

Everyday circularities : Perspectives from the Global South

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Dias, Sonia; Anantharaman, Manisha; Hobson, Kersty; Greene, Mary

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*Special Issue: Everyday Circularities: Rethinking Consumption
in Circular Transformation*

CONVERSATION

Everyday circularities: perspectives from the Global South

Sonia Dias, sonia.dias@wiego.org

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, Brazil

Manisha Anantharaman, manisha.anantharaman@sciencespo.fr

Sciences Po, France

Kersty Hobson, hobsonk@cardiff.ac.uk

Cardiff University, UK

Mary Greene, mary.greene@wur.nl

Wageningen University, The Netherlands

To highlight critical perspectives on the Circular Economy (CE) this conversation with Manisha Anantharaman and Sonia Dias considers often-overlooked Global South perspectives on everyday dynamics of circular transformation. In this conversation, we, Mary and Kersty, chat with Manisha (Sciences Po), a scholar in critical approaches to sustainability and circularity, and Sonia, a sociologist who works for WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), about key issues and debates concerning circular change that emerge from their work in India and Latin America.

Our conversation spans the broader political and economic contexts of the CE and the necessity of situating everyday circular practices within this framework of unequal access. Beginning with an exploration of the ‘circularity divide’ (Barrie et al, 2022), in which CE initiatives can deepen inequalities if not carefully approached, we discuss the crucial role of informal workers in the Global South and the importance of inclusive, context-specific approaches to circularity.

We then explore the differences and similarities in consumption dynamics across settings; the role of the household as a critical scale of analysis; and the diverse domestic experiences within these settings. Finally, we discuss the significance of DIY infrastructures and the informal economy in creating and sustaining the systems of provision essential for enacting circularity, as well as the role of scholarship in supporting political action for inclusive circular change.

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This interview is part of a Special Issue titled, *Everyday Circularities: Rethinking Consumption in the Circular Transformation*, edited by Kersty Hobson and Mary Greene.

Mary Greene (MG): Manisha, in a co-authored paper published last year you talked about the ‘circularity divide’ (Barrie et al, 2022). We really liked the idea of using this term to think about how circular transformation plays out in varied ways. As one of the authors of that article, what were you aiming to achieve by using that concept and what does it mean to you?

Manisha Anantharaman (MA): We wrote this article because we had noticed that CE is used as a growth and competitiveness strategy for the European Union (EU), as well as the United States, and other developed countries today. It’s a way to hedge bets when dealing with economic slowdowns, sluggish growth, as well as securing access to critical minerals.

Our view is that if the EU and the United States stick with this growth-based approach to the CE as a standalone strategy, it could end up pushing aside environmental goals and making existing inequalities between Global North and Global South countries worse. It’s not right to say that the global economy is a level playing field. Industrialised nations, which have a history of imperial or colonial power, have a lot of influence over the global economy. They have the upper hand when it comes to digitalisation, knowledge, patents, and so on. With our concept of the circularity divide, we wanted to emphasise how the CE is becoming another vehicle for neoliberal ‘development’. If we enhance ‘circularity’ as the West defines it, Global South countries that are less industrialised and have structural disadvantages in the global economy may not be able to participate. From a world systems perspective, Global South countries are once again playing subordinate roles in this global CE transition. So, we need to be careful that, when we are planning and implementing CE transitions, we don’t perpetuate the existing divides and inequalities in the global economy.

MG: Turning to you, Sonia, I’d like to ask you whether the idea of circularity divide resonates with your work?

Sonia Dias (SD): Absolutely! Manisha brought up some important points about the unequal power dynamics between the Global North and Global South, and how the latter often has a subordinate role. I think the circularity divide concept helps me understand how local and contextual knowledge from the Global South is either overlooked or given less attention than it deserves in relation to circular transitions. There are different ways to think about and put the CE into practice. The Global North approach tends to win out. So, for us at WIEGO, it is really important that we don’t view the CE as a technological fix. We believe it should be seen as a development tool for workers and communities. We want to provide space for moving away from a neoliberal ideology of circularity to consider other versions and perspectives.

