Economic prosperity in the European Union has placed increasing pressure on the environment as rising consumption has generated huge amounts of waste. Policy measures have been implemented to help break the link between economic growth and environmental stress. A recent study investigated how effective such policies have been.

Researchers examined the trends driving the waste chain, from the initial waste generation (measured as the waste collected) through to waste disposal by incineration, recycling or landfill in all EU member countries from 1995 to 2005. In relation to the European Landfill and Incineration Directives, the study investigated the effects of three factors on the amount of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) generated:

- economic drivers, such as household expenditure
- structural and socio-economic drivers, for example, population density, age and levels of urbanisation
- environmental policy drivers

Overall, the study found there has been only weak decoupling of waste generation and income drivers. This implies that waste policies, to date, have had minimal impact on reducing consumption, although there is evidence of greater decoupling between MSW generation and consumption compared with previous studies. In the case of EU15 (EU member countries before 2004), there is evidence of unsustainable growth in waste. However, for new Member States (i.e. nations that joined the EU in 2004) there are clearer signs of decoupling between waste generation and consumption. The researchers suggest that this may be the result of the need to comply with EU environmental legislation at relatively low income levels.

Recycling rates have increased with economic development and income growth, but the researchers suggest that rates could slow as economies of scale are achieved. In the EU15, for example, the study has linked highly urbanised populations with lower recycling rates, possibly due to collection and separation costs. However, the opposite trend is seen for new Member States, where urbanisation and population density are associated with increased rates of recycling. This has implications for future waste management strategies as society becomes increasingly urbanised.

Policy, primarily directed by the 1999 Landfill Directive, has been effective in reducing the proportion of waste going into landfill. This has lead to a greater volume of waste being incinerated or recycled. However, researchers warn that unless the amount of waste generated is reduced, this trend will not continue. Furthermore, as land available for landfill becomes scarcer, environmental and socio-economic hotspots could arise, particularly close to densely populated urban centers. Transporting waste elsewhere would not be a cost-effective alternative.

Higher land scarcity, population density and urbanisation seem to provide some incentives to avoid landfill at an early stage. The cost of land and difficulties finding suitable locations make landfills less economically and environmentally feasible. Nevertheless, given that waste generation is expected to grow without any sign of real decoupling from economic growth, policy levers at disposal and management levels are needed to drive down levels of landfill. The researchers suggest future policies should be targeted at reducing consumption and production at source in order to cut down waste generation.

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Contact: ma.maz@iol.it

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