

IASS-Blogpost

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[Dachzeile]

Facing Down the Plastic Flood – Recycling, a Plastic Tax, and the Barriers to Behaviour Change

In May 2020 I was a guest on an episode of the TV show “Planet Wissen” dedicated to “[Pathways out of the Plastic Flood](#)”. It was an opportunity for me to talk about the preliminary results of our work in the ENSURE project on “[Plastic: Social Perception and Behaviour Patterns](#)”. The journalist Andrea Wojtkowiak had sent me a few questions in advance, but – as is so often the case – there wasn’t enough time to discuss everything in detail during the programme itself. So for all those interested in the issue of plastic, here are the more in-depth answers.

Planet Wissen: Recycling and waste avoidance are the only environmentally friendly solutions to the problem of plastic packaging. Would the experts from science and industry that you interviewed agree with that assessment?

The actors that our ENSURE team interviewed are aware of the need to avoid waste and are looking into how user-friendly returnable and deposit systems can be established not only in direct sales, but also in shipping and transport. That starts with intelligent product design and consideration of the materials used in reusable containers. At the same time, the experts realise that changes are required along the entire supply chain in order to reduce the plastic packaging used in the transportation of goods. Here the main challenge is to avoid (single-use) outer packaging while upholding hygiene standards and protecting the product. Incentives are needed for everybody involved – manufacturers, retailers and consumers – to make products with little or no packaging more attractive. In addition to policy frameworks that would support this, the experts have proposed an extended producer responsibility as well

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as a new infrastructure for returnable systems that would ensure that plastic containers are kept in circulation.

Planet Wissen: How do consumers view returnable systems?

Far more consumers would use returnable systems if they were 1.) widely available, 2.) user-friendly, and 3.) attractive in terms of price and practicality. But, unfortunately, returnable systems are still the exception to the rule and tend to be confined to the beverages sector. On a more positive note, 67% of the respondents to our online survey buy beer in glass bottles – that is, in essence, Germany’s flagship returnable system. But only 34% buy mineral water in glass bottles – almost half of the respondents prefer plastic bottles in this case. Less than 8% of them buy their milk and yoghurt in glass containers, although this would be relatively easy. Here availability, portionability and price are likely to play a significant role in people’s choices. While the vast majority of respondents (85%) often or always take their own shopping bags with them when they go shopping, very few of them (4% always, 9% often) bring their own containers to fill. In my view, it would make sense if products were packaged in recyclable containers to start with – for instance, why does cream cheese have to be sold in round, rectangular and pyramid-shaped containers? After all, it’s the contents that count. One idea to reduce such single use plastic packaging would be to use standardised containers, with the relevant product information provided on a paper sleeve. On their next shop, customers could hand in the containers for professional cleaning and refilling, just like they do with their empty beer and milk bottles. The respondents to our survey also like the idea of having reverse vending machines for reusable containers on the streets. If we’re serious about switching to reusable packaging on a large scale, we have to think about what to do with the empty containers.

Planet Wissen: Is plastic pollution a major concern among consumers?

Absolutely! People are becoming increasingly aware of the problem, especially as a result of the growing media coverage. In our study, plastic waste in the environment ranks third in the list of perceived environmental threats, after deforestation and species extinction. And plastic waste in the oceans, animal deaths due to plastic waste, and microplastics are the top three concerns here. However, as with many other environmental issues, a heightened awareness of the problem and an appreciation of the environment do not automatically lead to behavioural changes. This is because of the many barriers consumers face.

Planet Wissen: Does the amount of money people have influence their plastic consumption?

Yes, to a certain extent. Nearly everything sold in discount supermarkets is packaged in plastic. One of the participants in our group discussions hit the nail on the head when he said “the less money I spend on groceries, the more plastic I take home with me.” Unfortunately, unsustainable products still tend to be cheaper – if their social, environmental and health costs were factored in, the same products would actually cost a lot more. So the companies that

make money from the sale of these products should be held more accountable. The respondents to our survey agree that the onus should be on the packaging industry and retailers to ensure that less plastic packaging is used. That said, not buying certain products or making home-made versions of them is usually the cheapest option by a long shot. Even if that's often not compatible with our working hours and ideas about consumption.

