

7. Towards just circular food systems: bringing justice principles to the table

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An increasing number of initiatives across the food system focus on improving the circularity of food production, processing, consumption, and waste management. These initiatives indicate that the transition process towards a future circular bio-based society has started. However, many initiatives focus on technological innovations and innovative business models and lack critical reflections on the socio-political context of circularity. This may lead to a depoliticised circularity narrative that offers great opportunities for some, but excludes others. Without engagement with the socio-political context, circular initiatives might lead to disproportionate concentrations of benefits and burdens in certain regions or with certain communities (distributive injustices) and/or a reproduction of current power dynamics for already marginalised communities (procedural injustices). Circularity in food production and consumption could become a luxury for those who can afford it. To advance the debate on justice implications of circular food system initiatives, it is important to understand which principles of justice can be used to analyse whether or not initiatives exacerbate or address injustices. This study therefore analysed the food system transitions literature to identify which, and how, principles of justice were used. A search in Scopus for papers that covered justice related issues of food system transitions resulted in 138 relevant papers. A subset of only 12 papers referred directly to circular or bio-based economy or society and the justice implications of initiatives. This subset of papers covered a range of circular initiatives across food production, consumption and waste management. The following principles were identified: equality of outcome; equality of opportunity; proportionality based on experience or capability; recognition; targeted universalism; and sufficiency. Papers specifically identified justice implications for indigenous communities, small-scale producers, women, those with previous experience of injustices, future generations, and non-humans. With regard to procedural justice, most papers were hopeful that changes in governance processes would lead to recognition and improved equality of opportunity. Principles reflecting on changes in distribution of employment, innovation opportunities, resource ownership, wellbeing, and pollution, showed a more complicated analysis. The focus on principles of justice enables a better analysis of justice implications of circular food system initiatives and advances the ongoing debates in society and academia. It will help to ensure the next steps in the transition address circularity of the food system within its socio-political context.

