

Reuse, accessibility and affordability: **Introduction to intersections**

The current high levels of packaging waste and increased public awareness of the harmful environmental impacts of plastics have intensified the search for alternatives to single-use plastic packaging. This includes transitioning from single-use packaging (SUP) to reusable packaging and reuse systems. The transition to reuse brings both opportunities and challenges for workers, businesses, consumers, and communities. This short paper zooms in on some of the intersections around reuse, accessibility, and affordability as a summary of key reflections raised during a forum organised by the [Break Free From Plastic](#) movement.

POLICY WORK AND COLLABORATION ARE CRUCIAL FOR A JUST TRANSITION TO REUSE


Implementing reuse systems would bring environmental, social, and economic benefits and make a formidable contribution to circular economy objectives. In order to implement reuse systems, there is a clear need for policy support to maximise the business case for reuse and its success.

Clear objectives and requirements on reuse set in legislation will bring legal security and clarity to the packaging sector and support investments in reuse infrastructures. It is critical that legislation also sets the conditions for reuse systems to be accessible and benefit all, particularly relevant for the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation and the European Accessibility Act and its implementation. When discussing certain legislative processes, environmental organisations sometimes face criticism for not incorporating the social aspects of the issue into their recommendations. At the same time, environmentalists often consider that the "green" perspective is often overlooked in other legislative processes. Ensuring policy consistency is critical to supporting a just transition.

ACCESSIBILITY IN REUSE SYSTEMS IS NON-NEGOTIABLE

When developing reuse systems across Europe, attention should be given to avoiding creating barriers for consumers in general. Notably, for persons with disabilities - 100 million persons with disabilities live in the EU. Persons with disabilities often prioritise advocating for other pressing issues, so they may not advocate for reusable packaging and the establishment of reuse systems as frequently. It is crucial to involve all groups concerned and address the intersections and concerns on all fronts.

Ensuring the accessibility of reuse systems also means creating a shared infrastructure that enables various systems to integrate at different stages of the process seamlessly. Accessibility here does not only mean physical accessibility, but the systems also have to be easy to use and understand. Information must be available in different formats, including easy-to-read, so the message reaches everyone.



Reuse systems could function similarly to separate waste collection systems in front of consumers' homes (i.e. curbside collection): reuse collection systems must be easily accessible to consumers to maintain accessibility and prevent the unnecessary accumulation of reusable packaging at home. Typically, consumers shop while on the move and may not have their reusable packaging on hand for returns. Consequently, we must ensure that the systems are conveniently located near consumers to facilitate the easy return of packaging.

GOVERNANCE OF REUSE SYSTEMS

Discussions about the desired governance structure for reuse systems in Europe are crucial. The Bring Your Own (BYO) refill model already functions as a "community" asset since consumers own the packaging, making it distinct from a formal reuse system. Nevertheless, achieving scalability within this model can be challenging. To incentivise business owners to transition their business models, they need to recognise the potential for profitability. Simultaneously, there's a need to explore opportunities for establishing social enterprises within reuse systems.


Creating a shared infrastructure for reuse models, open to anyone for tasks like tracking packaging and collection, can establish a neutral and inclusive environment for multiple stakeholders, preventing the emergence of monopolies. Another effective approach is to involve external providers responsible for washing and distribution. Standardisation plays a pivotal role in realising these objectives.

STANDARDISATION OF REUSABLE PACKAGING WILL HELP WITH THE CONVENIENCE AND ACCESSIBILITY OF REUSE SYSTEMS

Standardisation of reusable packaging, including bottles and containers, should be implemented to ensure interoperability. Diverse systems across different brands, regions or countries can create confusion for consumers who, as a result, have to learn and adapt to different methods of reuse (e.g. distinguishing between refillable and non-refillable packaging). Standardisation is not only effective for the system but also supports accessibility.

For people with disabilities, standardisation allows basic accessibility, an aspect often overlooked in existing recycling infrastructures and reuse initiatives, where many barriers exist (e.g., inaccessible collection points located upstairs, machines positioned too high, reliance on touchscreens, or too complex instructions). This is particularly important now that these new systems are being designed and developed: it is crucial that we not only look at the design of the packaging but also at the design of collection infrastructures and the overall system.

