



Dutch study shows policy effective in reducing packaging

Policies to reduce packaging are effective as long as they remain in place for at least five years and aim for an absolute reduction in packaging volume, experiences from the Netherlands suggest. A study of Dutch packaging policy found that packaging levels fell when such policies were in place, but that the amount of packaging has since risen as policies have become more short-term and focused on reducing packaging levels relative to changes in GDP.

Packaging makes up two-fifths of solid waste in Western Europe. To control the amount of packaging used and the amount that ends up in landfill, the European Commission has implemented various packaging and waste policies since 1975¹. Many countries have also implemented their own, more strict, policies and voluntary codes. One example of this is the Netherlands, which first introduced targets to reduce the levels of certain types of packaging in 1988. Since then, the Netherlands has relied on various voluntary agreements and regulatory changes to control the amount of packaging that manufacturers use.

To evaluate the success of these policies, the researchers began by establishing a baseline level of packaging for the Netherlands. They found changes in packaging levels (measured as the total weight of packaging used) tended to correspond with changes in population size, and to a lesser extent, GDP. Using this, the researchers could show whether packaging levels fell above or below the baseline, indicating whether packaging policies were successful.

The results clearly showed that packaging levels fell by 2.4 per cent, or 527 kilotonnes (kt), during the first voluntary Packaging Covenant. This covenant, which ran from 1991 to 1997, set an absolute target of three per cent reduction measured against packaging levels in 1986, which was narrowly missed. However, overall targets for recycling, and particularly for metals, paper and board, were met. This was mostly thanks to increased recycling by companies; household recycling rates remained constant at around 40 per cent.

After 2000, however, packaging levels rose compared to the baseline, and no subsequent reduction, recycling or recovery targets were met. The researchers also found that some policies discouraged people from reusing packaging. For example, companies were allowed to phase out schemes that encouraged people to return used plastic bottles for reuse if they recycled enough plastic waste.

The targets were linked to GDP during the later period and the actual prevention target, which was not met, was 214 kt higher than that set by the first covenant. This appeared to shift the emphasis away from reducing packaging levels. Also, many of the policies that existed after 2000 lasted for just a few years suggesting that policies with longer time-scales reduce the amount of packaging that is used more effectively.

The researchers noted that voluntary covenants are a good way to build trust between participants and encourage support for policy measures. Although the large and diverse nature of the Dutch packaging industry meant that negotiations were slow and complex, the voluntary covenant helped both sides understand one another's needs and prepare for future packaging regulations.

1. For a history of EU waste policy, see: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/pdf/story_book.pdf

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