



Policy recommendations to promote reusable packaging

Why we need effective EU policies for the reuse of packaging

50 million tons of plastic are consumed in the EU every year, equalling one eighth of the total global plastic production. Remarkably, packaging accounts for as much as 40 percent of the European plastic consumption¹, with only a negligible portion of it being reused. If the global plastic production continues to grow as expected, it will be responsible for up to 13 percent of the carbon budget in 2050.² Thus, **promoting the reuse of packaging** is crucial for resource conservation, the fight against plastic pollution, and, even more importantly, is an essential part of a climate-friendly new **Circular Economy Action Plan**.

The successful adoption of the **EU Directive on single-use plastics** demonstrates that the time to act against the overconsumption of short-lived products and disposable packaging is now, and that union-wide agreements on the necessary regulations can be reached. Hence, it is up to EU legislators to establish an ambitious framework for this important transition towards a low waste society and a true circular economy. The Commission's announcement of a sustainable product policy and "targets and measures against over-packaging and waste generation" – as part of the **New Green Deal**³ – is an important signal, illustrating the willingness of the European Commission to reach this goal. The EU waste hierarchy, and more specifically its two top priorities **waste prevention and reuse, must be at the core of these policies**. If the implementation of this prioritisation cannot be accomplished within the existing waste legislation, an analogous core principle must be laid down in a separate framework legislation, starting at the beginning of the life cycle. This applies to both the promotion of product durability and reparability and the prevention and reuse of packaging.⁴

Recommended policies

1. Binding waste reduction targets
2. Binding quantitative reuse targets
3. Fiscal and other financial incentives to promote reuse
4. Mandatory labelling of reusable and single-use packaging
5. Provisions for Green Public Procurement, events and on-site consumption

In the past decades, the **EU waste hierarchy** as an overarching principle has not been taken into account sufficiently, in both legislation and the public debate. Firstly, policies and discussions concerning sustainable packaging have mostly been centred around recycling – only ranked as the third most preferable option in the waste hierarchy – while continuously growing amounts of waste have simply been taken for granted. **Recycling does not reduce waste at source** nor does it prevent the production of increasing quantities of unnecessary, and oftentimes downright absurd packaging. Although recycling undoubtedly offers great potentials for the circular economy, **the resource and emission saving potentials of waste prevention and reuse are considerably greater**, which makes them the preferable options wherever possible.

Secondly, the discussion has unfortunately been increasingly concentrated on one material (i.e. plastic), **lacking the necessary focus on sustainable systems rather than materials**. The associated narrative has created room for consumer fraud and false solutions. Thus, there has been a trend towards disposable packaging made from composite materials, bioplastics, coated paper, aluminium, and glass, with little to no benefit for the environment.

Furthermore, the continuing **increase of on-the-go consumption**⁵, as well as the growth of the e-commerce sector, has contributed significantly to an increase in packaging waste volumes. The consumption of paper for packaging in Europe, for instance, has been constantly increasing, and reached an all-time high of 41.5 million tons in 2018.⁶ To stop this trend, we need a **shift from a linear to a true circular economy** and this shift has to be initiated and supported by effective and determined political action. Reuse offers a considerable potential for resource and climate protection that has been left mostly untapped – both in legislation and in practice. There is, however, a variety of well-established **reuse systems for sales, service, shipping and transport packaging**^{7 8 9 10} that can serve as models and best practice examples for the entire EU. This

5 Cf. NABU 2018: „Einweggeschirr und To-Go-Verpackungen“

6 Refers to the Confederation of European Pulp and Paper Industries' (CEPI) member states (which are responsible for 95 percent of the European paper production), cf. Statista 2019: "Papier- und Pappeverbrauch in Europa nach Sektoren in den Jahren 2009 bis 2018"

7 Cf. S. Miller, M. Bolger, L. Copello 2019: "Reusable solutions: how governments can help stop single use plastic pollution." 3Keel, Oxford, United Kingdom. A study by the Rethink Plastic alliance and the Break Free From Plastic movement.

