Europe’s environmental footprints exceed several safe limits

A new joint EEA-FOEN report ‘Is Europe living within the limits of our planet?’ explores two key questions related to Europe’s long-term sustainability ambitions. The first question is how to define a ‘safe operating space’ for Europe where all humanity can continue to develop and thrive. The second question is whether Europe’s consumption, or environmental footprint, is currently smaller or larger than its estimated ‘safe operating space’.

The report acknowledges that there are different ways to allocate Europe’s operating space in the global context, which inevitably involve normative choices about fairness, equity, international burden sharing, sovereignty and the right for development. Based on these different allocation principles, the study arrives to a minimum European share of 2.7 %, a maximum share of 21 %, and a median share of 7.3 % of the global limits.

Using a consumption-based analysis for four of the Earths life support systems, the report shows that Europe currently exceeds its safe operating space for **nitrogen cycle** by a factor of 3.3; **phosphorous cycle** by a factor of 2.0, and **land system change** by a factor of 1.8. Conversely, Europe does live within its limits when it comes to **freshwater use**, although problems with overconsumption and water scarcity remain locally and regionally.

The report also includes a case study of Switzerland’s biodiversity footprint. Considering the potential for global species loss because of land use, and by using and an equal share of land use per capita, the Swiss biodiversity footprint exceeds the threshold value by a factor of 3.7.