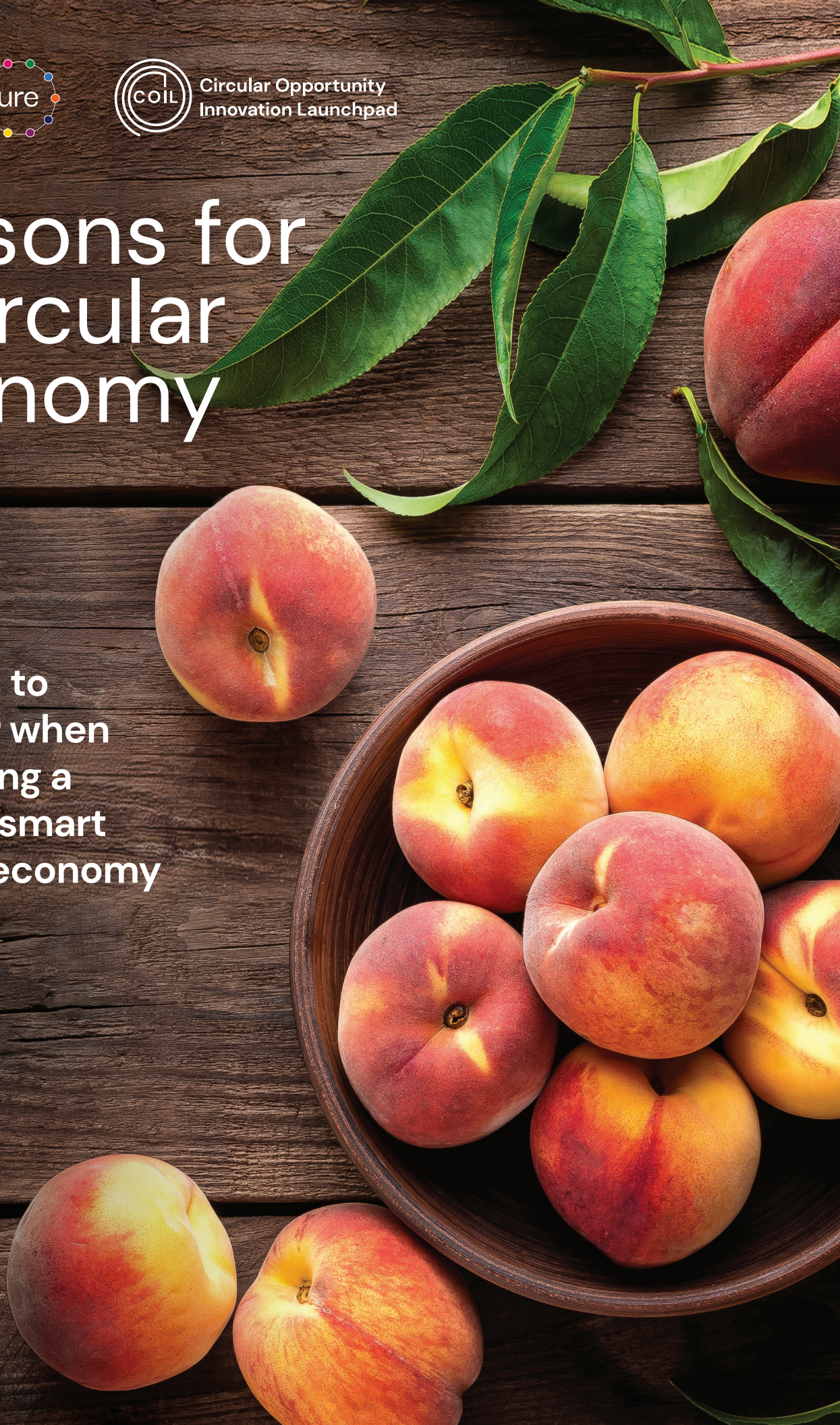


Lessons for a Circular Economy

10 things to
consider when
developing a
climate-smart
circular economy



Lessons for a circular economy

The experience of building a circular food economy in Guelph and Wellington County brought with it an abundance of joys and awakenings, validations and surprises, reinforcements, and reminders. Below are key lessons we learned from designing and implementing our two circular-economy initiatives: Our Food Future and Circular Opportunity Innovation Launchpad (COIL).

