



Effectiveness of Packaging Waste Policies

The effectiveness of packaging waste management systems in five EU countries has been recently evaluated. The results have shown that in the selected countries the targets of the EU packaging directive are generally met, but not the directive's priority of preventing the production of the packaging waste.

Packaging waste is an important and growing waste stream across Europe. The EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive aims to harmonise national measures in order to prevent or reduce the impact of packaging and packaging waste on the environment and to ensure the functioning of the internal market. It is based on directly measurable, and quantitative targets which, however, mainly address recovery and recycling and not the reduction of packaging waste.

The Directive has now been in place for ten years and this is an opportune time to evaluate its effectiveness across Europe. In this regard, the European Environment Agency (EEA) has conducted a pilot study of the effectiveness of packaging waste management systems in five EU countries (Austria, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, and the United Kingdom) with the aim of tracking progress in this policy area. The main goal of the study was to analyse the effectiveness of the packaging waste systems in terms of fulfilling the environmental objectives specified in the EU directive.

In terms of achievement of objectives and targets in the selected countries, the results of the study have shown that the amounts of packaging waste generally increased between 1997 and 2001. Only Austria has managed to stabilise the amount of packaging, even decreasing it by 1%, while Denmark experienced a 2% increase during the five-year period. In comparison, Italy and Ireland saw large increases in packaging by 18 and 36 % respectively. Despite absolute increases in packaging waste generation, all case study countries except Italy achieved a relative decoupling of waste generation and economic growth.

The amount of packaging placed on the market varied among the countries with Italy and Denmark generating more than the EU average and Austria and UK less. There may be several reasons for these differences, for example, the definition of packaging, statistical methodology and production and consumption patterns. At this stage of the study, nothing conclusive can be said in this respect except that the change in population does not seem to be the main factor for these variations.

Looking at target achievement alone, the picture looks good: all the countries met the 25% recovery target, but only 4 met the 50% recovery target. The UK achieved a recovery rate of 48%. Recycling and recovery rates vary significantly between countries, although the differences are getting smaller. Of the five countries, only Austria already meets the 2008 recycling target of 55 % and Austria and Denmark meet the recovery target.

Overall, this study shows that although the member countries have generally met the recovery and recycling targets, the production of packaging waste is still rising across EU. Because the manufacture of packaging accounts for a large share of its environmental impacts, measures to reduce the generation of packaging have greater potential to reduce overall environmental impacts than the management of the waste alone. However, the EEA report points out that this principle must be balanced with overall resource efficiency, costs and internal market obligations which makes the packaging directive difficult to implement and even more difficult to evaluate.

For more information: http://reports.eea.eu.int/eea_report_2005_3/en

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