8 Reloop 2018: "Making the Switch: The Business Case for Reusable Packaging", <http://reloopplatform.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/BusinessCaseReusablePackaging-MAY-181.pdf>

9 Ellen MacArthur Foundation, The New Plastics Economy 2019: "Reuse: Rethinking Packaging", <http://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/assets/downloads/Reuse.pdf>

10 Deutsche Umwelthilfe, Reloop, et. al. 2019: "Reuse system for beverage cups: FC Bayern München receives European Reusable Award 2019", http://reloopplatform.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Press-Release_Reusable_Award_FC_Bayern_Munchen_FINAL.pdf

1 European Parliament 2018: "Plastic waste and recycling in the EU: facts and figures", <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20181212ST021610/plastic-waste-and-recycling-in-the-eu-facts-and-figures>

2 CIEL 2019: "Plastic & Climate: The Hidden Costs of a Plastic Planet"

3 European Commission 2019: "The European Green Deal", p. 8

4 This paper focuses on policy recommendations for packaging.

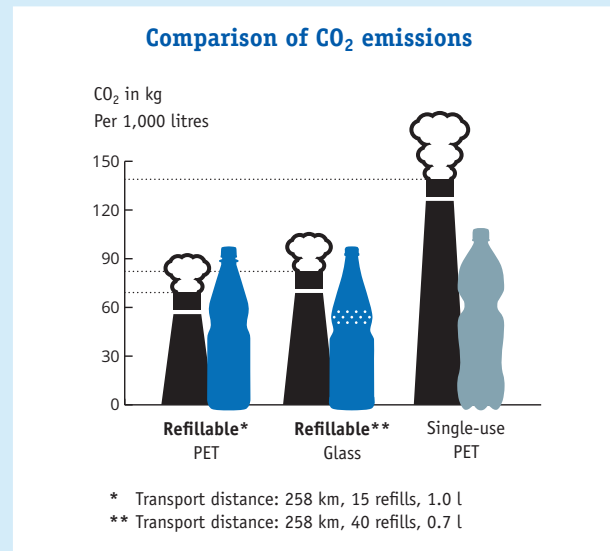
Shifting the debate from materials to systems

»There is no such thing as a sustainable material, only a sustainable system.«

Professor Mark Miodownik, University College London

Reusable packaging can consist of several functional and durable materials, e.g. different types of plastic, glass, porcelain or stainless steel. In Germany, both refillable glass and refillable PET bottles cause around 50 percent less CO₂ emissions compared to single-use plastic bottles.

On the contrary, replacing single-use plastic with single-use products made from other materials (e.g. bioplastics, aluminium, glass, paper) does not have considerable environmental benefits in the majority of the cases. The production of aluminium packaging for example requires a high amount of energy and therefore has a considerably higher carbon footprint than plastic production: According to the U.S. Environmental Investigation Agency, the same amount (by weight) of aluminium cans causes 5 times as many CO₂ emissions compared to plastic bottles.¹³



Source: GDB Ökobilanz 2008/IFEU

also holds true for the required technologies as well as return and distribution infrastructure.

However, consistent and uniform legislation is required in order for environmentally friendly reuse systems to be put into practice at a larger scale. **EU policy makers must provide the necessary framework for those systems to spread.** This is not yet the case in the Plastics Strategy, which lacks a clear and binding prioritisation of reuse over recycling.

Fortunately, this prioritisation is clearly made in the announcement of a sustainable product policy in the European Green Deal.¹¹ We expressly welcome this landmark decision by the European Commission and recommend the following policies to promote reuse, in order to mitigate climate change and effectively reduce resource consumption:

1. Binding waste reduction targets

The generation of packaging waste in the EU has been increasing consistently and currently lies at 170 kg per person per year.¹² A sustained reduction of unnecessary (over-)packaging can be

achieved the easiest by setting legally binding waste reduction targets, as has already been discussed in the negotiations for the Circular Economy Package. **For packaging waste, ambitious and legally binding reduction targets need to be set.** Packaging waste should **decrease by 25 percent by 2025 and 50 percent by 2030.** Additionally, the consumption of single-use food containers and cups of all materials should be reduced by 50 percent until 2025 and 80 percent by 2030. Reduction targets should be legally binding and attributed to market participants (producers and retailers). Their non-compliance should be linked to **effective sanctioning mechanisms.**

2. Binding quantitative reuse targets

Functioning reuse systems can quickly establish themselves on the market if the necessary conditions are present. **Binding reuse targets create a safe environment for investments** in the associated technology and infrastructure. That applies to both SMEs and regionally operating companies, but also to big corporations. Furthermore, reuse targets send out a strong signal against replacing disposable products with disposable products made from different materials.

¹¹ European Commission 2019: "The European Green Deal", p. 7

¹² Eurostat

¹³ EPA 2016: "Documentation for Greenhouse Gas Emission and Energy Factors Used in the Waste Reduction Model (WARM)"

For **beverage packaging**, setting ambitious European **reuse targets of at least 70 percent^{14 15} by 2030** offers great potential for waste prevention, since it accounts for 10 percent of overall packaging waste.¹⁶ Many countries already have a small percentage of refillable beverage packaging on the market, with the necessary infrastructure in place. The mere need to expand these existing systems makes beverage packaging a truly **low hanging fruit**. Beyond beverage packaging, a **reuse target of 25 percent by 2025 and 40 percent by 2030 should be set for sales packaging**. For transport packaging, a reuse rate of 70 percent should apply from 2025. These targets should be attributed to all market participants along the entire value chain (producers and retailers) as it has been the case in Romania since 1 January 2020¹⁷ and member states should be obligated to link them to effective sanctioning mechanisms in case of non-compliance.

