

REPORT

R E P O R T

Plastic waste between values and reality

WIDER
SENSE



RÖCHLING
STIFTUNG

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WHY “JUST DO IT” ONLY WORKS IF WE DO IT TOGETHER

You're holding on to your habits at the expense of your children's future.

That sounds harsh, accusatory, uncompromising... and is probably not the best way to contribute to a constructive debate. But it's also hard to deny: the socio-ecological transformation is stalling in part because the vague fear of changing our lifestyles today often outweighs the fear of far more drastic changes in the future.

A glance at the political climate seems to confirm this. Populists are gaining ground partly because they offer the illusion of a future without change—even to the point of denying scientific facts. And political leaders who dare to confront ecological crises with regulatory measures often do so at the expense of the next election.

Why is it so difficult to turn well-established facts and deeply held convictions into concrete action? Why is it so hard to do the things we know we need to do?

The fight against plastic waste and the broader shift from a linear to a circular economy clearly illustrates that the so-called intention-behavior gap isn't just a psychological issue on the individual level. It's a systemic problem, too.

The more efficient, optimized, and scaled a system becomes, the harder it is to change. And overcoming it is not just a matter of financial investment. In other words: money and good business ideas alone won't be enough to drive the shift toward sustainable living and working. What is required is a genuine willingness to act and embrace change.

In this report, we set out to understand what is really holding back the transition to a circular society—and how psychology and economics interact in the face of this global challenge. We spoke with leading international experts: behavioral scientists and entrepreneurs, policy advisors and project leaders, economists and activists.

At the heart of every conversation were two key questions: What stands in the way of turning knowledge into action? And what needs to happen to remove those barriers?

Our overarching insight: new narratives, well-designed incentives, and smart regulation can help bridge the gap between knowing and doing—but only when they are thoughtfully aligned and combined.

Closing the intention-behavior gap is not a personal choice. It is a collective responsibility.

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The state of mind in numbers

OUTRAGE 91, ZERO IMPACT?

The fight against plastic pollution should be marked by unmatched urgency and personal dedication – as numerous studies make clear. Yet reality tells a different story.

Almost 400 million tons of plastic waste are produced worldwide every year. Without countermeasures, that amount could almost double by 2040.¹

Awareness of the problem is growing among the population. In a study conducted by the German Federal Environment Agency (Umweltbundesamt) in 2022, 63 percent of respondents in Germany stated that they were well or very well informed about plastic waste in the environment.² The assessment of the problem is even clearer: 93 percent of respondents consider plastic pollution to be a threat, and 91 percent expressed outrage at man-made environmental problems such as ocean plastics.³

Accordingly, 72 percent of Germans also consider it to be very important to counteract the throwaway mentality, use materials for longer and recycle more.⁴ In another study, 71 percent of respondents believed that in Germany too much single-use plastic is consumed.⁵

There is a strong conviction that a change in behavior regarding the use of plastic is necessary: 50 percent of respondents believe that Germany should reduce its use of single-use plastic. 31 percent call for a complete ban on single-use plastic.⁶ Globally, as many as 75 percent of respondents support a ban on single-use plastics.⁷ Germans believe that the responsibility for

reduction lies equally with companies, governments and themselves as consumers.⁸

Given this willingness to act, why do scientists continue to assume that the mountains of plastic waste will continue to grow?

On a political level, various legal frameworks to transform plastic consumption are currently being discussed: International negotiations for a global plastics treaty that seeks to create a legally binding framework for addressing plastic waste are in progress.⁹ At the same time, the EU is advancing new strategies, including the introduction of a digital product passport to promote transparency and sustainability in supply chains, the Green Claims Directive (EU 2024/825) to combat greenwashing and the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR), which came into force in February 2025.^{10, 11, 12}

In Germany, restaurants are required to offer reusable packaging for takeaway food and drinks since January 2023. However, the figures so far indicate that the impact of these measures has been limited. Clearly, legal regulations alone are insufficient at driving meaningful behavioral change—despite many consumers' stated intention to reduce plastic use. The core issue lies in the fact that even improved offers have not pro-

duced the expected shift, given the well-documented awareness of the problem.

In recent years, zero-waste supermarkets were hailed as a beacon of hope for a more sustainable consumer culture. They grew rapidly, especially in large cities. However, the boom now seems to be fading. According to the latest figures, the number of zero-waste stores dropped to 235 in 2024—a decline of 17.5 percent compared to the previous year.¹³ Similarly, packaging-free products have underperformed in mainstream retail, falling short of the enthusiasm often expressed around them.

Despite widespread awareness of the plastic problem and the professed willingness among consumers to reduce single-use plastic, existing offers have seen limited uptake. Individual initiatives have failed to gain traction, and systemic change in economic structures and political guidelines remain pending.

This highlights a significant gap between intentions and behavior.

THE SIX LEVERS

The gap between conviction and action is the result of psychological, social and structural factors. Consequently, there is no “one” way to overcome it. The Rare—Center for Behavior & the Environment has described six evidence-based levers¹⁴ that can be used to change behavior:



Social influences



Emotional appeals



Information



Rules & regulations



Material incentives



Choice architecture

Choice architecture refers to the design of an environment that is relevant for decisions—for example, the simple and inexpensive availability of ecologically sound alternatives when shopping.

None of these levers work alone. The crucial factor is their combination and mutual reinforcement.

A MATTER OF MIND

Why beliefs alone
cannot drive change



SUSTAINABLE CHOICES REQUIRE SUSTAINABLE STRUCTURES

Nicole Bendsen spoke to the world-renowned researcher and author about navigating responsibility between individual agency and systemic forces.

Prof. Jackson, you have been working in the circular economy for more than 30 years. Why are we still increasing the pressures on the planet instead of decreasing them?

You will not be surprised that I think that is largely to do with the economic model. If you think about the circular economy in terms of decoupling, you are always going to be thinking of it as a race of the rate of efficiency against the rate of growth.

The pursuit of efficiency and the reduction in material throughput is helpful to a business if that material throughput is an input cost. So, reducing the material input reduces the cost and that increases the profit margin. But everybody's input cost is somebody else's output revenue. For every material input that is not going into one business, the output is being lost from the business that produces that material. That is the pressure of the production of materials.

The other is the pressure of aggregate growth. While businesses are chasing aggregate growth, they have got to make sure that the rate of materials reduction is faster than the rate of output increase. Even though the material input per unit of output is reduced, a more efficient business creates more output, and the overall material keeps going up. Those two dynamics persist.

That is the economic system's perspective. What role do individuals play?

I spent quite a long time looking at this for the UK Department of the Environment 20 years ago. One of the things that came out of—and it is really important to say that up front—is that you cannot put this on

individuals.

It is a paradox: at the individual level it is possible - with a little bit of effort—to make some changes, but at the population level you cannot expect everyone to be making that change, while the economic system is driving in the other direction. The overarching structure is one of the main reasons for the Intention-Behavior Gap.

Let us break this down. Which economic forces drive individual behavior?

In terms of economic incentives, it is sometimes cheaper to do the right thing but more often than not it is expensive, and you end up paying a premium. In the context of people, particularly poorer households, managing fixed budgets, it becomes a big ask to pay to do the right thing. That is something that governments must take seriously. You will get people who pay that premium, but you will not—and the evidence is just overwhelming—shift masses unless you create the right economic framework.

How about habits? Are they stronger than our concern for the planet?

The cognitive incentives are equally powerful. Habits are a critical part of our social psychology, because they allow us to free up cognitive resources to do the things that matter. Most of our interactions with material things operate below the cognitive radar. We do not make a cognitive decision every time we open a bottle of milk. And that ability to relegate decisions to the sub-cognitive level is an evolutionary advantage—and an important realization when it comes to getting people to shift behaviors around materials.



This is a bit of psychology that goes right back to Kurt Lewin's field theory, in which he said that if you want to change behavior, you have got to unfreeze existing behaviors which are locked into habits, then make the change and refreeze the new behaviors so that they become new habits. That is a task that is non-trivial.

