

A practical guide to LCA

for students

designers and business managers

Cradle-to-Grave and Cradle-to-Cradle

The cover photo is part of the “Design Cork” book and project ([www. designcork. com](http://www.designcork.com)), directed by Ana Mestre and photographed by Paulo Andrade, for Susdesign, 2008.

The tree is a cork oak tree. Cork is an almost forgotten material, made out of the bark of the tree (the bark is harvested every nine years, without cutting the tree).

Ana Mestre ([www.SUSdesign.org](http://www.SUSdesign.org)) has proven in her research that there are abundant opportunities to apply cork in innovative product designs. LCA and the method of the EVR (see Appendix IV) play an important role in that research, giving guidance on what to do and what to avoid. This is called ‘eco-efficient value creation’ [9].

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Cradle-to-Grave and Cradle-to-Cradle

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# Preface

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) is a well-defined method to calculate the environmental burden of a product or service. However, LCA has been made (needlessly?) so complex that it seems to be a job for specialists only. The specialists jargon ('functional unit', 'fate analysis', 'midpoints', 'endpoints', 'attributorial modelling', etc.) makes it even more impossible for non-specialists to find out what they need to know to make an LCA.

The recent LCA manual of the International Reference Life Cycle Data System of the EU is an excellent document for those people who like to become expert. The focus is on all the (theoretical) aspects of LCA: 80% of the text is on how to make an LCI (Life Cycle Inventory) and perform the Life Cycle Interpretation, including data quality checks and formalities on the reporting. However, the vast majority of students, designers, architects and business managers (and their consultants) never make LCI emission lists, nor write extensive reports on the interpretation. Most of them apply LCIs of databases of other parties (like the Ecoinvent database), apply existing single indicator systems (like eco-costs, carbon footprint, CED, BEES, Recipe, etc.), and draw simple conclusions on what seems to be the best solution in terms of environmental burden.

Students tend to make LCAs by using computer software. They quickly learn how the input works, regard the calculation as a black box, and watch how the output varies with the input. Basically, they make the LCA by instinct and common sense.

However, not all students are equal: some appear to have a much better instinct and common sense than others. Some issues in LCA are too complex to be tackled by common sense only. So these people need a little help and practical guidance.

When I realized the abovementioned situation, I decided to write this Practical Guide to LCA, starting with the common sense, and build on it with practical solutions for, sometimes, complex issues (like recycling). The examples are given in eco-costs; however, most of the examples are identical for other single indicators, like BEES, Ecological Scarcity, Ecoindicator 99, Recipe, Carbon Footprint, etc.

After two years of intensive use of the First Edition, the Second Edition as issued, with two extra issues: how to define the Functional Unit and the Declared Unit, and how to structure recycling calculations. The Third Edition is based on eco-costs 2012 data.

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# Contents

Preface	v
<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>VII</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 For whom is this guide?	1
1.2 Two groups of LCAs	2
1.3 The difference between a costs calculation and a 'Fast Track' LCA	3
1.4 The structure of this book	6
<b>2 THE SYSTEM YOU WANT TO STUDY</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Different system concepts	9
2.2 System Boundaries	13
2.3 Streamlined LCA	16
2.4 The Functional Unit	18
2.4.1 The basics of the FU	18
2.4.2 A wrong choice of FU leads to a wrong conclusion	20
2.4.3 The interrelation of the FU, the system boundaries and the goal and scope	23
2.5 Choice of Functional Unit and the Declared Unit	24
2.6 Quality aspects and the functional unit	27
<b>3 THE STEP BY STEP APPROACH AND LCA AS AN ITERATIVE PROCESS</b>	<b>31</b>
3.1 The Fast Track method, step by step	31
3.2 Applying LCA data in the early design stages	34
<b>4 TRANSPORT AND THE USE PHASE</b>	<b>37</b>
4.1 Transport	37
4.2 Energy	39
4.3 Maintenance	40
<b>5 END OF LIFE AND BY-PRODUCTS</b>	<b>43</b>
5.1 By-products and waste	43
5.2 Credits and system expansion	44
5.3 Combustion of waste with production of heat or electricity	47

