



## A performative definition of waste prevention



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### ABSTRACT

The increasing importance being placed on waste prevention in European waste governance raises the question of how waste prevention is defined *in practice*. This paper presents a qualitative analysis of a sample of fifty-one Swedish waste prevention initiatives with the purpose of identifying which kind of actions are imagined, promoted, and set into motion under the label of waste prevention. The analysis shows that despite their apparent variety, the initiatives in the sample boil down to three main types of actions: raising awareness about the need to prevent waste, increasing material efficiency, and developing sustainable consumption. In contradistinction to the formal definition of waste prevention in the European Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC), what emerges from analyzing the initiatives in the sample is a performative definition of waste prevention as something heterogeneous, contradictory, and evolving. Such a definition of waste prevention *in practice* provides an understanding of the organizational dynamics of waste prevention.

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### 1. Introduction

Waste prevention has become a component in its own right for a transition toward European sustainable waste governance (Bortoleto, 2015) and a circular economy (European Environment Agency, 2015). The European Waste Framework Directive (The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2008/98/EC), which orients waste policy in the European Union (EU) and urges its member states to move beyond landfills, posits that prevention is the best possible way to deal with waste. Following the Directive's requirement, a majority of member states have recently established waste prevention programs that aim at breaking the link between economic growth and the environmental impacts associated with the generation of waste (Eionet, 2015). Likewise, countless local governments, corporations, non-profit organizations, professional bodies, cooperatives, and individuals have embarked on initiatives that claim to prevent waste. The European Week for Waste Reduction alone has identified nearly 12,000 of these initiatives in 2014 (European Week for Waste Reduction, 2015).

On paper, the definition of waste prevention is clear. For the OECD (Vancini, 2000), waste prevention occurs before products or materials are identified or recognized as waste: it consists of actions that reduce both the quantity and the hazardous character of waste, and encompasses strict avoidance of waste, reduction at the source, or product reuse, but not recycling that belongs to

waste minimization. Similarly, the European Waste Framework Directive defines waste prevention as “measures taken before a substance, material or product has become waste, that reduce: (a) the quantity of waste, including through the re-use of products or the extension of the life span of products; (b) the adverse impacts of the generated waste on the environment and human health; or (c) the content of harmful substances in materials and products.”

Out in the field, however, waste prevention refers to a broad range of activities. As the European Environment Agency (2015:9) makes clear: “Improving waste prevention and management requires action across the full product lifecycle, not merely the end-of-life phase.” Waste prevention can occur in all stages of design, extraction, production, distribution, consumption, and waste management; it refers to regulatory, economic, communicative, and technical instruments; it can pertain, as in the European Waste Framework Directive, to the volume of waste as well as its dangerousness; it refers to measures that are as opposed as not using and re-using; and whereas waste prevention usually does not include recycling, recycling leads to a combined reduction of waste brought to landfill and raw materials extraction (Arcadis Belgium, 2010). Moreover, householders routinely equate waste prevention with recycling (Tucker and Douglas, 2007), and in everyday parlance waste prevention, reduction, or minimization are often used as synonyms. In addition, classification of what constitutes prevention differs from country to country; for example, composting is considered as prevention in France (Ministère de l'Écologie du Développement durable et de l'Énergie, 2014) but

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not in Sweden (Naturvårdsverket, 2015 [2013]). In actuality, there are a plenty of definitions of waste prevention around.

The present study adheres to a performative stance on definitions (Latour, 1986) according to which definitions in social life derive from actions rather than from formal conjectures, and thus studies how actual waste prevention initiatives, individually and taken together, define waste prevention *in practice*. The study focuses on fifty-one Swedish waste prevention initiatives that have been shortlisted for waste prevention competitions or best cases collections, investigates the implicit definition of waste prevention that these initiatives enact, and concludes with a so-called performative definition (Latour, 1986) of waste prevention in Sweden today.

The purpose of a performative definition of waste prevention is to develop an understanding of the organizational rationale of waste prevention (Corvellec and Czarniawska, 2015; Pongrácz, 2009). This understanding is to complement the current understanding of producers' (Deutz et al., 2010; Gottberg et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2012) and consumers' attitudes toward waste prevention (Abeliotis et al., 2014; Bortoleto et al., 2012; Cox et al., 2010; Quedstedt et al., 2013) so as to point to barriers and facilitators of waste prevention (Bartl, 2014; Fell et al., 2010). It is also to provide a theoretical understanding of the variety of local efforts (Cole et al., 2014; Kurisu and Bortoleto, 2011, 2012; Murphy and Pincetl, 2013; Young et al., 2010) being made to move up the waste hierarchy (Gregson et al., 2013), of the mundane character of waste governance (Woolgar and Neyland, 2013), and of a transition toward a more sustainable management of waste.

