

## Are reusable packaging a sustainable response to plastic pollution?

"A Literature Review and Analytical Framework of the Sustainability of Reusable Packaging" is an article published in 2023 in the Sustainable Production and Consumption journal, written by Charles G. Bradley and Lucia Corsini. The interesting aspect of this article lies in its critical approach to the use of reusable packaging as a solution to the plastic problem. Three key points in this article held La Fabrique Écologique's attention, namely:

**#1** Single-use packaging accounts for 40% of the plastic produced. To limit consequences, solutions often focus on recycling. However, it is considered that around a third of the packaging collected for recycling never actually reaches collection systems and pollutes the environment. Substituting oil with other materials to manufacture plastics is an interesting way of limiting this pollution. However, although bioplastics are made using natural materials (mainly farm produce), they are not necessarily biodegradable. These solutions only provide an incomplete response to the problem of plastic-related pollution.

**#2** The growing quantity of reusable packaging - for example with bulk sales or the comeback of returnable packaging - also appears to be an interesting but imperfect solution. Rebound effects and non-deliberate consequences may compromise the sustainability of such a process. In particular, the use of reusable packaging may increase energy and materials consumption, and even lead to overconsumption. Some forms of reusable packaging may also offer environmental benefits - such as reusable polypropylene packaging, compared with single-use polystyrene foam - but have negative impacts on other levels. Studies on packaging indeed seem to neglect the socio-economic aspects when considering how sustainable a solution is.

**#3** To make reusable packaging a sustainable solution to plastic pollution and prevent rebound effects, it is essential to ensure that the materials used are resistant. It is also necessary to make the packaging ergonomic so that it can be transported easily and encourage buyers to reuse it. It also seems crucial to study how service systems applied to reusable packaging could improve social equity and inclusion. The article highlights the need to adapt packaging models to products and geographical contexts, so that reusable packaging can be sustainable, not only from an environmental point of view, but also from a socio-economic one.

### Situation in France

The Anti-Waste for a Circular Economy Act (AGEC, *loi Anti-gaspillage pour une économie circulaire*), which aims at eliminating all single-use plastic by 2040, sets out a number of principles and obligations regarding packaging. In particular, it sets a 10% target for the re-use of packaging by 2027 and introduces the principle of standardising packaging to encourage re-use. It has also led to the ban on disposable crockery in fast-food restaurants serving more than 20 people at a time. Since 1 January 2023, the chains involved have been gradually rolling out their strategy for switching to reusable crockery, even if some exceptions persist.

### The opinion of Pauline Bureau, the Vice-Chair of "La Fabrique Écologique"

The success of reusable packaging as a response to plastic pollution depends on a number of parameters that need to be systematically taken into account: this is a *sine qua non* condition to the large-scale deployment of this practice.