5.4	Open Loop and Closed Loop Recycling	49
5.5	Open Loop Recycling of Plastics, Metals and other materials	51
5.5.1	Plastics	51
5.5.2	Metals	54
5.5.3	Waste Paper based products, and other secondary products	55
5.5.4	Time aspects in 'delayed' recycling or combustion of products with a long lifespan	57
5.6	Houses and office buildings, without End-of-Life	57
<b>6</b>	<b>LCA OF SERVICES</b>	<b>63</b>
6.1	Characteristics of an LCA of Services	63
6.2	Background on economic allocation, and the EVR	67
<b>7</b>	<b>CRADLE-TO-CRADLE IN LCA</b>	<b>71</b>
7.1	Life Cycle Design: LCA in early design stages	71
7.2	Pitfalls in LCA calculations on C2C systems	74
<b>8</b>	<b>CARBON SEQUESTRATION IN WOOD</b>	<b>77</b>
8.1	Carbon Sequestration in LCA	77
8.2	The global carbon cycle and biogenic CO <sub>2</sub> in wood	78
8.2.1	Chemical background	78
8.2.2	The global carbon cycle and the role of carbon sequestration in forests	78
8.2.3	Carbon sequestration in wood from the perspective of designers, architects and engineers	79
8.2.4	The negative eco-costs of carbon sequestration	81
<b>9</b>	<b>LAND-USE, WATER AND OTHER ISSUES</b>	<b>83</b>
9.1	Land-use: yield of land as a indicator for scarcity	83
9.1.1	LCA and Ecological Footprint	83
9.1.2	Yield of land: a sustainability issue for designers, architects and engineers	84
9.2	Fresh water	85
9.3	Other issues	86
	<b>APPENDICES</b>	<b>87</b>
	Appendix I	87

The model of the Eco-costs 2012, and 4 operational databases (source: Wikipedia)	87
Appendix II	94
Calculation structure in computer software for LCA and Single Indicator Systems	94
Appendix III	100
ISO 14040 and ISO 14044	100
Appendix IV	103
Benchmarking products with different quality and/or functionality: the EVR (source: Wikipedia)	103
Appendix V	110
How to apply Idemat (and Ecoinvent) data for recycling and re-use	110
Appendix VI	113
Converting EPD data in eco-costs	113
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>ABBREVIATIONS</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>INDEX</b>	<b>121</b>



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 For whom is this guide?

This guide has been written to assist anyone who is interested in the environmental burden of their design:

- students who must design products and services which are better for the future in terms of environmental burden
- designers of products who are interested in selecting better materials, or who design innovative products (or product systems) with minimum use of materials and energy
- architects who are interested in optimizing the use of materials and minimizing the use of energy
- business managers who want to introduce 'green' products (and wonder how green their products are)
- consultants in the field of business strategy, product innovation, or in the field of government advice

This group of users is not so much interested in all the ins and outs of LCA: they just want to have quantitative guidance in the decisions they have to take. They don't want to spend much time on LCA, since their primary task is the introduction of innovative products and services. They often have no dedicated computer software, no licenses on LCI databases<sup>1</sup>, and no budget available for specialized LCA consultant firms.

They want to do it themselves, but the time they can spend on the issue is limited. They are not interested in formalities and deliberations on accuracy: they just are interested in results.

There are 3 common misunderstandings about LCA:

1. To make an LCA requires a lot of time (at least 2 - 3 months) and a lot of money. This is true for the formal, classical, 'full' LCA according to ISO 14040 and ISO 14044. However the LCA of this guide takes only 2 - 4 hours (when the required input data are available), or a few days when several alternatives are studied. We

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<sup>1</sup> LCI = Life Cycle Inventory. This is a long list of all emissions during the life cycle plus all the natural resources which are required. Making an LCI is often complex and laborious. The subsequent step in LCA is the LCIA (Life Cycle Impact Assessment), where these long lists are compressed to a few category indicators or to one single indicator. See Appendix I and II.

## 2 The system you want to study

### 2.1 Different system concepts

Life Cycle Assessment (LCA) is a well-defined method to calculate the environmental burden of a product or service. The basic calculation structure of LCA is depicted in Fig. 2.1. The calculation is based on a system approach of the chain of production and consumption, analysing the input and the output of the total system:

- input:
  - materials (natural resources and recycled materials)
  - energy
  - transport
- output:
  - the product(s) and/or service
  - emissions to air, water and soil
  - by-products, recycling products, feedstock for electrical power plants
  - waste for landfill, waste incineration, or other types of waste treatment

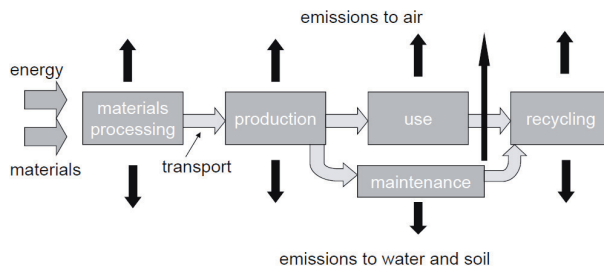


Figure 2.1  
The basic calculation system of LCA

Each LCA starts with the definition of the Processes inside the 'black boxes' of Fig. 2.1. Such a process definition is unique for each case. When the definition of the process system is wrong (or not suitable for the goal of the study), the output of the calculation will be wrong. The biggest mistakes in practice are caused by a system definition which is too narrow: sub-processes are not included which appear to be important (and other details are included which have hardly any influence on the output). The definition of the system is often an iterative process as such: by trial and error it is discovered what is important in a certain case.

Some C2C specialists claim that the cradle-to-grave dogma of LCA leads to wrong approach in design. They have a point that the cradle-to-grave dogma may lead to wrong design decisions (i.e. opportunities for recycling are overlooked). However, this