

On Circular Economy

We live in a throw-away economy. Raw materials, many of them non-renewable, are extracted, processed and manufactured to create our everyday products. These products increasingly have a shorter life, are filling up landfills and incinerators or end up in the environment. This whole process contributes to the climate crisis, is highly polluting to soil, water and air and creates large amounts of waste across the supply chain. This linear model is not only unsustainable; it is also making our economy dependable on an ever-increasing amount of natural resources to maintain our living standards, often imported. If we want to bequeath a livable planet with sufficient resources for future generations and not breach the environmental limits of our planet, we must move on to another system: the circular economy. In such an economy there is no waste: discarded products and materials are prevented from ending up as waste, used more efficiently or shared, reused or remanufactured, and, as a final option, recycled or used biologically. Cycles are closed, pollution is prevented, and green jobs are created.

We Greens are committed to using our political influence at local, national and EU level to trigger the switch to a circular economy. At EU level the European Commission has launched its circular economy package, which consists of legislative proposals on waste and an action plan containing future steps to promote smarter design of products, re-use and recycling. It is a start, but much more has to be done to make the circular economy a reality in Europe.

Reduction of resource consumption

The Commission's package ignores resource use. This while our European economy is highly dependent on a constant supply of imports of natural resources, we are a net importer. The EU has to acknowledge that it uses more than its fair share of natural resources, thereby contributing to pollution, deforestation, climate change and loss of livelihoods. We are living outside our planetary boundaries. In order to reverse this trend robust indicators that measure resource consumption across different economies need to be adopted. These indicators have to be applied in policy impact assessments and macroeconomic policies such as the European Semester. Binding targets for 2020, 2025 and 2030 on reducing resource consumption need to be set in order to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Target of achieving the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources by 2030.

Internalisation of external costs

The polluter pays principle should lie at the heart of the circular economy. Adverse environmental impacts have to be included into product costs. Environmentally harmful subsidies need to stop subsidising a system where material extraction and pollution are rewarded, not penalised. Taxes on labour should be shifted to taxes on (virgin) resources. Incentives should be given for the creation of repair, reuse, refurbishment, and recycling businesses, while the use of single-use and hard-to-recycle materials should be discouraged. Sustainable sourcing should be imposed across all product categories. Producer responsibility schemes have to be improved, and extended to include prevention and reuse. Member States have to monitor the composition of their waste and improve their waste reporting (including the measurement of residual waste), in order to find solutions or alternatives for those products that cannot be reused, recycled or used biologically.

Eco-design

Product design is a cornerstone of the circular economy. Good design does not use hazardous materials, enables and incentivises waste prevention, repair and reuse of products, and ensures the use of recycled and recyclable materials. Eco-design requirements have to be strengthened in order to safeguard continuous product design improvements. Planned obsolescence must be fought using constraining legal tools. A mandatory product passport, third party auditing and clear requirements on durability, reparability, reusability and recyclability have to become part of the Ecodesign Directive. Moreover, either

the existing Directive includes non-energy related requirements of products or a new Directive is created to ensure that the material aspects of a product are taken into account from the design phase.

Substitution of hazardous substances

Toxic substances have to be taken out of the production process to make sure that they do not endlessly circulate in the closed loop of the circular economy, affecting human health or damaging the environment. Strong regulations are needed to trace and restrict the use of hazardous chemicals in products. The REACH Regulation and RoHS Directive have to be strengthened; the precautionary principle should always prevail.

Consumer rights and information

Consumer demand for environmentally sustainable products and services has to be stimulated through policies that promote their availability, affordability, functionality and attractiveness, recyclability and reusability. Products should be designed so that they can be repaired and recycled rather than thrown away. The period for legal warranty for all products must be extended and the burden of proof on the consumer has to be made illegal. Clear and easy-to-understand information about expected lifetime and/or number of expected cycles and/or cost per use of products should be publically available, as well as information to allow for repair, reuse, dismantling and environmentally sound recycling. There also has to be an obligation on producers to keep spare parts and software updates widely available for, depending of the type of product, at least 10 years. In addition repair, recycling and re-use schemes should be encouraged with facilities available throughout EU territory. Furthermore, planned obsolescence should be prohibited, as is already the case in France.

Waste reduction and reuse

The waste hierarchy has to be strictly applied within the circular economy, taking into account lifecycle impacts. The first aim always has to be the prevention of waste, then comes re-use and repair, followed by recycling and biological use. In order to ensure the prevention of waste creation, ambitious and binding targets have to be set for the reduction of waste generation, the reduction of food waste, and the reduction of marine litter. We Greens also aim to establish a binding target for the preparation of reuse.

Separate collection

Collecting waste separately (especially of organic waste) holds the key to a better quality of reused, repaired and recycled materials, higher recycling rates, and reduced amounts of residual waste. We Greens therefore aim to make separate collection of key materials such as textiles and bio-waste obligatory within the EU as of 2018.

Recycling

If 'waste' cannot be prevented or reused it has to be recycled. In order to stimulate recycling, ambitious binding targets for 2020, 2025, and 2030 have to be set. The targets should cover different types of waste: household waste; paper and cardboard, glass, metal, plastics, wood; construction and demolition waste; and electronic waste, textiles and organic waste, including sewage sludge. A harmonised output-based methodology has to be established to report the amount of recycling that has been accomplished.

Incineration and disposal

Landfilling and incineration of waste should be the last resort. According to the Greens, as of 2016 no financial support from Union funds for landfilling and incineration (with and without energy recovery) should be allowed. As of 2018 there has to be a ban on landfilling and incineration (with and without energy recovery) of all separately collected waste. As of 2025 all landfilling of recyclable and biodegradable waste has to be banned. For hazardous waste an exception will be made, such waste should be disposed in an environmentally sound manner. Waste consists of finite resources; incinerated waste should therefore not be counted as renewable energy. The composition of waste that goes to landfills and incinerators has to be monitored and reported in order to find adequate reduction solutions.

Full implementation of existing waste legislation

Implementation of EU waste legislation by the Member States is too often weak. Failures need to be addressed. This not only leads to more sustainability, but also creates economic benefits and local jobs. We Greens urge the Member States to fully implement the EU waste directives at the earliest opportunity, and, should they fail to do so, urge the European Commission to make full use of its powers as 'Guardian of the Treaties' to ensure complete application by Member States of the provisions of existing waste legislation.