



**Preprint for:**

Life cycle assessment of integrated additive-subtractive concrete 3D printing. *The International Journal of Advanced Manufacturing Technology* (2021) 112:2149–2159  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00170-020-06487-0>

## **Life cycle assessment of integrated additive-subtractive concrete 3D printing**

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### **Keywords**

Additive manufacturing, LCA, cable robot, construction, 3D printing, concrete.

### **Abstract**

A life cycle assessment (LCA) was conducted on an innovative concrete 3D printing system with both additive and subtractive capabilities and based on a cable robot. The production of a 4-m height structural pillar was assessed, comparing it to production with traditional methods, namely using a mould. The study included the entire supply chain of the 3D printing equipment, operation and end of life, based on real data from the design and operation of a demonstration plant installed in Spain. Data for traditional construction was based on literature and expert judgement. The 3D production process included printing the pillar perimeter in four pieces with 3D printing concrete,

transporting to the construction site, reinforcing and casting with conventional concrete. Traditional production involved reinforcing and casting with the mould on-site. The results show that when only one pillar needs to be produced, 3D printing has a lower environmental impact in all the environmental indicators assessed when compared to using a mould that is discarded after a single use. As an example, GHG emissions are lower by 38%. It was also found that the contribution of 3D printing to the environmental impact of producing a pillar is almost negligible, representing less than 1% of the pillar's total GHG emissions. However, when the same pillar needs to be produced in higher numbers, the results show that 3D printing and conventional production have a similar environmental impact, given that the mould used in conventional production can be reused, becoming a comparatively efficient option.

## **1. Introduction**

3D printing, synonymous with additive manufacturing, has been defined as the fabrication of objects through the deposition of a material using a print head, nozzle, or another printer technology (ASTM 2009). It differs from traditional methods that are either subtractive, starting with a block and machining away material that is not required, or formative, shaping or casting material in a mould (Buswell 2007). 3D printing originated as a rapid prototyping technology, but it is quickly developing into a fully developed manufacturing process (Kellens et al. 2017). According to Faludi (2017), 3D printed goods are already being sold in high-value, small-run niches such as aerospace, jewellery and medical devices. Although very few commercial products are 3D printed, many contain 3D printed parts.

In the construction sector, the use of 3D printing techniques was, until a few years ago, confined to the production of affordable architectural models. However, more recently, attempts to 3D-print complete houses have been the subject of much publicity (Labonnote et al. 2016). The potential advantages of 3D printing in the construction sector are numerous, including, first of all, the ability to produce non-standard construction elements at a reasonable cost, which was virtually impossible earlier (Perkins and Skitmore 2015). Other advantages include reducing the dependence on labour, the risk of injuries and weather stoppages, as well as construction times and costs (Pegna 1997).

Advocates for 3D printing in the construction industry have also claimed potential advantages for this technology from a sustainability standpoint. The accurate nature of additive fabrication is expected to result in little or no material waste (Khosnevis 2003), Mainly due to the lack of requirement of formwork and moulds (Perkins and Skitmore 2015) and because the highly optimised construction process reduces the amount of materials used (Achillas et al. 2015). However, it has been recognized that in order to determine the environmental performance of 3D printing in the construction context, a

