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Comparative Report on Circular Economy Managers in the Agri- Food Sector

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1. Introduction

To establish a common understanding among all partners, it was crucial to define the scope of the "Food and Agriculture sector" in the context of researching the current state of the Circular Economy in the Food and Agriculture sector. Since the advent of the "Green revolution" in the mid-20th century, agriculture has transformed into a highly mechanized industry, relying on various inputs such as chemicals, machinery, and energy to meet the increasing demand for food. Concurrently, the food-related manufacturing industry and organized distribution networks have expanded, leading to the proliferation of intermediaries and substantial growth in food-related economic activities. Recognizing this, there is a growing consensus that transitioning to a circular economy presents numerous opportunities to enhance resource efficiency within the entire agri-food system, thereby positively impacting food security.

However, to ensure clarity in research, it was essential to also establish a comprehensive definition of agrifood activities. Defining precise boundaries can be challenging, particularly concerning circular economy activities. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) provides a broad definition, considering the agrifood sector as "the interconnected events in the agricultural production of food, including production, processing, trading, distribution, and consumption, commonly referred to as 'from field to fork'." However, when analyzing circular economy practices, it is crucial to encompass pre-production processes, planning-related activities, and post-consumption processes, specifically those pertaining to food waste. Therefore, in addition to the traditional agricultural sector, the definition of the agrifood chain should include non-farm sectors such as transformation and packaging, as well as all economic and non-economic activities and services related to food. These elements should be considered when developing circular economy practices associated with the production and management of biomasses.

By following specific content outlines and guidelines, we aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Circular Economy Manager Profile in the agri-food sector, specifically tailored to the unique challenges and opportunities of the counties in question. Thus, this report aims to outline the similarities and differences between the partner countries in this context.

2. Introduction to Circular Economy

Focusing on the following three aspects: definition and principles of circular economy, importance and benefits of circular economy in the agri-food sector and the role of Circular Economy Manager in driving circularity, the findings were that while all the partner countries share a commitment to sustainability and circular economy principles, their specific focuses and challenges vary. Embracing EU's Circular Economy Action Plan with a focus on sustainability, resource efficiency, and waste reduction, **Cyprus** is actively transitioning from a linear economic model to a circular one. The country has developed a comprehensive National Circular Economy Strategy, focusing on sustainable production and consumption practices such as redefining waste management, promoting eco-design, and enhancing resource efficiency. **Cyprus'** circular economy journey extends to agriculture, emphasizing innovative, sustainable solutions to safeguard the country's agricultural heritage and its practices not only address resource scarcity and environmental sustainability, but also serve as an inspiration for other regions facing similar challenges. Recognizing the need for expertise, **Cyprus** highlights the crucial role of a Circular Economy Manager who plays a vital role in driving circularity by developing skills and knowledge for sustainable practices, overseeing initiatives, and navigating challenges in infrastructure, behavioral change, and overall circular economy implementation. With the same aims, a Circular Economy Manager in the Greek agri-food sector plays a multifaceted role that encompasses various responsibilities and strategies in order to navigate the sector toward circular economy practices, aiming to reduce waste, optimize resource use, and promote sustainable agriculture. The agri-food sector holds paramount importance in **Greece's** economy, but sustainability challenges persist. **Greece** acknowledges the need for implementing circular economy principles to address issues such as resource depletion and environmental degradation. The sector's unique challenges, coupled with its rich agricultural heritage, make the adoption of circular practices crucial for long-term sustainability. The similarity of **Greece** with **Spain** in the importance of the agri-food section is tremendous as the country recognizes the importance of aligning agricultural practices with environmental sustainability, indicating a commitment to reducing environmental impact within the sector after this sector generated more than 1.1 million jobs and accounted for 5.8% of **Spain's** Gross Added Value in 2020. In **Italy**, where the agrifood sector is a significant part of the economy, a change to Circular Economy is essential to address environmental challenges, improve resource efficiency, and contribute to the overall sustainability of the sector. The transition to the Circular Economy comes directly from developing business needs even with limited resources and budget, and lack of expertise. While being a vital component of the Portuguese economy, the agri-food sector is also one of the most polluting and wasteful sectors.