Some very good behavior-change efforts take place in small groups, who jointly discuss their e.g. material impact, unlocking it from the sub-cognitive level. Without sufficient institutional and government support, however, you are still asking people to pay—in this case with time and cognitive effort—to do the right thing. There is evidence to show that there is less cognitive dissonance when people act in accordance with their own values, but it is something that you cannot rely on or scale as a change mechanism without sufficient support.

[The world is becoming increasingly complex. Have we lost faith in the impact of our individual actions because we are overwhelmed?](#)

I think that is true and you can cast it as part of a value conflict: There are a set of people who want the impact of their own lives to be good. Apart from the fragility of those values in the face of the cognitive and economic conflict, there are competing values. Sometimes those competing values exist in the same person, sometimes in other people, sometimes in different parts of the population, and sometimes even in governments.

So, this is a hugely political question. If we live in a world in which we are increasingly being persuaded that our security is at stake and therefore our kids' security is at stake, then we typically tend to de-prioritize some of our other values, such as the use of single-use plastics. When weaponized for political reasons, something like climate action can quickly become



part of a class or culture war. Without government leadership and consistent messaging, it is picked up as hypocrisy and you lose the trust of people with whom you are trying to create change.

The flip side: The public sector, specifically because it has substantial procurement programs, has the chance to lead by example.

[Which incentives can help to do the right thing?](#)

Social norms, which form our behavior, emerge from structures. Essentially you must create the structures that people need to be able to change. That can be Kurt Lewin's unfreezing or a more hardwired change in the institutional arrangements of everyday life. You must create a set of conditions where people win, where it is easy to do the right thing, where it is possible to do the right thing - because quite often it is not—and where it is not a question of individual's economic or cognitive

resources. There are some lovely examples from the USA where the social norm of waste segregation emerged from the creation of municipal recycling schemes. The existence of the structures helped people to do the right thing.

[Are structures always the precondition for social norms?](#)

There is another way of thinking about it, which is to say you must change people's values. There is a fantastic example, where through David Attenborough's documentary, suddenly single-use plastics became the cause that people in the UK picked up and wanted to change. The legislation around single-use plastic came from a call from people. That was a shift in social norms that went before structure.

You have got to think about both strategies: about shifting social norms from the value-led side and about sufficient structure to embed and sustain them.



Sometimes structures and regulations are in place and still people do not use existing, e.g. reuse systems. Why?

Too little can be worse than nothing sometimes. If you are offering a sustainable product as a potential alternative to people who are still suffering from economic, cognitive and value-based deficits in relation to that decision, in a half-hearted way, it becomes unrealistic to expect behavioral change.

We have heard “reduce, reuse, recycle” for 30 years. And still, the easier solutions are the technical ones where you, for example, substitute plastic for paper. It is something cost managers would agree to, but it is so faint-hearted when trying to create change.

What we really want is to sell less cups and have structures through which people could reuse their own cups, but the higher up the chain you go, the harder it is to see where profit comes from. The redesign and reuse of products imply significant investment, which is not something you can expect from a small business. There are very good designer solutions, but they must be supported by governments.

How important is convenience, e.g. for reuse schemes?

This brings us back to the aspect of cognitive effort, which is sometimes undermined. It is a potential business risk to change a product that is working. So rather than incur that risk, some businesses are essentially countering the incentives to use the reusable cups by making it easier to use the disposable ones. Then they can say it is a consumer choice: “We are offering it, but it is not happening”. That’s a very common business defense, which comes from a place of minimizing risk.

What role can industry play in directing us towards more sustainable behaviors?

They could stop selling our kids shit, merchandising them to death. Stop training them as consumers. The actual truth is being obscured by industry strategies

that design their products around what is essentially neuropsychological warfare, making things irresistible to us which are unhealthy, which are environmental toxins, which are the subjects of massive advertising campaigns to make sure that people behave in that way.

There are a lot of apologists for bad behavior, a lot of resistance against good behaviors and a lot of lobbying against regulation that might make good behavior the norm. On the other hand, for those who do want to do well, the economics of the solution is important. And you begin to get into macroeconomics here. Some circular solutions tend to be more time-consuming because of the need for expertise, the need for collection of materials, the redesign and the repair of products.

That goes against the grain of labor productivity growth – which is the foundation for the economic growth itself, so it tends not to be favored in a growth-oriented society. But Governments could introduce policies to reduce the cost of labor and increase the cost of materials, and this would incentivize businesses to go to these solutions.

...otherwise, sustainability will always have to be more expensive?

A more expensive product that lasts longer will attract a certain kind of client but that is not going to be the whole population. So, you must then look at the underlying drivers of people not being able to afford to buy the good products—the social determinants of behavior and inequalities—and the mechanisms that make it possible for the poorest households to be doing the right thing.

There is a false economy going on. By forcing people into material habits that are ultimately unsustainable for the planet, you are creating huge social and environmental costs, so that the argument for mechanisms that support poor households to have access to decent products is really strong. This requires a different level

of thinking about the issue, and it requires to step back from the idea that this is all about persuading people to do the right thing.

If we look at the geopolitical situation, the environment is not a top priority. How confident are you that there will be a shift towards more sustainable behaviors under these conditions?

It certainly seems as though we are taking steps back, but these things can change quite rapidly. There was a rapid change in what seems to be the wrong direction, weaponizing environmental ideas in the pursuit of cultural wars for political ends and commercial advantages for certain people. But I think you can expect some positive shifts to take place. We do not know exactly what we have to go through before we get there, we do not know how long that is going to be, so you have to keep pushing in the right direction even though you do not know whether it is going to be successful or not.

...and structure is a key factor, I assume.

Unless the underlying structure—that maximization of throughput and output—shifts, those pressures are going to be driving through the system. So, there is the task to keep our eyes on the ball, to design policies and instruments that will be useful and feasible to implement.

There is also a task to look at the underlying dynamics and figure out where changes must be more structural, where they must address the way that financial markets work, and bring those features into political strategies. We have a nice little mnemonic—the four E’s—to summarize what government could do: encourage, enable, engage and exemplify. They clearly can do all that, but they are unlikely to do it in a situation where their priorities are somewhere else.



Prof. Tim Jackson is an ecological economist and writer. He holds degrees in mathematics, philosophy, and physics. Tim has been at the forefront of international debates on sustainability for three decades. He has worked closely with the UK Government, the United Nations, the European Commission, as well as numerous NGOs, private companies and foundations to bring economic and social science research into sustainability.

His most famous books, *Prosperity without Growth* and *Post-Growth—Life after Capitalism*, have been discussed controversially and have resulted in numerous prizes. His latest book, *The Care Economy*, was recently published.

Part of his research focusses on sustainable lifestyles and the social psychology of sustainable consumption.



Behavioral scientist Philippe Bujold explains our contradictory behavior

HOW BEHAVIOR BETRAYS CONVICTIONS

“Our brains are simply overwhelmed—we’re not wired to handle everything at once,” says Philippe Bujold, behavioral scientist at *Rare’s Center for Behavior and the Environment*. This overload is a key factor in why many people, despite their environmental beliefs, act in ways that contradict those beliefs in everyday life.

Bujold explains: “We’re good at focusing on two or three things at once. Once there is more, we just ignore it.” In practice, this means that when you are hungry and grab a sandwich, you are thinking about food, not plastic waste. Our decisions are often not the result of careful reasoning but driven by *bounded rationality*—we settle for choices that seem “good enough” in the moment.

Habits take the lead

In addition, the majority of our daily actions are habits. “The brain loves routines,” says Bujold. Once behaviors are ingrained—like grabbing a disposable item in the morning—they run on autopilot. Even those with strong

environmental convictions can be overridden by old patterns. The problem is compounded when sustainable options are harder, more expensive, or simply unavailable.

Another obstacle is what Bujold calls *friction*—the small inconveniences that make sustainable choices feel more difficult. “Even when you try to break a habit, a little bit of friction is enough to push you back to the easier choice,” he explains.

Small nudges, big effects?