Our intention is that by sharing them we can help other communities move more quickly when developing a climate-smart circular economy.

Lesson 1

Successful projects move at the speed of trust. Invest in building this first.

Zita Cobb, notable social entrepreneur, and founder of Fogo Island Inn once said: “communities go at human speed, which is the speed of trust”. Our project can attest to the truth of this. We wove together complex patterns of partnership, inviting participants from government, academia, health institutions, not-for-profit organizations, community groups, and various business sectors. Applying these varied sets of expertise and perspectives to collective and coordinated problem solving is hugely valuable, but also enormously challenging. There were barriers of technical language and lingo, different expectations of project structure, and lived-experience muscle memories which are essential yet often difficult to communicate.

These barriers fall away more easily once trust is in the room, and this takes time. One of the Our Food Future funded groups started their work by consciously building trust, holding meetings to learn one another’s perspectives long before they met to discuss project targets or resource deployment. This group was highly effective in constructing solutions which maximized benefit to everyone because they understood best what everyone had to share and needed to achieve.

The problems addressed by the circular economy are ones which need cross-departmental and cross-sector cooperation. They require everyone to be part of a connected solution rather than just a link in a linear chain. To see these connections and to value a collective success, it’s essential to understand the stories around the circle. Building trust can sometimes be slow, and progress isn’t always smooth – but it will be one of the most valuable assets within any circular project.

Lesson 2

Food security needs everyone at the table. The public sector should be supporting local solutions.

Across all levels of government there are myriad organizations that govern the food system. Multiple federal and provincial departments, agencies and corporations are responsible for the agriculture sector, food-producing businesses, science and food sustainability, and food safety.

Municipal governments are responsible for solid waste and economic development, while public health departments are responsible for nutrition promotion programming, and food safety regulation. However, no government agency is responsible for ensuring that everyone can access adequate, nutritious foods to meet their daily needs.

This leaves a huge gap in our current system that, right now, is predominantly filled by not-for-profits, charities, and faith groups — organizations that don't have the resources or influence to solve the larger systemic issues that sit at the heart of food access, like poverty.

Services like food banks and community food programs are band-aid solutions that simply can't address the source of the problem. Complex societal challenges call for bigger solutions—and completely new systems, like universal basic income.

Governments, at all levels, must work together to make food access a legislated public responsibility.

Lesson 3

Effective food waste solutions require system-scale organization.

Food waste arises at every stage of the food supply chain — from production and processing to retail and consumption. From an economic perspective, it represents a substantial loss of resources, including labour, water, energy, and capital invested in producing food that never gets consumed. We need to work across sectors to create more efficient supply chains, implement better forecasting and inventory management, and develop markets for surplus food or secondary products derived from food by-products.

Systemic interventions can create policies that facilitate the redirection of safe, edible food waste to those in need through food banks and charities, and education campaigns that change consumer behavior towards food consumption and waste.

Environmentally, food waste contributes significantly to greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Systemic environmental solutions include the implementation of comprehensive recycling programs, the promotion of composting and anaerobic digestion to recycle nutrients, and the shift towards circular economy models that design waste out of the system.

Addressing food waste systemically also involves regulatory frameworks that encourage or mandate waste reduction practices for businesses and consumers. Incentives for waste reduction, research into longer-lasting food packaging, and the standardization of food labeling can also make a considerable impact.

Lesson 4

New infrastructure is needed to specifically support a circular economy; governments must play a role in this.

Current infrastructure, processes, and policies are predominantly designed to support a linear economy, which is based on a take-make-dispose model. The infrastructure that supports this model includes large-scale industrial

facilities focused on mass production, extensive distribution networks that prioritize speed and cost over sustainability, and waste management systems that are geared towards landfilling.

To transition to a circular economy, we need infrastructure that minimizes waste, promotes resource efficiency, and facilitates the continual use of resources. This involves investing in low-carbon energy sources, developing materials-recovery facilities, and creating composting and biogas plants that can process organic waste into energy and natural fertilizers.

New processes and policies are also necessary to support a circular economy. This includes designing products for durability, repairability, and recyclability, as well as implementing extended producer responsibility (EPR) to encourage manufacturers to design better products and manage their end-of-life. Policies need to incentivize sustainable practices, like tax breaks for companies that engage in material recovery or penalizing those that create excessive waste.

