

The Effect of Data Structure and Model Choices on MFA Results: A Comparison of Phosphorus Balances for Denmark and Austria - DTU Orbit (08/11/2017)

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Material Flow Analysis (MFA) studies for a particular substance often exist for several different countries or regions, but share a similar goal and scope. In direct comparisons of such regional resource budgets, the importance of the choices made in establishing an MFA system tends to be disregarded.

We identify and quantify the effects of choices made in system layout, data material and uncertainty assessment on the outcome of regional MFAs using two recent country-scale MFAs (of Denmark and Austria) of phosphorus as a case study.

We highlight the differences in system boundaries and definition of flows and processes. We quantify types and choice of data sources; analyse the consistency of the data used by looking at the extent of data reconciliation, as a measure of model quality; quantify the effect of different approaches to uncertainty assessment; and show the influence of aggregating/disaggregating flows.

We show that differences in system layout are mostly attributable to varying goals and scope definitions. Direct comparison of uncertainties across studies is problematic: both studies draw on similar types of data sources, yet they show very different uncertainty assessments; the uncertainty assessment in MFA is always subjective to a certain extent. We demonstrate that reconciliation of conflicting data provides a useful measure to assess data consistency and model quality: data are more consistent (5% average change in reconciled data) in the Austrian than in the Danish (9%) case. We suggest an iterative approach to uncertainty assessment. Likewise, we demonstrate the effect of the aggregation of flows on model uncertainty.

These findings quantify and emphasise the importance of examining MFA studies' metadata and suggest an approach to be followed when drawing on such studies as a source of information.

General information

State: Published

Organisations: Department of Environmental Engineering, Residual Resource Engineering, Vienna University of Technology

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Pages: 166-175

Publication date: 2016

Main Research Area: Technical/natural sciences

Publication information

Journal: Resources, Conservation and Recycling

Volume: 109

ISSN (Print): 0921-3449

Ratings:

BFI (2017): BFI-level 1

Web of Science (2017): Indexed yes

BFI (2016): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2016): CiteScore 3.73 SJR 1.16 SNIP 1.709

Web of Science (2016): Indexed yes

BFI (2015): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2015): SJR 1.275 SNIP 1.915 CiteScore 3.98

Web of Science (2015): Indexed yes

BFI (2014): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2014): SJR 1.339 SNIP 2.089 CiteScore 3.7

Web of Science (2014): Indexed yes

BFI (2013): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2013): SJR 1.432 SNIP 2.184 CiteScore 3.34

ISI indexed (2013): ISI indexed yes

Web of Science (2013): Indexed yes

BFI (2012): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2012): SJR 1.262 SNIP 1.811 CiteScore 2.91

ISI indexed (2012): ISI indexed yes

Web of Science (2012): Indexed yes

BFI (2011): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2011): SJR 1.119 SNIP 1.848 CiteScore 2.62

ISI indexed (2011): ISI indexed yes

Web of Science (2011): Indexed yes

BFI (2010): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2010): SJR 1.163 SNIP 1.82

Web of Science (2010): Indexed yes

BFI (2009): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2009): SJR 1.143 SNIP 1.647

BFI (2008): BFI-level 1

Scopus rating (2008): SJR 0.803 SNIP 1.302

Web of Science (2008): Indexed yes

Scopus rating (2007): SJR 0.783 SNIP 1.708

Web of Science (2007): Indexed yes

Scopus rating (2006): SJR 0.933 SNIP 1.688

Scopus rating (2005): SJR 0.719 SNIP 1.426

Scopus rating (2004): SJR 1.031 SNIP 1.425

Scopus rating (2003): SJR 0.571 SNIP 1.086

Scopus rating (2002): SJR 0.399 SNIP 0.856

Scopus rating (2001): SJR 0.328 SNIP 0.953

Scopus rating (2000): SJR 0.582 SNIP 0.938

Scopus rating (1999): SJR 0.479 SNIP 0.879

Original language: English

Substance flow analysis, MFA, Phosphorus, Data quality, Uncertainty assessment, Data reconciliation

DOIs:

[10.1016/j.resconrec.2016.03.009](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resconrec.2016.03.009)

Publication: Research - peer-review › Journal article – Annual report year: 2016