

We consume too much – and recycle too little

A new report shows that Denmark lags significantly behind in the circular transition.

Denmark is only 4 per cent circular. This means that only a tiny portion of the resources we consume have been used before. Thus, Denmark performs worse in the circular economy than several other European countries, as a new report indicates. This development calls for action, according to a broad alliance of stakeholders.

For the first time, a so-called Circularity Gap Report has been compiled, providing an overall status of Danish circularity, Denmark's resource consumption, and the impacts of consumption both nationally and globally. This assessment is presented in a Circularity Gap Report, which the Dutch consultancy firm Circle Economy produces. The report was initiated by a broad alliance of Danish stakeholders, including Industriens Fond, Dansk Industri, IDA, DTU-Miljø, Teknologisk Institut, Dansk Design Center, and Lifestyle & Design Cluster.

Too much – and too little

The report reveals that only 4 per cent of the materials consumed in Denmark are recycled. This should be seen in the context that Denmark also has one of the highest material consumption rates in the world. Globally, 72 per cent of materials are recycled. Unfortunately, this number has also declined in recent years. In Denmark, we consume the equivalent of almost 24.5 tons of materials per person each year. This is well above the EU average of 17.8 tons per person. It's more than three times higher than the estimated sustainable consumption level of 8 tons per person that we should ideally aim for.

- It is mainly our high resource consumption that drags down Denmark's circularity score, states Laura Klitgaard, Chairman of the Engineering Association, IDA. Therefore, we need to ensure more intelligent use of Earth's resources by reusing, recycling, and extending the lifespan of products through entirely new business and consumption models. We need to act not only swiftly but also comprehensively at all levels, she says.

The textile industry takes action

The textile industry is among the significant contributors to climate issues, acknowledges Betina Simonsen, CEO of the business cluster Lifestyle & Design Cluster.

- Our significant overconsumption and resource depletion result in large amounts of waste in Denmark and have consequences far beyond Danish borders. When materials are extracted and processed, substantial amounts of CO₂ are emitted. We must take responsibility for these emissions through a circular transformation in Denmark. Industry cluster partners in both fashion and furniture sectors are working on numerous initiatives to address this, she says.

Chairman of the voluntary sector collaboration in the textile industry, CEO Maria Glæsel of ATAYU, takes the numbers in the report seriously but also welcomes the progress, particularly in the textile industry.

- As this report shows, linear business models in the textile industry put significant pressure on the planet's resources, she says. Therefore, our work methods must be adapted to a more circular economy. The sector collaboration for circular textiles is a significant step toward guiding, supporting, and monitoring the inevitable transformation among Denmark's small, medium, and large companies. In this collaboration, competitors work side by side, exchanging knowledge, reporting on annual progress towards circular goals, and identifying opportunities for innovation and gaps in our understanding, all aimed at accelerating the development and adoption of a textile-to-textile cycle. Lastly, this collaboration, conducted in close dialogue with the Minister of Environment and the Danish Environmental Protection Agency, acts as a united voice between the industry and regulators, ensuring the development of effective and feasible EU legislation that will make all of us responsible players, she says.

Now we know where the problem lies

For Denmark to become a green leader, we must improve our sustainable resource utilisation and extend the lifespan of products, according to the broad alliance of stakeholders.

- Although the report's conclusions are not uplifting, we should be pleased that we now have a clear picture of where the problem lies and thus a good starting point to raise the bar and target our efforts, says Thomas Hoffmann Bang, CEO of Industriens Fond. Circular production is a challenge for many, especially smaller companies. Thus, our report should be actively used to educate decision-makers and companies on reducing waste and developing circular business models and solutions, he says.

New knowledge is needed

Chairman of TRACE and Vice President of Novo Nordisk, Dorethe Nielsen, also believes that the numbers in the Circular Gap Report Denmark speak for themselves and that shifting the balance will require research and additional resources.

- We need to accelerate the transition to a circular economy in Denmark. The TRACE partnership comprises more than 90 partners from universities, research institutions, and public and private companies. They have come together to kickstart a series of projects to ensure the recycling of plastics and textiles to achieve Denmark's 2050 climate goals. An ambitious roadmap has just been developed to support the allocation of investments in the most promising research and development projects. I am confident that TRACE will contribute to making Denmark more circular in the plastic and textile value chain, she says.

Enormous Challenge and Great Opportunity

- It is an enormous challenge and an excellent opportunity to rethink our production and consumption. The solutions we already know must come into play. Still, there's also a need to develop new technologies and solutions that preserve resources in the cycle and limit the need for new resources. This transition will undoubtedly require new skills and, above all, sustained attention from politicians, who must ensure the framework for our society to achieve balance with the planet we inhabit, says Laura Klitgaard, IDA.

Report and executive summary attached

For further information about the numbers in the Circular Gap Report within the textile area:

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