full life cycle assessment (LCA) must be performed (Labonnote et al. 2016), as it provides a comprehensive evaluation of the direct and indirect potential environmental impacts associated to any given product or service (Finnveden et al. 2009). Saade et al. (2019) performed a systematic review of the available peer-reviewed literature on the life-cycle impacts of 3D printing, identifying 52 papers presenting quantitative LCA or other environmental results. The main industrial sectors addressed in these studies were the aircraft and automotive sector, with construction featuring only three papers (Agustí-Juan and Habert, 2017; Agustí-Juan et al. 2017; Esposito-Corcione et al. 2018). Two of these studies (Agustí-Juan and Habert, 2017; Agustí-Juan et al., 2017) evaluated the life-cycle impacts of several structures (concrete wall, concrete floor, timber roof), digitally-designed and fabricated with a construction robot, but not 3D printed, while Esposito-Corcione et al. (2018) assessed the environmental performance of using waste stone as a filler for production of 3D printing filaments used in fused deposition modelling (FDM). In more recent research, Yao et al. (2020) assessed 3D printing of geo-polymer concrete, however this was done based on a theoretical scale-up of lab-scale printing. To our knowledge there are currently no peer-reviewed studies assessing actual 3D printing of concrete products, especially integrating both additive and subtractive capabilities. In this article we present the results of assessing with LCA an innovative concrete 3D printing technology, developed in the framework of the EU-funded research project HINDCON<sup>1</sup>. The goal of the LCA study was to determine whether or not production with this technology leads to an overall environmental benefit when compared with traditional construction methods, using as a case study the production of a structural pillar.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 A demonstration plant for hybrid additive-subtractive manufacturing with concrete**

The main innovations achieved by the HINDCON approach to 3D printing in construction can be boiled down to two key aspects: its hybrid additive-subtractive capabilities and the printer positioning system using a cable robot.

One of the common features of printed concrete is its characteristic ribbed finish. With current 3D printing technologies, achieving a smooth finish requires either trowelling the wet material or the printed finish needs to be ground to a smooth surface. Either way, this must be completed manually (Lim 2012). HINDCON aimed at designing and demonstrating a 3D printing machine incorporating subtractive capabilities, allowing automated post-processing of the printed parts, including operations such as surface polishing, grooving and drilling. Secondly, traditional 3D printing methods have relied

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.hindcon3d.com/>

on gantry-type positioning systems, which can be thought of as “giant” 3D printers and as such, these systems are expensive and bulky. Instead, HINDCON relied on the concept of cable-driven parallel robots (Pott et al. 2013), which are less expensive, lighter, more transportable, more energy-efficient and more easily reconfigurable (Barnett and Gosselin 2015).

The mechanical architecture of the demonstration plant designed and built in the framework of the HINDCON project was based on modular components. A cable robot structure was used to provide positioning in a given workspace. Interchangeable platforms provided the process functionality, either additive or subtractive. The demonstration plant system consisted of the following main elements:

- A cable robot IPAnema 3 (Pott 2018), with a working area of 17x12x4.5 m. This system included a steel frame, eight Bosch motors and gearboxes, 200 m of Dyneema LIROS D-PRO cable and control cabinet.
- A tool-changing platform suspended by the cable robot, used to manually switch between additive and subtractive end-effectors.
- The additive end-effector or extruder, designed and built by CIM UPC. This device was responsible for dosing additives to the concrete and carrying out the concrete addition. Its main components were a 150 L tank, progressive cavity pump and auxiliary pump, mixing chamber and print head. The average printing speed was 2.53 L/minute during demonstration tests.
- The subtractive end-effector, designed by ESTIA, consisting of a robotic arm, model KUKA KR10 R1100 C-WP, to which different tools could be attached to polish, mill and engrave. The average processing speed for surface polishing was 9 m<sup>2</sup>/hour.
- Different concrete formulations suitable for 3D printing, specifically developed by Lafarge Holcim.
- A building constructed to house the plant and to serve as workshop/factory (231 m<sup>2</sup>). A closed space was regarded as a necessity, since the machine would not be suitable for work in outdoor conditions.

The demonstration plant was built in a facility owned by Vías y Construcciones in Pancorbo, Spain, and was operational from May to October 2019. During these six months, operation tests of increasing complexity were carried out in order to validate the technology. Further information, including videos of the plant set up and demonstration tests are available in the HINDCON website.

## **2.2 LCA methods and goal**

LCA was carried out with the ISO 14040 and 14044 standards as methodological guidelines (ISO 2006a, 2006b). The software used to model the life cycle was SimaPro

version 8.5 (Pré 2016). The overall goal was to quantify the potential environmental benefits (or otherwise) associated to the implementation of the HINDCON concept for manufacturing, when compared to current practices in the construction sector.

