Friends of the Earth Europe

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Seven ways Europe can use fewer resources

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Friends of the Earth Europe asbl Rue d'Edimbourg 26 | 1050 Brussels | Belgium
Tel. +32 2 893 10 00 | **Fax** +32 2 893 10 35 | info@foeeurope.org | **www.foeeurope.org**

Seven ways Europe can use fewer resources

The European Commission started developing the EU's resource efficiency agenda by including it as one of the pillars of the Europe 2020 strategy – its 10 year overarching plan launched in 2010[1]. Following this it published its 'Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe' in 2011 to tackle Europe's dependency on imported resources.

Two years since this roadmap was unveiled there has been insufficient action to implement it. The discussion on resource use indicators and targets has become bogged-down in obscure and academic debates, rather than focusing on the adoption of real measures to reduce Europe's overconsumption of resources.

In a resource-constrained world, in which resource prices have risen by 150% in the last decade, and with recycling levels across the EU as low as 40%[2], it is absurd that the EU does not have a single robust resource use policy. Current resource use policy is fragmented, lacking in clarity and focus, and suffers from being split across different departments within the Commission which do not share a coherent approach.

So, what steps should the EU take to ensure that we live in a world where there are enough resources for everyone while we simultaneously become more resource resilient?

1) European policies need to have resource efficiency and its benefits at their core

At the moment, when resource efficiency is mentioned in policies and speeches, it is more likely to be a statement of good intentions than proposals for strong policies which contribute to the Europe 2020 vision.

Resource efficiency is an agenda which will benefit us all, as reducing the quantity of resources we consume can be positive for the environment, society and the economy. Social benefits include job creation throughout Europe in areas such as recycling and reuse[3]. It can also bring massive cost savings and net benefits of up to €640 billion[4].

2) Reduce Europe's overconsumption and provide space for other nations to develop

Overpopulation is often blamed for the resource crises we are facing. There are 7 billion people on the earth and it is expected that this number will rise to 9 billion by 2050[5]. The

[1] Main page Europe 2020: http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm
[2] http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/8-04032013-BP/EN/8-04032013-BP-EN.PDF
[3] http://www.foeeurope.org/publications/2010/More_Jobs_Less_Waste_Sep2010.pdf
[4] AMEC and Bio (2013) *The opportunities to business of improving resource efficiency* http://ec.europa.eu/environment/enveco/resource_efficiency/pdf/report_opportunities.pdf
[5] http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2008/pressrelease.pdf

argument used is that the rate of population growth is driving the increase in demand for resources.

However, not everybody consumes at the same pace or in the same volumes. Developed nations, like those in Europe, have historically consumed more than their fair share of resources. Indeed, the top 20 highest consumption countries are responsible for 75% of the materials consumed globally. This can be contrasted with the 100 countries with the lowest absolute material consumption which together use only around 1.5% of the world's materials[6].

The consumption crisis that we are facing is not driven by the increase in population but rather by the overconsumption of a small minority.

3) Measure the quantity of resources we consume and introduce resource reduction targets

Improving resource efficiency means reducing waste, using fewer and better materials, and finding efficiencies across the supply chain. These are important, positive steps but more is needed. Finding efficiencies can easily lead to the so-called 'rebound effect': increased consumption due to increased efficiencies.

Resource efficiency on its own will not address the overconsumption of natural resources or the negative impacts where resources are extracted. It does not address the rebound effect either.

We need to find a way to reduce the quantity of natural resources we consume. To achieve this we need to, first, measure the quantity of resources we consume and to put resource reduction targets in EU legislation.

Climate policy is based on the measurement of emissions of greenhouse gases, the setting of targets to reduce these emissions, and then the creation of policies to achieve these emission reductions. Resource efficiency policy should be the same. The EU needs to measure its resource consumption by calculating its carbon, water, material and land 'footprints'.

Using a consumption-based 'footprint' methodology is the only way to measure the overall quantity of resources that Europe consumes. This should have a life-cycle perspective and include the embedded or indirect use of resources for the production of an item, irrespective of where it is produced. For example, the water footprint of a t-shirt is 2,500 litres, and the water footprint of a pair of jeans 8,000 litres[7]. As Europe is a net importer of resources, no other indicator will provide a complete picture of the overall scale of the resources consumed by Europe.

[6] SERI (2012) *Green economies around the world? Implications of resource use for development and the environment* http://seri.at/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/green_economies_around_the_world.pdf

[7] Water Footprint Network http://www.waterfootprint.org/?page=files/productgallery

A set of indicators is essential in order to avoid aggregated indicators (i.e. where different types of resources are added up into one number). Aggregated indicators cannot measure resources in a robust way, since unreliable assumptions are required in order to transform different types of data (e.g. greenhouse gas emissions, land use, water use, material flows, etc) into one common number, resulting in important information being lost during this procedure.