Behavioral science can help. Nudges—subtle prompts to guide people toward better choices—have proven



Philippe Bujold is a behavioral scientist at *Rare’s Center for Behavior & the Environment*. There, he develops science-based strategies to foster sustainable behavior in everyday life—using nudges, social norms, and systemic design. Bujold is co-author of the paper “*Expanding Beyond Nudge: Experiences Applying Behavioural Science for Comprehensive Social Change*” (Springer, 2023) and has contributed to studies that have gained international recognition in environmental psychology.

effective, though the effects are often modest. An example is the plastic bag tax. “It’s not about the money,” says Bujold. “It’s about interrupting someone at the moment of decision.” Studies show these measures typically result in a 1–2 percent change in behavior. It may seem small, but with large populations, even 1 percent can have a significant impact.

What everyone else is doing – or seems to be doing

We are also strongly influenced by what we believe others are doing, sometimes in surprising ways. Rare is using media to subtly shift norms. “When people see characters switching to plant-based orders or driving electric cars on TV shows, it normalizes sustainable choices,” Bujold says.

Systemic change > individual choice

Focusing only on individual behavior is not enough. Systemic changes are essential. “There is always an

emphasis on consumers making better choices,” says Bujold. “But ultimately, we’re only presented with the options the system is set up to offer.” Real impact happens when incentives at every level—from policymakers to procurement officers—align with environmental goals. As Bujold puts it: “Even in climate-conscious companies, the person placing orders is judged on cost savings, not sustainability.” Until the system supports and rewards sustainable behavior, individual efforts will continue to hit a wall.

Rare—Center for Behavior & the Environment was founded in 1973 and is a leading nonprofit organization focusing on the intersection of behavioral science and environmental protection. The organization works in over 60 countries with local communities, governments, and businesses to promote sustainable behavior—from coastal protection to reducing plastic consumption. Through its interdisciplinary approach, Rare has become a pioneer in making environmental communication both effective and scientifically grounded.



(DIS)EMPOWERED CONSUMERS

The difficult journey from
consuming to creating

CELEBRATED BY MANY, BOUGHT BY FEW



Reusable packaging in mainstream food retailing is rare. In Germany, it is only used for bottles. The retail giant REWE¹⁵ wants to change this and is running tests in its stores to find out what works and what does not. Preliminary conclusion: Much persuasion is still needed.

“Our aim is to design reusable products in such a way that they are both ecologically beneficial and present a real alternative in terms of price”, summarizes Judith Maier. She is a project manager for reusable solutions within the Climate & Circularity team at REWE Group.

The company definitely recognizes the potential for reusable solutions in the retail sector but is also aware of the significant challenges involved. Disposable packaging has been the standard for decades. Its production and use are highly scaled and optimized. “Reusable solutions can only be economically viable if widely adopted. Therefore, meeting clients’ needs and gaining customer acceptance are crucial”, explains Judith Maier. Moreover, new systems must also be user-friendly for employees in the store, at the checkout and on transportation routes.

A visible sign of REWE’s sustainability commitment is the nationwide offer of reusable packaging at the to-go salad bars. Here, customers can buy prepared salads in reusable containers. Additionally, a temporary pilot project with re-filling stations for unpackaged food is underway. Behind the scenes, REWE has been working for years to reduce packaging waste in the supply chain.

Since early 2023, the retail group has offered reusable containers for take-away food in over 3,800 stores. These containers can be returned via vending machines, like deposit bottles. The system is open and scalable, using standardized containers that, in theory, could be

used and returned across different providers. This system is used because isolated solutions limit the broad acceptance of reusable containers. A cross-industry or even cross-sector solution would be far more effective. Here, Judith Maier sees a responsibility for legislators. REWE has already advocated for standardized reusable systems in a position paper in 2022 and is currently conducting a pilot project with the environmental non-profit Deutsche Umwelthilfe in Berlin.

In eleven REWE stores unpackaged re-filling stations were piloted as another initiative to reduce packaging waste. “We carried out regional tests to explore customer interests, assess practical implementation and evaluate the sustainability and cost-saving potential,” explains Judith Maier.

The project aimed at delivering a double benefit: reducing supplier waste by using large delivery containers and cutting consumer waste through reusable packaging. While surveys showed positive customer feedback and intentions to use the refill stations, actual usage remained disappointingly low—even after extending the pilot from six to twelve months. The gap between intention and behavior is clearly reflected in REWE’s figures. “This is where it becomes challenging for us as retailers,” explains Judith Maier. “If an unpackaged product range is rarely used, it also fails to achieve the desired environmental benefits in the life cycle assessment due to the resources required to offer it.”

According to Judith Maier, the limited success was not due to a lack of communication efforts aimed at making unpackaged shopping more attractive to customers. REWE provided economic incentives through vouchers for products from the re-filling stations and employed staff who offered direct assistance and explained how the stations work, helping to reduce any hesitation or uncertainty.

Judith Maier reports that one persistent obstacle for users is the need to plan ahead and bring containers for re-filling. To address this, customers were able to borrow containers on site in exchange for a deposit.

However, customers perceived the products from the re-filling stations as more expensive, even though

REWE's own brands were offered at the same price as the packaged products. The reasons for this remain unclear. Potentially, this could stem from the perception of the stations as a niche product, or perhaps the association with the organic food image.

Mixed acceptance during the trial does not discourage Judith Maier. "Sustainability is a key issue that will remain relevant in the long term," she emphasizes. However, much more intensive cooperation is needed between retailers, suppliers, other providers, civil society, politicians, and consumers. Judith Maier summarizes: "The implementation of standardized, customer-friendly and ecologically beneficial solutions across product ranges will require joint action in the coming years."—No one can achieve this goal alone.







How co2online's energy-saving consultations get people to take action

FACTS OVER EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Sebastian Metzger and his colleagues are walking on thin ice. They provide information to people on how to build, renovate and heat their homes in the most climate-friendly way—something that often meets resistance. Even before the former German government's "Heating Act" (Heizungsgesetz), which set rules for heating systems in new buildings, many perceived such recommendations as an invasion of privacy. Meanwhile, the non-profit energy-saving consultancy co2online is welcome in German boiler rooms—and beyond. How have they earned that trust?



"We don't make emotional appeals. We focus exclusively on communicating facts", says Sebastian Metzger from co2online's management team, summarizing the Berliners' consulting strategy. Almost 160,000 subscribers receive the company's newsletter. The website recorded nearly four million visitors last year. It offers a range of resources for individuals, including guides, energy-saving checks and climate protection campaigns. Around 280 partner organizations have integrated co2online's various energy-saving checks into their websites.

And most importantly: In 2023 alone, the digital advisory services helped save five million tons of CO₂. The figure is based on a systematic user survey conducted by the team. This demonstrates that co2online is successfully encouraging people to turn intentions into actions.

Data is the key to success

The foundation to this work is solid data. "You have to be able to make evidence-based statements about the building stock, for example. Otherwise, you quickly slip into a superficiality which provides no added value, instead frustrating people and triggering skepticism rather than motivating action", says Sebastian Metzger.

co2online obtains data about its target group from various sources. The most important are its energy-saving

checks on specific topics, such as heat pumps or subsidies, offered through its website or those of its partners. These tools allow consumers to calculate the potential savings from particular measures. The information generated is anonymous and feeds into co2online's building database (see www.wohngebaeude.info/).

Through targeted follow-up surveys, co2online receives feedback on the calculators and finds out whether users actually implement any changes. "We need the follow-up survey in order to know whether the concept has really worked or not, even if additional questions are sometimes off-putting," explains Sebastian Metzger.

co2online identifies usage trends from the calculators and uses these insights to shape communication across social media, the website and the newsletter. By analyzing user behavior, such as click numbers, the team can see which content people engage with most. Isabelle Ritter, project manager at co2online, gives an example: "Posts about myths and misconceptions always work well for us." Additionally, co2online gets to know its target group through regular surveys of newsletter subscribers. Attention is given to potential data bias in order to determine how representative the surveyed group is of Germany's overall population. "This allows us to keep checking: Does the data reflect behavior or is something changing?" notes Sebastian Metzger.

Finally, co2online uses external data, such as research findings, to supplement its own observations. This ensures accurate and evidence-based communication in the media.