Reuse targets in Romania

As from 1 January 2020, market operators who place packaged products on the Romanian market are required to sell a minimum of 5 percent of their goods in reusable packaging, but not less than the average percentage achieved between 2018 and 2019, with an annual increase by 5 percent until 2025. Consequently, by 2025, at least 30 percent of consumer packaging on the Romanian market will be reusable. Retailers (with the exclusion of retailers with a small sales area) will be required to give consumers the opportunity to choose reusable packaging and return it to the point of sale.¹⁸

3. Fiscal and other financial incentives

In order to reduce the overall production and consumption of single-use packaging, environmental costs need to be internalised. Up to today, it has been very cheap to produce packaging and to place it on the market. Therefore, the EU urgently needs **economic incentives for waste prevention**. Manufacturers and distributors must be held accountable for the environmentally unfriendly packaging they put on the market, and thus the environmental impact of those single-use items must be reflected in either **ecologically modulated licencing fees or a resource tax**.

¹⁴ Cf. German Packaging Act (VerpackG) §1(3)

¹⁵ Zero Waste Europe et.al. 2019: "Deposit return scheme manifesto", <http://eeb.org/library/deposit-return-system-manifesto/>

¹⁶ Assumption is based on beverage packaging accounting for 10 percent of packaging waste in Germany (GVM 2015)

¹⁷ Government of Romania: "Government Emergency Ordinance no. 74/2018"

¹⁸ PwC 2018: "Legislative amendments in the field of packaging and packaging waste management", <http://www.pwc.ro/en/tax-legal/alerts/Legislative-amendments-in-the-field-of-packaging-and-packaging-waste-management.html>

At the same time, the production of environmentally friendly reusable packaging should be rewarded through adequate tax benefits, for example a **reduced VAT rate**. Alternatively, the VAT rate for certain unecological single-use packaging could be raised.

Additionally, effective financial steering mechanisms must be introduced to achieve a short-term reduction of the consumption of environmentally unfriendly single-use items. The **introduction of a levy on environmentally harmful single-use products** is a very potent policy instrument to achieve this. Furthermore, the generated revenue could be used to support environmental protection projects, awareness campaigns and innovative reuse systems.

The effectiveness of levies could be shown in Ireland, where a levy on plastic bags led to a 96 percent reduction in consumption. To build on this success, the Irish environment ministry is now planning levies on several other single-use products (e.g. coffee cups, food packaging) in a multi-step procedure that includes, amongst others, the following measures:

Phase 1: 2020-2021

- Increase plastic bag levy from 22 to 25 cents
- Remove exemption from plastic bag levy enjoyed by medium weight plastic bags
- Introduce a flat levy on disposable cups ('Coffee Cup Levy')

Phase 2: 2022-2023

- Develop proposals for the introduction of a levy on take away food containers

Phase 3: Timeframe to be determined

- Develop proposals for the introduction of a levy on food packaging in retail outlets
- Develop proposals for further levies for introduction, as appropriate¹⁹

Additionally, the EU should **stimulate public and private investments in the infrastructure and technology** that is required (such as collection vehicles and washing facilities) for reuse systems to spread at a larger scale.

¹⁹ Irish Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment 2019: "Minister Bruton Cracks Down on Plastics, Single Use Cups, Landfill and Takeaway Waste", <http://www.dccae.gov.ie/en-ie/news-and-media/press-releases/Pages/Minister-Bruton-Cracks-Down-on-Plastics,-Single-Use-Cups,-Landfill-and-Takeaway-Waste.aspx>



Reusable cups for coffee to go

4. Labelling

In order to empower consumers and avoid greenwashing with pseudo-reusable packaging, there is a need for a **clear definition of reusable and single-use packaging** and a corresponding obligatory labelling directly on the packaging. Clearly visible labelling of single-use and reusable packaging allows consumers to make environmentally friendly purchasing decisions. It is often hard for consumers to distinguish between single-use and reusable packaging, as surveys looking at the consumer awareness around refillable and single-use beverage packaging in Germany have shown.²⁰ Thus, **labelling can further increase the market share of reusable packaging**. By definition, packaging should only be labelled as reusable if it is reused multiple times for the same purpose within a reuse or refill system.²¹ Furthermore, **effective sanctioning mechanisms** need to be in place for packaging without the required labelling or with an incorrect labelling.

