

Report online webinar “Let’s talk about reuse”

On Thursday the 8th of October, the webinar “Let’s talk about reuse” was organized by the Circular Economy Policy Research Center. The goal of this webinar was to present the results of their new study and open a broader debate on the role of reuse in the circular economy. The major conclusions? The amount of reused consumer goods in Flanders equals 33.8 kg per person. This is much higher than the 5.4 kg per person reused goods in the Flemish reuse shops, which was used up till now. This original number excluded other formal and informal reuse channels and therefore underestimated the total reuse in Flanders. Monitoring the transition to a circular economy, as was done in this research, is a crucial step to develop the right policy measures.

The webinar was moderated by Rishi Panchasara. Professor Karel Van Acker, head of the Policy Research Center Circular Economy, opened the webinar. Professor Van Acker framed the research study on reuse in the broader strategy of the Policy Research Center to monitor and facilitate the transition to a circular economy. Of the three central strategies in the circular economy, namely prevention, reuse and recycling, reuse is still understudied. How popular is reuse in Flanders? What is the goal of reuse? These are the questions this new study on reuse aims to answer.

The destination of textile waste

According to Rozanne Henzen, consumer behavior is a crucial factor when stimulating reuse. Rozanne Henzen is a researcher at the Sustainable Transformation lab at the Antwerp Management School. For her research, she performed an online survey questioning 491 consumers about their behavior regarding the disposal of their textile waste. Four potential destinations were included, namely disposal in exchange for an incentive, disposal without incentive, extension of the lifespan of textiles and binning textiles as household waste. This last option was selected by the respondents as the destination for 27.49 unwanted textile pieces per year. In Flanders, this adds up to a total of 180 million pieces of discarded textiles per year. The expected increase of 61% in the amount of textile waste by 2030, will only further increase this number.

Textile recycling knowledge is often considered as one of the important drivers for reuse and is also used as a strategy to convince consumers to increase their recycling behavior. However, the current study indicated that this knowledge had no significant impact on the different consumer choices. The identified consumer behavior drivers varied considerably over the different destinations. For donating textiles for example, the respondents considered the societal opinion, their personal norm and their awareness of the industry as important drivers. Another remarkable finding was the big gap between the knowledge of a disposal destination, the past behavior of respondents and their intention to dispose their textile waste through this destination. As a motivation to bin unwanted textiles, the bad quality of the textiles was often mentioned. However, further questioning revealed that this bad quality often referred to small damages, which would not have hindered the reuse or recycling of this textile considerably. “We as a society value use over reuse”, was stated by Rozanne Henzen.

Reuse in Flanders

Subsequently, Kris Bachus and Joni Delanoëije, from the HIVA research institute of the KU Leuven, presented their study on the reuse of consumer goods. “We could identify different reuse channels in Flanders: the Flemish reuse network, independent reuse shops, online platforms, second-hand fairs, family and friends and charities”, was explained by Kris Bachus. Joni Delanoëije provided further insights: “We knew that the current amount of reused goods in the ‘kringwinkels’ equaled 5.4 kg per person. By asking consumers about their personal percentage of reuse through the different channels, we could extrapolate this number to the other reuse channels. This way, a total amount of 33.8 kg reused goods per person per year was obtained. This adds up to a yearly amount of 222 000 tonnes reused goods in Flanders.”

The study also revealed that 65.2% of the respondents had bought, received, sold or donated reusable goods in the past year. Younger people (< 35 years) and women appeared to be more engaged in reuse behavior compared to others. Social and local job creation, sustainable consumption and production, ease and price were indicated as the main reasons for reuse. Negative perceptions on the quality and hygiene of the reusable goods appeared to be important barriers.

The positive impact of reuse on the environment is not self-evident. The findings of the study indicated that only 28% of the reused goods replaced the purchase of a new good. “It is a place where you can find additional things”, was indicated by 29% of the respondents. Reuse appeared to be important for jobs in the regular and social economy. An additional finding was that reuse can provide access to certain products for people with a lower income. “When I would buy new, I would have difficulties to make ends meet at the end of the months”, was stated by 23% of the respondents.

The road to more reuse?

The presentations were followed by an animated panel debate, moderated by Richi Panchasara, involving multiple stakeholders: Brigitte Mouligneau, transition manager of ‘Vlaanderen Circulair’, Joren Verschaeve, policy officer circular entrepreneurship at Herw!n, Barbara Janssens, coordinator of the ‘Netwerk Bewust Verbruiken’ and Patrick Van den Bossche, head of the expertise center ‘Milieu’ of Agoria. The panel debate was initiated by the question: “Wat are the next steps in enhancing circular reuse in Flanders?”

Joren Verschaeve opened the discussion: “We do already a very good job in Flanders, but we should not sit back and relax. There is still a lot of low-hanging fruit. The big challenge there is to mainstream reuse both in legislation as well as in the mind of people. Today it is for companies more expensive to dispose goods for reuse than for waste. The same for households, we have a very well functioning system to collect waste. But there are no checks at present to prevent that reusable goods end up in incineration. On a longer term, we need to install smart leverages. For electric and electronic appliances, we can expect that a market for reuse and repair will develop itself. These products also have a high added value. This is different for other reusable goods, for which this is a hard market to get economically viable. Currently, up to 40% of what ends up in bulk-waste containers is reusable. If we want to avoid this, this costs money. The French government wants to install a reuse and repair fund by 2030. These kinds of mechanisms can very easily transform our society and can quite easily accelerate the transition to a circular economy in Flanders.”

Barbara Janssens discussed the role of the consumer in more detail: “A system driven by consume, consume, consume, is not something to sustain for the rest of planet’s life. You can educate consumers, but you cannot put the whole responsibility on them. We as consumers are focused on buying stuff, but we still need to something about planned obsolescence as well.”