Hence, **Portugal** is in the process of transitioning its agri-food sector to a circular model to address environmental concerns and promote overall sustainability. As in the other countries, CE Managers play a crucial role in helping businesses navigate the complexities of circular economy implementation, providing them with the necessary tools, expertise, and knowledge to integrate circular thinking into their operations. While these five countries are mainly focused on transitioning, **Belgium** exhibits strong commitment to advancing circularity, being already on its way to build a more sustainable society through circular economy through circular practices in the agri-food sector that foster eco-friendly agriculture, promote responsible consumption, and contribute to the nation's environmental and economic sustainability.

The presented statuses demonstrate a shared commitment to embracing circular economy principles, particularly in the agri-food sectors. Commonalities across **Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Italy,** and **Portugal** include a recognition of the importance of aligning agricultural practices with environmental sustainability, addressing resource scarcity, and reducing environmental impact. These countries are actively transitioning or in the process of transitioning toward circular models to promote overall sustainability, while **Belgium** is notably ahead. The collaborative efforts in embracing circularity in the agri-food sector reflect a global recognition of the need for sustainable practices to ensure long-term environmental and economic viability.

1. Main professional functions, activities, and tasks

Regarding the main professional functions, activities, and tasks there are common findings in all the partner countries. Circular Economy Managers in the agri-food sector play a pivotal role with diverse responsibilities. They strategically plan and implement comprehensive circular economy strategies, aligning with organizational goals for sustainability and waste reduction. Resource optimization involves promoting sustainable farming practices and reducing water and energy consumption. Waste reduction programs target minimizing disposal through collaboration and circular product design. Managers mitigate the environmental impact by streamlining logistics and conducting life cycle assessments for product sustainability. Engaging with stakeholders, both internal and external, they build partnerships and promote circular principles. Continuous learning and innovation drive their commitment to staying informed about emerging technologies. Evaluating financial implications, risk management, and constant measurement of environmental and economic impacts round out their multifaceted role. Nonetheless, Circular Economy Managers are key drivers in steering the agri-food sector toward a more circular and sustainable future. Facing more challenges, **Greek** Managers indulge more into water scarcity and soil degradation than the other countries. Although there are no specific procedures mentioned in any country to follow in order to become a certified Circular Economy Manager, the common belief is that they need a combination of formal education, relevant work experience, and ongoing professional development. Their role in the agri-food sector is dynamic and can evolve as the production's circular economy strategy matures. They should be adaptable and open to new approaches and technologies.

2. Knowledge, competences, and skills (hard & soft skills)

Concerning knowledge, competences, and skills (hard & soft skills), a circular Economy Manager in the agri-food sector in **Cyprus** plays a pivotal role, necessitating a robust knowledge base rooted in circular economy principles and an understanding of local agricultural practices. This role requires expertise in environmental science, sustainability principles, and knowledge of regulations related to resource management and waste reduction. Competences crucial for the manager include strategic planning, optimizing resource utilization, engaging stakeholders, and proficiency in technology and data analysis tools. Hard skills encompass supply chain management, lifecycle assessments, and regulatory compliance, while soft skills such as effective communication, collaboration, problem-solving, adaptability, and leadership are equally vital. In **Cyprus**, the Circular Economy Manager serves as a catalyst for sustainable

change, effectively bridging circular principles with practical implementation in the local agri-food context, steering the sector towards circularity and sustainability. The Circular Economy Manager (Officer) in **Belgium's** agri-food sector, as outlined in a study based on the Circle Economy's report and LinkedIn job profiles, requires a comprehensive set of knowledge, competences, and skills, such as expertise in economic history, global systems, and geopolitical relations, crucial for effective partnerships on regional, national, and international levels. In-depth knowledge of Circular Economy principles, especially in **Belgium** and the EU's Agrifood sector, includes staying updated on regulations and addressing challenges aligned with company objectives. Strong analytical, commercial, and consultative skills are essential, along with the ability to negotiate agreements and manage client relationships effectively. The role demands excellent communication, problem-solving, and adaptability skills within the diverse linguistic context of the Belgian agri-food sector. The Circular Economy Manager thrives in a dynamic, entrepreneurial culture focused on growth, innovation, and sustainability. In **Spain** hard skills required for the Circular Economy Manager include proficiency in data analysis tools, environmental impact assessment, supply chain management optimization, circular design principles, waste management strategies, and regulatory compliance. Soft skills play a pivotal role, including leadership qualities to inspire and lead teams, stakeholder engagement for collaboration, adaptability to changing circumstances, empathy to understand diverse perspectives, negotiation skills for sustainable procurement, and creativity in finding innovative solutions to agri-food industry challenges. This comprehensive skill set is essential for effectively steering the agri-food sector towards circular economy principles. In **Italy** there is not set of competences regarded as an obligatory starter pack for whoever wants to start being a Circular Economy manager in an SME in the Agrifood Sector, especially as it comprises a lot of high-level skills and in-depth knowledge which can be obtained only through time, dedication and expenditure of resources. It is more a guideline of the optimal set of skills and knowledge outlined in the other countries too that a person should have to be a perfect CEM in the field. On a similar note with the other countries, **Portugal** and **Greece** require deep knowledge of circular economy principles, familiarity with the specific challenges in the agri-food sector, and a solid understanding of sustainability practices. Proficiency in supply chain management, analytical and problem-solving skills are essential for optimizing processes and developing innovative solutions. Business acumen, negotiation, and adaptability skills enable effective engagement with financial aspects, partners, and evolving sustainability trends. Effective communication and collaboration with diverse stakeholders, coupled with sustainability expertise and regulatory compliance knowledge, ensure alignment with organizational goals. Strong project management skills, encompassing planning, execution, and team leadership, are crucial for driving sustainability and circularity initiatives. Overall, a Circular Economy Manager

