

TERMS OF REFERENCE:

Research study on holistic indicators for waste prevention

Overall objective

ZWE wants to publish a piece of research to show the need of having a holistic vision of waste production when setting waste prevention targets, beyond the boundary of municipal waste. This piece of research should identify potential indicators and policy alternatives to advance towards reduced material use.

This will be used by the organisation and its network to feed into the circular economy debate and the future proposal of EU-wide waste prevention objectives that the European Commission is expected to look into by 2024.

Context

This piece of research comes after the approval of the new directives on waste that mandate the European Commission to look into the feasibility of setting a EU-wide waste prevention target by 2024. In a context of transition towards a circular economy, still little attention is being put to the role of waste prevention and the need to reduce significantly the use of raw materials through longer lasting products and overall reduction of waste.

In addition, the current debate on plastics has highlighted how plastic and plastic-containing products are increasing due to the push for making products lighter, which has resulted in short-lived, single-use, and bad performing products. Although the new work plan of the eco-design directive will include resource efficiency, this is still only for energy-using products.

The research

Recent research around waste prevention illustrate the big environmental benefits delivered by the reduction of waste that, rather than only being limited to waste collection and treatment processes, they go much beyond with environmental gains through all the value chain, including reduced impacts in extraction, production, distribution and use phases, along with, obviously, reduced use of natural resources.

While the reduction of the material use –expressed in weight- in products is desirable and can lead to environmental benefits associated with reduced extraction of natural resources and lower impact of freight, several studies illustrate that lightweighting products may actually impact on the product's durability and potential repairability, leading to shorter lifespan of products and, eventually, to increased demand for natural resources and increased environmental impacts associated to the fulfilment of that specific need. For certain product categories, lightweighting may also be impacting their recyclability as exposed in recent literature. These impacts suggest that the reduction of products' weight may have limited impact in waste generation or the reduction could even be counterproductive to achieve to a waste reduction and a circular economy.



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In the context of a transition towards a circular economy, with the future Waste Framework Directive mandating the European Commission to assess the feasibility and relevance of European-wide waste prevention binding objectives, it becomes necessary to have a right setting of indicators that allow measuring the advancement towards an overall waste reduction and that prevents a trend towards lightweighting the municipal waste without necessarily reducing waste arisings upstream.

In the piece of research requested, Zero Waste Europe intends to answer some key questions:

- Is a municipal waste reduction target the best indicator to measure progress in waste prevention? Which alternatives are there? Can we envisage waste reduction targets that include waste produced upstream as well?
- How would this be measured and what kind of objectives could be set?
- Is it relevant to measure the progress with overall objectives or is it preferable to focus on product-category specific objectives? Which product-categories should be a priority? What are the main reasons for products in each category to be discarded and which policy changes could support an extension of the lifespan of these products?

Timeline

Potential researchers are expected to submit their bid by September 28th COB.

The piece of research is expected to be finalized before the end of 2018.

Project management

The main point of contact will be Ferran Rosa (ferran@zerowasteurope.eu)

The project manager, in agreement with the researcher, might set up an advisory group of staff from either ZWE or other organisations who would review and provide advice along the project timeline.



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