



Machteld
Simoens



Sina
Leipold



Why the Packaging Act contributes little to the Circular Economy

Understanding perspectives - Creating room for action

RESULTS IN BRIEF

Many stakeholders from politics, business and civil society are disappointed with the German Packaging Act. They feel it makes a comparatively small contribution to a circular economy.

This study provides **explanations for the disappointment:**

- Policy-making became entangled in disputes between proponents of a private and a public system for waste collection. Stakeholder fears of potential radical changes led to a "lock-in" (a blockade).
- These fears allowed only incremental changes in the 2019 Packaging Act.
- The incremental changes could not resolve existing conflicts. Necessary disputes therefore shift to the current implementation

Based on the findings, we propose possible **courses of action:**

- To create a shift to a circular economy, we propose a dialogue using backcasting methods to explicitly address fears and overcome lock-in.



UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVES –

Policy finding of the German packaging law

To achieve a circular economy in the packaging sector, stakeholders discussed what was perceived as a radical policy proposal for a Recyclable Materials Act, in which recyclable non-packaging would also be integrated into the product stewardship system.

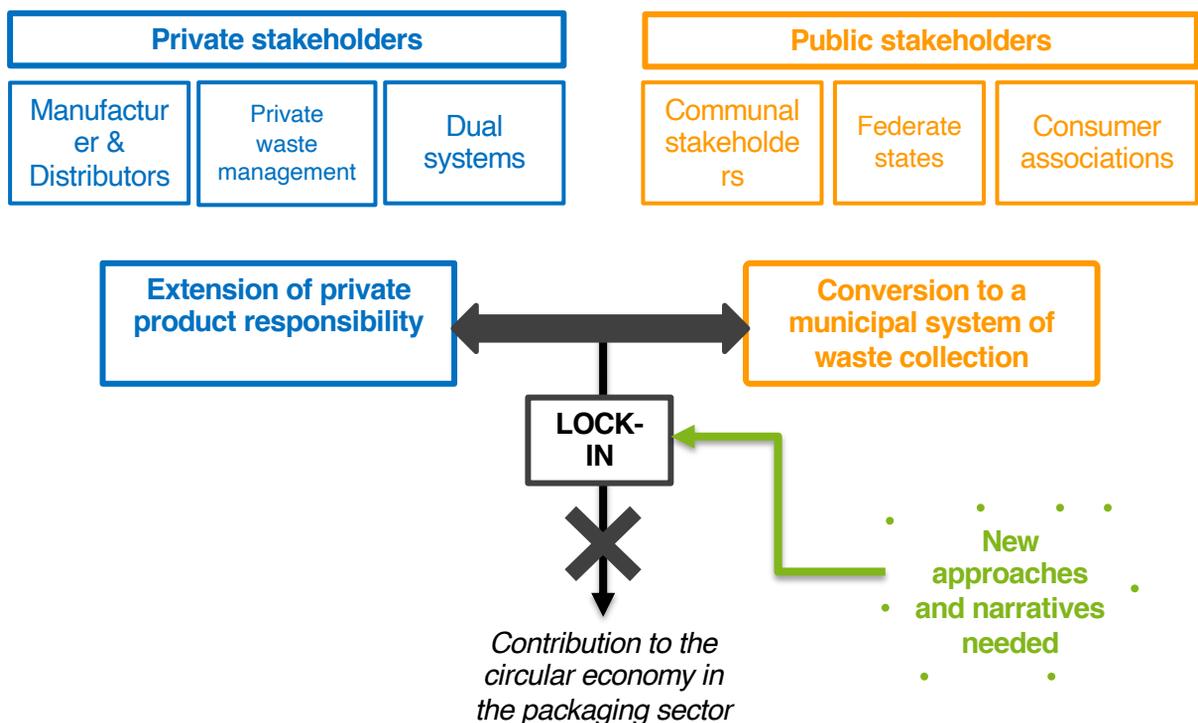
However, a major disagreement over the preferred organization of the system divided the policy-making process. Two main narratives divided stakeholders into a private and a public policy camp.

