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Bioeconomy Revolution in Europe

□ 3.12.2018 Articles in English, Kiertotalouden ratkaisut, LAMK Pro □ LAMKpub

The world is facing many challenges. The growing population demands more resources, including a safe food supply. At the same time, climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss limit the availability. A disruptive and comprehensive solution can be offered by a sustainable and circular bioeconomy as it bridges environment, society and economy. The future success of Europe lies on how the bioeconomy is embraced by the EU citizens as a solution for improving our environment, providing

us with renewable resources and healthy food, and offer jobs where people live, both in urban and rural areas.

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Sustainable & Circular Bioeconomy – the European Way

On October 22, 2018, the Bioeconomy (BE) conference was organised under the Austrian presidency by the European Commission and by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Sustainability and Tourism in the Charlemagne building, in Brussels, Belgium. The full title of the conference was Sustainable & circular bioeconomy, the European way. The reason for organizing this high-level event was to turn the spotlight on the update of the 2012 EU Bioeconomy Strategy, which was announced on October 11, 2018. (European Commission 2017; 2018)



Figure 1. Bioeconomy conference in Brussels gathered many participants.

The strategy defines BE as "the production of renewable biological resources and the conversion of these resources and waste streams into value-added products, such

as food, feed, bio-based products as well as bio-energy”. Bioeconomy is worth of € 2.2 trillion in turnover and employs over 18 million people in the EU. The sustainable and circular BE can generate up to 1 000 000 new jobs by 2030. BE can help us to reach the renewable energy targets of 27% by 2020 and 32% by 2030. (European Commission 2017; 2018)

According to John Bell, Director Bioeconomy, not one BE exists but many diverse bioeconomies, which Europe should harvest. BE pulls together all the aspects of the challenges Europe is facing, such as climate change, protection and restoration of natural resources, biodiversity and food security. Bell also stated that Europe is moving from an aspiration to the realisation of sustainable bioeconomy. Sustainability is not a concept; Bell explained it as a place the Europeans chose to live, work and nurture nature.

Carlos Moedas, Commissioner of Research, Science and Innovation, compared the BE potential to the introduction of lightbulb 139 years ago by Thomas Alva Edison. In the beginning, people were afraid of the revolutionary technology, so most of the population did not switch to the electric bulb until later on. Likewise, the BE potential is there but people cannot see it. This can be changed only if communication is done in a way that people understand, using storytelling and examples. Phil Hogan, Commissioner of Agriculture & Rural Development, referred to BE as not being “a pie in the sky”, as many successful examples already exist in Europe. BIOREGIO project also aims at promoting and sharing good examples and practices related to the bio-based circular economy. Concrete examples from different European regions are available from the project website, under the section Good Practices. (Interreg Europe 2018)

Another interesting comparison of BE is that of Anthony Luzzatto Gardner, the U.S. Ambassador to the European Union, who once stated: “The EU is like a window, you only realise that is there when there is a crack or dirt, but it always protects from the wind and the cold.”

During one of the panel discussions, Sveinn Margeirsson, CEO of Matis, pointed out the presence and use of plastic and glass water bottles during the event. He emphasized the need of courage to make a decision of no plastic bottles use and demonstrated it by throwing the plastic bottle away as better alternatives already exist.

Bio-based Products

BE is highly complex and touches many areas of our lives; the food we eat, products and energy we use, or clothes we wear. Therefore, bioeconomy and bio-based products are the tools to fight the climate change and dependency on fossil fuels. The challenge here is to let people see that these products are as good as or even better than the traditional ones. During the event, a bioeconomy corner was organised to showcase bio-based products, including compostable 3D printed cups and plates, cosmetics using insect protein, alternatives to plastic foil using beeswax wraps as well as clothes from coffee grounds.



Figures 2 and 3. Bio-based products displayed at the bioeconomy corner.

Conclusions

BE is the next economy the Europeans will have in the future; the European way as the title of the conference says. The updated strategy and the action plan can accelerate the BE development and a transition towards a circular and low-carbon economy. The huge BE potential can be unlocked only if everyone is on board and understand its benefits. BE touches everybody, everything and every day. Effective and clear communication is the key to nourish the collaborative spirit and together build the European sustainable future.

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All photos by Katerina Medkova.

Published 3.12.2018

Reference to this publication

Medkova, K. 2018. Bioeconomy Revolution in Europe. LAMK Pro. [Cited and date of citation]. Available at: <http://www.lamkpub.fi/2018/12/03/bioeconomy-revolution-in-europe/>



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LAMK Pro ISSN 2489-3765

LAMK RDI Journal ISSN 2489-3773

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