in the agri-food sector plays a multifaceted role that demands a deep understanding of circular economy principles, knowledge of sector-specific challenges, and expertise in sustainability practices. The manager must possess analytical skills for optimizing supply chain processes, while business acumen and negotiation abilities are crucial for financial considerations and adapting to evolving sustainability trends. Effective communication and collaboration skills with diverse stakeholders, coupled with sustainability expertise and regulatory compliance knowledge, ensure a holistic approach aligned with organizational goals. Strong project management skills are pivotal in executing initiatives, fostering innovation, and driving the sector towards circularity and sustainability.

3. Educational paths/ EQF Level /Accreditation requirements

In the realm of Circular Economy Managers across partner countries, the qualifications and educational backgrounds exhibit notable variations. In Belgium, professionals are typically positioned at EQF level 7, boasting diverse educational backgrounds and certifications. Cyprus sees Circular Economy Managers with bachelor's degrees in environmental science or related fields, with an increasing relevance of master's degrees. Spain offers diverse educational paths, ranging from Basic VET (EQF 3) to specialized master's degrees (EQF 7), encompassing professional certifications. In Italy, professionals generally hold education levels equivalent to EQF 6 or higher, often complemented by specialized Master Degrees in sustainability. Portugal presents Circular Economy Managers with a combination of bachelor's and master's degrees in relevant fields, along with certifications at EQF level 7. In Greece, the educational journey includes a Bachelor's Degree (EQF Level 6) in relevant fields, with many professionals pursuing a Master's Degree (EQF Level 7). Furthermore, the availability of certifications and training programs focuses on circular economy practices and sustainable agriculture. Therefore, the educational pathways for Circular Economy Managers in European countries reflect a nuanced landscape, encompassing diverse qualifications and levels of specialization. From the comprehensive expertise of professionals in Belgium at EQF level 7 to the increasing relevance of master's degrees in Cyprus and the broad spectrum in Spain, each country demonstrates a unique approach to preparing professionals for roles in circular economy management, although the EQF level in all of them is around 6/7. The educational diversity across these nations underscores the evolving nature of the circular economy field, accommodating a range of qualifications and expertise to address sustainability challenges.

4. Conclusion

Across partner countries, a collective commitment to sustainability and resource efficiency is evident in the adoption of circular economy practices. The data demonstrate the overall progress in the EU, with countries like Belgium leading in circularity rates, Cyprus actively embracing the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan, translating it into tangible policies and initiatives and others successfully facing the challenges that come with the transition towards sustainable and circular practices. Instigating behavioral change among the population and businesses remains an ongoing endeavor.

Despite these challenges, the introduction of Circular Economy Managers emerges as a crucial component of the journey. These managers, equipped with skills in strategic planning, resource optimization, and stakeholder collaboration, play a pivotal role in navigating the complexities of this transition. The emphasis on Circular Economy Managers underscores their importance in driving the shift towards circular and sustainable practices in the agri-food sector. Their multifaceted role includes overseeing initiatives, addressing challenges in infrastructure, promoting sustainable farming practices, and collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders. As these professionals actively contribute to the circular economy journey, they serve as catalysts for change, fostering innovation and steering the agri-food sector towards a more sustainable and circular future. The diversity in Educational/Academic Qualifications emphasizes the evolving and inclusive approach to circular economy management, catering to a range of qualifications and skills necessary to address sustainability challenge.



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