### 2.3 Case study: a structural pillar

We assessed the production in Spain of a structural pillar designed by the company XtreeE (Figure 1, left). This pillar is 4 m height and weighs 1.5 tonnes, with diameters at the base and top of 1.52 m and 0.68 m, respectively. Its volume and area are 619 L and 6.8 m<sup>2</sup>, respectively. A key aspect to consider is that this element needs to be printed in four independent pieces rather than in one single piece (Figure 1, right). This was due to the fact that the extruder's storage capacity was limited to 40 L of concrete. Also, it must be highlighted that the entire pillar was not printed during the plant's demonstration phase, but only one of its pieces. Printing of the remaining pieces is assessed in this study on a theoretical basis, but based on real operational data gathered during the demonstration tests.



**Figure 1. 3D model of case-study pillar (left); the pillar broken down into four pieces that can be printed with the HINDCON demonstration plant.**

### 2.4 System boundaries and functional unit

The system under study is a 'cradle-to-gate' one, whereby we included all activities in the product system until the pillar is finished and placed in its position in the building or construction structure where it will be integrated. The use and end-of-life phases are excluded from the study, given that they are not affected by the technology used to produce the pillar.

The study includes the life cycle of all capital equipment, including the 3D printer, moulds, as well as of all raw materials (concrete, steel rebars, etc.) and disposal of waste, mainly concrete, originated during manufacturing.

The functional unit and reference flow for this analysis was the demand of one pillar.

## 2.5 Production process: 3D printing

Figure 2 shows a flow diagram for the 3D printing scenario, featuring those activities included as part of the foreground system, i.e. those activities for which primary data were collected with as much detail as possible. Production of the pillar is split in two stages, an on-site printing and polishing stage, and an off-site casting and assembly stage, the latter taking place in the construction site where the pillar is ultimately installed. The pieces are not printed with a 100% infill rate, but rather only the outer perimeter is printed, representing approximately 21% of the pillar's volume, thus leaving a hollow interior. After the concrete has set, the pieces are subject to polishing using the subtractive system, in order to achieve a smooth surface finish. These finished parts are then transported from the workshop to the construction site where the pillar is assembled, reinforced with steel rebars and casted.

Concerning the types of concrete used, a C30 concrete formulation suitable for 3D printing is used to print the four individual hollow pieces, casting at the construction site is carried out using conventional C60 concrete.