On the one hand, private actors proposed the extension of private product responsibility, based on the conviction that only an efficient and fair competitive system would ensure sustainable and circular waste management.

On the other hand, public actors were convinced that only a change to a municipal system of waste collection could be successful. Based on values such as effectiveness and transparency, they argued that only such a system change could achieve sustainability.

These two narratives dominated the political discussion. They were based primarily on the fear of the actors involved that radical changes in the existing system could fundamentally threaten their respective positions and responsibilities.

As a result, the participants focused on protecting their positions rather than progressively negotiating change. This left little room in the discussion for alternative approaches and sustainability concerns.





Implications for future policy-making processes

In order to break out of the lock-in, the legislator exchanged a radical policy reform in the form of a recyclables law for an incremental adjustment of the packaging law. This disappointed many stakeholders from politics, business and civil society. They feel that the new law makes a comparatively small contribution to a circular economy.

The current hardened position of private and public stakeholders and their fear of change does not bode well for the current implementation phase. The Packaging Act has not been able to resolve existing conflicts, and necessary disputes are being postponed to the future.

CREATING ROOM FOR ACTION –

Dialogue and positive transformation narratives

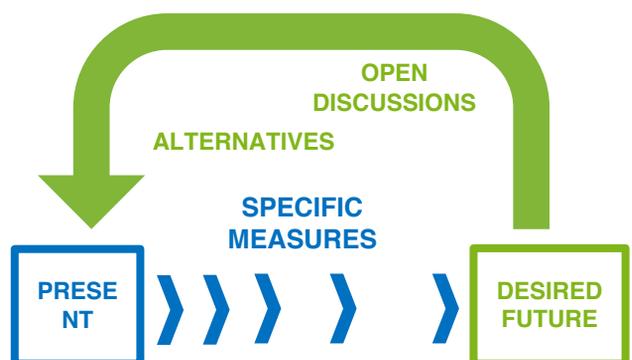
Understanding perspectives and mutual fears offers an opportunity to break through the deadlocked discussions and arrive at an ambitious regulation - desired by all - towards a circular economy.

To achieve this future, a method is needed that openly addresses currently hardened narratives and concerns in order to advance a purposeful dialogue in this way. That is why we propose to apply the so-called backcasting method to upcoming policy-making processes. Unlike the previous simulation game, this method takes the jointly desired future as the starting point. All stakeholders are intensively involved under professional moderation and support.

Backcasting involves the collective articulation and development of criteria for a sustainable future, which then serve as a guide for concrete implementation measures.

This means that all participants develop a common understanding and common goals on which a new narrative and alternative positions can be built. Explicitly addressing the possible effects of radical political changes on the positions of the actors enables ways out of the lock-in.

We appeal to all stakeholders in the packaging sector to promote such a dialog. As a research group, we are happy to support this with our knowledge and methods.





FURTHER INFORMATION UND SOURCES

Scientific basis:

"Trading Radical for Incremental Change. The Politics of a Circular Economy Transition in the German Packaging Sector" (2020) by M. Simoens & S. Leipold

Access: [doi:10.31235/osf.io/mvx5q](https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/mvx5q)

Backcasting:

Robinson et al. (2011). Envisioning sustainability: Recent progress in the use of participatory backcasting approaches for sustainability research. doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2010.12.006

Cover image by Etienne Girardet from unsplash.com

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The **Circular Economy Series** presents research results of the research group “Circulus - Opportunities and challenges of transition to a sustainable circular bio-economy”. The researchers are developing a comprehensive understanding of possible pathways to a circular economy in Germany and Europe. To this end, they combine perspectives from the social, environmental and engineering sciences to analyse the ecological and socio-economic consequences of the circular economy in various sectors.

Contact:

Machteld Simoens

Chair of Societal Transition and Circular Economy, University of Freiburg

machteld.simoens@transition.uni-freiburg.de

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<https://www.circulus-project.de>

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