MG: In relation to the theme of this Special Issue, which is to bring together critical perspectives on everyday consumption in the CE particularly, can you comment on what you see as the distinct issues emerging in Global South settings?

SD: I think it is important to understand that the CE is really a positive tool for the social and economic development of workers and communities. Because countries in the South rely on the work of informal workers, we need to view circularity through the lens of the everyday work of these informal workers. Take, for example, the waste pickers and those collecting recyclables, which are so important in Latin America.

MA: Yes, I'm on the same page. If we think about the Global North and the Global South, it's clear that there are some important similarities when it comes to how our everyday consumption relates to circularity. Taking a step back, in a capitalist system, businesses and the state try to cut production costs. They do this both by exploiting and devaluing workers, as we can see with neoliberal reforms to the welfare state, while also finding ways to 'externalise' the full costs of production. One way this is done is by refusing to pay for the 'infrastructural labour' (Gidwani, 2015) or 'the social production of sustainability' (Anantharaman, 2024) that maintains the infrastructural conditions for production. This includes keeping cities clean, getting rid of waste and regulating environments. So, whether that is women working in homes to segregate waste (Wheeler and Glucksmann, 2015) or informal workers who are going through municipal dumps to recover discarded materials, this work is either unpaid or underpaid and overexploited. This tendency to try and pass the buck for these infrastructural functions exists in both the Global North and South. Acts of everyday consumption, in a broad sense, are a place where we can see this happening. And here I'm thinking of acts of consumption quite broadly to include things people do to take care of themselves, their families, and to care for their immediate environment. This pattern, of shifting responsibility for maintaining the infrastructural conditions for economic growth and capitalism, is something we can see in both the Global North and South.

It's worth noting that in the Global South, this act of shifting responsibility has also become an important source of income for many people today. In places where wages are stagnant and work conditions are unfair, people – especially women – turn to waste work as a way to make a living. And so, I think one of the main challenges for circular transformation in the Global South is to increase respect for these informal, socially reproductive forms of work, and the knowledges that goes into them. At the same time, we need to make sure we don't reproduce the very patterns of expropriation and exploitation that are part of our economic systems today. I also think that tackling consumption and care will be a big part of the solution.

MG: In this Special Issue, we focus on the role of the household as a social unit of analysis when looking at consumption. We know from research in the Global North that the household is a key site for consumption work and consumption care labour. When we think about the labour involved in sustainable and circular consumption, much of it falls on women. We'd like to know more about the role the household plays as a useful scale of analysis when it comes to circular change in the Global South. That is, do you think the household matters? And if so, how?

MA: The household scale is really important, but the dynamics and relationship with the market are different from the Global North. Our colleague, Qabeer Arora, who is looking into informal work in India, has noticed that a lot of informal workers in the Global South do tasks like waste sorting or repair within the household. Historically, homes in the Global North were also places where people made things, like in artisanal production and repair work, but this changed as capitalism took over. As Sonia points out in her work, following these historic trends in the Global North, we are seeing the emergence of "rational modernist" waste management models in the Global South, with strict rules on where workplaces can be located. These regulations can force informal workers out of business by reframing home-based activities as wasteful and making poor use of resources: and, in some cases, making them illegal.

So, the household scale is also really important in the Global South, because it is where a lot of ‘circularity work’ gets done. One significant difference is how households relate to the market. Informal workers are market players, supplying recovered or repaired materials to formal firms, or services to the state. This market link is not as big a focus in studies of households in the Global North, but it could be interesting and show some common themes. Sonia, what are your thoughts on this?

SD: I really believe that it’s important to have a lens on the household scale in the Global South. Homes are a space where informal waste pickers can and do make a difference. Households play an important role in making our world more circular. For example, we have explored many instances where households are involved in community-based projects aimed at transforming interactions with waste. We see that these projects can make a big difference to those who are working in reuse, repair and recycling economies, in terms of how they access and interact with this waste. It is great to see how households can really play an important part in supporting inclusive systems.

