

# THINK 2030

Science-policy  
solutions for a more  
sustainable Europe

Led by



In collaboration with



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#Think2030

## SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION

*Policy approaches for systems change*

### Key message

Consumption is closely linked to most sustainability challenges we are currently facing. There is ample opportunity for the EU to better acknowledge the role of consumption in achieving Agenda 2030 and seek to complement and balance existing policies targeting supply and production with ambitious demand-oriented interventions. Reflecting the magnitude and complexity of the challenge, we call for a holistic approach and argue that the EU should establish a regulatory context and strategy conducive to front-runners, Member State initiative and market innovation advancing more sustainable consumption.

### Background

If everyone on the planet consumed as Europeans do, we would need almost three Earths to support the global economy. It is an impossible equation. What is more, the ways in which most of us consume – large volumes at a high rate and along a linear trajectory – drive a range of environmental and social impacts in Europe and elsewhere. Resource scarcity, land degradation and chemical pollution are a few examples. Achieving an absolute reduction in these impacts and a fair allocation of resources requires not only addressing *what* we consume, but also how, how much and why. It is an ambitious task that will need concerted efforts by individuals, companies and policy makers.

This policy paper discusses the role of the EU in driving sustainable consumption towards and beyond 2030. It identifies challenges for doing so and opportunities for overcoming them. Five policy themes are suggested as particularly promising to pursue for advancing systems change and deliver necessary progress toward Agenda 2030 and other internal and external commitments and goals related to sustainability.

## Policy recommendations

Using Agenda 2030 as a starting point, the EU should lead by example and adopt a holistic approach to achieving sustainable consumption. EU action and Union-level collaboration should seek to encourage initiative and innovation by the private sector and at national and regional level, creating the conditions for others to follow while preventing laggards from being left behind.

In doing so, the following five policy themes are examples of particularly important mechanisms for the EU to pursue over the next few years:

- **Actively promoting a green fiscal reform, in a wider range of sectors, creating the conditions for Member States to gradually shift tax burden from labour to the use of non-renewable energy and natural resources.** This could provide important price signals in the market, adjust artificially low prices for certain resources and encourage the consumption of more durable, low-impact products. The long-term trend in the EU is currently moving in the opposite direction and the share of environmental taxes in total tax revenues remains low. Concrete opportunities include the proposed shift to qualified majority voting for certain tax areas, the Commission's proposal to introduce more flexibility for Member States' VAT rates, and introducing environmental tax reform as a focus in the annual European Semester process.
- **Establishing a centralised system for environmental product information to support industry and regional initiatives in the transition, steer investments and enable safe consumer choices.** This includes ensuring reliable and comparable environmental information and metrics, a more comprehensive view of impacts of EU imports and addressing the confusion and confidence erosion created by the wide range of environmental claims on the internal market.
- **Providing funding to advance the sustainable consumption agenda.** This could involve funding for research into the consumption effects of new demographic and technological realities of Europe, support for up-scaling of successful regional initiatives, or for platforms for convening stakeholders and sharing experiences.
- **Exploring best practice and scalability of integrating behavioural insights into policies interacting with consumers,** in collaboration with existing research teams and through support to new platforms, with the objective to find balanced and transparent ways of making the healthier, safer and more sustainable choices the easier and cheaper choices for citizens.
- **Expanding circular and green procurement guidelines to more sectors/ product groups and gradually transforming guidelines into mandatory requirements.** The size of public procurement in the EU economy makes circular and green procurement criteria an important complement to an expanded Ecodesign Directive and wider application of extended producer responsibility schemes. Procurement criteria should cover high-volume products and include more than energy efficiency, such as, for instance, level of reusability or other measures to reflect product longevity.

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## Additional information

While controlling the adverse impacts of production was an early focus of EU environmental policy (targeting pollution for instance), addressing environmental challenges from a demand perspective has received less concrete attention. Important **existing EU-level initiatives** include, for instance, the voluntary instruments encouraging Green Public Procurement (GPP), the EU Ecolabel and EMAS Regulations and the Ecodesign Directive. However, existing policy has so far had limited results and has been criticised for providing piecemeal initiative for change.

**Key challenges** for advancing sustainable consumption in the EU include the prevailing growth-based and linear model on which the economy is designed, how to ensure equal opportunities and access to resources and challenges posed by changing demographics. These challenges and others are discussed in the paper.

Full report at  
[www.Think2030.eu](http://www.Think2030.eu)

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