



Promoting stakeholder engagement and public awareness  
for a participative governance of the European bioeconomy



## **BioSTEP Forum: Creating Networks for the Transition to a Bio-based and Circular Economy**

**Proceedings of the BioSTEP Forum**

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## 1 Introduction

The EU Bioeconomy Strategy is currently undergoing a review, which will be completed by mid-2017 and underpin the future orientation of the strategy. At the same time, policy-makers are discussing the links between the bioeconomy and the circular economy and whether the two concepts should be combined in a single strategy.

The objectives of the [BioSTEP Forum](#), which took place on 29 March 2017 in Brussels, Belgium, were:

- To present and discuss the [results of the stakeholder engagement activities in BioSTEP](#) and its value to the current policy discussions on the bioeconomy and the circular economy.
- To discuss how strategies can be developed in a participatory way, ensuring that the change in economic value chains that is necessary for the transition to a bio-based and circular economy is understood and supported by all stakeholders.
- To provide an opportunity for stakeholders to discuss barriers and opportunities related to the participatory development of bioeconomy and circular economy strategies.

The conference was attended by [55 bioeconomy stakeholders](#), including industry representatives, representatives of regional bioeconomy clusters, representatives of non-governmental and civil society organisations, policy-makers, researchers, and consultants. Overall, stakeholders from 15 different Member States participated in the BioSTEP Forum; stakeholders from Belgium (as the official seat of many European associations and institutions), Germany and the Netherlands represented the majority of the participants.

The BioSTEP Forum concluded a series of three stakeholder workshops, which BioSTEP had organised in 2016 and 2017. The outcomes of the BioSTEP Forum fed into the finalisation of a [policy paper](#), which provides policy-makers with recommendations for effective stakeholder and public engagement in a bio-based and circular economy.

## 2 The ongoing review of the EU Bioeconomy Strategy

A [presentation](#) by Lino Paula (DG Research & Innovation, European Commission) provided insights on the ongoing review of the EU Bioeconomy Strategy. According to Lino Paula, the evaluation of the Bioeconomy Strategy requires more time than initially planned and will continue through 2017. Until the review is concluded, which will be in early 2018, the Commission is looking forward to getting more feedback on the strategy.

Until now, much of the feedback has stemmed from the [Bioeconomy Stakeholders Panel](#), where 30 actors from different sectors meet to discuss the matters of the European bioeconomy. Currently, the Bioeconomy Stakeholders Panel is working on a 'Stakeholders' Manifesto for the Bioeconomy in Europe', which is to be finalised by June 2017. Also in June, the report from the 'Expert Group Review' and a JRC/SCAR report on "Mapping the Bioeconomy in the Member States" are expected. Currently, an opinion factsheet on the "Local and regional dimension of Bioeconomy and the role of regions and cities" is being prepared by the EU's Committee of the Regions and will be published in May 2017. Later, in November 2017, a conference and the launch of a public consultation are planned.

Lino Paula highlighted that stakeholder interaction plays an important role in the process (also in the context of the circular economy, where a new stakeholder platform is currently being built by the Commission). As of now, it is too early to say whether there will be a new strategy. However, a renewed strategy could potentially link to the Circular Economy Package, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the Energy Union process.

### 3 The challenge of building new networks within the bio-based and circular economy

In this session, Lucas Porsch (Ecologic Institute) and Sara Davies (EPRC), gave an introductory [presentation](#) on the challenges that stakeholders may face when re-organising the economic value chain towards bio-based products and processes.

Lucas Porsch highlighted that one conclusion of BioSTEP's stakeholder workshops was that the bio-economy is about more than a change in the dominating technology, but a change in the building of new networks (including a new regional economic structure). The creation of such networks, *inter alia*, requires the cooperation of actors, which includes stakeholders who have not worked with each other before. This includes suppliers, businesses of different sizes, workforce (especially relevant in rural areas), researchers, regulators, policy-makers, consumers/residents (crucial for acceptance) and civil society groups. One specific characteristic of such bioeconomy networks is the cross-sectoral interaction; an example is the collaborations of the chemical and agricultural industries in many areas. The circular economy requires the involvement more and partially different stakeholders, e.g. those who deal with waste treatment or transport logistics. In order to settle these different networks and to adapt them to local situations, participatory approaches can be used to identify the right stakeholders and to engage and motivate them. In some cases, this participation happens unaided, e.g. on the basis of existing relationships between stakeholders. In other cases, public policy is needed to support the development of new or strengthened networks.