Major German media outlets like BILD and SPIEGEL ONLINE have used co2online's data and featured tools. Such collaborations often lead to a surge in user numbers for co2online—providing another opportunity to improve the data. “Although we have to be very careful with large collaborations—our servers don't have infinite capacity and have crashed before, which was painful for the organization”, recalls Sebastian Metzger.

Less is more

In addition to providing solid and reliable facts, another key element helps to move people from intention to action: a clear focus on key messages. “Many people feel overwhelmed by the amount of good advice. Communication should focus on the measures with the greatest impact”, says Sebastian Metzger. Tailoring content to personal circumstances is crucial. co2online targets users with relevant data and individualized guidance, rather than offering general tips.

The tone can also make a difference. People need to feel that their motivation is taken seriously. According to Isabelle Ritter, “people want to be seen as responsible citizens.” This is why co2online showcases real-life stories of people renovating their homes and fosters a networking community. This creates transparency and makes technically complex topics more accessible. “Empathy meets empiricism”—for Sebastian Metzger and his colleagues, it is this blend that makes the difference.





How Benedict Wermter went from being a journalist to founding an environmental education organization

“SOMETIMES, MORAL SANCTIONS ARE NECESSARY”

There was notable buzz in the consumer goods and the recycling industries when journalist Benedict Wermter released his 2022 documentary “The Recycling Lie”, which mercilessly exposed the empty promises behind the circular economy for plastic packaging. Today, Wermter works in Indonesia—and has shifted his focus to a completely different audience: everyday consumers. And he takes a tougher stance than what is typically recommended.

Benedict Wermter is still convinced: “We can’t recycle our way out of the plastic waste crisis.” However, his approach to the issue has changed. He no longer just wants to conduct research, write and create films about it, but address the problem directly. Determined to make an impact where it is needed most, he has left Germany and set up a charitable foundation in Indonesia. The name, *Veritas Edukasi Lingkungan (VEL)*, simply translates to Veritas Environmental Education.

In just a few months, Wermter built up a team who uses digital communication formats to inform people about the consequences of carelessly discarded plastic waste and to promote practical alternatives. The *SampApp*—*Sampah* is the Indonesian word for garbage—was developed by the young foundation. It playfully encourages users to reduce waste and discourages the common practice of burning garbage in front of homes.

Not only has Wermter converted from a journalist to a social entrepreneur. His perspective on responsibilities for the plastic crisis has also evolved. “I used to see the industry as being almost solely responsible for solving the plastic waste problem. Today, I believe that it’s mainly down to us consumers,” he admits. Wermter

knows he is addressing a sensitive point: “NGOs in particular have a mantra that avoids holding consumers responsible for the problem. I think that’s overly cautious and even dishonest. We can’t celebrate the responsible citizen while shielding the citizen from any responsibility.”

Benedict Wermter also challenges the widely held belief that only positive narratives are effective, and that people immediately shut down when confronted with critiques of their own behavior. He puts it plainly: “I ignore the rules about what you can talk about and how. Sometimes, moral sanctions for harmful behavior are necessary.” By saying this, he challenges the consensus of most other experts, including some quoted in this report.

However, the VEL Foundation does not disregard proven educational strategies in its digital offers. Wermter has learned that it is important to align with cultural values. “Indonesians have a very strong sense of national pride and a strong sense of community. So, we specifically appeal to this,” he explains. The message is simple: if you throw your garbage in the river, you cannot be a patriot.



According to Wermter's observations, this approach is more effective than generally assumed. Wermter firmly believes that people do not have to be coddled. The rapidly increasing number of users of the SampApp and the social media channels *@bulesampah*—operated by Wermter on Instagram, TikTok and other platforms, and followed by half a million Indonesians—seem to support this theory.

The founder sees environmental education and consumer awareness as a stronger lever than additional government regulations—especially if enforcement is

weak. "Here in Indonesia, it has been illegal to burn plastic waste on your doorstep for a long time. Despite this, around 30 percent of waste is disposed of in this way," he reports.

Of course, his young foundation aims to change behavior. But as he knows from his experience as a journalist, this requires more than knowledge—people must feel personally affected. "Before behavior can change," says Benedict Wermter, "there must be a change of commitment."

INTERVIEW

A conversation with
Katharina Richter,
CEO of the zero-waste store
“Original Unverpackt”



Everyone loves the idea. Yet zero-waste stores like Original Unverpackt are fighting to stay afloat. Zero-waste stores experience the gap between what people say they value and how they behave daily. Katharina Richter is one of the movement's early pioneers. What keeps her pushing forward?

Ms. Richter, who are you and what do you do?

Katharina Richter: I am the managing director of Original Unverpackt in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighborhood—it is currently the oldest still-operating zero-waste store in Germany. For some time now, we have also been running a second location in the neighborhood Prenzlauer Berg. In addition, I volunteer with the Unverpackt Association. Together with a few other stores in Berlin, we are trying to keep the zero-waste infrastructure alive. And I deliberately say “keep alive” because the current economic environment is quite hostile.

“Hostile” is a strong word. What makes the situation so difficult?

Original Unverpackt has been around since 2014. In 2019, we reached our peak mainly due to the Fridays for Future movement. There was huge interest: long queues, high sales, many people wanted to open their own zero-waste store. Things also went well during the pandemic, because people were shopping more consciously. But after the pandemic, behavior changed: people started spending their money on other things again.

In addition to that, there is inflation, war, rising costs of living and of course the fact that supermarkets and discount chains are now increasingly offering organic products, even if they still use packaging. Many people believe they are getting the same “benefit” there as they do from us.

The decline of similar stores also affects us: when others shut down, some people assume we are going bankrupt too. But the opposite is true. Our store in Kreuzberg is doing well, has had a loyal customer base for years, and is firmly established in the neighborhood.

How many stores are still around today?

At one point, we had over 500 stores. Currently, about 200 are organized within the association, and we estimate around 30 additional stores who are not affiliated. Some are still in the planning stage. But clearly, many are now tightening their budgets and evaluating what is still worth keeping.

Has your customer base changed as well?

Yes. These days, it is mainly the early adopters, people who have been loyal to us for years and act out of real conviction. During the boom period, we had many customers who were simply drawn in by the trend. Now it is mostly those who can afford it, who genuinely care and those who value quality and transparent sourcing. Price-sensitive customers have often dropped out. Many do not realize that shopping zero-waste is not necessarily more expensive. In product categories like tea and spices, the stores are often even cheaper.

Could time investment be part of the issue?

Absolutely. People who cook for themselves are more likely to take the time to shop consciously. But especially young people who work long hours often find our



“CHANGE IS NEEDED— EVEN IF IT IS UNCOMFORTABLE”

opening times inconvenient. When the store closes at 6 or 7 p.m., that is simply an obstacle. And if people are not strongly aware of the problem, they often lack the motivation to plan ahead and go out of their way.

[Do you also notice in conversations with friends or acquaintances that people seem convinced but do not act accordingly?](#)

Oh yes. Sometimes I realize that arguments alone do not get me anywhere. Then I try to lead by example. I buy drinks for others or bring something zero-waste along, because if you push too hard, it often creates resistance.

I often wish for more political support—clear rules, incentives, maybe even bans. That would make things easier for all of us.

[That sounds sobering: If even the convinced do not act consistently, is regulation the only option left?](#)

Partly, yes. I am thinking of an example of a cooperative company that sells oat milk products in reusable glass jars. Now they are considering switching to plastic cups because retailers are pressuring them. The distribution channels are designed for single-use packaging. If even these companies deviate from their ideals, it shows how powerful the old structures are. At the same time, we continuously demonstrate the impact of a modified product format. A recent study shows: We achieve a packaging reduction of over 84 percent—sometimes significantly more.

[Do you and your fellow advocates have a chance to change this?](#)

We try, within our means, to optimize our systems. We are currently working on a project for joint logistics and procurement—a kind of mini central distribution for

zero-waste stores—because the existing system is too expensive and inefficient for us. We are planning to invest around 200,000 euros, shared among several stores, preferably without a bank loan. If we succeed, we can stabilize our prices and become more efficient.

