

Life Cycle Thinking is the key to unlocking the Circular Economy

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Opinion Plus

The great advantage of Life Cycle Analysis is its ability to discover areas of weakness and improve upon them, explains Henri Colens.

Life Cycle Assessment:
the future for improved
sustainability in Europe?



The circular economy will take a big step forward when the European Parliament's Environment & Public Health (ENVI) Committee votes on the Simona Bonafè report later this month.

It is of vital importance that members take the time to carefully consider the key targets that materials and processes, companies and citizens, municipalities and regions will abide by. The more collaborative the actors can be, the more successful this venture will be.

As with many other legislative measures, the Circular Economy Package has encouraged different industries and sectors to push for an advantage. Within the negotiations different materials have fought to claim that they are more efficient, better suited or more environmentally beneficial.

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But there is only one tool that can establish the performance of a material, and that is Life Cycle Analysis (LCA).

Many products are now put through such testing, which analyses the entire value chain, and assesses, amongst other things, their environmental impact. The great advantage of such a procedure is the ability to discover areas of weakness and improve upon them.

However, not all materials or products have undergone LCA. There may be legitimate reasons for this, but I have suspicions that some are hiding behind them. Yes, the methodology is expensive, and it does have its limitations. But there is no excuse for commercial products or large volume materials not to submit to this analysis.

In the case of bio-based materials, that is to say those made wholly or partially from non-fossil sources, it is even more necessary. In order to counter the concerns surrounding these materials, this small (but growing) sector must be transparent about its practices and the environmental impacts that stem from them.

MEPs have been discussing language which would encourage member states to assess and implement push and pull measures favouring these materials within Article 4 of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive.

While these actions would indeed be limited, they would signal a willingness of the European Parliament to look at how to progressively decarbonise plastic in the long term. Crucially, from my point of view, the language makes reference to the “life cycle perspective”.

But the last draft of this language makes for depressing reading, as it confuses the original purpose (to assess the potential of bio-based materials in packaging) with an end-of-life consideration, namely biodegradability. An emphasis solely on this functionality would exclude almost 61 per cent of bioplastics from the scope of this amendment, leading to a dampening effect for the European bioeconomy.

Sceptics will say that the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive deals mainly with waste (and therefore end-of-life issues), but I would argue that in order to truly do justice to circular thinking, it must also concern itself with sourcing, hence the need for Member States to focus on bio-based.

The power of this legislation depends on joining all the dots of the value chain – otherwise this will be

another missed opportunity.

Braskem's I'm Green is a bio-based polyethylene which has undergone two LCAs, the latest of which can be made available on demand. Please contact Henri Colens: HENRI.COLENS@braskem.com [9] for more information.

About the author

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