

# EU needs circular economy that will work in practice

Written by **Mark Demesmaeker** on 25 June 2015 in **Opinion**

**Parliament's circular economy proposals are encouraging, but policymakers must focus on making it work in practice rather than getting stuck on the details, writes Mark Demesmaeker.**



Given the well-known challenges ahead, the transition to a circular economy is crucial. The EU is highly dependent on the import of raw materials and a significant number of natural resources face rapid depletion.

In addition, every EU citizen produces five tonnes of waste per year on average, of which only one third is recycled. This underlines the urgent need to use the strategic stock of resources in a more sustainable and efficient way.

Flanders, the nation I represent in the European parliament, has a strong track record on waste management. 65 per cent of our household waste is recycled, making us the top performer in Europe.

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Flanders also has some successful pioneers in the broader field of circular economy. Building on that expertise, I have engaged constructively in the ongoing discussions to make real progress. My contribution has centred around economics, scientific data and subsidiarity.

Apart from the important intrinsic environmental benefits, making our economy more circular essentially boils down to economics and competitiveness. It concerns access to - or the sustainable availability of -

raw materials, the re-industrialisation and further digitalisation of Europe, the creation of new jobs and challenges linked to climate, energy and scarce resources.

I still consider this to be the most powerful argument to convince non-believers. If we want the circular economy to work in practice, we need competitive businesses which act as a driving force towards systemic change.

I am convinced that there is now a genuine window of opportunity to achieve this, but we need smart policy which reduces burdens and barriers, stimulates innovation as well as new business models which create long-term legal certainty.

Furthermore, effective policies should always be underpinned by sound and scientifically-founded data. The feasibility of new proposals should be subject to comprehensive impact assessments. A circular economy requires a mix of instruments, at various policy levels taking full account of subsidiarity.

The report adopted in parliament's environment, public health and food safety committee explicitly refers to subsidiarity, but I remain cautious. I fully support the key messages of the resolution adopted in its recent strategic report, and three of these stand out to me.

We must have the means to effectively measure and reduce the overall use of resources, we require a well thought-out product policy, and we must incentivise smarter waste management.

However, I believe that parliament could send out an even stronger signal if it focused on the important political messages and avoid the detail and prescription that risk overshadowing these essential points.

Given what is at stake, we must be ambitious. At the same time, if we want to ensure substantial progress in the real world - rather than just on paper - we need to reconcile ambition with realism.

Our proposals need to work and be achievable. I represent a top-performing nation, therefore my level of ambition is high. But something European environment agency Hans Bruyninckx said often crosses my mind: "if you think you are leading, but nobody is following, you are just taking a walk".

Reconciling ambition with realism does not equal lowering our level of ambition. On the contrary, it is a strong commitment to make the circular economy happen in practice.

### **About the author**

Mark Demesmaeker (BE) is parliament's European Conservatives and Reformists group shadow rapporteur on resource efficiency: moving towards a circular economy