

Designing resource use policy for Europe

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Summary

The European Union's debate on overall resource use gained momentum with the publication of the "Roadmap to a resource-efficient Europe" in 2011. However, resource use policy is still far from being the centre of the political debate.

When discussing how sustainable resource use should be fostered through policies, until now decision makers tended to focus on one resource category only, usually greenhouse gasses. By introducing policies which focus on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, often unintended negative effects in other resource categories are induced, such as in the case of the EU's biofuels policy which resulted in increased land use change and related land and water demand. The paper discusses existing approaches in European policy aiming at managing Europe's resource use and indicates how responsible use of land, water, greenhouse gasses and materials can be integrated into policy making.

Extended Abstract

At the EU level, decision makers are starting to realise that the era of cheap and abundant resources is over, mainly due to the constant price fluctuations and sudden increases. Natural resources are the basis for our lives, and yet most of the time this is ignored at policy level. The available resources are increasingly under pressure due to high levels of demand. Europe, as the continent with the highest net imports of resources, is economically dependent on a secure and uninterrupted supply of imports of all types of resources. The publication of the "Roadmap to a resource-efficient Europe" in 2011 aimed to be a stepping stone for a coherent strategy on resource use for Europe.

However, resource use policy is still on the margins of the political debate in the European Union and in most of its member states. On the international and European level, environmental policy has had the tendency to focus on climate and energy, while resource consumption, material extraction and its social and environmental impacts has not been fully understood. The climate debate has been central to environmental discussions mainly because its impacts affect all types of citizens despite their social and economic status and because the limits on the emission of greenhouse gasses are very clear. This has contributed to the implementation of new policies which have the sole objective of reducing Europe's greenhouse gas emissions, such as the current move to a bio-based economy, including biofuels, which have resulted in increased land use change and related land and water demand. Indeed, the full picture of Europe's resource consumption or the social impacts of the new policy are disregarded by this approach.

This is supported by the current unclearness on what resource efficiency means. The great majority of companies refer to better use of resources as getting more value from their products. Genetically modified organisms are a good example, since they require less water and land than any traditional agriculture, even though these relate to monocultures, soil damage or biodiversity loss. As a consequence, environmental organisations are growing sceptical of the term 'resource efficiency', and tend to view it as another policy by which global resource extraction and consumption will increase. The choice of resource productivity

indicator to measure resource consumption by the Commission as a leading indicator reflects this situation, as well as the adoption and implementation of the Raw Materials Initiative or the Blue Growth Strategy.

At the same time, governments remain in the dark when it comes to what resources we consume and for what purposes. The Commission's proposal to introduce a dashboard of indicators measuring water, land, greenhouse gasses and material consumption is constantly delayed. There are questions regarding the underlying data to measure Europe's consumption of these resources, as well as their availability across countries and sectors, in addition to pinpointing the limits of Europe's consumption that respect both the limits of the planet as well as a fair distribution of these resources.

This paper focuses on the development of the policy debate on resource use in the European Union, and how policies can be designed to take resource use into account. When discussing the formulation of policies in a way that resource use is taken on board, our overall consumption of land, water, materials and greenhouse gasses and their interaction cannot be ignored. Robust footprint indicators for each of these resource categories need to be perceived as a tool for sustainable policy making and, most importantly, they need be used together, as a coherent set that allows the decision maker to analyse trade-offs between different sets of natural resources. Impact assessments of new policies are a key opportunity for formulating policies that help Europe use resources better as well as improve their distribution.