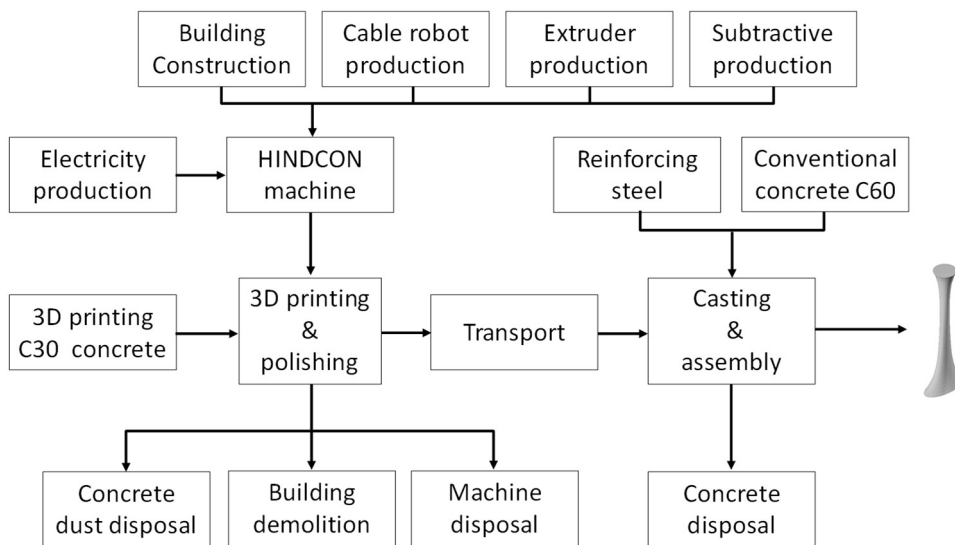


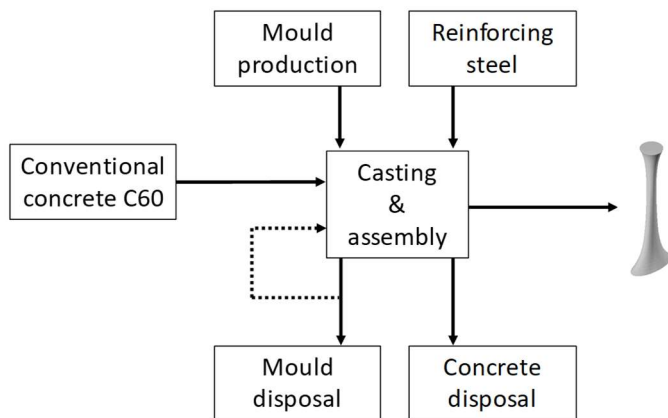
Figure 2. Product system for the 3D printed pillar.

## 2.6 Production process: conventional

The alternative to 3D printing was considered to be casting the pillar by means of formwork with the desired shape. We excluded the option of formwork in steel or wood, as this is only suitable for perfectly square or circular pillars and therefore do not offer the required design flexibility. The option considered is a reusable acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) mould.

Production of the pillar (Figure 3) involves placing the formwork in position with the reinforcing steel bars and pouring the concrete. The concrete used is C60. As opposed

to the 3D printing scenario, there are no transport steps involved, since the pillar is produced in the precise location where it will be integrated as part of the wider building/construction project. After use, the mould can be reused if more than one pillar needs to be produced. As a base case, a single mould use is considered in the study, although this particular aspect was subject to a sensitivity analysis.



**Figure 3. Product system for the pillar constructed with traditional methods. The dashed line represents the potential reuse of the mould.**

## 2.7 Impact assessment methods

The method used for impact assessment in the LCA study is Stepwise2006, version 1.6. The method is described and documented in Annex II in Weidema et al. (2007) and in Weidema (2009). Stepwise is capable of providing results at the level of midpoints (characterization) and endpoints (damage). At the endpoint level, each impact category is expressed in monetary units (€2003) measuring environmental damage. In this study we adjust the monetary units by inflation to €2019.

## 3. Inventory analysis

### 3.1 Background system

The life cycle model was built using the global hybrid environmentally extended multi-regional input-output database EXIOBASE (version 3.3.16) described in Merciai and Schmidt (2017) and Stadler et al. (2018).

### 3.2 Foreground system

Table 1 summarises the inventory for 3D printing and conventional production, the latter assuming the mould is only used once, i.e. only one pillar is produced. Further details regarding the inventory analysis, including how primary data were linked to EXIOBASE can be found in the supplementary material (SM).



### **3.2.1 Concrete production**

Two types of concrete were considered in the study. A confidential formulation for a 3D printing C30 concrete was shared by Lafarge Holcim, containing CEM I cement, sand, a mineral filler, additives and water. The formulation for a conventional C60 concrete was obtained from Civil Engineering Portal (2018), containing, on a per m<sup>3</sup> basis, 504 kg CEM I cement, 683 kg sand, 4.7 kg superplasticizer, 1,108 kg gravel and 142 L water. The inventory includes the production of the individual ingredients and the transport of the product, although infrastructure for concrete production is excluded.

### **3.2.2 3D printer production and end-of life**

Production of the 3D printer was modelled based on a bill of materials for each of the machine modules, namely the cable robot, additive system (extruder) and subtractive system. From a geographical point of view, each module was assumed to be produced in the country where it was developed, namely Germany for the cable robot and subtractive robot and Spain for the additive system.