The fact that we are working together on such solutions shows how vibrant and adaptable this scene is. Additionally, we collaborate with colleges and universities, for example in research projects on zero-waste logistics or educational programs for sustainable consumption.

[Is the goal to grow?](#)

Not in the traditional sense. I am not a fan of growth for growth's sake. For me, it is about sufficiency, about society learning to manage with less. But if we want zero waste to move out of the niche, we also need to keep up structurally. Large retail chains could make the change—they already have pilot projects underway. They just do not do it voluntarily. And that requires pressure from politics, from us, from society.

[And will you keep going?](#)

As long as I can. If I worked in humanitarian aid, I would not ask whether it is economically worthwhile. It is right and important. And that is exactly how I see this: We have already changed a lot. Despite all critical reflection, there are also very motivating moments. We were nominated for the German Sustainability Award in 2024 and 2025—that shows that our commitment is recognized by society as well.

Change is needed—even if it is uncomfortable. What we need are more people who do not just start when it is exciting but also keep going when it gets difficult.



ALL TOGETHER OR EACH ON THEIR OWN?

CHANGE AS COLLECTIVE
RESPONSIBILITY



HOW WE REMAIN STUCK IN THE SINGLE-USE TRAP

At first glance, the numbers seem promising. But a closer look reveals a sobering reality. In 2023, the share of reusable containers used for takeaway food and beverages in Germany roughly doubled compared to 2022—yet this growth occurred at an almost negligible level. Just 1.6 percent of all cups, bowls, and plates handed over the counters of fast-food restaurants, kiosks, and bakeries were reusable. And this is happening despite a new legal requirement mandating that businesses offer reusable options.

The absolute figures paint an even more alarming picture. In 2022, consumers in Germany used 13.6 billion single-use containers for out-of-home consumption. Meanwhile, only 101 million were reusable. One year after the legal obligation to offer reusable options came into effect at the start of 2023, the number of reusable containers in circulation had risen to 232 million—but the use of single-use containers had climbed even higher, reaching 14.6 billion.

Given these figures, it is no exaggeration to say that the new regulation has had, at best, a homeopathic effect. The systemic shift it was meant to trigger remains nowhere in sight.

Laura Griestop, Senior Manager at WWF, is deeply engaged with the question of how reusable packaging can become the norm. “One of the biggest challenges is that the overall volume of packaging has not decreased. In fact, the number of single-use containers actually rose by one billion in 2023,” she notes, citing findings from the WWF study (German, February 2024) which analyzed the changes introduced by the new obligation.

This shows that legal obligation alone is not enough to bring about real change and raises the question: why do consumers continue choosing single-use packaging?

“Switching from single-use to reusable sounds simple, but it is actually an enormously complex challenge,” explains Gina Rembe. Like Laura Griestop, she is part of

the team behind the reuse implementation alliance “*Mehrweg. Einfach. Machen*”, a civil society coalition that brought together key players from all relevant sectors: reusable system providers, municipalities, companies in the foodservice industry, associations, and politicians. The alliance was initiated by ProjectTogether, WWF, and the German Reusable Packaging Association (*Mehrwegverband Deutschland*). The Röchling Foundation is among the initiative’s supporters.

Former Environment Minister Steffi Lemke officially kicked things off. The enthusiasm for this joint effort seemed high. Reusable system providers shared their experiences, cities and municipalities came together to discuss enforcement possibilities, and learning labs as well as regular exchange formats were established. In short: the lack of willingness does not seem to be the reason why reusable packaging still plays a niche role in the to-go sector. So, what’s really holding back progress? The alliance has compiled its findings in a comprehensive *learning report* (German). These largely align with the results of the WWF study.

What is holding consumers back?

“One of the main reasons for the low uptake of reuse options is the **lack of convenience**,” explains Laura Griestop. Using reusables often requires extra effort—such as returning containers or downloading an app. When people are in a hurry, they tend to opt for single-use packaging.

Another issue is the **poor visibility** of reuse options at points of sale. “In many cases, customers have to actively ask for reusables, and staff often have to dig through the back shelves to find out whether they even have any available,” Griestop reports. On top of that, there is a lack of standardization: different reuse systems operate with different deposit models and separate return structures, making the process confusing for consumers.

Price is also a major factor. Single-use packaging is often still too cheap, creating little financial incentive to switch to reusables. “Rather than making reuse cheaper, significantly raising the price of single-use packaging would be more likely to drive behavioral change,” says Griestop, citing insights from behavioral economics.

Habits also play a role. While environmentally friendly behavior has become mainstream in other areas, social pressure is still absent when it comes to reuse. “Personally, I’d be embarrassed to be seen with a single-use cup—but that’s far from being the social norm,” says Griestop.

Closing the *intention-behavior gap*

To truly increase the use of reusables, stronger political and economic measures are needed. If food service providers were to offer reusables as the default and single-use packaging only on request, the switch would be more intuitive and less effortful for consumers. Improving return systems, making reusable options more visible and actively promoting them at the point of sale could also significantly boost uptake.

Lukas Schuck from ProjectTogether agrees. He led the behavioral *nudging* experiments within the reuse implementation alliance. In collaboration with major food chains like Burger King, IKEA, Ditsch and Haferkater, the team tested which incentives most effectively encourage customers to choose reusables.

One clear takeaway: reuse rates increase most when reusable packaging is the operational and communicative default—while single-use containers are only provided upon explicit request. These “hard nudges” prove more effective than softer measures like fast-track pickup lanes for reuse clients.

“We also found out that the people on the ground are a key factor for success,” says Lukas Schuck. That, he explains, is the only way to account for the striking variations in reuse rates across locations of the same restaurant chains—despite identical nudges being used. The impact ranged from zero to 80 percent. “How much energy and ownership store teams put into the issue makes an enormous difference,” Schuck concludes.

For his colleague Gina Rembe, many consumers still do not clearly understand how their behavior contributes to the bigger picture—or how much they can influence. “We’ve kept the waste problem out of sight for decades: I throw the cup away, and someone else deals with it. But it’s cities and municipalities—meaning us, the taxpayers—who bear the cost. That needs to change. The real cost of single-use should be internalized by the companies that profit from it,” she argues.

The obligation to offer reusable options in Germany

Since January 1, 2023, the obligation to offer reusable packaging options has been an integral part of Germany’s Packaging Act (VerpackG). Food service businesses with a sales area exceeding 80 square meters or more than five employees are required to provide reusable alternatives alongside single-use packaging for take-away food and beverages. Smaller businesses must at least allow customers to use their own reusable containers. The aim of this regulation is to reduce the use of single-use packaging and the resulting waste.

The learning report introduces the EAST framework as a model for shaping behavioral change. The framework promotes behavior shifts through four core principles:

- **Ease**—by reducing barriers and using default options;
- **Attractiveness**—through visual cues and rewards;
- **Social influence**—by highlighting norms and leveraging networks; and
- **Timing**—by initiating changes at opportune moments.