Subsequently, Barbara Janssens highlighted the important role of repair: “If we see which kind of products are reused, repair is very important. A repair score could be interesting. 64% of the European citizens don’t want new devices, while 25% of the European citizens want to pay more if a product is repairable. It would also help to repair products before reselling them in a social economy. This is a job creation that can be very local. Reuse centers can grow this way. In addition, don’t forget the informal part of repair. People are in

need for support for repair knowledge. This common intelligence is not captured at the moment.”

Finally, Barbara Janssens also discussed the risk of new business models such as product-service systems: “One in ten persons in Flanders lives in poverty. When power and ownership stay with the producer, this can be dangerous for people who lack resources.”

Brigitte Mouligneau noticed a recent trend: “During the corona crisis, a lot of people discovered the ‘kring-winkels’, because they did a lot of cleaning. A lot of additional goods were received. So please people, clean up your cellars and attics and bring your goods to one of the reuse channels.”

In addition, the key role of developing and stimulating specific skills was emphasized: “Recycling parks could be organized better to give better opportunities to sort goods which are still reusable. If you put something in a container, you can be sure it is broken. If you can make a distinction between broken and good stuff, the good stuff could be reused. How can you sort this? How can you repair this? These are the skills we need to invest in, the jobs of the future.”

Brigitte Mouligneau also highlighted a positive side of the rebound effect which was identified in the previous presentation: “If people find their way to the second-hand shops, that is already a good thing. The first time this might be ‘fun shopping’, but later you will remember that they had something interesting when you are in need of a certain good. Also the social aspect is important. Reuse is cheaper and gives opportunities to people who are not able to buy the primary goods. While they are buying these high-quality goods in second-hand shops, they don’t spend the same amount of money on these goods in low-quality shops, where these goods are much harder to recycle, reuse or repair. Everytime you get somebody to buy a good-quality good in second-hand shops instead of low-quality shops, you win.”

Also the importance of the Policy Research Center study was pointed out: “Targets are completely useless if you don’t have the right tools to measure the impact. Research is extremely important here. The difference today between the 5.4 kg, which we were aware of and the 33.8 kg which was show today is very large.” Finally, Brigitte Mouligneau shed some light on the proposed reuse and repair fund from a policy perspective: “A lot of fees and taxes go to the big pile of government funding and do not go directly to the circular economy. It’s not so easy to start a fund with fees. You need to take into account the rebound effects that this would generate. Another way forward is to look at which jobs you need, which skills you need. We need to work together on this with our federal government to find a good cocktail of financial instruments. It is very important to find the correct solutions to move forward to a circular economy.”

“Companies producing electronic equipment try to avoid repair. Consumers don’t like to have reparations; the major cost here is time. Brands try to avoid repairs by incorporating a good design right from the start”, as was stated by Patrick Van den Bossche. “It is also in their interest to have a good technician to repair the product. To react on the issue of planned obsolescence, a producer who does this is clearly destroying his own brand name. But not every producer will do the repair and maintenance themselves. Business-to-business, there are already some very nice initiatives. It is clearly a market in progress and it will go faster for products with a higher residential value. At the moment, 30% of electrical and electronic equipment is reused. We have to look at how we can support the low value products. That’s why it is important to consider the different dynamics of the markets, for example between the textile market and the market of electric and electronic equipment. We should think twice on where the real difference can be made. The first step would be to have a better understanding of informal markets.”

Patrick Van den Bossche also reacted on the potential targets: “I don’t see yet what legal framework we would need. The main challenge is how you measure this. At the moment, these are very expensive studies. There is also a lack of inspection enforcement on reporting. You can get a target, but if you cannot report it, it is meaningless.”

Finally, Patrick Van den Bossche compared the repair and reuse fund idea with the current regulation concerning the extended producer responsibility: “We see that one of the problems is that a lot of money is collected in the early stages, but not again used. The authorities tend to use this fund for something else. Don’t underestimate the powers in the value chain. Currently, the extended producer responsibility is prefinanced by the producers and often the producer does not get this back. The responsibility should be a shared responsibility.”

Reuse as one of the drivers of the circular economy

The afternoon ended with a concluding summary by Kris Bachus. “The study is a valuable addition on the debate on future policies. A positive note is that 65% of the population is engaging in reuse and 222 000 tonnes of goods get a second life. At the same time, we see a lot of room for improvement, as still 49% of textiles were thrown away. Moreover, reuse should be framed in the larger perspective of product lifetime extension. Reuse is one of the strategies, but also the other strategies are important and should be considered collectively. Also new business models such as product-service systems can be important. The role of the consumer and producer is not very straightforward at the moment. No consensus on this was found and more discussion is needed. Investing in skills is also important. If we go for repair in the future, we need more people with the right skills.”

In conclusion: Reuse is an important strategy to accelerate the transition towards a circular economy. Scientific research can shed some light on the current markets, required competences and necessary targets to fulfill this expectation.

More information on the presented research can be found in the following studies:

- Henzen and Pabian, 2019. Increasing consumer participation in textile disposal practices: Implications derived from an extended theory of planned behaviour on four types of post-consumer textile disposal. *Journal of Textile Science & Fashion Technology*, 4 (2), p. 10. DOI: 10.33552/JTSFT.2019.04.000581. <https://irispublishers.com/jtsft/fulltext/increasing-consumer-participation-in-textile-disposal-practices-implications-derived-from-an-extended.ID.000581.php>
- Delanoeije and Bachus, 2020. Reuse. The understudied circular economy strategy. CE Center publication N° 13. <https://ce-center.vlaanderen-circulair.be/en/publications/publication/13-reuse-the-understudied-circular-economy-strategy>