The responsible use of resources is one of the key challenges of our time. Europeans already use 1.5 times the amount of resources that the Earth can regenerate in one year, and there is a political consensus that this trend needs to be reversed. For this reason, circular economy has been high on the agenda of European environmental policy and is often among the key sustainability commitments of the business sector. Resource-efficient circular economy not only brings benefits to the environment, but also leads to economic benefits and job creation.

Focus on circularity of the carpet sector

This report focuses on the application of circular economy principles to the carpet sector. In 2016, 700 million square metres of carpets were sold in the EU, which makes it the second biggest market, after the US. This sector has a significant impact on the environment, not only in the manufacturing process, but also at the end-of-life stage. Each year about 1.6 million tons of used carpets are disposed of in Europe - most of them ending up in landfills and incinerators.

The carpet industry, however, is a sector where circular solutions already exist and could be scaled up. For this, the following measures need to be implemented:

1. Carpet manufacturers need to focus on designing carpets with reuse and recyclability in mind;
2. Manufacturers, retailers and municipalities need to provide infrastructure for separate collection of carpet waste to prevent contamination and enable easier reuse and recycling;
3. Carpet companies need to scale up recycling facilities that provide high quality recycling of carpet back to carpet, in a closed-loop system.

In addition to this, the research carried out for this report highlights that the two leading manufacturers in the EU market (and self-proclaimed sustainability leaders), Interface and Desso, lag behind their own commitments to close the loop.

Desso and Interface: discrepancy between environmental claims and reality

For several years, these two manufacturers have set high environmental targets and sustainability commitments. Interface has committed to producing “zero waste” by 2020, while Desso says it will incorporate all their products into a “Cradle-to-cradle®” system. These commitments have been very effective, as the two companies are fast-tracking local recycling infrastructure. Otherwise, the industry will be trapped in an unsustainable linear economic model for another 10 to 15 years.

France: Zero level of circular economy in the events sector

In France, the events sector is particularly problematic, as it treats its carpet as disposable product that is virtually never reused or recycled. Some 1.135 fairs are being held in France every year, representing an exhibition area of almost 6 million square meters, equivalent to more than 65,000 medium-sized homes in France. A large part of the stands, aisles, external spaces or stairs is covered with single-use carpet. The duration of use of the carpet is just a few hours or a few days, after which all this carpet is disposed of, leading to a large amount of unnecessary waste. Better alternatives, such as rental systems that enable reuse, exist and are more largely used in other European countries.

Germany: Overcapacity and false incentives for incineration

The overcapacity for the treatment of municipal and commercial waste in Germany encompasses a total of 2 million tonnes and is contrary to the idea of the circular economy, especially since low prices encourage burning of recyclable materials and products, like carpets. As a result, almost all carpets in Germany are incinerated, leading to a waste of precious resources, carbon emissions and toxic chemicals. Industry bodies often refer to incineration as waste-to-energy or even “thermal recycling”, which is a misleading term for the practice that prevents the transition towards a true circular economy.

Recommendations

- Carpet manufacturers must integrate reuse and recycling objectives into the design phase, develop collection and recycling capacities and clearly label the materials used in their products to facilitate recycling by other actors.
- French authorities must produce a report on the reuse and recycling potential of the carpet sector, in application of the Energy Transition Act (Article 101) and combat false environmental claims.
- German authorities must introduce the principle of product stewardship, set standards for reuse and recycling by means of a mandatory bulky waste regulation and make the incineration of recyclable materials financially unattractive by introducing an incineration tax.
- Retailers must offer a wide range of sustainable products from recycled materials, inform consumers about the environmental benefits of reused and recycled carpet and offer take-back schemes in a consumer-friendly way.
- Consumers should request information about the reusability, recyclability and environmental impacts of their carpets and make sustainable decisions when purchasing carpets.
- European decision-makers must include carpets in the Eco-design Directive, ensure that toxic chemicals are eliminated from carpets from the design stage, and ensure that Member States prioritise reuse and recycling over incineration and landfilling.