The next section introduces the tenets of performative definitions. Then comes a description of the study's methodology and a presentation of the analyzed waste initiatives sample. The study's main finding is that waste prevention initiatives promote three types of action: raising awareness that waste needs to be prevented, increasing material efficiency, and developing sustainable consumption. Being heterogeneous, contradictory, and evolving, this performative definition of waste prevention provides an understanding of the organizational dynamics of waste prevention.

## 2. A performative stance on definitions

In an effort to redefine the notion of social, Latour (1986) suggests that there exist two kinds of definitions of the social link: ostensive and performative ones. An ostensive definition postulates that it is *in principle* (all emphases in this paragraph are in the original) possible to discover properties that are typical of life in society and could explain the social link and its evolution, though in practice these properties might be difficult to detect. The actors in society are *useful informants* for those who seek to discover the principles that hold society together, but since they are simply part of society, actors are *only informants*. With the proper methodology, social scientists can sort out the actor's opinions, beliefs, illusions, and behavior to discover the properties typical of life in society and piece together the whole picture. A performative definition of the social link is radically different, Latour argues. It departs from the assumption that it is impossible *in principle* to define the list of properties that would be typical of life in society although *in practice* it is possible to do so. Actors define in practice what society is, what it is made of, what is the whole and what are the parts – both for themselves and for others. No assumption is necessary about whether or not any actor knows more or less than any other actor the 'whole picture' is what is at stake in the practical definitions made by actors.

Latour's notion of performative definitions opened an epistemological program where definitions are approached as constituted *in practice* as an alternative to *in principle*. Arguably, this program was

introduced in management and organization studies to show that organizing rests on a dynamic interacting of symbolic, practical, and political dimensions (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1991). Further, scholars have used performative definitions to describe how management has swept over post-soviet Eastern and Central Europe as a modern crusade (Kostera, 1995), to show that organizational imitation is a process of translation rather than of diffusion (Sevón, 1996), and to explain why routines are at the same time the source of change and of stability (Feldman and Pentland, 2003). Scholars have also adopted a performative stance on definitions to show that firms use green certification programs to defend their interests (Mouritsen et al., 2000), to warn against a naïve understandings and use of the notion of intellectual capital (Mouritsen, 2006), or to explain how corporations may increase their environmental accountability to limit their moral responsibility (Catasús, 2008). More recently, performative definitions have been used to describe the pervasiveness of humiliation in organizing and the forms that it takes (Czarniawska, 2008), to show that coordinating mechanisms do not arise prior to coordinating but are constituted through coordinating (Jarzabkowski et al., 2011), and to frame organizational routines (again) as communicatively constituted constructions (Wright, 2016).

In the present article, the notion of performative definition is applied to a selection of Swedish waste prevention initiatives that have been shortlisted for waste prevention competitions or best case collections to chart how these initiatives, together, define waste prevention. Following an ostensive stance, an acting is defined as a certain type of act because it corresponds to the definition of this act; but following a performative stance, it is the acting that defines the act. Take an initiative to reduce food waste in school kitchens, for instance. Whereas an ostensive approach suggests asking whether or not this initiative fulfills any of the three conditions for waste prevention set forth in the European Waste Framework Directive (reducing the quantity, impacts, or dangerousness of waste), a performative approach suggests investigating how this initiative participates in defining waste prevention. Performative definitions underscore that definitions are contingent on the performance of the acting upon which they are built (Corvellec, *In press*). In this regard, performative definitions reflect the changing and heterogeneous assemblages of, for example, political motives, technical limitations, material affordances, legal requirements, and life-experiences that constitute the social (Latour, 2005).

## 3. Method: data collection and analysis

### 3.1. Constitution of the sample

The study is based on a sample of Swedish initiatives that have been singled out in best case collections or to participate in waste prevention competitions (see Table 1; see also Appendix A for a presentation of the studied initiatives). Nineteen initiatives have been shortlisted by the Swedish Waste Management and Recycling Association (*Avfall Sverige*<sup>1</sup>) to participate in the European Week for Waste Reduction award competition between 2009 and 2014, some of them having become a prize winner (European Week for Waste Reduction, 2015). Three initiatives were shortlisted by the Swedish trade magazine *Recycling och miljöteknik* to participate in the first edition of the Waste-preventer-of-the-year

<sup>1</sup> The Swedish Waste Management and Recycling association (*Avfall Sverige*) is a trade association. Its 400 members from both the public and the private waste management and recycling sectors serve 99.9 percent of the Swedish population. The association represents its members in dealings with politicians, other decision makers, authorities and media, both in Sweden and internationally (<http://www.avfallsverige.se/in-english/>).

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