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Aligning the circular economy and the bioeconomy at EU and national level

(own-initiative opinion)

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Rapporteur: **Cillian LOHAN**

Advisor	Agnieszka SZNYK (for the rapporteur)
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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. Coherence is needed with European Green Deal, sustainable development commitments, the circular economy and broader climate and biodiversity targets. A robust bioeconomy will complement progress made on circular economy and will allow for competitive growth within planetary boundaries consistent with sustainability.

1.2. The opportunity for the EU to be a global leader should be capitalised on with a highly ambitious, coherent bioeconomy strategy. Well-paid sustainable jobs, including in rural and remote regions, should be maximised. Existing technology can be used to bring urgently-needed products and services to the market assisting innovation, supported by a strong and interlinked circularity legislative package.

1.3. The EU needs a clearly-defined definition of bioeconomy in order to explicitly emphasise its link to the circular economy and its potential as a tool for delivering on sustainable development.

2. General comments

2.1. The bioeconomy should be developed with strategic autonomy in mind, and with due regard for competitiveness as previously defined by the EESC ([1]). Specifically, competitiveness should ensure that business, research and innovation should be supported to maintain high EU standards, while lower standards and ambitions outside the EU should not be used as justification for a race to the bottom.

([1]) Opinion to the European Economic and Social Committee – Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Securing our future Europe's 2040 climate target and the path to climate neutrality by 2050 building a sustainable, just and prosperous society (COM(2024) 63 final) (OJ C, C/2024/4667, 9.8.2024, ELI: http://data.europa.eu/eli/C/2024/4667/oj); Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 'Fit for 55': delivering the EU's 2030 Climate Target on the way to climate neutrality [COM(2021) 550 final] (OJ C 275, 18.7.2022, p. 101).

2.2. The success of circular economy initiatives in transforming business models and bringing benefits to consumers should be used as a template for how to progress with mainstreaming bioeconomy. Lessons learned should be applied, including the greater emphasis on the social aspects of a new economic model.

2.3. It will be essential to create financial support for innovative front-runners in the business sector to ensure early adopters are not penalised, particularly in the context of ensuring EU competitiveness.

2.4. The European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) should be used, with its strong network, and specifically its Coordination Group, to achieve peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing. The ECESP Knowledge Hub can be used to collate and make accessible information and expertise on bioeconomy ([2]).

2.5. Drawing on the successful work of the EU Bioeconomy Youth Ambassadors, we advise establishing a permanent, participatory platform or network to represent the voice of young people within the bioeconomy, and to include young people as stakeholders in the decision-making process.

2.6. The bioeconomy should be consistent with circularity principles, especially with the principle of cascading. Circular design applied to bioeconomy products and innovation should be encouraged, waste should be eliminated or minimised and valorised, energy input should be circular, and the objective should be to work with natural cycles.

2.7. The bioeconomy is a strategic choice requiring investment, education and adaptation. A strong peer-to-peer learning facility should allow those engaging in the bioeconomy to learn from each other and to develop an iterative learning model, with finance and funding easily accessible. This education should also be included in curriculums for young people in schools and in vocational training.

2.8. Building on previous research and investment, specific research and innovation funding should be available to maximise bioeconomy opportunities. This will help identify industrial symbiosis and highlight opportunities for social benefits while operating within planetary boundaries.

2.9. Some land use activities that involve biological materials use pollutants and practices that degrade soils and activities that result in more waste. Those land use activities are not automatically part of the bioeconomy in the context of the EU Bioeconomy Strategy.

2.10. The BIOEAST initiative can be used as a model for cooperation in the sector. Central and Eastern Europe, including many candidate countries, have an important role in biomass valorisation.

3. **Policy coherence including Sustainable Development Goals**

3.1. It is essential that policy initiatives such as the EU Bioeconomy Strategy are coherent with other policies related to the European Green Deal, the Paris Agreement, the circular economy and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Other relevant initiatives include the Certification Framework for Carbon Removals, the EU Nature Restoration Law and provisional agreement on packaging, biobased plastic packaging and food-related files. A Bioeconomy Action Plan could be developed along with the planned Circular Economy Act and Biotech Act. This can ensure that an EU bioeconomy would actively contribute to delivering on climate and biodiversity targets.

([2]) https://circulareconomy.europa.eu/platform/en.

