



Deposit Refund Systems in the EU

2023 Update

Executive summary

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This publication is a follow up to the ACR+ report on Deposit Return Systems (DRS) for single use-packaging that was published in 2019. The almost five-year time frame between the two publications has been an important period in the European and world history. Together, we witnessed a global pandemic, the start of wars still on-going and an economic crisis. The push for a more sustainable, healthier, and fairer Europe gained new impetus in the same period with the European Green Deal and the legislative overhaul it triggered.

Against this background, policy makers at all governance levels, including local and regional level found themselves facing new challenges but also discovering new opportunities. Most of these are interconnected: from plastic pollution to resource efficiency, from climate change to loss of biodiversity. To face these complex and interconnected challenges, we need a mix of policy tools that are efficient, fair, and ambitious. Deposit systems are one of the tools in the policy arsenal and have impacts on a wide range of issues from pollution to more sustainably designed products.

As underlined in the section 1 of this report, the relevance of waste management tools such as deposit systems has been emphasised in the latest EU and global developments. Legislation stemming from the Green Deal is increasingly demanding in terms of waste and resource management and has implications for the local and regional authorities. The most important among these are the Circular Economy Action Plan, Single-Use Plastics Directive,

Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive, Landfill Directive, and the Own Resource Decision. At the same time, developments at global level such as the changes made to The Basel Convention and third countries banning plastic waste imports are putting additional pressure to all parties, forcing them to better manage their waste by collecting and recycling more, and ideally not to create waste the first place. This comes at a time when the waste is growing, presenting a double-challenge.

It is therefore no surprise that these challenges make policy tools like deposit systems attractive. At the end of 2023, 14 European countries (DE, DK, EE, FI, HR, IS, LT, LV, MT, NL, NO, RO, SE, and SK) have a deposit system in place for beverage packaging, mostly targeting single-use containers. Romania has become the latest, in November 2023. This makes the total number of people living with a deposit system 164 million in the EU and EFTA countries. Some of the systems have been around for decades, while others were introduced in the last two years.



[Read the 2019 report](#)

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Many other systems are currently being developed. The existing ones vary in terms of organisational choices, materials and beverages involved and the roles and responsibilities for different stakeholders. Overall, they achieve high collecting and recycling rates for the beverage packaging types that they target. They also contribute to reduce litter to some extent and influence design choices even though the magnitude of these impacts has not been fully researched.

The second part of the report aims at contributing to a general discussion about the deposit systems. This is mainly about looking at the bigger picture, focusing on the potentials and limitations of deposit return systems in addressing pressing issues such as waste reduction and plastic pollution. When these are explored, we can see that their potential impact depends on many factors, and we are looking at a mix picture. While deposit systems increase collection and recycling rates, they do not necessarily address waste hierarchy by design. For instance, only a small minority of deposit systems in the EU include reusable beverage packaging in their policy framework. This leads to an over-emphasis for recycling, which is, based on waste hierarchy, a less desirable choice than reuse. In the same vein, deposit systems encourage more recyclable products or provide purer recyclate but they do not guarantee circularity of packaging. The latter requires a whole ecosystem with reusables and where not possible, an efficient collection, recycling network as well as secondary materials market, stable in supply and demand and financially attractive to economic operators. When it comes to reducing litter, there is evidence that deposit systems contribute to limiting the pollution, but this does not mean they can solve this growing problem on their own, nor address legacy pollution.

It is important to emphasise that these limitations are not a reason for not making use of this effective policy tool. They simply point out to the shortcomings in our knowledge that we need to address. These include a better understanding of the relationship between the quantities of beverage packaging and the total quantities of relevant material and waste flows in circulation. In the same vein, we need to have a better understanding of the impacts on litter with before/after comparisons from field surveys. Both necessitate robust, transparent and publicly available data, which is currently limited.

Further, while exploring the existing deposit systems, we need comparative frameworks that go beyond descriptive analyses. This will help discerning blueprints, for instance important structural elements across these varying systems which can be replicated elsewhere. We also need to better explore the relationship between Extended Producer Responsibility schemes and deposit systems since the interaction between the two seems to be crucial for the effectiveness of both. Finally, we need to develop a deeper understanding at product and material level. Since materials like glass, aluminium or plastic have different properties, market values and consumption trends, different measures might be more effective for each. This will avoid adopting blanket measures, or binary choices between 'deposit or not deposit'.

Addressing these gaps will help us to finetune future policy choices, while continuing to explore context-based solutions. The increasing number of countries implementing deposit systems will certainly help in this regard, with more information and insights.

Discover the full report on the ACR+ website!

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