

Now that the European Commission has finally published its Plastics Strategy, the EU institutions should take inspiration from the best practices out there to make the upcoming legislation on single-use plastics work for citizens, the planet and the economy.

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Having two Commission Vice Presidents present the long-awaited Plastic Strategy yesterday illustrates the EU executive's intention to put its weight behind tackling plastic waste.

Even environment chief Karmenu Vella once labelled the Plastic Strategy the jewel of the circular economy package. Jewel or not, Timmermans promised that the Commission will publish new legislation in May to reduce single-use plastics.

Reducing plastic use, especially single-use plastics, could be a game changer in Europe: it has the potential to create new markets and local jobs, stimulate new technologies and provide opportunities for dynamic businesses, while preserving the natural resources upon which we all depend.

This is an opportunity for EU decision makers to take inspiration from the best practices that have arisen all around Europe and beyond, and develop a policy framework to support and mainstream small scale initiatives that can make a difference when it comes to plastic pollution. Below is a short list to start with.

Something old...

Once upon a time deposit return schemes were the modus operandi across Europe: people paid a small deposit for a container, which was returned to them once the container was brought back to the collection point.

DRS are a time-tested tool to collect large quantities of high-quality material, which can later be reused or recycled. In addition, there are benefits for local authorities that introduce such measures, with some estimates putting savings as high as £35 million per year due to reduced littering and disposal costs.

Taken a step further, DRS could be introduced for other items. The German city of Freiburg, for example, has introduced a reusable cup system for coffee-to-go throughout the entire municipal area, which has already seen a significant reduction in the 12 million empty cups used and wasted per year.

A startup in Switzerland has organised a deposit return scheme for food takeaway containers that one can use in restaurants and takeaway food outlets.

DRS could also be a good tool for the collection of products with low collection rates, which are toxic or highly damaging to the marine environment, from batteries and mobiles to fishing nets and cigarette butts.

Something new...

Reducing or banning single-use plastics is a great opportunity to create new businesses and jobs in Europe, contributing to making our economies more resilient.

The most obvious example is the growth of packaging-free groceries across Europe. These shops are creating jobs along the entire supply chain, from local food producers to the local distribution systems.

In France, one of the places where this sort of shop has been growing the fastest in the last few years, the first association of these type of business was created about three years ago to share resources, ranging from know-how to legal advice.

The “reseau vrac” highlights how some of the barriers that these type of business face are very much related to EU legislation, such as the strict description of the maximum capacity of packaging for certain products like olive oil, with no indication on how to sell it in bulk. Such a policy measure also provides the right framework for the creative, sustainable design of products, where product durability and repairability become central to the design. In Bologna, for about 10 years now, the social company Lavanda has been providing reusable and organic nappies to both public and private nurseries. The company takes care of cleaning, repairing and recycling the nappies, thus incentivising the use of durable ones.

Something borrowed...

Some of the international work being done to tackle single-use plastics is rather inspirational. Take Costa Rica, which is developing a strategy to get rid of all single-use plastics. This is not a fashionable declaration of intentions, but rather part of a wider strategy that aims to develop sustainable production and consumption, and have a positive economic impact.

There are many other initiatives that could easily be replicated, such as the ban on styrofoam containers for food on the go, as well as the ban on single-use plastic bottles in San Francisco. And in places like Chile, there has been a specific ban on single-use plastic bags in coastal areas.

Similar initiatives are already being introduced across the EU, some of the best-known examples coming from Penzance or Aberporth, where local communities and businesses are ensuring no single-use plastic is used in the area.

The fact that the initiative is being taken in coastal or very touristic areas is no surprise, as these communities' local economy and livelihoods are particularly strongly affected by plastic pollution.

Something blue

Overcoming the proliferation of single-use water bottles is easy if the availability of drinking

fountains and tap water in bars and restaurants becomes the norm.

In Copenhagen, drinking fountains have been installed across the city, while other cities like London have already announced plans to develop similar schemes, and digital maps to locate water fountains are available from Bristol, UK to Melbourne, Australia.

Water fountains can even be found in places where the use of single-use bottles has been the norm, such as in airports, like the one in Barcelona. Mobile water fountains are also spreading, as is happening in Evanston (Illinois), where a Council-owned mobile water fountain is available for events.

In addition, when it comes to plastic bottle pollution, it is not only the bottle per se that causes significant problems, but also the cap, which can travel long distances due to its light weight, especially when it ends up in the sea. Stopping plastic bottle pollution is the objective of the 'leash the lid' bill in the USA, which requires all beverage containers, including bottles, to have the lid attached to the bottle.

The above examples show how inspiration can be found in many places across Europe and beyond, where people have been empowered to test and implement virtuous initiatives to combat single-use plastics.

All have been received positively by the public and have generated a direct positive impact on the local community. However, legislation is key to allowing such positive change to be rolled out across the EU and become the norm. Let's hope the EU legislation on single-use plastics due in May won't let citizens down.

Source: [euractiv.com](http://euractiv.com)