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PNRR – Missione 4 “Istruzione e Ricerca” – Componente 2 “Dalla Ricerca all’Impresa”
Investimento 1.1 Fondi PRIN – Settore ERC SH2 “Institutions, Governance and Legal Systems”

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Empowering Citizens for Circular Economy: a HUMAN-centred law model (“ECCE HUMAN”)

CUP: B53D23032500001



November 2025

Premise and Objectives of the Project

The PRIN 2022 PNRR project Empowering Citizens for Circular Economy: A Human-Centred Law Model (ECCE-HUMAN), carried out by multidisciplinary teams from the University of Verona, the University of Udine, and Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, investigates citizen empowerment in the transition toward a Sustainable and Digital Circular Economy. Recognising that this transition cannot rely solely on technological innovations or business models, the project seeks to transpose the human-centred approach that underpins technological development into the legal domain, placing citizens and their well-being at the core of the process.

This summary presents the project’s main findings through a systemic and interdisciplinary lens, drawing on the results of twelve research lines spanning five disciplinary areas: Commercial Law, European Union Law, International Law, Constitutional Law, and Sociology.

A. An Integrated Paradigm: Social Complexity and Shared Responsibility

This preliminary analysis aims to outline the policy context, research questions, and methodological approach from a sociological perspective. Research conducted within the ECCE-HUMAN project shows that the Sustainable Circular Economy (hereinafter SCE) is not a sector-specific reform but a systemic transformation involving legislation, governance, and culture. Sociological analyses highlight that the circular economy is a multidimensional paradigm: it requires technological and economic innovation, but also cultural and legal change. This complexity calls for shared responsibility among institutions, businesses, and citizens, emphasising the need to address structural inequalities in wealth, access, and opportunity.

Given that the social dimension of the SCE risks being overlooked without active citizen involvement and a legal framework that recognises their role, a fair and inclusive transition presupposes responsible environmental policies, equitable cost distribution, and participatory governance. This sociological foundation supports the project’s emphasis on the interdependence between social action, information asymmetries, and citizen engagement in the circular transition.

B. Corporate Responsibility and Sustainable Governance

Another thematic area concerns corporate responsibility and the transformation of corporate governance. Research on Corporate Sustainability Reporting shows that the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive pushes companies to integrate environmental, social, and governance criteria into their decision-making models. Transparency on ESG performance becomes a governance tool rather than a mere compliance requirement, yet challenges remain in terms of data reliability and comparability.

Analysis within the project highlights that sustainability reporting generates both *ex ante* and *ex post* duties for directors: the obligation to construct adequate organisational structures to produce reliable sustainability information, and the obligation to use such information in strategic decision-making. A broader perspective integrates sustainability reporting with Ecodesign Regulation and the Corporate

Sustainability Due Diligence Directive to align managerial discretion with stakeholder interests. In this context, the principle of proportionality offers a criterion to balance profit with environmental and social considerations and makes managerial decisions more reviewable.

Parallel research on stakeholder participation proposes a model of inclusive governance in which citizens – despite lacking formal powers within corporations – act as holders of supra-individual interests. Furthermore, studies on Workers’ Buyouts (WBOs) reveal that worker-led recovery of distressed firms can combine economic revitalisation with social inclusion and environmental responsibility. These lines of research interact with the project’s focus on citizen rights, showing how sustainability reporting and stakeholder participation enhance transparency and strengthen the trust needed for citizens to exercise rights such as the right to repair and sustainable consumption choices. Likewise, WBOs illustrate how economic democracy can redistribute resources and responsibilities, contributing to a fairer circularity.

C. Consumer Empowerment and Protection, in B2C and C2C transactions

A third study area concerns market regulation, consumer empowerment and the evolution of consumer rights within the SCE. The analysis of the Right to Repair, considering Directive 2024/1799/EU, shows that legal tools must balance public interests with intellectual property rights, which should be duly protected but not overprotected to the detriment of the very same SCE. In this sense, an evolutionary interpretation is proposed in order to ensure such an effective systemic balance that does not impair the reform aimed at enforce repair in the new legal framework. Additionally, product servitization may restrict consumer autonomy and reinforce planned obsolescence, underscoring that only an evolutionary legal interpretation favouring social and environmental objectives can make repair a truly enforceable right to the benefit of SCE.

Research also underlines that emerging consumer rights – including product durability, repairability, and truthful environmental claims – are essential to empower consumers as active contributors to circularity. However, challenges persist in combating greenwashing, improving consumer understanding, and removing unsustainable products from the market.

Key consumer rights, such as access to reliable information, may be framed as human rights to enable stronger international protection. In addition to this, research on sustainable consumer choice as a human right widens the perspective: it calls for a shift from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric understanding of rights, recognising that consumption decisions have ecological implications.

Research in private international law highlights how circular supply chains, C2C transactions, and digital platforms challenge traditional conflict-of-laws instruments, which were designed for a linear economy. Functional reinterpretations and greater integration of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are proposed to ensure legal certainty and access to justice across borders. Project findings identify regulatory gaps regarding C2C contracts and product-related damage in circular markets, pointing to structural limits in the current legal framework that hinder cross-border circular practices.

D. Multilevel Governance and the International Dimension

The project also explored the multilevel dimension of the SCE. An Eco-feminist approach to the topic provides evidence of how global inequalities and over-consumption necessitate a model of sustainable consumer grounded in rights and ecological responsibility, at national, regional and global level.

