

Tim Cooper :

Recyclability or durability?

Despite the growth in environmental concern over the past twenty years we are creating more waste than ever before. Official statistics suggest that each year over 130m tonnes of municipal waste are generated in European Union countries. On average each person is responsible for around 350 kg of waste annually. Governments are emphasising the need to recycle a higher proportion of this waste to reduce the amount sent to landfill sites. A third of all municipal waste is packaging and less than a fifth of such waste is recycled.

Yet does this strategy go far enough? Is it enough to reduce packaging waste without addressing the vast amount of waste created by the number of products which we buy? How much less would there be if products were designed to last longer?

Throughout Europe there is growing pressure for recycling. The principle of design for recyclability is being applied not only to packaging but to household appliances and cars. It is sometimes forgotten, however, that recycling itself has an impact on the environment, through transportation, disassembly, sorting and the manufacture of new items from secondary materials. Each stage uses energy and causes pollution.

We need to raise our expectations and go beyond recycling. Products should certainly be recyclable, but they should also be more durable. Of course, there are exceptions of ageing products which are unsatisfactory. Old refrigerators, for example, are less energy efficient. Computers change rapidly through technological advance. More often than not, however, products change little over the years and there is no gain from short life spans. Must small kitchen appliances and utensils last for less than five years, sofas for barely seven years, cars for twelve years?

Manufacturers accept that there is no technical reason why products cannot be made to last longer. Consumers complain about short life spans. Governments issue waste strategies. Why, then, is there not yet a trend away from planned obsolescence?

One explanation is that economic incentives encourage a 'throwaway society'. The fact that energy and raw materials are relatively cheap and labour is

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expensive means that it is very often cheaper to buy a replacement than to get an item repaired. This could be changed through 'ecological tax reform', switching taxes from labour to energy and raw materials so that it is in the consumer's economic interest to choose the environmentally preferable option.

Another concerns attitudes and behaviour. Many people prefer to spend rising incomes on cars or holidays rather than higher quality consumer durables. Others may be keen to buy products designed to last longer, but lack the information necessary to make an informed choice. Products are rarely labelled with a design life and people resist paying extra when there is no certainty that a higher priced item will last longer. Much longer guarantees might help to overcome this problem.

Change is up to each of us. The throwaway society is not inevitable if consumers refuse short life products.

Tim Cooper (United Kingdom) wrote the influential New Economics Foundation report 'Beyond Recycling: the longer life option', which argued the case for longer lasting household products. An economist by training, he is currently Senior Lecturer in Consumer Studies at Sheffield Hallam University. He has been active in the environmental movement for over twenty years, is a former o church-based environmental organisation. He is also a director of CREATE, a charitable organisation which provides training for the long-term unemployed repairing household appliances.