

## WHY THIS REPORT?

Plastic bags are only 1-2% in weight of the municipal waste problematic. However, this issue is emblematic of the debate about sustainable consumption, about the need for a close-loop recycling society and about the need to react strongly against litter and marine litter especially.

Free plastic carrier bags are a symbol of a consumer-driven society. A restriction about this practice can have a “foot in the door” effect to educate the general public on other consumption eco-behaviours. A lot of LCA studies prove that the more the reuse option is chosen, the lower the environmental impact is. In any case, the wastage of plastic material is a non-sense and there are many possibilities to recycle plastic waste.

Uncontrolled disposal of plastic waste is unacceptable for aesthetic reasons but also for public health reasons. Marine litter is affecting more and more species of whales, birds and fish. Plastic bags are not the only item in marine litter but they represent an important part of this problem (at least 7% of marine litter items in the Mediterranean following an UNEP/MED POL report of 2009). Plastic bags accounted for 73% of the waste collected recently by trawlers along the Tuscany coast / ARPA-ARPAT-DAPHNEII (2011).

Already in 2008, Kit Strange wrote a first report concerning “Plastic carrier bags: national policies and practices” for ACR+. The present report is an update of the 2008 edition, adding a considerable number of policies and practices. The question of plastic bags has become a sensitive political issue in the recent years in the majority of countries around the world. In the European Union, a specific Irish tax launched the debate in 2002; more recently, the Italian prohibition of non-biodegradable bags has been an incentive for some European Commission initiatives.

For the countries bordering seas and oceans, the contamination of the water by waste – notably plastic bags - is already an old issue; but some recent studies have put emphasis on the major risks of “plastic soup”. Micro-plastics, and the chemical additives they contain, if ingested in large quantities by marine fauna may have a high potential for contaminating all the food chain – COM(2013)123final. Therefore, it is obvious that this topic is now on the table for the members of the ACR+MED network.

The aim of this report is an in-depth review of all the policies and practices currently implemented around the world in relationship with the plastic bags problematic. We try to give a clear overview of the different political options taken, including the arguments justifying the different choices.

We consider “plastic bags” as a very good case to implement the ACR+MED approach: “Integrated and Sustainable Management of Resources, Products and Waste”. In others words, we have to consider all the possible action steps in conformity with a waste hierarchy of at least five levels (reduction at source, preparing for reuse, material recycling and composting, energy recovery before waste disposal).



Probably, a mix of policy instruments is the appropriate choice to resolve the plastic bags problem. But this choice must also be directly connected with the specificities of the socio-economic and cultural context, existing at national, regional or local levels.

The first chapter of this report provides key data about the scale of the plastic bags problem, as well as a synthesis of the existing initiatives at EU and South Mediterranean area level. The last part of the first chapter explains in depth the commonly-used policy options such as: education and information instruments; economic instruments; command and control instruments; management and planning.

The second chapter is a summary of the findings from the ACR+MED Thematic Working Group on priority waste flows: plastic bags meeting held in Brussels on 25 March 2013.

The third and last chapter is a true “country by country” repertory of the political initiatives and practices developed for plastic bags:

- EU level and its Members States
- Others European Countries
- North Africa and Middle East
- Rest of the world