

Re:Construct Socio-Material practices of Circularity in the Global South: *Authority, Agency, and Collectivization in Kenya's Circular Economy*

ABSTRACT

Recent developments around material circularity have reshaped governance systems and our perceptions of waste, materials, and sustainability around the world. Nevertheless, the established instruments that define, fund, and enact circularity are primarily technical, apolitical, and driven by the institutional priorities of the Global North. The purpose of this dissertation is to show that the current framing of the circular economy fails to take into consideration the socio-material and political aspects of material flows, alongside the grounded realities of the Global South context. Using multi-sited fieldwork conducted in Kenya and the Netherlands from 2022 to 2024, as well as employing the critical scoping review along with ethnography and reflexive positionality analysis, this dissertation aims to understand how knowledge, practice, and discourses of diverse actors such as informally, community-based, and international actors shape and shaped by material circularity in both contexts, as well as what implications this has for both contexts. This dissertation is composed of four interrelated articles. The first article examines how academic discourses around the social aspects of the circular economy shape different development and technological trajectories for the Global North and Global South, thus embedding existing inequalities within the conceptual approaches to circular economies. The second article analyses how Dutch circular economy initiatives exert their influence on waste governance in Kenya through their particular epistemological, financial, and material structures, thereby excluding informal workers from the material commons that they historically occupied. The third article explores the daily lives of informal recovery and community recovery communities in Nairobi and the Lamu Archipelago by documenting instances of hybrid technological authority, material agency, and self-governance that formal circular economy processes misrecognize because of their purely technical nature. Lastly, the fourth article engages in a critical self-reflexivity of this research, using the lens of positionality, power, and institutional context to show the prescriptive and normative nature of what is defined as legitimate knowledge about circularity from Global South perspectives. In sum, this work illustrates that circularity is not a disinterested technical phenomenon but a deeply socio-material one informed by power, knowledge, and justice relations between the Global North and Global South. In addition to contributing to socio-material theories, this dissertation creates an informality-based perspective from the Global South about situated material expertise and introduces the concept of aesthetic economies of waste to reflect upon the forward-oriented, material-based visions of circularity developed by Kenyan communities. The dissertation provides an invitation to rethink circularity through a Global South lens, not just with the intention of amplifying different voices but of reshaping who produces circularity knowledge, and what qualifies as circularity knowledge, and for whom circularity functions.