The inventory for the cable robot included the eight motors (188 kg), eight gearboxes (176 kg), 200 m of Dyneema cable (4.6 kg), a control cabinet (housing and electrical equipment, 250 kg), energy chain and spool (600 kg), the tool changing platform mainly made in aluminium (77 kg) and the steel frame (8,220 kg).

The additive system was constituted by a large number of elements. A bill of materials was produced with around 300 individual elements classified into groups (hydraulic system, transmission, pumping system, electronics, etc.). The total weight was 247 kg, most of which constituted by machinery (pumps, motors) and aluminium structures.

The subtractive system included, first of all, the KUKA robotic arm (56 kg), its controller (33 kg) and SmartPAD (1.1 kg), electrical cable estimated at 13.6 kg and a support platform made in steel, with an estimated weight of 92 kg. The subtractive system counts with a set of tools (milling tool, sanding tool, vacuum cleaner, among others), which amount to 23.4 kg.

Regarding the building/workshop, this was included in the inventory based on its expected construction cost, which was taken as 400 €/m<sup>2</sup> (Soler & Durá 2014). The total cost of construction was then linked to the EXIOBASE activity for construction in Spain, which is expressed in monetary units. In addition to the building itself, the inventory also included a safety fence to isolate the printer's working space (380 kg) and a silo to store concrete premix (2,268 kg).

Besides accounting for the mass and type of materials and equipment, a key task in the inventory analysis was defining their expected service life. This was done on the basis of expert judgement, paying particular attention to the expected stress and rough environmental conditions (moisture, dust, wet concrete, etc.) to which the machine would be subject during operation. Useful lives were determined component by

component, ranging from 6 months for the Dyneema cable, to 20 years for structural elements such as the cable robot frame. The building was given a longer service life, of 50 years.

In a hypothetical commercial deployment of the 3D printer, production would be expected to run 300 days per year in two 8-hour shifts, leading to 4,800 operation hours per year. This was used to calculate the amortization of the equipment, previously quantified in years.

Concerning the end-of-life stage, the fate of the different materials and equipment was determined based on plausible expectations. On the one hand, metallic components and the metal fraction of complex equipment such as motors, pumps, etc., were assumed to be sent for recycling. In EXIOBASE, recycling processes lead to a substitution of equivalent primary materials. Plastic components, on the other hand, were assumed to be disposed by landfilling. Construction materials embedded in the workshop building were also assumed to be sent to a landfill after demolition.

### **3.2.3 3D printer operation**

Operation of the 3D printer involves electricity consumption by the machine and building. The average power consumption by the cable robot during printing is rather low, around 2 kW, since it is operating at low speeds. The average power consumption by the additive system is 1.1 kW. As for the subtractive system, the expected power consumption by the KUKA robot is 2 kW. The required power for the milling tools (sanding, drilling) and vacuum cleaner is 3.4 kW combined. With these data, we can establish that 1 hour of additive work uses 3.1 kWh, while 1 hour of subtractive work uses 7.4 kWh.

Concerning the building, we only include energy consumption for lighting, estimated as 54 kWh/m<sup>2</sup>/year in Spain (European Communities 2002, p. 22). Based on 231 m<sup>2</sup> and 4,800 operating hours/year, the energy consumption per hour of operation is 2.6 kWh. The overall amount of time required to print the four pillar pieces is 8.6 hours. This includes 0.9 hours of printing, 0.8 hours of polishing using the subtractive system, while the remaining time is associated to manual tasks, such as setting up the machine for either printing or polishing, as well as cleaning activities at the end of the production process.

### **3.2.4 Plastic mould**

The conventional method to produce the pillar is casting by means of formwork with the desired shape. In our study we considered using tailor-made formwork manufactured in ABS plastic, which is available from several Chinese manufacturers for similar construction elements such as decorative columns. However, we did not have access to a specific design for the targeted pillar. In Lcmolds (2019) the weight of

moulds for square pillars of 3 to 4 m height is given for several sizes, and this weight is well correlated to the volume of the pillar. For a pillar with a volume of 619 L, the estimated weight of the mould is 64 kg and this weight is assumed to remain constant even if the targeted pillar is not square. Production of the mould is modelled with the EXIOBASE data set for production of plastic and rubber products in China.