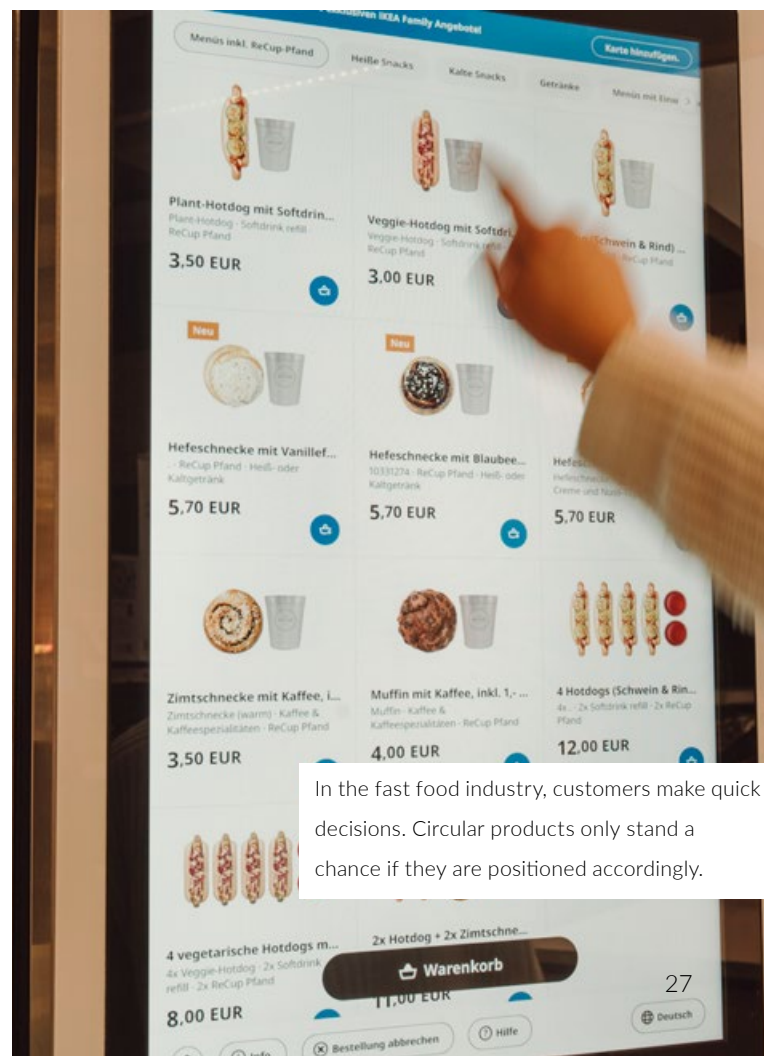
One practical example is the nudging experiment, where incentives such as technical defaults, rewards, and social comparisons led to an increase in the use of reusable packaging.

At the same time, the alliance's learning report cautions against overestimating the impact of awareness campaigns: "The results of such campaigns are often disappointing: large sums are invested, but the actual behavioral impact remains limited. (...) Why? Because people are far more complex than uninformed beings who can be moved to action through knowledge alone."

Shaping behavior through smart policy—not just appeals

Despite slight improvements, the share of reusable packaging remains low. The EU Packaging Regulation stipulates that by 2030, at least ten percent of take-away packaging must be reusable. With current measures, this target is out of reach. Consumers need clear, simple solutions that make it easy to integrate reuse into their daily routines. Only a coordinated approach—combining legislation, public awareness, financial incentives, and smart practices in the food service sector—can make reuse the norm.

Achieving this requires collective action from food businesses, government, and consumers alike. "We're beginning to shift away from a deeply rooted throw-away mindset. Reuse will only succeed if it becomes more convenient and affordable than single-use packaging," summarizes Laura Griestop.



INTERVIEW

René Bethmann,
Innovation Manager at
outdoor outfitter VAUDE

Dr. Hyewon Seo,
Expert in sustainable consumption
at the Environment Agency



Some believe the market economy should govern supply and demand, while others argue that greater political oversight is needed. To explore where responsibility truly lies—between the state, companies, and consumers—we sat down with René Bethmann, Innovation Manager at outdoor outfitter VAUDE, and Dr. Hyewon Seo, an expert in sustainable consumption at the Federal Environment Agency.

Mr. Bethmann, your company is considered a pioneer when it comes to sustainable products. Are VAUDE customers particularly nature-loving and environmentally conscious?

René Bethmann: People who enjoy outdoor sports and spend time in nature tend to be more environmentally conscious—a value we also tap into in our marketing. At the same time, we create gear designed for specific activities, where customers often prioritize performance and functionality. So, despite high levels of environmental awareness, rebound effects can still occur: when a product seems more sustainable, people may be more inclined to purchase it, even if they do not truly need it.

Despite growing public awareness around waste reduction, progress remains slow, for example when it comes to using recycled materials or designing recyclable products. Why is that?

Hyewon Seo: It really depends on the topic. I think packaging is one area that has already reached consumers' consciousness. But in many other areas, people often choose to look the other way, even when they know better.

René Bethmann: I completely agree. Packaging has been demonized in recent years, and I think this focus has caused us to miss the bigger picture. Instead of debating whether a cucumber should be wrapped in plastic, we should be asking whether it makes sense to offer cucumbers year-round in the first place. What we need is a shift in mindset. Personally, I am a strong advocate for certain rules and regulations which guide consumers more clearly and help drive real change.

It is not every day that a company calls for more regulation—that must seem unusual from the perspective of the Federal Environment Agency.

Hyewon Seo: Surprisingly, we are hearing this more and more, especially from companies that see themselves as sustainability leaders. It is understandable: they do not want to be at a competitive disadvantage for making responsible choices. These pioneers are often the ones pushing for clear rules, minimum standards, and a *level playing field*. On the flip side, we often hear from industry associations, who represent the broader spectrum of companies, that there are already too many regulations. So, we are hearing two very vocal, but very different perspectives.



Prove that commitment pays off

What kind of narratives do we need to move people, organizations, and companies from knowledge to sustainable action?

René Bethmann: Many stakeholders are overwhelmed by the scale of current challenges. Faced with crisis after crisis, some freeze, unsure of what to do, while others take the path of least resistance. That is why I believe it is essential to shift away from pessimism and focus on the opportunities we have to make a real, positive impact. People need to feel empowered, to believe that their individual actions matter, and that commitment truly pays off. That has been our approach at VAUDE. We started by embedding sustainability deeply within our organization, anchoring it in our team before sharing it with the world.

Hyewon Seo: An international study on the *Intention-Behavior Gap*¹⁶ showed that this gap is significantly smaller in countries with traditionally strong sense of community, such as Japan, Korea, and China. In these societies, the line between consumer and citizen is less distinct. From a sociological perspective, collectivist cultures place greater value on social norms and harmony, which encourages individuals to align their actions with their values to maintain social cohesion. At the Federal Environment Agency, we try to build on this insight by addressing people not just as individuals, but as part of a larger group.

What would that look like in practice?

René Bethmann: As a company, we can help customers

truly understand the value of a product, so they appreciate and respect it. That starts with transparency: Who made this product? How many steps have gone into creating it? Qualities like durability, timeless design, and even resale potential also add value. When customers recognize this, it creates space for companies to thrive with sustainable products and services and to develop circular business models that are both environmentally and economically viable.

Is this approach a way to reach the broader public or mostly those who are already convinced?

René Bethmann: It is hard to say whether we are truly reaching a wide new audience. I do think awareness is growing, and we are definitely influencing retailers and competitors who are looking to us for direction. But unfortunately, that impact is not always reflected in the numbers.

Hyewon Seo: That actually aligns well with the idea of *social tipping points*: once around a third to half of society adopts a certain behavior, it can trigger structural shifts which make that behavior the new norm. That is exactly the leverage point we focus on. At the Federal Environment Agency, we conduct target group analyses to figure out who we can reach most effectively with specific messages. Our goal is to activate that reachable third of the population. Influencers also play a key role here as they can amplify messages and help normalize sustainable behavior.



