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Imagine a world without waste? Yes, it is possible

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A couple of years ago, one of our partners invited me to their rather expansive farm to witness their work; growing beans for the export market. I honoured the invitation almost immediately not because they were big in production and making money while at it; I did so because of what they were doing with the waste.

Mara Farms, an agricultural company that produces beans for export, redirects beans that do not make it through its export packaging process to produce high quality soup for bottom of the pyramid customers often without a profit markup. These are customers who in ordinary circumstances would not afford such kind of meal as the price would be way out of reach.

This is the rationale: Why throw away the beans when it can make a huge difference elsewhere in another market? This is one way of making a product affordable while also reducing hunger and contributing to poverty reduction.

At Mara, there is simply no waste. Or rather, waste is converted to something useful. Nothing is thrown away. Little wonder, and this is no exaggeration, the farm is so relaxing it feels as if no work is going on there. This is what Mara Farms is good at and they can become even better at it.

Certainly, other businesses, big and small, can do something along the same lines. At Mara, the management made a decision that any produce which doesn't meet the specifications for export market isn't discarded.

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Well, that should be obvious, you say? Actually, it is not always obvious. On these large-scale operations, there is usually little time, workforce or space to properly dispose of produce that do not accurately fit the market requirements. Often it is discarded as waste or given to somebody who can transport it. That is almost always another firm or a person of means, not the disadvantaged in the community who need it most.

The foregoing, in a way, describes what circular economy is all about. Circular economy, as the name suggests, means we more or less end up where we started, only better. To use the example given above, bottom of the pyramid families which benefit from the soup project end up healthier because they get to consume healthy food rich in some of the vital nutrients including micronutrients. But more than that, they get to save money on hospital bills and expensive food.

There are two aspects to this narrative. The farm contributes to a more sustainable environment and a more inclusive society by supporting a segment whose survival options are limited and may, through lack of alternatives, engage in activities that destroy the earth.

This "saving the earth" ends up benefiting the farm whose success depends a great deal on the balance of nature. It may not seem that obvious but it is a fact which almost every business appreciates.

The second aspect of this narrative is that the people who are very often forgotten by the system get to take their children school, stay together as families and have real chance of overcoming poverty without necessarily leaving their communities. Their contribution to the economy ends up benefiting everyone.

I will put it out there that circular economy is not a new idea much as it sounds like one of those crazy concepts which environmentalists often attempt to force down our throats. Everywhere, there are examples of communities innovating and going the extra mile to limit waste and ensure they live in harmony with nature.

Something must be done to protect the earth from human greed. We may not necessarily go back to traditional ways of survival. But we must innovate. We must be better.

Boomsma is Director, Sustainable Inclusive Business.

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