

Recycling is not enough -- we need to consume less

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Recycling rates have risen, and the UK is on schedule to meet EU targets, but the key to dealing with our escalating waste problem lies in changing our buying habits and our attitudes to consumption, according to the authors of a new Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) publication.

Consumption: reducing, reusing and recycling, which accompanied a seminar in Belfast organised jointly with the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland, says that the benefits of recycling risk being undermined by the sheer quantity of waste being generated. If household waste output continues to rise by three per cent a year, the cost to the economy will be £3.2 billion and the amount of harmful methane emissions will double by 2020.

The report highlights the many ways that social science can contribute to waste policy development, either by devising initiatives, by providing tools to evaluate their relative effectiveness or by helping understand why they did or did not work.

Professor Ken Peattie, Director of the ESRC Centre for Business Relationships, Accountability, Sustainability and Society (BRASS), Cardiff University, describes three projects which are linked to different aspects of waste reduction at the production stage and in consumption. He says the key tool in the development and implementation of consumption reduction policies is 'social marketing,' which involves using commercial marketing techniques to influence their behaviour for

the benefit of society as a whole.

Ken Peattie explains that social marketing can be successful because it focuses on the target audience's point of view, taking account of any emotional or physical barriers that may prevent people from changing their behaviour. 'Guilt messages are ineffective. A focus on the benefits of a greener lifestyle has been shown to be a better way to encourage people to reduce their consumption,' the report says.

Ben Shaw, Senior Research Fellow, Environment Group, Policy Studies Institute, describes international efforts to become more resource efficient by significantly reducing waste or achieving higher rates of recycling or reuse. He says that despite recent improvements the UK is still a long way behind the best performing countries and regions where taxation and household waste charges have been used to reduce landfill.

However, even the toughest penalties have not been enough to prevent a significant accumulation of waste. Ben Shaw says that waste reduction needs to be tackled higher up the chain of production and consumption. "Waste reduction must be a goal of UK environmental policy, and not tackled through waste policy alone," he says.

The report also gives examples of zero waste initiatives which have been tried - from the high-tech, large-scale waste management systems of consumerist San Francisco, to the locally based, small-scale initiatives in the Philippines.

Ben Shaw says that although there are some inherent problems with 'zero waste' as a concept and as a policy objective, there lessons to be learnt by critically considering the achievements of existing practice, wherever in the world that may be found. For example:

-- We should set a per capita residual waste target to drive both recycling

and prevention, backed up by variable charging of householders.

-- We should be among the first countries to tackle consumption by making innovative and transformative producer responsibility agreements.

-- We could be much more ambitious in our recycling targets. We should try harder on construction and demolition waste.

-- We should develop more 'closed loop' systems for organic wastes, for instance by returning composted food waste to the land as fertiliser, rather than losing this valuable resource.

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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