5. Green Public Procurement, events and on-site consumption

To further boost reuse, there are several **low hanging fruits** that should be addressed separately: public procurement, events and on-site consumption.

Annually, all over the EU around € 2 trillion are spent on public procurement (around 14 percent of the total GDP).²² Leveraging the purchasing power of public authorities and institutions of-

fers an enormous potential for the development and support of environmentally friendly products, practices and systems. The EU has long recognized the importance of Green Public Procurement (GPP) for sustainable consumption and production. The European Commission offers a variety of toolkits, criteria and the EU Ecolabel as resources for procurers and decision-makers. However, all of these tools are voluntary, which diminishes their effectiveness, leaving the great potential of GPP for the circular economy largely untapped.

As of today, there is no EU regulation that obligates member states to **establish binding legal provisions on GPP**. The requirement for procurement offices to ensure that economic operators “comply with applicable obligations in the fields of environmental (...) law established by Union law, national law, collective agreements or by the international environmental (...) law provisions”²³ is not sufficiently strong, clear or specified to be put into practice at large scale. This holds especially true for waste prevention, longevity, reparability and reuse.

Prioritising reusable products and packaging should be obligatory for procurement offices. This can be achieved by placing **bans on certain single-use products or orders to exclusively purchase reusable products**. An increased application of reusable solutions in public procurement can in turn stimulate suppliers to provide reusable alternatives and foster a safe environment for investments. The EU needs to support this development, providing a clear and binding regulatory framework, obligating member states to implement ambitious action plans for a truly environmentally friendly public procurement.

²⁰ Kantar Emnid, 2017

²¹ Cf. definition of reusable packaging in the German Packaging Act (VerpackG) §3(3)

²² European Commission: http://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/public-procurement_en

²³ Directive 2014/24/EU, Article 18.2



Reusable crockery for big events

In addition, the EU should **develop uniform environmental criteria for certain product groups** and their packaging with a strong focus on waste prevention, longevity, reparability and reuse. Apart from that, these criteria should cover aspects similar to the ones laid down in the EU GPP criteria²⁴ and the EU Ecolabel²⁵, however their application should be obligatory. In the short term, **a strong focus on prevention and reuse of packaging** is needed within both the existing **EU Ecolabel and the EU GPP criteria**.²⁶

The use of single-use crockery and cutlery for on-site consumption in restaurants, cafés and canteens, where the installation of washing facilities is possible, is not necessary and completely

unacceptable. As a matter of principle, **caterers and shop owners should not be allowed to give out disposable cups for on-site consumption**.

About Environmental Action Germany

Environmental Action Germany (Deutsche Umwelthilfe, DUH), founded in 1975, is a recognised environmental and consumer protection organisation that campaigns mainly at national and EU level. The organisation is engaged in energy and climate protection, circular economy, traffic and clean air, nature conservation, urban environmental protection and consumer protection. DUH is politically independent, non-profit and entitled to take direct legal action. Apart from the realisation of numerous nature and environmental projects, DUH renowned for its fight for clean air, the establishment of environmental zones in German cities, its role in uncovering the Diesel Scandal and its successful campaign for a deposit system for one-way beverage containers and a quantitative target for refillable beverage containers in Germany. Within its Circular Economy Department, DUH has been campaigning for waste prevention, responsible consumption and a sustainable economy. DUH is a member of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB) as well as the Break Free From Plastic movement (BFFP).

²⁴ European Commission 2019: "EU GPP criteria", http://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/eu_gpp_criteria_en.htm

²⁵ European Commission 2017: "The EU Ecolabel Product Catalogue", <http://ec.europa.eu/ecat/>

²⁶ The current lack of clarity when it comes to prioritising prevention and reuse becomes evident in the recently published criteria on Food Catering services and vending machines, which state to: "where safe to do so, maximise the reuse or recycling of packaging and/or other waste" and "return[...] packaging for reuse when possible and environmentally relevant" (source: [https://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/pdf/190927_EU_GPP_criteria_for_food_and_catering_services_SWD_\(2019\)_366_final.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/gpp/pdf/190927_EU_GPP_criteria_for_food_and_catering_services_SWD_(2019)_366_final.pdf), p.19,22). Unfortunately, these suggestions leave a lot of room for interpretation and cannot be considered sufficient guidelines to effectively encourage the application of reusable solutions. In reality, the usage of reusable solutions (e.g. packaging, crockery, cutlery) is possible and safe in the overwhelming majority of catering, vending and event applications, especially, but not exclusively, if food and beverages are consumed on-site. For this reason, a more determined reflection of the waste hierarchy in EU GPP criteria is needed.



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