This kind of mould can be reused many times, although as a base case we assume that only one pillar needs to be produced, after which the mould is discarded and sent to a landfill.

### **3.2.5 Transports**

As it can be seen in Figure 2, the four printed pillar parts require transport to the construction site. Given that this is a hypothetical analysis, we have taken as starting point a road transport distance of 100 km.

For the plastic mould, we consider its shipping from China to Spain. This transport scenario assumes hypothetical distances of 100 km by road to the port in China, a maritime transport distance of 16,000 km and a final road transport distance to the construction site of 100 km.

For all other materials in the inventory analysis, the EXIOBASE data sets used include default transport services.

### **3.2.6 Casting**

The inventory for reinforcing and casting the pillar, in both 3D printing and conventional scenarios was approximated by data for circular reinforced-concrete pillars of 4-5 m height published by CYPE ingenieros (CYPE 2019), where the reference flow is 1 m<sup>3</sup> casting. The inputs per m<sup>3</sup> casted pillar include steel rebar (120 kg), tying steel wire (0.6 kg), plastic separators (estimated at 10 g each), 0.24 L release agent and reusable post shores. The data set also establishes a concrete loss of 0.05 m<sup>3</sup> per casted m<sup>3</sup>, which we model as disposed in landfill. All these aspects are included in the inventory for conventional casting, while for the 3D printed pillar the use of release agent is not necessary, due to the absence of moulds or formwork.

**Table 1. Inventory summary for production of 1 structural pillar according to 3D printing and conventional methods. Functional unit: 1 pillar. See SM for further details.**

Exchanges	Unit	3D printing	Conventional	Comments
<b>Raw materials:</b>				
3D printing C30 concrete	L	139		Concrete to print pillar perimeter
C60 concrete	L	511	650	Concrete for casting
<b>Printing:</b>				
3D printer equipment	kg	1.2		Depreciation of 3D printer equipment associated to 8.6 hours of operation
Electricity, Spain	kWh	31		3 kWh for printing, 6 kWh for polishing, 22 kWh for building lighting
Building	kg	3.6		Depreciation of building materials, safety fence and concrete silo associated to 8.6 hours of operation
<b>Transports:</b>				
Road, Spain	tkm	30	6	100 km assumed
Road, China	tkm		6	100 km assumed
Maritime, China-Spain	tkm		1,019	16,000 km assumed
<b>Casting:</b>				
Mould production	kg		64	ABS mould used once
Steel rebar and tying wire	kg	74	74	Reinforcing steel and wire
Plastic separators	kg	0.07	0.07	Plastic supports for reinforcing steel
Post shores	kg	0.64	0.64	Depreciation of reusable post shores
Release agent	L		0.14	For removal of mould
<b>Waste management:</b>				
Concrete to landfill	kg	74	76	Concrete dust from polishing, losses during casting