Sara Davies stressed that the development of new or adapted networks is particularly relevant for rural areas, which often receive support via cohesion policies. Seventy-three percent of the respective EU budget goes to the poorer Member States or regions, where it often funds projects linked to bioeconomy-relevant fields (such as renewable energy). This is especially the case with Smart Specialisation Strategies, which aim to identify the strengths of a region and may be used to develop the bioeconomy networks and economic development strategies accordingly. Sara Davies mentioned the example of [Xanthella Ltd.](#), a company that produces micro-algae in Scotland, cooperating with universities, public bodies and non-profit entities (including a community entity) and thereby realizing the regional potential of the bioeconomy. While this kind of development may be perceived critically in some regions (e.g. due to new environmental pressures), bioeconomic activities are usually perceived positively in less populated areas.

### 4 Effective stakeholder and public engagement: Insights from practitioners

BioSTEP examined current participatory practices involving both stakeholders and citizens in bioeconomy strategies in six national and regional case studies. The national bioeconomy strategy in Finland and the BioBased Delta in the Netherlands were both identified as good practice examples, among others, for effective stakeholder and public engagement. In this session, Anu Reinikainen (Natural Resources Institute Finland) and Dietmar Lemmens (Bergen op Zoom Municipality / Bio-based Delta) shared their insights with the audience on how stakeholder and public engagement can be facilitated and what the challenges and opportunities of this process are.

In her [presentation](#), Anu Reinikainen provided insights on stakeholder and public engagement in the context of the Finnish bioeconomy strategy. In Finland, the development of a national bioeconomy strategy was steered by a governmental Executive Group and a Working Group. The process built on the participation of business representatives, researchers, sub-national authorities and NGOs, which were invited to take part in workshops, industry hearings, regional bioeconomy forums and consultations. In addition, citizens were informed through websites and social media and were invited to participate in workshops. This process used a broad understanding of the bioeconomy, encompassing not only (forest) biomasses, but also well-being services, to enable engagement of different sectors. Anu Reinikainen highlighted the following challenges that became apparent in the process:

- How can we consult all the relevant stakeholders?

- How can we take into consideration, in a balanced way, all the different opinions (e.g. business actors, environmental actors)?
- How can we promote the active engagement of individual citizens, not just disseminating information?
- The limited interest of citizens: A grassroots-level understanding of bioeconomy requires concrete examples of what bioeconomy is in everyday contexts.

Dietmar Lemmens gave a [presentation](#) on stakeholder and public engagement activities in the Bio-based Delta (The Netherlands). The Biobased Delta is a triple-helix organisation that aims to combine job creation and investment with sustainability principles. In order to achieve this goal, the region builds on its chemical and agricultural sector using a five-fold approach, including bio-based business development, internal procurement of the municipality, education, development of the public area and creative elements and projects. Additionally, the municipality creates public awareness, e.g. by establishing the first 'Biobased Pop-Up Store' in the Netherlands, which showcases bio-based products in everyday life. This Pop-Up Store attracted great interest among citizens and the media and numerous meetings and public events have been organised. In addition, a platform for SMEs was created. Generally, from the Bergen op Zoom experience, obstacles for implementing the bio-based economy at a regional scale are limited financial resources and overregulation.

## 5 The BioSTEP policy paper: Key recommendations for effective participation and network creation

In the context of a *World Café*, participants of the BioSTEP Forum discussed the draft of the BioSTEP policy paper and the five key recommendations for effective participation and network creation. The discussions were structured along two specific questions that had been defined for each of the five recommendations. The key outcomes of the discussions are highlighted below:

### **Recommendation 1: Support small and medium-sized enterprises in the creation of new networks**

1. Which aspects of the existing regulatory and policy framework can be further developed to support SMEs?

The working group concluded that grants and financial support are generally available, but that it is often difficult and bureaucratic to apply. In addition, it was stated that the funding party often does not fully recognize the risk of failure.

