

Let's Talk Plastics Session 7 – Plastics in a Circular Economy: Lessons Learned in Europe – Q&A

Panelists:

- Helmut Schmitz (helmut.schmitz@gruener-punkt.de)
- Delphine Lévi Alvarès (delphine@zerowasteurope.eu)

Questions and Answers:

1. How do you see the role of consumers in pushing the development of new products that are based on zero waste principles?

- consumers can play several roles in that:
 - 1) Promoting the ZW alternatives that exist already and supporting the businesses that develop them
 - 2) Calling out the companies that are not offering these options and challenge them to do better
 - 3) Demanding their decisions makers to act on that through legislation

That's the way we have designed our latest campaign [#WeChooseReuse](#)

2. How effective have the recycling programmes been especially in regard to private sector investments?

- Only 9% of the plastic ever produced has been recycled... so it gives you a sense of the effectiveness of these programmes so far. Most of this plastic, because we can't guarantee its quality and safety due to lack of traceability (in particular of chemicals) is being downcycled in products that may not have a recycling system at the end of life (e.g.: recycling PET bottles into fleece, that's going to release microfibers but also depending on the country won't be collected for 'recycling').
- There are certainly some successful individual projects, but a solution to the fundamental problem of the massive global littering of the environment with plastic waste, the inadequate recycling management of plastics, can only be seen in a few approaches so far.

What could be e.g. the reason why, despite increased consumer awareness, political measures and voluntary commitments by industry, the demand for recyclates is not already rising noticeably worldwide?

Firstly, the simple reason that recyclates are more expensive than primary material for higher-value applications. This price difference to the detriment of recycling is due not only to the low oil price but also to the lack of economies of scale in the recycling industry.

It is still not possible to cut the Gordian knot: the lower the production volumes in recycling, the higher the price compared to mass-produced primary material. And the higher the price of the recycled material, the lower the demand. It is a spiral that puts secondary raw materials at a disadvantage on the market compared to virgin material.

3. Can you share examples on local system that has been developed in public-private-community partnership - links to last point on your last slide?

- Have a look at the work of GAIA on that

[Example of Pune in India](#)

[Example of Mumbai in India](#)

[Recent report on financing Zero Waste](#)

In general, just explore GAIA and WIEGO's work

4. How do you foresee the social and economic development issues for waste pickers? These are often the poorest and most disadvantaged populations. There are wonderful ideas for creating livelihoods, but there are also worker health and safety aspects that must be considered for any project to move forward.

- The informal sector of waste pickers indeed bears the greatest risks and burdens (poor and irregular payment) in countries where producer responsibility does not exist or is not implemented. Over the past decades, real costs have always been externalized in the production of plastics from primary material. The chemical industry has enjoyed fantastic growth rates in the production of basic plastic products. But only because the question of recyclability was completely ignored during production.

In other words, the success of plastic in its production is at the expense of those who ultimately have to deal with the waste products. And this dealing with the waste products is more complex in organizational and technical terms and therefore more expensive than new production.

In short: There is no level playing field, i.e. no fair competition between new products and recycled materials under the same starting conditions.

5. what would be the key element to introduce a solid EPR policy in a country?

- it really much depends on the country, but I would say that some of the basics are:
 - 1) Existing prevention and reuse measures so that the collection for recycling system is not developed on wrong the basis and doesn't lock the country in an 'all recycling' model
 - 2) Multi-stakeholder process and governance to design and run the scheme (e.g. in France where a multi-stakeholder group monitors the performances of the PRO and defines targets)
 - 3) Should never come at the detriment of existing deposit return schemes! In particular, if these systems continue to allow reuse of beverage containers. In France, the introduction of the EPR system on the packaging has almost completely killed the DRS for B2C because reusable containers are heavier and that the EPR schemes charge per ton of packaging put on the market, and that producer who wanted to keep these systems were asked to guarantee a 100% return rate. So they went for the 'easy' solution and switched to single-use. DRS schemes should be part of the EPR system
 - 4) There is a need to work on corruption first... so that money paid by producers is properly and transparently used
 - 5) EPR fees should not only cover all collection and treatment costs, but also (real) prevention campaigns, and litter management and prevention. They should be modulated according to real eco-design criteria (not only weight because lightweight packaging often comes at the expense of their recyclability and always at the expense of their reusability).
 - 6) They should disincentivize incineration and landfill, by investing in the proper reuse, composting and recycling infrastructure
 - 7) They should be a platform for producers, NGOs, municipalities and government to discuss prevention and eco-design

6. As EPR and circular Economy are under Public Policies field, how have you managed interference from industries (private sector) during the making of these Directives and Policies?