Standardisation of packaging represents a significant step towards solving a big part of this challenge, so all consumers have clear expectations. It is also essential to recognise that consumers are ready for these implementations: in surveys regarding the implementation of Deposit Return Systems, an overwhelming majority expressed their willingness to embrace such systems once they are implemented. Deposit Return Systems for single-use bottles can operate alongside reusable packaging systems, utilising the same return machines.



Additionally, these infrastructures can potentially make reusable packaging a more appealing choice, mainly if the deposit for single-use items is higher than that for reusable ones.

CONSUMER'S PERCEPTION OF SAFETY AND HYGIENE OF REUSABLE PACKAGING

Ensuring the safety, hygiene, economic viability, and user-friendliness of reusable packaging is essential. Regarding safety, it is vital to carefully consider which material to choose given the intended use and reuse; inert materials, such as glass and stainless steel, raise fewer concerns regarding the presence and migration of chemicals. Consumers are not advised to "reuse" products designed for single use, such as refilling single-use plastic bottles or "reusing" a single-use plastic food container as a lunch box.

Regarding sanitation, provided that appropriate requirements are put in place, implementing reuse infrastructures instead of relying on BYO will likely reduce risks associated with sanitation as reuse systems involve professional sanitation processes. Many stakeholders express reservations about reuse due to sanitation concerns but often overlook the safety issue related to the presence of harmful chemicals in single-use packaging (plastic, paper and composite).

FINANCIAL ACCESSIBILITY AND CHALLENGES IN THE TRANSITION TO REUSE SYSTEMS


The global supply chain for single-use packaging has been optimised over the years and is now very cost-effective. Introducing a reuse system would entail additional costs, at least initially, and require changes in the existing supply chain.

Transitioning into reuse systems could pose financial challenges for consumers, particularly regarding deposit return systems or refill options. Reusable packaging can be expensive, making the deposit a burden if consumers are on a tight budget. When consumers pay a deposit for certain reusable packaging, that money typically remains within the system. Sometimes, it can only be exchanged for another product or used as a discount, leaving consumers with limited options. The coexistence of various systems is crucial to avoid penalising anyone.

The shift to reuse systems will require investments, especially to put in place the infrastructures and acquire an initial stock of reusable packaging. Funds from levies on single-use packaging or Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) systems could be redirected to support the development and infrastructure of reuse systems. Additionally, as these systems are scaled up, deposit costs will likely decrease, making them more competitive with single-use plastics.

All in all, we must ensure that the financial burden of setting up reuse systems is not disproportionately placed on consumers and small businesses.

There must be a compromise between affordability (not paying too much for reusable packaging) and accessibility (collection stations are reachable), which is both a challenge for industry and consumers. Currently, stores testing reusable containers target higher-income consumers, who are more likely to be early adopters because of



time and money. We need to design systems that are accessible to all. Refill systems are advantageous for lower-income people as they allow them to buy the quantity they want. This is something that needs to be taken into account when designing these systems. We should not create premium products, and reuse cannot be a premium option—the transition to reuse needs to take consumers by the hand, not burden them.

This paper is a summary of key messages and reflections shared by speakers at Break Free From Plastic Europe's Intersectionality Forum on Reuse, Accessibility and Affordability, whom we thank for their contributions, namely:

Boštjan Okorn, Chair of the Sustainability Working Group at [ANEC](#), the European consumer voice in standardisation

Catherine Conway, Founder and Director of [GoUnpackaged](#), a pioneering zero-waste retail business model

Marie Denninghaus, Senior Policy Coordinator at the [European Disability Forum](#)

Additional resources

[A Just Transition to a Reusable Packaging Report](#)

[GoUnpackaged](#)

[Plastic production, use, disposal and workers' rights: Introduction to Intersections](#)

[Intersectionality Matters Webinar: LGBTI persons and persons with disabilities. European Disability Forum](#)