

Environmental sustainability is the future for sustainability in business

More and more companies are beginning to integrate sustainability principles into their business models as they realize the potential to make processes more effective and add value. Ivana Maleš, co-founder of the Institute for Circular Economy, is among the biggest advocates of sustainability issues in Slovakia. Besides her professional interest and experience she also writes a popular personal blog about the zero waste lifestyle. Her current mission is to spread the ideas behind the circular economy to households, municipalities, as well as companies.



IVANA MALEŠ

Co-founder of the Institute for Circular Economy

The Institute of Circular Economy in Slovakia (INCIEN SK) was founded in March 2016. However, your own inspirational story related to sustainable living started earlier and is documented on your popular personal blog. Could you describe your path from changing your personal life and inspiring individuals to do the same, to influencing municipalities and companies to adapt the principles of circular economy?

INCIEN was founded by three senior environmental consultants. Petra Cséfalvayová, Katarína Bednáriková and me. It was founded in March 2016, but the idea of creating an NGO that would be part of systemic change occurred many years before at our consulting company.

My journey towards sustainability started in 1998 when I chose to study environmental science at Comenius University in Bratislava. After I finished my studies, I started to work at an organization dealing with packaging waste. After three years, I founded our own consulting company, EPIK, with Katarína and Petra. This company has now been operating for 11 years. At EPIK, I was responsible for waste management projects. I liked working on systemic changes at municipalities, where I could see how changing their waste management system affects

them. At this time, I also started my personal path towards zero waste. I wanted to know how individuals and households can impact waste management in our society. I found that we are one of the most influential parts of this. How we behave affects waste prevention, recovery and recycling.

In 2015, I started my personal blog, Nezmar, where I shared my own experiences and solutions as regards zero waste. I never thought the blog would become so successful and influential.

What do you hope to achieve with INCIEN SK and how do you evaluate the first year and a half of its functioning?

INCIEN was founded by environmental consultants, so the main part of our work is to bring circular solutions to households, companies and municipalities. Our goal is to create good case practices for the circular economy and show how the circular economy can benefit our lives and bring sustainable solutions for businesses and the environment.

As an NGO, part of our work is to spread the ideas behind the circular economy. Another part of our work is education – in schools, companies, municipalities. One of INCIEN's most popular activities are public workshops. They are sold out every time we hold one anywhere in Slovakia. This came

as a surprise to us. It's a signal that Slovaks are concerned about waste and are willing to contribute to solve the problem.

The first year and a half was about waste analysis, developing new tools for the circular economy, and creating and implementing our first projects. Every time we look back, we see our progress as a new organization. We have established good co-operation with many different organizations: private, governmental, municipal, and non-profit organizations. We didn't want to be seen as activists who blame others for waste management problems. Our goal is to create solutions based on our own data, i.e. tailored solutions via co-operation between different organizations: private companies, municipalities, universities, NGOs, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Ministry of the Economy.

How does Slovakia rank compared to other EU countries when it comes to adopting the principles of the circular economy?

The circular economy consists of three parts: design, responsible consumption, and waste as a resource. While other countries are more focused on design and responsible consumption, Slovakia is still mostly focused on waste. That is logical since Slovakia's biggest challenge is

BIOGRAPHY

WORKING EXPERIENCE

- Circular Economy Consultant, Institute for Circular Economy (March 2016 – Present)
- Environmental Consultant (waste management consultant), EPIK, s.r.o. (January 2007 – Present)

EDUCATION

- Comenius University, Faculty of Natural Sciences, Master's degree, Environmental planning and management (1998 – 2003)



waste – 69% of municipal waste goes to landfill, and 17% goes to two incineration plants. Slovakia ranks 27th among EU member countries for achieving recycling rates. The main reason for this is that Slovakia has a very low landfill price and this affects the whole waste management system.

As regards design, we have some good examples of design for circularity (D4C) products. As for services, we are still behind the other EU countries. There are only a small number of businesses focused on services, rather than selling products. The same situation occurs for responsible consumption. People are aware of the need to change this, but there is only a small number of places and businesses that offers this.

Do you think the biggest barrier is cultural, political, economic, or something else?

It's mainly cultural and political. In every other country, waste is connected to the local economy. As a source of materials or energy, it is very valuable. Municipalities in Slovakia pay a large amount of money to waste management companies. It's absurd that municipalities spend millions of euros on their waste. They could profit from it instead and spend the money on their development, not on decreasing the quality of their environment.

The key step towards the change is raising the landfill rate. This is a political decision that was never made. The Ministry of Environment, a large number of organizations, and NGOs agreed on this. But until now there was no political will to change this. Hopefully, in 2018 this decision will be made and Slovakia will move forward.

Can you give any examples from other countries, where the transition to a circular economy is more advanced, which could serve as an inspiration for Slovakia and which could also

be implemented here?

Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, Italy. The trends from all of these countries are slowly coming to Slovakia, although they are coming from culturally different environments.

progressive in waste prevention (especially in household composting), and their recycling rates are higher than Slovakia's. Municipalities are also more open to sustainable solutions in waste, energy and water treatment.

How are companies in Slovakia incorporating these trends into their business models and related activities? How are they reacting to the solutions and adjustments you propose?

Companies in Slovakia (national and international) still mostly look at the circular economy as part of their CSR activities. Only a few see the opportunity as a part of their business. This is the main difference between companies here and companies abroad. Every business, every product has an impact on the environment during production, not just when it becomes waste. Companies must be aware of this and start to implement more sustainable solutions for their products – because sustainability is the future for sustainability in business. When you have a good source for your products and you provide good services – you will have a more sustainable business for many years.

Sustainability challenges have inspired many innovations which are transforming long-established business models. Big companies have also discovered the potential of sustainable solutions and are adjusting their processes. How do you see the economic promise of the circular economy?

Every time the leaders of big companies talk about the changes that they have made towards sustainability and circularity, you see how this change has positively affected their business, as regards using secondary raw materials and how it has affected their company strategies and how employees behave. So, by changing strategy at companies, you can also affect social changes, including the

creation of many new jobs. There is a big opportunity to create jobs in services, rather than in production. Companies must be aware of this and start doing something about this today if they want to be the leading companies in the next decades.

One of the major topics at the World Economic Forum in Davos for the past two or three years has been the circular economy. The Circular Economy Awards are given to companies which achieved the most in this area at Davos. The circular economy already plays a big part in contemporary society and the future of the world's economy.

Industry 4.0, the next stage in the ongoing digital revolution is likely to transform several industries.

Do you think these changes increase the chances for further development of the circular economy or could they represent an obstacle?

Digital industry can help us use our primary and secondary sources smarter than today. It could also be helpful with designing products and increasing responsible consumption.

The transition to a circular economy requires a deeper change of the value system of a society. What key factors might help contribute to such a change? Are you optimistic about its progress?

Good case practices, development and continual education. If these changes are present, but we do not inform the general public, people will not be aware of the possibilities the circular economy can bring by better use of secondary materials and waste, better-designed products and improved services. People need to experience the positive changes circular economy can bring to their everyday life.

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But we also have good examples from culturally closer countries such as Slovenia and the Czech Republic. Slovenia is one of the leaders in the region and they have been very successful in transitioning towards the circular economy in design, and also in municipal development. In the Czech Republic, everything is one step ahead compared to Slovakia, for companies and municipalities. The landfill rate is more than three times higher, municipalities are more