3.2. It is important to work on an agreed definition that clarifies that the bioeconomy is a tool to achieve sustainable development. In this sense, a definition must link the bioeconomy with environmental, social and economic aspects as joint and equal priorities, while remaining consistent with definitions used by G20 ([3]) and United Nations. This can ensure consistent strategies across Member States and regions.

3.3. The bioeconomy should be seen as linked to the circular economy. The circular economy provides a systems approach to sustainably managing material flows promoting the reuse and recirculation of raw materials, driven by ecodesign. The bioeconomy includes a focus on the same principles, but applied to biological flows.

3.4. The bioeconomy must be consistent with the Blue Deal. A resource-use mapping is required where the volume of water per product is calculated. Clear links to Ecodesign and the Chemicals Strategy reflecting the health of ecosystems and humans are needed to ensure policy coherence.

3.5. Competitiveness should be considered in the context of previously agreed EESC positions highlighting that it should not be an excuse for operating to the lowest common denominator in terms of green and social standards and should always be examined in the context of coherence with our commitments to the Sustainable Development Goals. This is a particular focus in the context of the recent Draghi report ([4]).

4. **Technology and land use**

4.1. The high technology element of the bioeconomy is important. This includes technological advances and innovation that develop biologically-based components for products to replace those that are currently fossil-fuel based or otherwise unsustainable.

4.2. Digital and technological tools are a driver for efficiency in the bioeconomy but should not become the objective. The objective is a move to a bio-based economy and efficient use of natural biological processes to improve the sustainability of our economic model building on circular principles and approaches.

4.3. The bioeconomy aims at a fair transition, respecting traditional practices and nature-based solutions. This is particularly important in the agri-food sector, where there are many examples of small to medium family farms that use traditional regenerative practices to produce high-quality, high-value food without requiring high technology or digitalisation. This element should not be lost in a drive for greater use of high technology. Nature-based solutions for food and the environment should be supported.

4.4. Urban farming combined with technologically supported data-sharing can shorten supply chains, and link with circular food hubs can address food waste, integrating circularity and bioeconomy. These opportunities should be designed in collaboration with urban communities.

4.5. The use of natural systems to create carbon sinks can be enhanced and encouraged. A biodiverse forest managed under continuous cover forestry (CCF), as is typical in many EU Member States, has multiple benefits for the different elements of sustainability. Many farms are already managed in a way that uses nature to sequester carbon, for example employing regenerative practices that increase carbon storage in soils, and creating and preserving hedgerow habitats as field boundaries. These practices provide a means of achieving climate and sustainability targets and need to be recognised and rewarded under a bioeconomy strategy. Mechanical carbon removal technology while technically viable is still questionable in its commercial viability.

([3]) G20 High-Level Principles on Bioeconomy: https://www.g20.org/en/news/g20-reaches-consensus-and-establishes-high-level-principles-on-bioeconomy.

([4]) https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/97e481fd-2dc3-412d-be4c-f152a8232961_en?filename=The%20future%20of%20European%20competitiveness%20_%20A%20competitiveness%20strategy%20for%20Europe.pdf.

5. **Social element**

5.1. The bioeconomy has an additional social dimension, considering the people involved in the associated businesses and the benefits for communities.

5.2. In terms of a rural strategy and developing and supporting rural, coastal and remote areas, there are opportunities within the bioeconomy to create well-paid, sustainable jobs, opportunities, training and social benefits with careful development of a bioeconomy that is coherent with circularity and sustainability.

5.3. The Strategic Dialogue on Agriculture report ([5]) offers a chance to integrate circular principals, through bioeconomy, into the creation of a resilient food system in the EU. Support and funding beyond the common agricultural policy (CAP) should be identified to maximise the opportunities and to ensure comprehensive support for farmers seeking to transition.

5.4. The Bioeconomy Strategy is a chance to lay the groundwork for a vision for rural Europe, taking into account the well-being of those living in rural areas and prioritising the complementary principles of circularity that promote shorter supply chains, repair and reuse. It should outline supportive measures to empower young people to become transformative changemakers in shaping the future of the bioeconomy.

5.5. Broader societal benefits include greater health and well-being of communities, associated budgetary savings in providing healthcare, and rural regeneration. Research to ensure that implementation of bioeconomy practices is fair and just is required, highlighting the opportunities while being realistic about the challenges.

Brussels, 23 October 2024.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE

([5]) https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal/agriculture-and-green-deal/strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture_en.