



22 JUN, 2026

The circular economy has a branding f problem

The Star, Malaysia



"CIRCULAR economy" sounds like a buzzword that escaped from a Davos brainstorming session and ran wild through corporate sustainability reports. We hear it constantly. We're going circular. Increasing circularity. And it's all driving sustainability. But here's the uncomfortable truth laid bare by a recent study: most of us have no idea what we're actually talking about.

The paper by Anteneh D. Sewenet, Youssef Boulaksil, and Paola Pisano, published in the *Cleaner Environmental Systems* journal, is a necessary intervention. The authors rigorously show that circularity is not the same as sustainability. Not even close.

Circularity is about loops – closing material flows, reducing waste, extending product life. That's necessary and noble. But a circular system can still be deeply unsustainable. Imagine a fully circular economy powered entirely by coal. Or a circular supply chain for cobalt that still relies on child labour. The loop is closed, but the world burns and people suffer.

Sustainability, by contrast, is the triad: environmental integrity, social equity, and economic viability. Circularity is just one tool in that toolbox.

The paper's most damning insight concerns measurement. We have fallen in love with circularity metrics: material input per unit of GDP, recycling rates, percentage of design for disassembly. These numbers make us feel accountable.

The circular economy has a branding problem



Photo: 123rf

But the authors find that most circularity indicators systematically ignore social impacts, long-term ecosystem effects, and even basic rebound effects. For instance, you can increase circularity while increasing overall resource extraction, because the bottle is cheaper, so we use more of it. The metric goes up. The planet goes down. This isn't a

technical glitch. It's a conceptual failure. We have outsourced sustainability thinking to inventory management.

The authors don't just complain – they build. Their proposed conceptual framework is a much-needed intervention. It disentangles the three concepts: Circular economy as a set of operational principles. Circularity as a

measurable property of a system (how closed are the loops?). Sustainability as the normative destination – are people and planet better off?

This seems basic. But in practice, businesses and governments routinely skip from "we increased circularity" to "we are sustainable". That's like saying "I ran faster" means "I won the race". It ignores direction, context, and the existence of other runners – like biodiversity, climate, and justice.

The authors' framework forces a simple, powerful question: Circular towards what end? If the end isn't genuine sustainability – ecological regeneration, social fairness, long-term resilience – then "circular" is just green-tinted linearity.

The circular economy is not a solution. It's a strategy. And strategies are only as good as the goals they serve. Too many companies today are adopting circular practices because they are measurable and marketable, not because they are just or ecologically sufficient. They will sell you a "circular phone" with modular parts, then design it for obsolescence

anyway. They will boast of "zero waste to landfill" while outsourcing emissions to a coal-fired recycler in another country.

Without a framework that places sustainability above circularity, the entire circular economy movement becomes a tool for corporate comfort, not ecological transition.

So the next time you hear someone say "we're going circular", stop them. Ask the hard question: Circular for whom, and for how long, and at whose expense? If they can't answer in social and ecological terms – not just material flow terms – then what they are selling isn't sustainability. It's just a better-looking cage. And we don't need a prettier cage.

PROF DATUK DR AHMAD IBRAHIM
Affiliate
Tan Sri Omar Centre for
Science, Technology, and
Innovation Policy Studies
UCSI University
Adjunct professor
Ungku Aziz Centre for
Development Studies
Universiti Malaya