## 4. Results and discussion

### 4.1 Impact assessment: midpoint and endpoint level

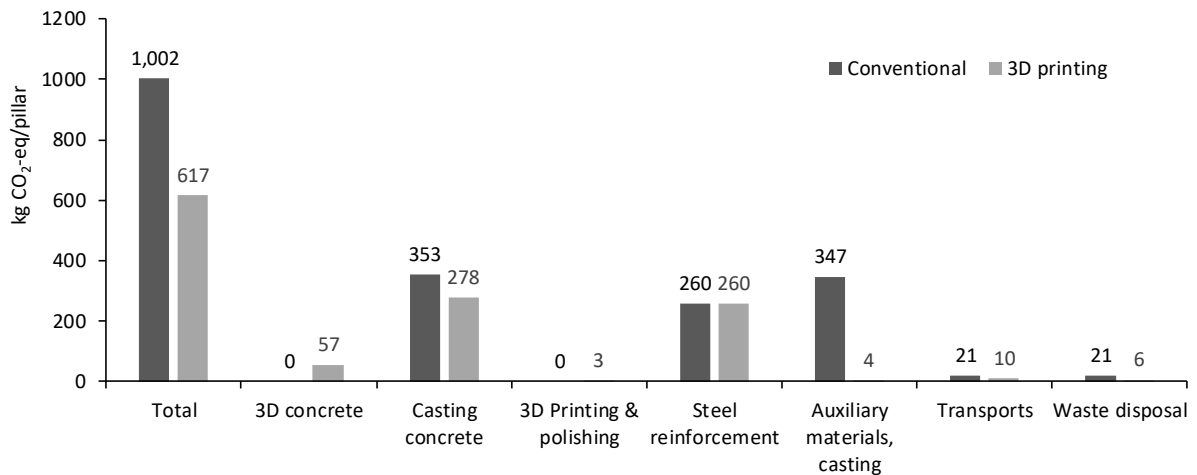
Table 1 shows the life cycle impact assessment results for the two scenarios, at both midpoint and endpoint level. While at midpoint each indicator has its own specific units, at endpoint level they are all expressed in monetary units (€2019). We can see that the 3D printing scenario shows a lower environmental impact in all indicators, with a reduction in impact ranging from 24% in mineral extraction to 81% in aquatic eutrophication. The inclusion of results at endpoint level is useful to identify those impact indicators where the system has the highest contribution to environmental damages. In our case study most of the damage corresponds to respiratory inorganics, closely followed by global warming, while the remaining indicators have a relatively minor contribution.

**Table 2. Life cycle impact assessment results at midpoint and endpoint level (€2019).****Functional unit: 1 pillar.**

Impact category	Unit	Midpoint		Unit	Endpoint	
		Conventional	3D printing		Conventional	3D printing
Human toxicity, carcinogens	kg C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>3</sub> Cl-eq into air	39	26	€	13.2	8.9
Human toxicity, non-carcinogens	kg C <sub>2</sub> H <sub>3</sub> Cl-eq into air	13	7	€	4.5	2.5
Respiratory inorganics	kg PM <sub>2.5</sub> -eq	1.6	1.1	€	136.5	91.4
Ecotoxicity, aquatic	kg triethylene glycol-eq into water	1,960	1,205	€	0.02	0.01
Ecotoxicity, terrestrial	kg triethylene glycol-eq into soil	5,145	3,263	€	7.3	4.6
Nature occupation	PDFm <sup>2</sup> a	36	11	€	5.7	1.8
Global warming	kg CO <sub>2</sub> -eq	1,002	617	€	106.8	65.7
Acidification	m <sup>2</sup> unprotected ecosystem	79	44	€	0.8	0.4
Eutrophication, aquatic	kg NO <sub>3</sub> -eq	2.5	0.5	€	0.3	0.1
Eutrophication, terrestrial	m <sup>2</sup> unprotected ecosystem	100	55	€	1.6	0.9
Respiratory organics	Person·ppm·h	0.8	0.4	€	0.3	0.1
Photochemical ozone, vegetation	m <sup>2</sup> ·ppm·hour	8,261	3,981	€	3.9	1.9
Non-renewable energy	MJ	10,448	4,312	€	0.021	0.016
Mineral extraction	MJ	4.0	3.1	€	13.2	8.9

