AJEMA GLOBAL RESEARCH NETWORK

AMERICAN Journal of Engineering, Mechanics and Architecture
Volume 4, Issue 01, 2026 ISSN (E): 2993-2637

The Role of Recycling in Building a Circular Economy

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Abstract: The growing global demand for resources and increasing waste generation pose serious threats to sustainable development (UNEP, 2023). Transitioning from a linear to a circular economy has become crucial. This article analyzes the environmental, social, and economic benefits of recycling, illustrated by practices in Sweden and the European Union. Findings indicate that recycling contributes to energy savings, waste reduction, job creation, and economic resilience. Nevertheless, recycling alone is insufficient without systemic approaches and supportive policies (Circularity Gap Report, 2024).

Keywords: circular economy, recycling, sustainable development, waste management, natural resources, climate change, energy efficiency.

1. Introduction

Historically, global production and consumption followed a linear model: extraction → production → use → disposal (Kneese, 1970). UNEP (2023) reports that global material extraction increased from 27 billion tons in 1970 to over 100 billion tons in 2020. Waste generation has risen proportionally. The World Bank (2022) predicts global municipal waste could reach 3.4 billion tons annually by 2050 if current practices persist. These trends illustrate the unsustainable nature of linear economies.

A circular economy aims to decouple growth from resource consumption (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021). Recycling serves as a critical mechanism by reintegrating materials into production cycles, reducing the need for virgin resources and minimizing environmental impact.

Energy conservation is one of the most measurable benefits of recycling. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, 2022), recycling aluminum saves up to 95% of the energy compared to primary production. Steel recycling saves 60–74%, paper 40%, and plastics 30–80%, depending on polymer type. Life-cycle assessment by the International Aluminum Institute (2021) found that secondary aluminum emits only 0.5 tons CO_2 per ton versus 11.5 tons for primary aluminum, directly mitigating climate change.

2. Literature Review

Kneese et al. (1970) introduced the materials balance approach, emphasizing that all extracted materials eventually return to the environment, highlighting the need for efficient recycling. Later studies extended this to industrial ecology and circular economy frameworks (Ghadimi et al., 2022). Circularity Gap Report (2024) highlights that only 6.9% of materials globally are derived from recycled sources, showing the limitations of recycling without complementary measures like product longevity and eco-design.

3. Methodology

This study employs qualitative and quantitative methods: logical abstraction, systematic analysis, induction, and deduction. Empirical data and case studies are drawn from international organizations (UNEP, World Bank, EPA) and peer-reviewed journals to ensure reliability.

4. Analysis and Discussion

In a circular economy, waste is treated as a secondary raw material. Common materials recycled include paper, plastics, metals, glass, as well as organic waste, textiles, electronics, rubber, and industrial by-products (Almansour & Akrami, 2024).

Case Study – Abertis: The company recycles 80% of its waste, using recycled plastics in asphalt, rubber in Brazil/Mexico, vegetable resins in France, and RAP in Europe and Latin America (Abertis Foundation, 2024). Recycled asphalt is 20–25% more durable than conventional asphalt.

Innovation – Coffee Grounds & Mycelium: At the University of Washington, Danli Luo et al. (2025) developed a method to convert coffee grounds into 3D-printable, compostable materials using Reishi mushroom spores. This process reduces landfill methane emissions and provides an eco-friendly alternative to plastics.

Social benefits include employment. EU studies show 6–10 jobs per 1,000 tons of recycled waste versus 1 for landfills (EEA, 2023). Sweden employs 200,000 people in recycling, contributing 4% to GDP (Swedish Ministry of Environment, 2022).

Behavioral measures, such as color-coded bins in Germany (2015–2019), improved recycling participation by 18% and reduced contamination by 25% (Journal of Environmental Waste Management, 2025)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Recycling is essential for energy efficiency, emissions reduction, economic resilience, job creation, and public health improvement. However, it must be part of a holistic circular economy strategy including:

Individuals: minimize consumption, participate in recycling/composting, support sustainable businesses.

Businesses: design durable, recyclable products, implement circular supply chains.

Governments: provide regulations, incentives, and public education (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Integrated strategies ensure that recycling drives environmental, social, and economic sustainability effectively.

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