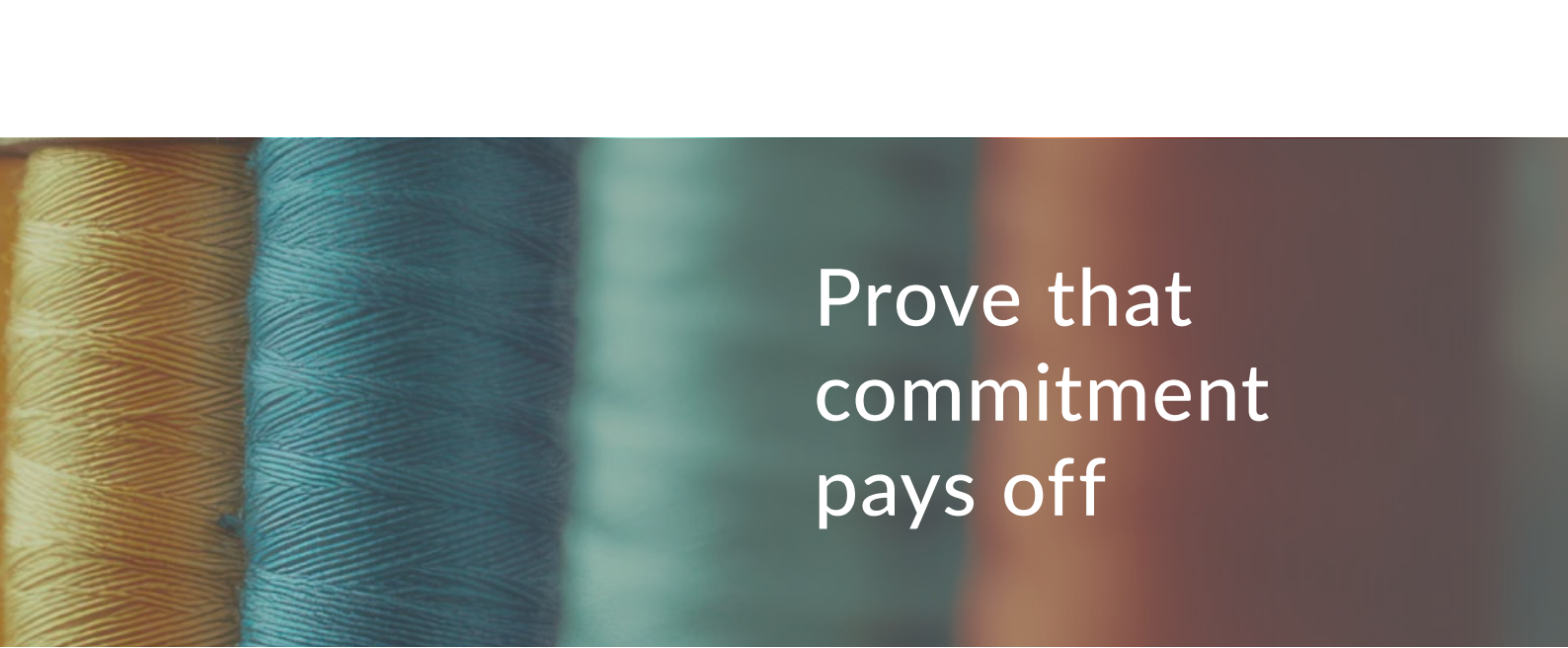
Does sustainability need to come at a higher cost to be profitable for companies?

René Bethmann: From a business perspective, there are different paths to profitability. One option is to keep increasing the number of products we put on the market, by entering new regions, for instance. But another, more sustainable approach is to enhance the desirability and value of each product, allowing for a higher price point. As a company, we also must question the very idea of endless expansion and consider growing only as much as truly necessary. That means rethinking our business models and looking for alternatives. For example, can we shift towards offering more services, like extending the life of our products through paid repair options? After all, people are willing to pay for car or bike repairs. Why not apply the same thinking to outdoor gear?

To wrap up, let us allow ourselves to dream for a moment: What would be your magical strategy to inspire people to consume more sustainably?

Hyewon Seo: I imagine the year 2026 without any advertising pushing us to buy more—an official Year of Prosperity. But not prosperity in the sense of owning more, rather in the sense of not needing more.

René Bethmann: I would love to see a true education revolution, one where sustainability and circular economy principles are woven into every school subject. That way, future generations can grow up thinking more critically, making thoughtful choices, and better understanding what is truly right.

A close-up photograph of several spools of thread in various colors, including yellow, teal, and blue, arranged in a row. The threads are tightly wound and the colors are vibrant.

Prove that
commitment
pays off





The global plastics treaty

THE BUMPY ROAD FROM A GLOBAL DECLARATION TO COLLECTIVE ACTION

In 2022, a new sense of optimism emerged in the global fight against plastic pollution. “Governments collectively acknowledged the need for change. The Plastics Treaty represented a historic declaration of intent to create a legally binding agreement to curb plastic pollution,” explains Ambrogio Miserocchi, policy manager at the Ellen MacArthur Foundation who has been closely involved in the negotiations of the Plastics Treaty.

Has reality crushed all optimism?

In five rounds and almost three years, the negotiators have struggled to bridge the gap between intention and implementation. While many countries pushed for strong, legally binding regulations, others feared economic disruption, leading to delays and disagreements. This shows: The “Intention-Behavior gap” is not just an individual problem but a systemic one. While governments, industries, and civil society recognize the urgency of the crisis, meaningful action falls short.

A primary obstacle for collective action is the economic and political reality that different nations face. Some countries, particularly those with strong petrochemical and plastic manufacturing industries, depend heavily on plastic production and trade. While recognizing the long-term environmental risks, they also fear short-term economic consequences.

“Managing to get governments to agree on something that will have implications on their economies is a complex process,” states Miserocchi, “especially because it is difficult to quantify both direct economic impacts, including job creation, as well as the externalities generated by plastic pollution.”

Another factor that needs to be taken into consideration is the lack of a common understanding of the issue at the beginning of this process. Miserocchi remembers

that “our general understanding has increased significantly, the global conversation around plastic pollution is more advanced than ever before and we are in a much better position to address the issue.”

“Coming up with a globally coordinated response to the issue of plastic pollution in three years was really ambitious,” remarks Miserocchi. Despite the delay and an increasingly complex geopolitical environment, the expert from the Ellen MacArthur Foundation remains optimistic. He believes that with increased collective knowledge, a robust international agreement is still possible. “Of course, we didn’t land on an agreement, but the last INC was really positive in my opinion,” he noted, emphasizing that alignment among countries is growing and discussions were more focused on the content of the articles rather than on political dynamics.

Success now depends on the ability of nations to commit not just in words, but in concrete action.

Bridging the gap: ensuring collective commitment

Tackling plastic pollution requires broader behavioral and systemic change. The expert emphasized that no single measure will suffice: “I can tell you with certainty that we’re not going to solve the problem unless we address it in a holistic and coordinated way.” This is where the Plastics Treaty becomes vital. It must lay the

groundwork for a redesigned system—a system that makes collective environmental action easier and more affordable. The challenge, however, is that “while the general intention is shared by a multitude of countries, the specific interest of the different parties also depends on the context of their countries.”

Changing collective behavior is even more complex than changing individual behavior because it involves additional layers including social and political dynamics, institutional inertia, and systemic barriers. According to Miserocchi, the key levers to bridge the gap between intention and collective action are:

Economic concerns must be addressed to ensure that countries do not view environmental action as a trade-off against economic development. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation expert suggests that a clear and con-

sistent regulatory framework is needed, including incentives and subsidies for alternative business models, infrastructure development, and more clarity for businesses to redirect their investments in line with efforts to tackle plastic pollution. “The more discussions progress, the more people understand that the cost of inaction is just not acceptable,” he observes.

Strengthening international cooperation will be crucial. “In the coming months, we hope to see countries unpack, resolve, and understand each other’s position, striking the right balance between having a strong starting point and paving the way forward to support an effective implementation,” says Miserocchi. Continuing these conversations will help parties resolve misunderstandings, understand commonalities and work towards a harmonized and effective approach to tackling plastic pollution.

The Plastics Treaty: A Summary

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the world’s highest-level decision-making body for matters related to the environment, with a universal membership of all 193 States. In March 2022 (at UNEA 5.2) a resolution was adopted to develop a legally binding instrument on plastic pollution. Inger Andersen, Executive Director of the UN Environment Program (UNEP), described the agreement as the most important international multinational environmental deal since the Paris climate accord.

The Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC) is tasked with drafting the treaty and began its work in the second half of 2022. In December 2024, the INC session in Busan, South Korea was meant to finalize the treaty. Instead, discussions on economic trade-offs, regulatory approaches, and enforcement mechanisms led to an extension of the process.

Now, the world looks to the Geneva session in August 2025 as a critical moment to determine whether the treaty will become a meaningful instrument of change.

Stakeholders must work together to ensure that the treaty is ambitious, enforceable, and capable of driving real systemic change. If negotiators can build on the growing alignment seen in Busan, with 84 countries signing the *Stand Up for Ambition* statement, the treaty could mark a turning point in multilateralism and global environmental policy.

The road to an international Plastics Treaty has been bumpy, but it is far from over. As Miserocchi concludes “progress should not be measured by deadlines alone but by whether the treaty lays the foundation for lasting change. We have an opportunity to accelerate the way we address plastic pollution and how we make and use plastics. I hope to see governments come together in Geneva later this year turning intention into effective action.”