From a constitutional standpoint, the study highlights asymmetries between EU law, which increasingly embeds environmental protection, and national constitutions, which often treat environmental protection as a limit on economic freedom. This tension suggests the need to internalise sustainability as a constitutional principle within domestic systems.

Project analysis ultimately shows that although the EU is a leading normative actor, global regulation remains fragmented and lacks binding standards; therefore, a future international agreement on the circular economy would be crucial to achieving global coherence. In this global perspective, it is underscored that the circular transition intersects with the right to a healthy environment, integrating human-centred and eco-centred approaches while also emphasising global inequalities and gender dimensions. Building on this foundation, the environment is conceptualised not merely as one component of sustainability but as its very basis, and thus as the cornerstone of any SCE. Such a paradigm shift requires rethinking the relationship between economy and environment, prompting a deeper reflection on humanity’s role and its impact on natural systems. The right to a healthy environment becomes particularly significant in this context, as it reframes the environment not as a passive resource but as an autonomous legal entity deserving of protection.

Synthesis and Future Perspectives

The project’s findings, presented in the volume [*Legal Perspectives for a Sustainable Circular Economy*](#) (see Table 1): a) demonstrate that the transition toward a circular economy requires a comprehensive rethinking of the legal system; b) identify structural challenges (global regulatory fragmentation, insufficient consumer empowerment, constitutional asymmetries, and gaps in private international law); c) assess the impact of innovative tools, including:

- legally reviewable models of sustainable corporate governance;
- strengthened consumer rights and market regulation;
- democratic economic mechanisms such as WBOs;
- more coherent supranational and international regulatory frameworks;
- eco-centric rights models to orient the transition.

In this regard, the project findings are condensed in a “catalogue” of reconceptualized rights for a Sustainable Circular Economy, to the benefit of future discussion and research (see again Table 1).

All in all, a common conclusion emerges across the different research lines: citizens must be the central reference point of the circular economy. The ECCE-HUMAN project advances a human-centred legal model in which transparency, participation, consumer rights and inclusive governance form the foundations of a circular economy conceived as a civic project rather than a purely economic paradigm.

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Table 1. Volume “Legal Perspective for a Sustainable Circular Economy”, B. Calabrese (ed), Springer (chapter, title, research questions, catalogue of reconceptualized rights), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-07795-0>

1	“‘Ubi societas ibi ius’: centering a Sustainable Circular Economy from a sociological perspective” (M. Marzulli)	How can a sociological lens help us reconceive the legal order needed to support a truly sustainable circular economy?	• Right to a “sociological” engineering of legal norms
2	“Corporate sustainability reporting and commitments: effectiveness and enforceability from EU to national law” (A. Genovese)	To what extent are EU-mandated sustainability reporting obligations actually effective and enforceable at Member State level?	• Right to transparency on ESG information by companies
3	“Citizens as active stakeholders in corporate governance” (A. Caprara)	What role can—and should—citizens play as stakeholders in steering corporate behaviour toward circular economy goals?	• Right to participate in the corporate governance of companies
4	“The ‘proportionally sustainable’ management of companies in the context of a Sustainable Circular Economy” (F. Bianconi)	How does the principle of proportionality operate when balancing profitability with sustainability in corporate decision making?	• Right to a sustainable management of companies
5	“Companies regenerated with Workers’ Buyout (WBO): a human centred tool for a Sustainable Circular Economy in corporate insolvency” (F. Pasquariello)	Can Workers’ Buyout mechanisms in insolvency law serve as levers for advancing circular economy principles?	• Right to preserve jobs and collective interests despite business insolvency
6	“Right to repair between intellectual property and environmental law” (B. Calabrese)	How does the enacted reform on “right to repair” actually address relevant market obstacles?	• Right to “independent” repair of products
7	“Reshaping Consumer Powers and Responsibilities in the European Union’s Transition to a Sustainable Circular Economy” (F. Deana)	What legal levers exist to empower consumers as agents of circularity, and where do gaps remain?	• Right to protection against products “unsustainable defectiveness”
8	“Dispute Resolution and Private International Law in the Context of Circular Economy: Effectiveness Beyond Alternatives” (E. Bergamini)	Are existing ADR and private-international-law tools adequate to resolve cross-border circular-economy disputes?	• Right to efficient and user-friendly remedies for dispute resolution
9	“The constitutional implications of a Sustainable Circular Economy at the European Union and national levels” (A. O. Cozzi)	How does the constitutional integration of sustainability principles support the implementation of circular economy regulation?	• Right to a constitutional safeguard of sustainability
10	“Global sustainability in the international arena beyond the EU policy agenda” (C. Candelmo)	What role can the EU play globally: a frontrunner exporting its model, or one among many actors shaping circular-economy norms?	• Right to safeguard sustainability obligations on a global scale
11	“Rethinking the role of the consumer in a global economy: the power of choice as a ‘human right’?” (S. Dal Monico)	Can “power of choice” be recognized and enforced as a human right in service of environmental sustainability?	• Right to free and informed choice in sustainable consumption
12	“The International Dimension of the Environment as a Legal Entity: The Human Rights of the Sustainable Consumer in an Ecological Perspective” (S. De Vido)	What are the legal foundations and implications of granting the environment legal-entity status for consumer rights?	• Right to protection and restoration of the natural environment