For example, in Belo Horizonte we have a community-based zero waste project, which is run by several community organisations. And we have seen that it is an important space for bringing people together in our neighbourhoods to help shape the waste cultures and practices of households. In this project, participating households get to interact with informal waste pickers. They start to separate their organic matter, use our composting site, and donate their recyclables to a waste pickers co-op. We also have a food court where you can buy organic produce. The project really tries to engage by creating a supportive environment and bringing householders together with informal workers. So, building on this experience and the success of engaging people in neighbourhoods, we are encouraging the city to expand and scale this initiative into other areas of the city. However, when thinking about the role of households, it is also important to have in mind that without an enabling environment, individual and household changes will not be possible.

MA: I think you make a very important point, Sonia. You remind me that the Global South is a diverse place, not homogeneous or monolithic. We both work in cities that have a lot of inequality too. For example, in Bangalore – the city where I’ve done a lot of my work – many households resemble those in the Global North, in terms of their spending power, in terms of their practices and access to enabling environments ([Anantharaman, 2017](#)). It’s critical to think about how households are connected to the infrastructures outside and beyond each household unit. We also need to recognise that different people and different types of households in Global South cities interact with these systems in different ways. So, in Bangalore, for example, on the one hand you have households that are much more like the consumers in the Global North, and then, on the other, you also have folks who are informal workers or waste workers who interact with these systems in terms of their work and their labour.

MG: Yes, it’s important to think about social differences when we’re looking at how households and circular change play out in people’s everyday lives. We’d like to dig a bit deeper into this topic. Could you tell us how you see difference and justice reflected in your work? How is circular transformation showing up as a way to either reinforce or challenge some of these existing inequalities among households and citizens?

MA: That's a great question. I explore the themes of difference and justice a lot in my work. I'll use my recent book, *Recycling Class* (Anantharaman, 2024), which is set in Bangalore, India to respond to your question. What I found in Bangalore, which resonates with broader trends in global economies, is that the current waste management system in Global South cities exploits and relies on various forms of devalued labour and devalued environments. At the same time, those people and places are treated as disposable. This dual mode of treating informal workers as 'essential, but disposable' (Tucker and Anantharaman, 2020) is central to maintaining current structures of inequality. But, the new interest in promoting a CE for sustainability means that waste pickers in Bangalore can draw attention to the work that they are already doing by saying, 'Hey, you want to find a way to institute these recycling and repair practices more broadly because now you are becoming anxious about climate change, biodiversity loss and about your dirty city? Well, we have been doing this work for a long time, so we know what we are talking about. We are the ones with the know-how.'

This kind of terrain, of the CE, or urban sustainability more broadly, allows workers to make political claims about the value and worth of their work, and in so doing to make knowledge claims to say 'Hey, we are the ones who actually know how to do this well'. In terms of bridging the gap between different groups, I noticed in Bangalore that the CE discourse has helped to create a strategic alliance between different social classes and groups representing waste pickers with some sections of the environmentally engaged middle classes. They have joined forces to campaign for different community solutions that challenge the status quo. For instance, they are pushing back against large-scale waste energy plants or a market-based system that is very neoliberal. Instead, they are advocating for a decentralised approach that is more community-controlled, while also paying attention to livelihoods, dignified work and gender equality.

I found this story inspiring because it showed how circular change can be a way of bringing people together and bridging class divisions. So, you had these middle-class environmentalists who are largely older people or women working within the home coming together with waste pickers to say, 'Let's try to create a coalition and build up some infrastructures to tackle our shared problems without relying too heavily on the market or giving everything over to the state'.

On a less positive note, I believe these community-based systems are constantly at risk of being co-opted and absorbed by this top-down agenda of green growth (as I explain in Chapter 5 of the book). I think there is tension between how to nurture these decentralised arrangements, where you bring diverse coalitions together that are willing to push for both environmental and social justice goals simultaneously, while also managing the threat of being co-opted, commoditised and marketised by top-down forces.