- Starting with the former German Environment Minister Klaus Töpfer (also Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in Nairobi, 1997 – 2006) in the late 1980s, the concept of "Extended Producer Responsibility" (EPR) has become an established principle of environmental policy in an increasing range of countries. It aims to make producers responsible for the environmental impacts of their products throughout the product chain, from design to the post-consumer phase. It was hoped that this would relieve the burden on municipalities and taxpayers for managing end-of-life products, reduce the amount of waste destined for final disposal, and increase rates of recycling.

As in any other legislative process, there has been an intensive political discussion with the various stakeholder groups about the legal design of extended producer responsibility.

7. Have EPR policies resulted in less plastic pollution, use or production?

- By funding the collection and recycling of plastic waste through EPR, a contribution is made to reducing litter. The scope of the benefits depends on the respective legislation. In the EU, there is a very clear legal development towards full cost coverage by the distributors. In Germany, the obligation to assume 100% of the costs for the collection and recycling of all packaging from private households has already existed for 30 years. In order to improve the plastic packaging used, the amendment of the packaging legislation starting in Q1 2021 will focus on the introduction of an eco-fee modulation and the definition of so-called essential requirements for market authorization.

•

8. I would imagine that for EPR to be successful in countries where enforcement of environmental legislation is lax, it would require a strong buy-in by the private sector. What sort of incentives/disincentives exist, to promote this buy-in?

- Delphine: strong buy-in yes, but also a strong political will and a government that has the capacity to properly enforce its legislation. The incentives for the private sector have mostly been around 'image'. Never underestimate the power of shame, in particular, if your practices make you lose clients. You often need a couple of 'champions' that have a significant market share, to drag the rest of the group up.

9. In India under the Plastic Waste management Project of UNDP we could have successfully set the reverse logistic to bring back certain high value plastic, however, for low value plastic like MLP & other soiled packaging plastic the collection & segregation system is highly cost & labor intensive. Has there been any case study how these types of cost intensive system are being managed and who is paying for it?

- Will we see a functioning market for secondary raw materials in the foreseeable future? We have to do this together, otherwise we won't be able to get a recycling economy going. It is important to understand that the sales market for secondary raw materials cannot be opened up by supply and demand alone. That's why we need both: clever political measures and the recognition in industry that sustainability and EPR is not just an option, but a prerequisite for their survival in the market.

10. Could you share experiences about how waste pickers are being involved in EPR schemes? What are the keys to do it profitable for them?

- EPR systems need to find ways for informal operators to work with rather than against formal waste management systems. However, this is not always easy or possible, and it will be important to draw lessons from current initiatives to guide further policy development in this area. I recommend contacting the members of the PREVENT platform I presented in my presentation and ask for information and good practice examples.

11. Would incinerating sanitary napkin and baby diapers the best way to manage that waste?

- NO. It transforms the solid pollutants in it into atmospheric pollution and toxic solid ashes that you have to dispose of. For this kind of waste again, prevention is the key!
 - 1) Diapers: Many zero-waste cities have reusable diapers collection and washing systems (so that it doesn't weigh on the couple). The disposal of single-use diapers is in particular a problem because of the toxic chemicals that are put in the product in the first place. That's where working, with legislation, on eco-design and toxic-free design with the producers becomes essential.
 - 2) Sanitary napkins: there are plenty of reusable alternatives out there (cup, reusable pads, period panties) that are much cheaper and safer for women and should be promoted in schools. There are many organizations around the world working on that at the moment even without the support of the public authorities ([see for example the red cycle in India](#)). The disposal of single-use sanitary napkins is, in particular, a problem because of the toxic chemicals that are put in the product in the first place. That's where working, with legislation, on eco-design and toxic-free design with the producers becomes essential. See the [work of SWaCH in India for inspiration](#).