

Sustainable Paper Consumption

November 2011

The issue

Industrial production has been under political and legislative radar screen for many years. Decades of initiatives have reduced considerably the environmental footprint of industry in general, and even more so that of the pulp and paper industry.

Since the previous Rio summit, attention has turned to sustainable consumption. While it is common sense to use the concept of sustainable consumption to areas such as what we eat and our needs for housing and transportation, some products such as paper have their sustainable consumption linked to reducing use or avoiding wastage.

The most common approach to sustainable paper consumption is therefore to reduce paper use: “Don’t print this email”, “print in both sides of the paper”, “let your hands drip dry”, etc. Actions recommended in environmental management systems such as EMAS include reduction of paper consumption. Paper is now included in the promotion of resource efficiency at the same level as the most significant consumption domains. However, paper has not been identified as a high impact or growing consumption in assessments made by the European Commission. Paper and board accounts for only 2.2% of the total waste generated in the EU-27 (Eurostat 2008) of which over 70% is recycled¹, therefore is used as raw material for paper making.

Sustainable Consumption of Paper

Consumption of paper and board packaging is sustainable in many aspects. The packaging is renewable and protects its content from being destroyed during distribution. Paper and board packaging has a big role to increase the global resource efficiency and to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases that would have been the result if the content was wasted, especially in the food sector.

Paper products meet the UN definition, which in turn is in line with the definition of sustainable development.

“The use of goods and services that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life, while minimizing the use of natural resources, toxic materials and emissions of waste and pollutants over the life cycle, so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations.”

United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD),
Symposium on Sustainable Consumption, Oslo, 1994.2

¹ CEPI publishes annually recycling rates calculated on the basis of total consumption of paper. In 2010, the paper recycling rate in Europe was 68.9% of total paper consumption. If calculated on the basis of paper and board **waste** the rate would be higher as on average 10% of paper consumption is not ending up in waste.

This implies that consumption also includes the production stage, i.e. consumption of natural resources and impact on the environment. Such life cycle approach means that for paper the production stage is entirely linked to its consumption.

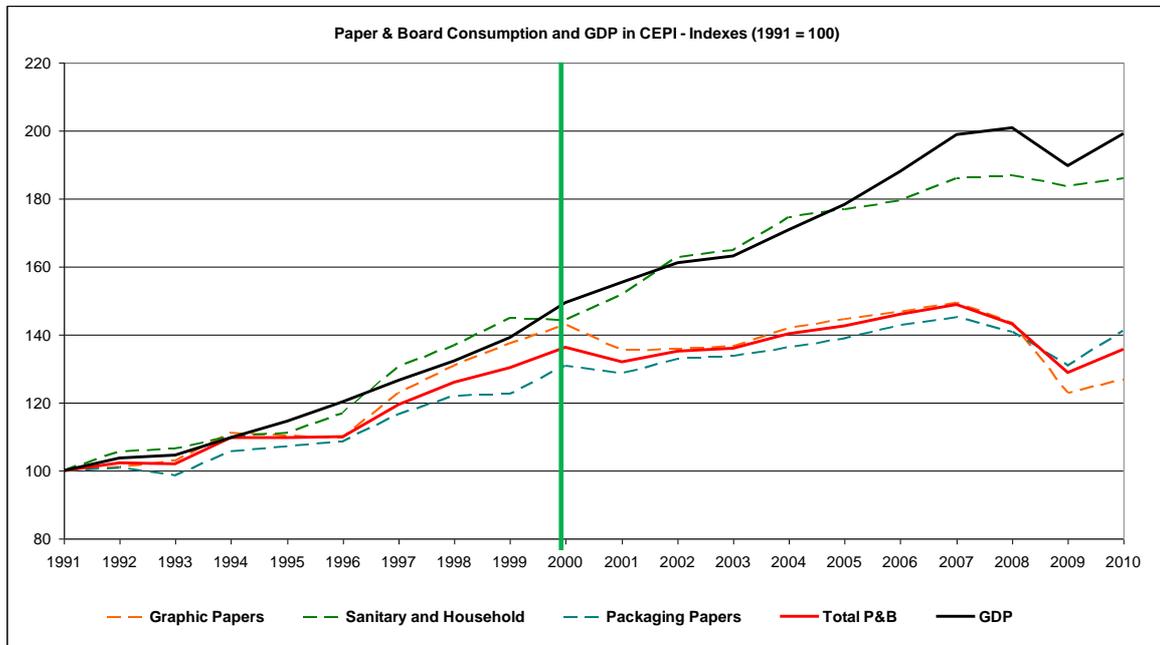
There are areas where reducing paper consumption not only makes sense but it is even standardised for example in printing and converting. That includes DIN standards for paper which is ensuring the paper is delivered in the final shape and size, near-net-shape supply of paper rolls and sheets cut to the customer specification, and long term trend to light weighting.

In the above context, sustainable consumption of paper includes the following assumptions:

1. making available services and products which can be recognized beyond their own economic value, and include their social and cultural values and reduced environmental impact;
2. striving for a better management of raw materials, in particular forest and recovered paper, through the involvement of the whole productive chain from cradle to grave;
3. investing in research and technologies which increase production efficiency and reuse²;
4. cooperating along the whole value chain as to optimize resources use in delivering the product to the final consumer;
5. striving for optimisation – make the distinction between wastage and consumption;
6. informing the final consumer about the attributes of paper and motivate him/her to participate in recycling schemes; and
7. recognising that waste of resource/inefficient use of resources is a loss for society because it decreases the total value of product.

² Paper products are commonly and widely reused: cardboard boxes for moving and storage, paper bags for many round trips after the original purchase and naturally books and publications in libraries. No estimate on the reuse of paper products exists in Europe.

Finally, paper consumption typically correlates with GDP or other growth indicators. In Europe we can also see a decoupling of paper consumption from the economic growth since 2000.



Caption: Since 2000, the growth (in tonnes of paper) in printing and packaging paper has decoupled from economic growth. This is due, in part, to using continuously lighter paper for the same performance.

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