk about a circular economy are those who have no idea of real grassroots practices, and those who already practice circular economy concepts in their own ways have no idea about the concept and its use by development practitioners and

academia. This is reason why new ideas introduced and popularized in countries like Nepal do not always produce desired results, as was the case with community forestry discussed earlier.

Phrases like women empowerment, leadership development, etc., were used to showcase the outcomes of community development even though the community forestry program was largely working as an anti-community approach to destroy the relationship of the forest user community with the forests. Eventually, and as result real forest dwellers had to move away from the entire eco-system of forest-farming in Nepal. For example, a country like Finland could offer many rights to people including right to hunt a deer per year per residents, and this hunting rights were tied with land ownership, mainly for farmers. But Nepali farmers residing near forest were not allowed to use timber even to make plough from the community forest (Pyakurel 2024).

Often new concepts, including that on circular economy, are picked up by those who cannot not relate that with similar traditional practices. Even if we have much better, eco-friendly economic practices, most of Nepal’s experts subscribe the idea of waste segregation as a model, primarily as far as waste management is concerned. That is why distribution of plastic buckets to keep different types of waste in different bins might be a lucrative project for NGOs for next few years. The locals won’t easily accept solutions if sustainable solutions like the *doko* are replaced. Therefore, the need to find strong matches in the mindsets of villagers’ and the working style of NGOs and academia to avoid a vicious circle that is being run in many villages in Nepal. Offering a

refresher typed training to manage household induced waste, announcing incentives for those who are managing locally generated waste without going beyond the concept of green economy will be encouraging factors, and it is better if such incentive is transferred in cash to the beneficiary. For it, we can take an example of the Western model of bottle recycling⁹. However, it is very difficult for policy implementing institutions, including local government to convince for direct benefit approach. Rather most of them will be happy to involve market or third party to offer something in kind. Even if government agreed to intensify locals, plastic made bucket like materials will be delivered using middleman or third party so that a portion of commission is ensured for everyone. To do so, there need to be a compromise on quality of materials resulting short life of the good and service.

To conclude, I argue that every new idea has to be based on the local context. If we talk about Green and Circular Economy, all small-scale farming might fit the idea in the European context. It is because there is hardly anyone in Europe who remembers how traditional farming was done by using animals i.e., oxen and buffalos to plough the fields, animal dung as fertilizer, and exchange of labor to support farming activities, etc. They may not recall how farmers rely on neighborhood on seeds, and how seeds can be preserved by the farmers and used for next seasons or have the knowledge of traditional ways to deal with harmful insects using natural pesticides. Contrary to this western context, more

than 60% Nepali adults still know how animals, especially oxen can be used to prepare farmlands with the support of wooden plough, how labor exchange works, how seeds can be preserved, exchanged and used locally, etc. For example, I could learn from a village of Finland through an observation in 2024 that they had horses to help with ploughing the fields, but ploughs made of 100% metal were available even 100 years ago. What is important here to understand is that shifting from natural ploughing and manual digging to mechanized farming cannot be Green and Circular Economy for a society like Nepal as such practices displace local practices, make locally available jobs redundant and also involve use of non-natural resources i.e., diesel to run tractors, chemical fertilizers, etc. But if there is any human and animal involvement in the small-scaled farming activities, many Western societies are in a position to acknowledge it as part of Green and Circular Economy in their own context of all mechanized situations. This is why, it is time for eastern society to recall our immediate past, articulate in the right forums so that some of the less discussed but eco-friendly practices will be on the fore as in the Green and Circular Economy discourse.

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⁹ It is the model which offers direct benefit to the party who collect those used bottles and deposit them to the collection center or machines.

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