Transitioning to a circular economy requires rethinking and redesigning the current infrastructure, processes, and policies to create closed-loop systems where materials are kept in use for as long as possible and waste is dramatically reduced. This transition not only benefits the environment but also offers economic and social advantages by fostering innovation, creating jobs in new industries, and promoting a more sustainable and resilient society.

Lesson 5

Farmers need more support for climate-focused food production.

Food is a necessity of life — and perhaps more than any other product it is an expression of its place. To create a circular regional food system, it's essential to first understand the nuances of local food production by taking a place-based approach and considering local climate impacts.

This should include exploring opportunities to help farms restore the enormous carbon sequestration potential of their soil. Because farms are sitting on Canada's most promising carbon sinks, restoring soil health could help municipal governments reach their climate goals and build thriving agri-food sectors at the same time.

Farms can be producers of food AND biodiversity, more carbon-hungry soil, healthy watersheds, increased pollinator habitats, and support bioregion stability. But we can't expect producers to transform their practices into climate-friendly ones without help.

Soil health restoration needs to be prioritized and funded by all players in the food value chain: farmers, processors, retailers, and consumers.

Lesson 6

Data only becomes information when creative minds are telling the story.

Data can be an incredibly valuable tool in visualizing complex areas of regional economies — but it's not without its challenges.

Working with data is hard and expensive. It's also usually in private hands, available through expensive collection systems and has complicated legal protections. Data is also more of a compass than a map. You need a diverse and creative team to plot the journey. Gathering baselines and reporting on metrics are essential for indicating where challenges or opportunities might reside. Investing in creative, accessible data storytelling is essential.

Lesson 7

Collaboration = amplification. Harness networks and move out of silos.

In the transition to a circular economy, collaboration is of paramount importance.

Redesigning the whole system will not happen with a series of isolated actions. Our Food Future and COIL brought together over 1,000 stakeholders from public and private sectors, and from this new spinoff collaborations emerged.

We saw businesses collaborating to develop closed-loop systems where the waste of one becomes the input for another. As governments we designed programs and incentives to support such business models and facilitate research and innovation.

Community actors played an important role, piloting creative circular initiatives that were grounded in local contexts and needs, fostering social acceptance and active participation. Educational programs raised crucial public buy-in.

The circular economy is an interconnected ecosystem of processes and stakeholders. The success of this ecosystem hinges on the strength of its collaboration and innovative solutions.

Lesson 8

Businesses need matchmakers. Active facilitation is essential.

When collaborating and connecting businesses, it can be time-consuming to find companies that have excess material to sell or share. Once located, it can be even more difficult to find a company (food-related or not) that has the motivation and capabilities to extract value from that surplus.

A third party is sometimes needed to bring complementary businesses together.

Matching and connecting these types of companies requires active facilitation. Communities and organizations attempting to collaborate and connect with businesses will have to plan for much time and effort.

Lesson 9

Circular economy is climate action.

To reach local climate goals, switching to renewables alone will only address a portion of current GHG emissions. To truly achieve net zero emissions, we will also need to adopt a circular economic model — one that allows us to get more out of the resources we extract, by rethinking how we manufacture products, produce food, and manage our land. Despite this, only a handful of municipalities across the country have a circular economy framework.

Climate and circular economy practitioners must continue to make a concerted effort to work together, amplifying each other's goals, stories, and impacts. Circular economy projects should ensure they are producing climate metrics and circular thinking should be a necessary component of any comprehensive climate solution.

Lesson 10

There is no such thing as waste.

In nature, there's no such thing as waste — all organic byproducts are feedstock for other natural processes. Some Indigenous languages don't even have a word for waste.

Waste is built into our current take-make-dispose linear economy, which was born during the industrial revolution — an economic movement that relied on the extraction of finite resources to facilitate the mass production of goods. Our waste problems started to grow when throw-away culture rose in popularity and convenience.

Waste creation is a learned behaviour — not a natural one. A circular economy reeducates us to see waste as a design and efficiency failure. By simply valuing what we have, we learn to share or reuse, reduce the overconsumption of resources, and forge a connection with, and respect for, our planet.

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