

Collecting and Recycling Deposit Bottles and Cans in Austria and Europe

Alban Knecht, April 2024

Collecting returnable bottles and cans for their deposit has been a source of income in Germany since 2006. The deposit on plastic bottles and cans had only just been introduced when the country hosted the Football World Cup in the summer of that year. Open-air public viewing on large screens was popular, and led to the breakthrough of collecting bottles for their deposit as a source of income, as beer-swilling football fans produced empty cans and bottles non-stop. In addition, the merging of unemployment benefit and unemployment assistance with the introduction of Hartz IV in 2005 meant that many unemployed people had to face severe financial challenges. It was mainly unemployed people, early retirees and pensioners who were struggling to make ends meet and started collecting bottles and cans for their deposit. For them, it is an activity that resembled a regular job and thus brings them closer to the labour force model.

In Germany, collectors have become part of everyday life. The pop singer Andreas Dorau wrote a song about the “De-Da-De-Da deposit” (freely translated from “Fli-Fli-Fla-Flaschenpfand”): with the (freely translated) refrain on the different levels of the deposit fee: “Eight, fifteen, twenty-five – we all know these numbers for life”. There are now several scientific studies on bottle collecting (see: www.albanknecht.de/materialien/Literatur_informelle_Lebensunterhalte.pdf) and Eduard Lüning even wrote an adventure novel about it in the style of the Beat Generation. He claims to have collected 13,000 euros for a motorhome over 30 days at open-air rock festivals – including stress at the drop-off points, because on the one hand supermarkets and petrol stations are not happy when a great number of bottles are handed in at once, and on the other hand returning dented cans can be a problem, even though there is an obligation for supermarkets to take back all empties.

Almost half of the EU countries now have deposit systems for plastic bottles made of PET. The Netherlands, Romania and Portugal have joined

in recent years. Austria will follow suit in 2025. The aim is to increase the return rate of single-use plastic bottles to 90% across the EU – and deposit systems are the best way to achieve this. In Austria the return rate actually is only 70%. Experience has shown that deposit systems even lead to return rates of up to 97%. The 1.6 billion plastic bottles used in Austria every year should no longer end up on the streets and in nature, but be recycled. The pre-sorted plastic can then be better reused – also to produce new PET bottles. (It is still best to take your personal water bottle with you!)



It's a difficult to search “Big Bellies” in Hamburg

In fact, bottle collectors play an important role here: The head of the Englischer Garten, a large park in Munich, calculated that he saved around 40,000 euros a year in disposal costs with the help of bottle collectors. A lot of empties are also collected at airports because everyone has to hand in their bottles and cans at the security gate. Despite their usefulness, Hamburg Airport reported almost 100 bottle collectors in 2014 in order to keep them away of the airport. At the time, the street newspaper Hinz & Kunz stood up for the collectors and started an online petition. As a result, a co-operation was formed: Three

Hinz & Kunzt employees have since been taking care of the empties donated at collection points as empties supervisors. They collect more than 300,000 bottles and cans every year, largely financing their own regular socially insured jobs.



The headquarter of Hinz&Kunzt in Hamburg

The Spanish trade union *Unión General de Trabajadores* has also expressed interest in what can be done for future bottle collectors to help them out of their precarious financial situations. Now that a deposit system will soon be introduced in Spain, a study is being carried out to analyse the social impact of the deposit system in Germany and look at how its introduction in Spain can be made more socially responsible. The study not only looks at the effects of the deposit system on the labour market and consumers, but also asks how a framework can be created from the outset to make the collection of deposit bottles as accessible and dignified as possible. The trade union is concerned that e.g. in Germany the

hard work of collecting bottles has so far been “unofficial, frowned upon and usually carried out almost without pay”, says Arian Delphine Feigl-Berger, who works on the study. The study aims to show what measures can be taken to improve the situation for future collectors in Spain.

Collectors who are given a permanent job for their efforts to improve recycling, such as at Hamburg Airport, are of course the ideal solution. But there are also other measures that can make life easier for bottle collectors: Normally, rubbish in Austria constitutes “ownerless property” that anyone can take possession of. However, the legal situation is not always entirely clear – and a change in the law that focusses on collectors would be desirable. The fact that in the planned Austrian system, retailers are to be remunerated for taking back waste is also a good step towards making it easier to hand deposit bottles and cans in at supermarkets. Waste bins should be designed in such a way that the contents are easily accessible – the large containers used by Hamburg are problematic for collectors. Furthermore, deposit rings can make it easier to take bottles away and help to avoid injuries when rummaging. Conversations with collectors have shown that some of them would also like to sell beer on the street, partly because this could be more lucrative. In Barcelona, this was tolerated for a long time, even if it was not legal and controversial. If mobile beverage sales were accepted as a travelling trade, then sales and collection would once again be in one hand – and the recycling cycle would be closed.

Annotations

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Now that all countries in Europe are to introduce recycling systems, bottle collection is becoming a topic of interest everywhere – for those affected, the municipalities, the trade unions and the states. I am currently looking for stakeholders from all European countries and look forward to hearing from you via my website www.albanknecht.de/albanknecht.html.

About the Author



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