SD: Building on what Manisha has said, I want to highlight one aspect from her India example, which is how workers are challenging the idea that traditional ways of living – and specifically traditional ways of reusing and repairing – are somehow outdated. Much of the debate around circularity, especially when it comes to sustainable consumption, is very much focused on the urban middle class that needs to reduce their impact and maintain their high living standards. But what we are seeing is the spread of neoliberal ideas influencing what gets prioritised in urban development in the Global South. Our City Officials are trying to copy the cities of

the Global North. They forget that we already have a people and ways of living here that have few impacts on the environment, in terms of how they make a living and how they live. So instead of bringing in Global North views about how to live and do 'development', we can think about how the North can also learn from the South to value more indigenous knowledges and ways of living. We can think about how we can share low-impact development approaches and consider how these traditional ways of living could help us to make progress in terms of living well within planetary boundaries. Manisha gave the example from India, but I have comparative examples from Latin America too. There, workers are trying to challenge the idea that what they do is outdated and needs to be modernised. So, we need to challenge capital-intensive modern ways of living and rethink what workers are already doing and the value of traditional ways of living and working.

MG: Very interesting and relevant to debates about more sufficiency-based approaches to the CE. Building on this, how does your work engage with the broader patterns of production and consumption that lead to waste generation in the first place? How do these issues relate to approaches to circular change in urban settings in the Global South?

MA: I think this is an important and interesting question. Something that you're hearing more and more recently is 'Oh, if we reduce waste generation, people in the Global South who do informal work or people who work in textile factories will lose their jobs'. And I think that is a very false assumption. In fact, overproduction of plastics often makes waste sorting more difficult. For instance, informal workers in Bangalore report that most of the plastics discarded in the city are not recyclable. As a result, they spend more time and effort sorting through waste to find recyclable materials, bending more and working longer hours. This example shows how we need to move beyond the binary argument that reducing production will eliminate jobs and livelihoods.

In terms of what looking at informal work reveals about broader systems of production and consumption: as long as our societies and economies are rooted in these elaborate systems that outsource and displace the problem of waste – by colonising land and treating them as waste sinks, by dispossessing the labour of people who do these tasks in very degrading conditions – the inequalities and problems of the linear economy will continue. And the conditions that make this possible are the deeply rooted systems of historical socio-cultural inequalities: colonialism, racial domination, casteism and patriarchy. It is these systems that keep these people and places in situations where they are forced to accept conditions, such as exposure to pollution or degrading work. As long as these kinds of systems of inequality are maintained and reproduced, it's really hard to solve the systemic problem of linear production and consumption, because exploitation is a pressure release valve. That is, if there is too much waste in one place, pressure is lessened by moving the waste somewhere else and dumping it on someone else's head. And if we can use people and more-than-human life to release pressure within systems, then I think that's what powerful systems will do, because that's what power does.

So, for me, going back to Sonia's point, what is so important here is to build the power of workers. Workers can resist the ways in which they are instrumentalised or exploited and say 'No, this is not what we accept. Here is what we are proposing; here is what we think is an infrastructure system that can deal with the environmental problem and, at the same time, also bring us better livelihoods'. Building the political

power to resist the instrumentalisation of certain people and certain places to deal with the so-called externalities of production and consumption is a crucial means of resisting and transforming these systems.

SD: Expanding on the power of workers, I think a key thing has been how organised workers are trying to really position themselves, not as victims, but as change agents. And in doing so, they are now seeing the systems of inequality more clearly. But they are also making proposals. Here in Latin America, more and more organised workers are really trying to position themselves to say: ‘OK, we are exploited; we face so many vulnerabilities, related to our class, to the position we have in the recycling chain, when it comes to gender, and other important factors. But we are also here to show that we are trying to be more in tune with the demands and needs of these new CEs, and we want to position ourselves in terms of being able to diversify what we have been doing and to play a bigger role in the reuse and repair economies.’ They also say: ‘We are very important service providers for Extended Producer Responsibility, and we are able to address this in line with the need for traceability.’ We have examples of events that waste workers here in Brazil have done with big companies where they are using technology to trace materials. And they are positioning themselves as environmental educators, as people who can help to change other’s habits and practices. So, I think it’s important for us to really document these movements and to think about what we need to do to help these workers reposition themselves as service providers in the CE.

MG: Building on this theme of collective organisation from the bottom up, Manisha, in your work you talk about DIY infrastructures ([Anantharaman, 2024](#)). Do you see this as related to this bottom-up political action?