4) Use resource use indicators in impact assessments of new policies

The Commission should use the footprint indicators as part of impact assessment of relevant polices. For example, an impact assessment of new proposals regarding biofuels or on the bioeconomy should include an estimation of the impacts on Europe's land, water and carbon footprints. Similarly, new waste policies should also include an assessment of the impacts on Europe's material and carbon footprints.

Impact assessments need to inform decision makers about the extent Europe's consumption of resources is likely to change in the future, and consequently how dependent the EU is becoming on the availability and affordability of resources.

5) Move to achieve zero residual waste in the EU

There is more gold in a tonne of electronic waste than in the average gold mine[8]. Europe could obtain many of the resources we need by ensuring effective separate collections for waste materials rather than continuing to bury and burn waste at the current rate. At the moment around 60% of Europe's waste is incinerated or landfilled[9].

Waste is the symbol of inefficiency of any modern society and represents mismanaged resources. There is a trend to concentrate all policy efforts on diverting our waste from landfill. However, this does not move Europe to zero waste. Zero waste means reducing our residual waste (the waste that is not reused or recycled) to zero. In other words, phasing out landfilling and incineration whilst improving sustainability, economic resilience and social cohesion. Products need to be designed in ways that makes them easy to disassemble for repair and reuse, and ultimately, for recycling. We need to stop funding and building infrastructure for the burning of waste as once these investments are made and the infrastructure exists we are 'locked-in' to waste creation. EU funding should focus on the creation of composting, recycling, reuse and repair infrastructure and networks.

Waste is not only created at the end of a product's life; there is also a lot of waste across the supply chain. Until now businesses have made great efforts to improve labour productivity even if that has required a more generous use of natural resources. With unemployment at

[8] Umicore http://www.preciousmetals.umicore.com/PMR/Media/e-scrap/show_raceIsOn.pdf
[9] Eurostat http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_PUBLIC/8-04032013-BP/EN/8-04032013-BP-EN.PDF

record highs and some countries seeing over 25% of their workforce out of work[10], it is essential to incentivise business to employ more people and use fewer resources. This can be done by shifting the tax burden from labour to resources. This will provide the right framework to encourage governments and businesses to reduce of the waste in the system – the unproductive kilowatt hours, tonnes and litres, rather than their workforce.

6) Make long-lasting products designed for repair, reuse and recycling

Undermined by amount of cheap goods of poor quality and short life, repair activities are not the norm in Europe. The manufacture and replacement of products with diminishing lifespans means using additional energy and resources, thereby generating more waste and harmful pollution. The EU should increase the minimum warranty for product from the current two years to between 5 and 10 years, depending on the product type. This would provide new incentives to businesses and result in more durable products.

Manufacturing which takes into serious consideration the end of life of must be made a priority. We will only be able to increase the reuse and recycling of products and their components if their design allows for disassembly. This will allow easier repair, reuse and recycling.

7) Focus on wellbeing of European citizens and the reduction of our impacts around the world, rather than a simplistic focus on GDP growth

Our economic system is based on the notion of unlimited growth. This system works under the flawed assumption that the world has abundant quantities of natural resources and that these are cheaply available. This infinite growth is not possible in a finite world.

Our high consumption has serious unintended consequences, such as global warming, dwindling resources, the acceleration of species extinction, water and food shortages, and pollution. Our environmental consumption is not properly accounted for in the relentless pursuit of consumption-based growth.

How are we going to be able to survive if we aim for growth in a finite ecological system? Today's growth-at-all-costs approach is undermining the conditions on which tomorrow's prosperity will depend. Simply manufacturing more and more 'green' products does not lead to sustainable consumption.

Our well-being and quality of life are not underpinned by our material possessions. Research shows that there is no correlation between happiness and personal income above a certain threshold. Access to education and good healthcare can increase our well-being much more than the accumulation of objects. Policymakers need to start focussing on improving overall wellbeing, not economic 'growth'.

[10] Eurostat http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

We can ensure we have everything we need without each of us having to own every single thing. New business models, such as leasing in which a service is provided rather than a product, can change this situation. If a person is a product user rather than a product owner then the manufacturer has an incentive to make more durable products that, in case of malfunction, can be repaired easily and upgraded. Car sharing could be replicated with other products, such as household tools.

Conclusion

Genuine sustainability means providing meaningful lives for all while living within planetary boundaries. Unfortunately, up until now most environmental policy has focused on making products greener, without considering our levels of consumption.

Friends of the Earth Europe wants the EU institutions to take resource use policy seriously by triggering a real change via the implementation of the 2011 ‘Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe’. We are concerned that the European Commission as a whole does not share one coherent vision and has watered-down policy proposals that would benefit both the environment and the economy.

There is an urgent need to move resource policy forward, because of the benefits it will bring, and because the current policy framework does nothing to curb the consumption the entire planet in pursuit of an-ever increasing GDP.

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Friends of the Earth Europe campaigns for sustainable and just societies and for the protection of the environment, unites more than 30 national organisations with thousands of local groups and is part of the world's largest grassroots environmental network, Friends of the Earth International.

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