

How do plastic packaging taxes and regulations foster circularity in the food packaging industry? A policy mix perspective

ABSTRACT

Plastic packaging, rooted in a linear economic model, has become central in sustainability debates, prompting European and national policymakers to accelerate circularity through targeted regulations. This paper examines how key policies, perceived as most influential by stakeholders in the food packaging industry, shape circularity-related decisions within the European–national policy mix. Drawing on qualitative interviews with food packaging stakeholders in Spain and the United Kingdom, the study reveals a governance pattern where command-and-control regulation dominates at the European level, while market-based instruments prevail nationally. Central European policies include the Single-Use Plastics Directive, the Regulation on recycled plastics in food-contact applications, the Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation, and Extended Producer Responsibility schemes. Nationally, Spain’s and the UK’s Plastic Packaging Taxes, alongside upcoming reforms in the UK such as Extended Producer Responsibility, Deposit Return Scheme, and Simpler Recycling initiative, are pivotal. Despite Brexit, the UK remains aligned with European circularity goals, though fragmented governance complicates implementation. Stakeholders identified drivers such as regulatory clarity and business demand-pull incentives, as well as barriers including limited tax scope, weak enforcement, and insufficient support for upstream innovation and reuse. The analysis highlights a policy mix characterized by strong consistency, growing coherence, politically contingent credibility, and low comprehensiveness. This paper contributes to policy mix theory by applying it to packaging circularity, offering empirical insights and outlining implications for designing coherent, credible, and innovation-friendly policy frameworks.

Keywords

Circular Economy; Plastic; Food packaging; Policy mix; Regulation; Tax