MA: Yes, I do. What’s most interesting to me is the way in which the CE, and this speaks a lot to Kersty’s work too, has the potential to democratise control over the vital infrastructures and resource flows that we depend on in our daily lives. So, these DIY infrastructures that I write about in Chapter 4 of *Recycling Class* are about trying to create local, decentralised, community-owned, community-produced ways of dealing with resources and waste. I discuss how these decentralised infrastructures are not only about providing services, but also building important cross-class political coalitions. It’s not just about bringing somebody who provides a service together with someone who needs it, but that this DIY infrastructure is creating a new politics in the city that resists some of these very technocratic, managerial, and behavioural ways of trying to solve the problem of waste and achieving the CE. Instead, it’s about creating something that is more democratic, more accountable and can actually take on some of these challenges of injustice and address them.

MG: Do you want to add anything to this theme of political action, Sonia?

SD: Yeah, sure. As I said, workers have organised themselves and we have now set up workers’ organisations as membership-based organisations. I think it’s very interesting to see how in Latin America, RedLacre – the Latin American network of waste pickers – now has more than 15 countries affiliated to it. And they’ve really tried to build the capacity of their leaders as well as the workers at the grassroots level in the countries that they’re affiliated with, in terms of being able to learn skills, such as ‘green skills’, that they need to be able to meet ‘circularity demands’. And one of the key things that the leaders have consistently said is that in order for them to be able to reach their base of workers – where the level of education is often low, and the level of vulnerability is high – we really need to build green skills in ways that informal workers can relate to.

So, in terms of political action, I want to focus on the power of organising. I want to focus on supporting and giving a voice to this trend that has emerged over the last 15 years or so, where workers in Latin America, India, Africa and other Global South contexts are not only organising themselves at the grassroots level with cooperatives or micro-enterprises or associations, but they are also scaling up and forming networks: regional networks that support workers at the grassroots level. Because it is these workers who are the most vulnerable ones. And if we want to make progress towards an inclusive CE, we need to consider the diverse needs and demands of workers, as well as how these demands relate to both income inequalities and other factors such as gender (Dias and Ogando, 2015). And in that sense, we can look at the power of organising among informal workers as a way to build inclusive CEs that take into account women's empowerment, economic empowerment and political empowerment.

MG: Finally, we'd like to ask for your views on how scholarship can enrich these bottom-up governance processes. Is there a role for scholars and scholarship in contributing to meaningful change towards inclusive CEs in the Global South?

SD: I'm very much someone who is both a scholar and a practitioner. I want to see things change at the level of theories and academic debates, but I also want that to reach workers, to reach people on the ground. I think engaged scholarship can really help to contribute by exploring these economies of reuse and repair and giving them the value they deserve, while generating concrete insights into what is required to take them to the next level. I think it's important to understand that waste picking is a complex economic and social phenomenon, which is shaped by cultural, political and economic factors (Dias, 2016). So, we need to document its specificities and complexities and explore how to promote inclusive circularity. And this means approaching our research and scholarship with a transformative aim, to take academic knowledge to the next level of implementation, and to use what we do to change the minds and practices of policy makers – those who are still trying to imitate the city of the Global North, instead of really engaging with the army of environmental workers at home.

MG: And a final comment from you, Manisha?

MA: I think for me, being more of an academic and not enough of a practitioner, I feel like my role is to intervene in different academic and policy avenues where sustainability is being discussed and highlight inequality and the legacies of colonialism. Because I also see this troubling trend now – and maybe, Sonia, you can offer some perspective on this – where everyone is celebrating the knowledge and capacities of waste pickers in the Global South, but then with limited discussion about how to better compensate them and how to value them more.

Part of my work as a scholar and a public intellectual is to talk to policy makers and think tanks and go to the various places where people are coming up with CE schemes and say 'Well, recognising the value and worth of informal workers is one thing, but we also need to talk about the mechanisms through which there is going to be reparation of resources, reparation of power.'

So, what I try to do is to take some of what I've learned from people like Sonia who are doing the work on the ground on a daily basis. From workers' organisations like WIEGO, and other labour organisations, and then use that knowledge to challenge some of the dominant policy models that are being pushed. I try to make those connections as often as I can, in as many forums as I can.

MG: Thank you, Sonia and Manisha, for this extremely interesting conversation.

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