2. Which measures could public bodies take in order to facilitate matchmaking among actors?

The working group concluded that policy could help clusters to emerge ("settling the ground") and should then "let them go". They also stated that a "moderating public body", which acts as matchmaker between different stakeholders, but also different clusters, could be useful. Structural funds could potentially be used to finance such bodies. Additionally, policy coherence between regulators and legislators is something that is, according to many participants of the working group, increasingly needed.

### **Recommendation 2: Facilitate involvement of civil society (actors) in bioeconomy and circular economy debates**

1. How should approaches to civil society participation differ between sub-themes of the bioeconomy?

The working group concluded that it is challenging to link all sub-themes with the respective communities and to identify the relevant NGOs/CSOs. When including NGOs/CSOs, according to the participants, one has to bear in mind that the different organizations have very different mindsets and are open for compromise to different extents.

2. How could policy-makers encourage stronger participation by civil society actors?

In order to integrate civil society actors, stakeholder mapping is often indispensable. Additionally, the actors should be prepared for a high heterogeneity of opinions. The participation process should also be open for new perspectives and new ideas – at least as a starting point for further discussion if the idea is not feasible. In order to motivate civil society actors, they should be included as early as possible in order to show the possibility of influencing the process from the beginning. Furthermore, it is useful to identify ‘change agents’, or people who are very engaged within civil society organizations. At the end of these processes (the dissemination stage), civil society actors can be integrated as powerful multipliers.

### **Recommendation 3: Increase public awareness and acceptance of the bio-based and circular economy**

1. How could the involvement of NGOs/CSOs improve the trustworthiness of certification and (voluntary) standards?

The working group concluded that NGOs/CSOs should assess standards and labels ex-ante and ex-post. Gradual labels (like with energy labels) are useful in communication, but often limited in the extent of their assessment.

2. How could information strategies better reach out to regional or local communities?

The working group highlighted the need to use good examples (“local heroes/ambassadors”), emotional stories and storytelling. Abstract and overly rational communication forms should be avoided. Positive stories, however, are highly relevant, but it is also important to be transparent about challenges, obstacles and failures. A promising approach could be to develop a general communication concept and to apply and adapt it to local stories, creating local storytelling.

### **Recommendation 4: Provide opportunities for participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation phases of bioeconomy and circular economy strategies**

1. At which stages of the strategy process is stakeholder and public participation needed and most effective?

The working group concluded that different stakeholders (according to their expertise) need to be consulted at different stages of the strategy process, which include: problem definition, agenda setting, policy formulation, strategy implementation and strategy evaluation. According to the working group, participation could be broad in the first three stages, then narrowed down and then widened again. As such, public participation plays a key role in the problem definition and policy evaluation stages. Transparency is important at all of the five stages.

NGOs may fear blame in the case that the strategy turns out to be harmful from specific perspectives. Offering the possibility to work as an anonymous consultant might be a solution. Not only NGOs face limitation of their resources, SMEs do as well. Easy-to-understand summaries of policy documents could help to facilitate the engagement of these actors since working with them requires less time.

### **Recommendation 5: Design and implement effective instruments for stakeholder and public engagement**

1. What are appropriate instruments to facilitate the engagement of the business sector, academia and civil society?

To engage the business sector, new clusters could be built or existing clusters could be linked to the bioeconomy. In addition, competitions, exhibitions, pop-up stores, events at schools or so-called ‘living labs’ are powerful tools to engage different stakeholders and even the general public.

2. What could be a non-bureaucratic way to initiate and foster interest in the bioeconomy?

It remains of great public interest to compare bio-based problems with the oil-based ones – preferably to be done by independent authorities. The public should also be addressed with appropriate tools in public spaces, such as supermarkets, bus stations etc.