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How to enable a circular economy transition – insights from the German packaging sector

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Policy-makers, industry and civil society all aim for a transition towards a sustainable circular economy for packaging in Germany. Despite this shared goal, Germany's packaging waste footprint is continuously increasing, showing a large gap between ambition and practice in the sector.

The current configuration of the German packaging sector is characterized by various sources of resistance to change. These highlight why – despite the numerous attempts and efforts – the transition process is not progressing as desired and the sector only experiences incremental change, unable to close the gap between ambition and practice.

Furthermore, although the goal of a circular economy is shared, the best pathway towards this goal is still disputed as each holds a different vision about a circular economy for packaging and its contribution to the overall sustainability transition in the sector.

Hence, more prominent discussions about the values and assumptions shaping the different visions in transition processes and addressing the underlying resistance to change is crucial for successful transition-making.

Illuminating and discussing underlying visions for the packaging sector can inspire more disruptive policy interventions while targeting core trends of resistance; a crucial endeavor to close the gap between ambition and practice and enable a successful transition towards a circular economy.

INCREMENTAL CHANGE

Small alterations, changing components or activities step by step, thereby building on the status quo.

DISRUPTIVE INTERVENTION

Far-reaching alterations, changing various components and activities simultaneously, thereby replacing the status quo.

THE ROAD FORWARD FOR POLICY

Implications for successful transition-making in the German packaging sector and beyond:

- Shift focus from incremental to disruptive interventions to enable system change.
- Target interventions at overcoming resistance and stability.
- Enable active discussions on the desired directionality and pathway of the transition.



Figure 1: Aligning practice with the ambitions for a circular economy in the German packaging sector is crucial for a successful transition.

A STUDY TO UNDERSTAND THE GAP BETWEEN AMBITION AND PRACTICE

To explain the gap between ambition and practice, as well as formulate suggestions to accelerate the transition, it is crucial to understand the transition process as a struggle between stability and change.

This research project focuses on three key issues in the sector:

1. the policy making process of the German Packaging Act;
2. the dominance of single-use packaging over reusable packaging alternatives; and
3. the large variety of sustainable packaging innovations driven by incumbents and the transition pathway these support.

Each of these empirical issues form a part of the puzzle explaining the gap between ambition and practice in the German packaging sector.

THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSITIONING TO A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

The findings highlight the importance of including a discursive perspective to understand and explain the transition process towards a circular economy in the German packaging sector.

- First, the analysis of the German Packaging Act shows a major disagreement about the organizational design of the planned radical policy reform (the Recyclables Act). As the narrative of the opposing coalition was perceived as a threat, the only way out of the continuous repetition of these two narratives was to move away from a more radical reform and focus on incremental changes instead.
- Second, the study of the dominance of single-use over reusable packaging illuminates a large variety of mechanisms stabilizing the status quo, including material, institutional, behavioral, and discursive self-reinforcing mechanisms. Additionally, the analysis points to the interactions of these mechanisms and highlights three clusters of resistance. For the packaging sector, the trends of securing profits, sustaining lifestyles, and continuing individualization, are crucial in reinforcing the dominance of single-use packaging.
- Third, when analyzing the incumbent-led packaging innovations and the transition pathways underpinning them, five different pathways towards a sustainable and circular packaging sector were identified. The study shows that packaging incumbents fail to engage with the variety of alternative visions among them as well as insufficiently incorporate disruptive changes necessary to achieve a circular economy.

Overall, the three studies give insights in the current attempts to move towards a circular economy. They point out how the struggles between actors, the perseverance of stabilizing mechanisms and the lack of a shared vision limit these attempts to incremental changes insufficient to enable a circular economy transition.

KEY POINTS FOR POLICY

- A large gap between “ambition” and “practice” characterizes the transition towards a circular economy in the German packaging sector.
- The current configuration of the sector continuously reinforces the status quo, allowing only incremental changes towards a circular economy.
- So far, the sector fails to engage with the variety of alternative visions about the directionality of the transition.
- The sector lacks consideration of the disruptive changes necessary to overcome resistance and achieve a sustainable circular economy.
- Including and addressing the underlying norms and values that shape the vision of transition processes is crucial for successful transition-making.

PUBLICATIONS

For more information you find the complete set of articles by Machteld and co-authors Sina Leipold and Lea Fuenfschilling on this topic in Machteld's Dissertation framework: *A discursive perspective on socio-technical sustainability transitions. Insights from the German packaging sector.* <https://freidok.uni-freiburg.de/data/231181> page 12.

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