



Circular economy, people, and ecology: A case for just transition, inclusive and regenerative business models

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Extended abstract

The ongoing economic transformations in our era of heightened globalisation are intricately linked to distinct production and consumption patterns, exhibiting noteworthy variations across diverse global regions. The predominant and linear economic paradigm and its associated business models have been instrumental in steering growth trends, shaping value systems characterised by separation, domination, extraction, individualisation, efficiency, conservation, and shielding (Eisenstein, 2013; van Stam, 2017b, 2017c, 2024b). This value scheme has been underpinning economic globalisation and raises pertinent issues about the intersection between human activity and the ecology (Albrecht, 2019; Klomp and Oosterwaal, 2021). Regrettably, voices from socio-communal and natural-ecological perspectives often find themselves marginalised or co-opted within the confines of linear economic lenses (Mukuka, 2010), instigating apprehensions about the notion of sustainability, particularly concerning biodiversity, climate, and the environment (Mawere, 2010). In stark contrast, the circular economic paradigm can draw inspiration from indigenous knowledge systems and theories originating in Europe and – among others – Africa, as they champion value systems that accentuate togetherness, conversation, deep listening, sharing, the present moment, and harmony. Extending these values to economic transactions between peoples and in engagement with the non-living and other beings (Smith, 1999; Mawere, 2015; Merry, 2023; van Stam, 2024b) has the potentials to facilitate transformations that are embedded within the principles of reciprocity and mutuality circularity and sustainability, shared growth and prosperity .

Examined from a futuristic lens, our work touches on transitions in relation to how human activity interreacts with the ecology. We apply paradigm switching between an anthropogenic centrality of the individual and a symbiogenic view of the community, recognising an emerging business ecosystem that includes the natural and social environment from an 'I-paradigm' (focusing on individual agency – whether conservative,

liberal, progressive, or critical) to a 'We-paradigm' (representing communal agency) (van Stam, 2017a, 2024a). This paradigm switching requires new and (w)holistic theories for business model development that are embedded and informed by the principles of just transition, regeneration, circularity, and inclusivity, among others.

From our living research, embedded in European and African practices and education, we deduce the need for existential economics, driven by a sense-making and meaning-making that is sensitive to ontological and epistemological variety. Such a purpose-driven outlook fuels intrinsic motivation for both communal and individual economic orientations (Mayer and Roche, 2021). Within this epistemic view, the role of agency is very important in terms of the ability of individuals to make choices, take decisions and actions within a multilayered ecosystem that is constituted of particular social structures and cultures (Ong'ayo, 2019). Agency is closely linked to feeling empowered and a conscientious engagement with consequential outcomes. Agency – or actorship – exists in various ways: single, relational, and transformational. Transformational approach to engagement is a crucial perspective in developing new business models in view of the profound and disruptive consequences of the ongoing poly-crisis in the world, in our communities, and in lives and in recognition of the value of interconnectedness. The challenge is that many professionals and students in the field of business appear unaware of this. However, decision based on any business model and their consequences also affects the very existence of those who make these decisions because of interconnectednesses.

We pursue inclusive understanding of encompassing business models grounded in local ecological understandings and how communities can fuel economic regeneration and harmony (Klomp and Oosterwaal, 2021). From a deconstruction of philosophies and subsequent theories, businesses and business modelling can be reconstructed and operated with a holistic understanding of the intricate link between the economy, people, and the ecology. This intricate entanglement between humans and the environment (Tironi et al. 2024) necessitate a paradigm switching whereby people begin to act from a well-established, tested, conscious and mature mindset that is anchored in the core (the soul as an outlook that recentres humanity in the models of production and doing business).

From our embedding in extended case research and practices in both Europe and Africa (Sheneberger and van Stam, 2011; Ong'ayo, 2019; Klomp, 2022; Rijdsdijk and van Stam, 2024; van Stam, 2024a), in research and education, we reflect upon and share our experiences of how academic deliberations can challenge status quos in both natural and social sciences in political sciences (e.g., the influence of globalisation brought in through diaspora transnational engagement (Ong'ayo, 2019)), natural sciences (e.g., the tunnelling of a Eurocentric view on technology platforms), and social sciences (e.g., the diversity in economics and education). From our experiences in paradigm switching, established, living, and working in both I-paradigmatic and We-paradigmatic settings, we share embodied knowledge that we hope will contribute to sensitivities in theory development about economic interactions. Our aim is to bring the academic conversation towards a nuanced continuum that involves inclusion – while celebrating diversity/pluralism in meaning-making, knowing, and ethical interactions.

Keywords: Diversity, economic paradigm, circular economy, business models, embodied knowledge, inclusivity

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