Planet Wissen: What do consumers think about plastic bans?

Even if it only covers a limited number of products, the new EU regulation that foresees a ban on single-use plastic and polystyrene from 2021 on has been welcomed by most consumers. When asked more generally about political regulations, bans, levies and taxes, people express mixed feelings, however. Our studies have shown high acceptance levels for measures and levies that are used specifically to make plastic-free or reusable packaging more affordable and set up more reverse vending machines. Our survey found that measures that oblige retailers to provide reusable packaging or unpackaged products enjoy the greatest public support. A call for clear labelling of products so that customers can determine at a glance whether the packaging is reusable and how it should be disposed of, was also broadly welcomed. I find it frustrating when I have to tear the cardboard packaging of frozen goods to see if the box is lined with plastic and figure out in which bin it belongs. It would be so much easier if that information was provided on the outside of the product. The respondents to our survey are also in favour of more support for small shops, especially those that sell organic and unpackaged goods, and outdoor food markets.

Planet Wissen: How have consumers responded to proposals for a plastic tax?

People are more ambivalent about general measures like taxes, where the usual reaction is "Oh no, not another tax!" I think that it's important for people to know what exactly the money is spent on and that the process is very transparent. I'm convinced that public acceptance will be higher if it's very clear that the additional revenues from a plastic tax are used to subsidise sustainable packaging and returnable systems, making them even cheaper than conventional single-use plastic packaging. However, the main problem at the moment is that it's quite difficult for consumers to choose the sustainable option – when actually the opposite should be the case!

Planet Wissen: What factors make it difficult for people to do without plastic?

In our focus group discussions we found that there are many different factors at play here. The lack of alternatives is one – as I said, in normal supermarkets practically everything is packed in plastic. But when it comes to adopting more environmentally conscious habits, people often fall at the first hurdle because they are uncertain about what options are actually more sustainable, and also because the alternative retail outlets are less accessible for them. In the corona crisis, hygiene and safety have become even more important when people do their shopping. In addition, many consumers want to buy their groceries as quickly and cheaply as possible, without having to think too much about where a product comes from, whether the

ingredients are healthy, how it was produced, how it is packaged, and how they should dispose of it after use. These are the kind of questions we should actually be asking ourselves about every product we put in our shopping baskets. But we don't want to, and simply can't in the case of many products or we'd never manage to do the shopping on time. And that's why a sustainable lifestyle and sustainable, plastic-free shopping should be the path of least resistance. Of course people could bring their own containers and shopping bags with them when they go shopping, but if they won't or can't do that for whatever reason we need sustainable and affordable alternatives, for example returnable and deposit systems with safe and practical materials.

Planet Wissen: Can you give us a few tips for avoiding plastic?

Of course! You can avoid packaged fruit and vegetables by growing them in your own garden or participating in a community-supported agriculture project. You can choose to do without many products that will only harm your health anyway – many detergents and cosmetics contain harmful substances. When it comes to cleaning, baking powder, lemon juice or vinegar, and a basic household detergent do just the job. When buying cosmetics, try to go for (micro-)plastic-free natural cosmetics. Nowadays, different apps allow you to find out if a product contains harmful substances like microplastic by scanning the barcode. In many cases, we use certain products by force of habit – a quick check like that can help us adopt healthier habits. It's also more sustainable to buy drinks from regional producers in glass bottles or drink tap water or drinks that you make yourself than purchasing beverages in plastic bottles. Where possible, you should avoid to-go coffee and drink it at home or in a café instead. That was what we always used to do and it's a much nicer and more relaxed way of enjoying your drink. If you fancy a hot drink on the move, why not bring your own cup or avail of cup-sharing systems? Try to buy clothes in natural fibres that are made in your own country or close to home. When it comes to furniture and toys, it's important to look for products that are made of natural materials and can be easily repaired. For me, the most important thing is that we as consumers try to buy as consciously as possible, enquire about alternative options, and actively demand them. You can also try to bring about changes in your professional capacity – as a politician or businessperson – so that sustainability gradually becomes everybody's default mode.

Note: The results of the empirical studies will be published in detail in academic journals and discussed this autumn in a round-table discussion with representatives from the business world, science, politics, government agencies, and civil society with a view to developing feasible recommendations for action.