SOCIAL
INFLUENCES

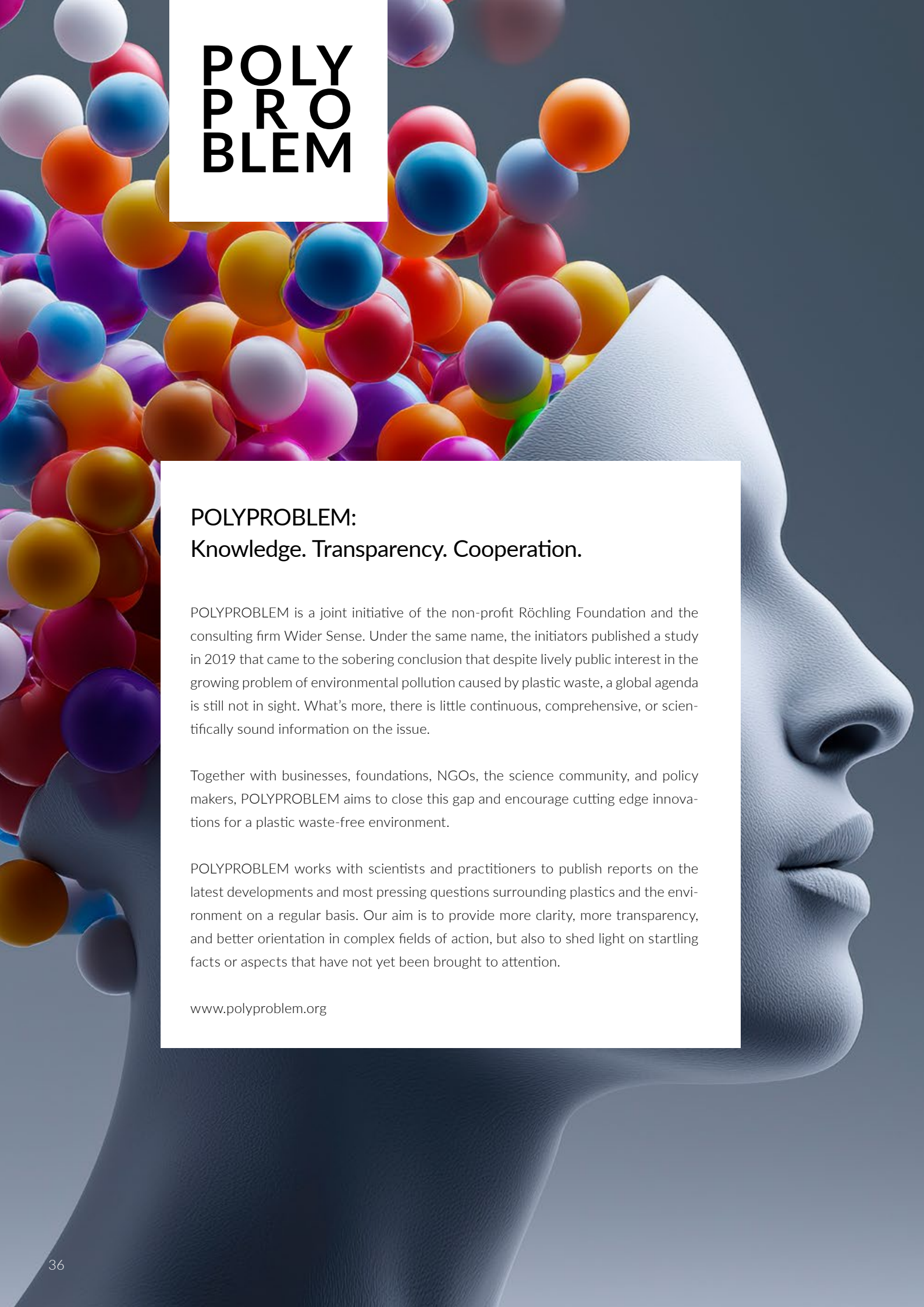
RULES &
REGULATIONS

MATERIAL
INCENTIVES

INFORMATION

CHOICE
ARCHITECTURE

EMOTIONAL
APPEALS



POLY PROBLEM

POLYPROBLEM: Knowledge. Transparency. Cooperation.

POLYPROBLEM is a joint initiative of the non-profit Röchling Foundation and the consulting firm Wider Sense. Under the same name, the initiators published a study in 2019 that came to the sobering conclusion that despite lively public interest in the growing problem of environmental pollution caused by plastic waste, a global agenda is still not in sight. What's more, there is little continuous, comprehensive, or scientifically sound information on the issue.

Together with businesses, foundations, NGOs, the science community, and policy makers, POLYPROBLEM aims to close this gap and encourage cutting edge innovations for a plastic waste-free environment.

POLYPROBLEM works with scientists and practitioners to publish reports on the latest developments and most pressing questions surrounding plastics and the environment on a regular basis. Our aim is to provide more clarity, more transparency, and better orientation in complex fields of action, but also to shed light on startling facts or aspects that have not yet been brought to attention.

www.polyproblem.org



The Röchling Foundation is committed to the topic of plastics and the environment. It supports both research projects and civil society initiatives that contribute to the responsible use of plastics in the sense of a sustainable circular economy. The Röchling Foundation does not see itself as a mere investment partner, but is fundamentally active in establishing new, cross-sector collaborations and networks.

In addition, the Foundation also initiates its own activities that contribute to a holistic understanding and integrated solutions to the global challenge of plastics and the environment.

The Röchling Foundation was established in 1990 by the Röchling family who is also the owner of the Röchling Group, one of the leading international suppliers of high-performance plastics for automotive technology, industrial applications, and medical technology.

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By offering customized consulting services, from research to strategy design and implementation, WIDER SENSE helps businesses and foundations to effectively shape social change. In May 2015, Wider Sense was certified as a B Corporation. In recent years, WIDER SENSE has built up expertise in CSR, philanthropy, and social investment, and has developed a global network of strategic partners.

Thanks to its international outreach and multidisciplinary team, WIDER SENSE has worked with more than 100 clients on projects in more than 30 countries, who have contributed funds in excess of EUR 100 million directly toward fostering social change.

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LINKS TO THE ORGANIZATIONS AND PEOPLE MENTIONED

Organisation	Abk.	Link
co2online		https://www.co2online.de/
Ellen MacArthur Foundation	EMF	https://www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/
Mehrweg Einfach Machen— Mehrweg Umsetzungsallianz		https://mehrweg-einfach-machen.de/
Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Plastic Pollution	INC	https://www.unep.org/inc-plastic-pollution
Original Unverpackt		https://original-unverpackt.de/
Rare—Center for Behavior & the Environment	RARE	https://rare.org/
REWE		https://www.rewe.de/
Tim Jackson		https://timjackson.org.uk/
Umweltbundesamt (Federal Environment Agency)	UBA	https://www.umweltbundesamt.de/
Unverpackt Verband		https://www.unverpackt-verband.de/
VAUDE		https://www.vaude.com/de/de/blog/category/ueber-uns.html
Veritas Edukasi Lingkunga	VEL	https://vel.earth/
World Wide Fund For Nature	WWF	https://www.wwf.de/

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LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

co2online, Isabelle Ritter, Project Manager

co2online, Sebastian Metzger, Member of Management Team

EMF, Ambrogio Miserocchi, Policy Manager

Original Unverpackt, Katharina Richter, Managing Director

Project Together, Gina Rembe, Mission Lead Circular Futures

Project Together, Lukas Schuck, Team & Project Manager Bauwende Allianz

RARE, Philipe Bujold, Behavioral Scientist

REWE, Judith Maier, Project Manager Sustainability Goods

Tim Jackson, Environmental economist

Umweltbundesamt (German Federal Environment Agency), Dr. Hyewon Seo, Expert for sustainable consumption

VAUDE, René Bethmann, Innovation manager

Veritas Edukasi Lingkungan, Benedict Wermter, Foundation Founder

WWF, Laura Griestop, Senior Manager