## 4.2 Contribution analysis

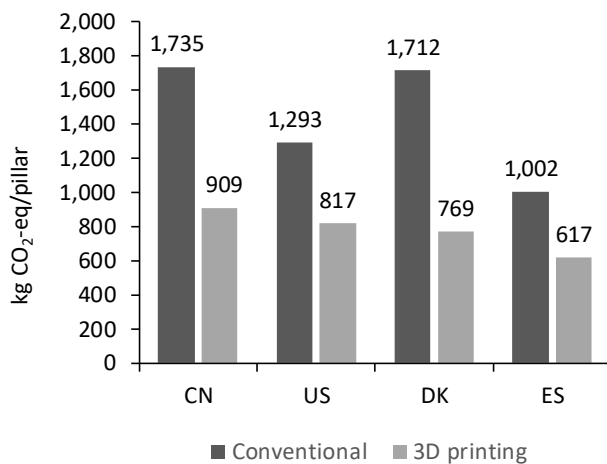
Figure 4 breaks down the Global warming indicator into the different activities that have been described in the inventory analysis. Overall, greenhouse-gas (GHG) emissions in the 3D printing scenario are lower by 385 kg CO<sub>2</sub>-eq or 38%. On the one hand, we can see that the two production methods lead to a similar contribution to GHG emissions associated to concrete production, with 335 kg CO<sub>2</sub>-eq for the 3D printing scenario vs. 353 kg CO<sub>2</sub>-eq in the conventional scenario. On the other hand, the conventional scenario leads to a higher impact mainly due to the production of the mould (classified under ‘Auxiliary materials, casting’). Last but not least, it is worth mentioning that the 3D printing process (printing and polishing operations, including the entire life cycle of the machine) appears to be almost negligible, representing less than 1% of the total GHG emissions.



**Figure 4. Contribution analysis for Global warming.**

### 4.3 Sensitivity analysis: geographical variation

As a base case, we took Spain as geographical context for the evaluation, given that this is the country where the demonstration plant was in operation. In order to check the robustness of the results regarding geographical scope, in Figure 5 we show the results of a sensitivity analysis where we simulated the life cycle model in three alternative countries, namely China, the United States and Denmark. This was done by linking the entire background system to the corresponding EXIOBASE supply activities in these countries.



**Figure 5. Sensitivity analysis for Global warming regarding geographical scope.**

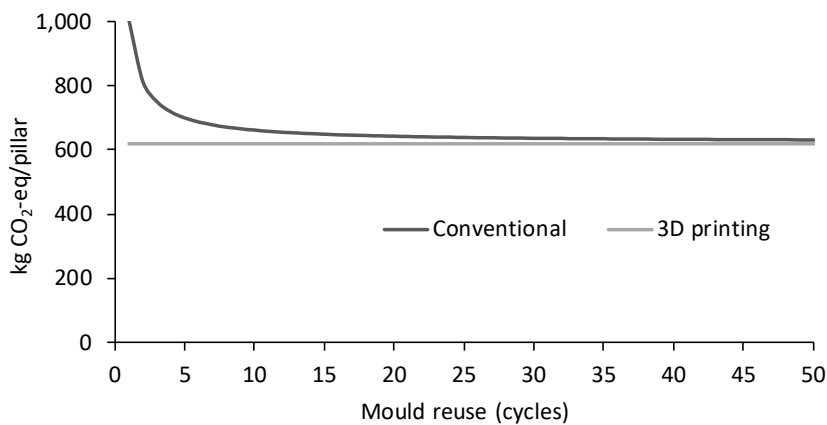
In Figure 5 we show only the impact assessment results for Global warming, although a similar pattern is obtained in the remaining indicators (see SM). As it can be seen, the absolute CO<sub>2</sub>-eq emissions vary substantially from one country to another, however the key point of interest in these results is the fact that the 3D printing scenario consistently

achieves a GHG reduction when compared to conventional construction, namely 37% in the United States, 48% in China and 55% in Denmark.

Based on these results, our study seems to confidently point to a lower environmental for 3D printed concrete products, when the alternative is to use a disposable mould, or a reusable mould that is used only once.

#### 4.4 Sensitivity analysis: Multiple pillars

As a base case, we assumed that only one pillar is ordered by a hypothetical customer. This is a reasonable scenario for 3D printing, which allows us to design and produce unique construction elements. However, a single building is likely to require more than one pillar. In a traditional construction scenario, these can be produced by few moulds reused many times. In this situation, the environmental impact of the conventional scenario is expected to decrease on a per pillar basis. Following this line of thought, we conducted a sensitivity analysis where we considered that more than one pillar needs to be produced, which in the conventional scenario is achieved by reusing the mould. This is approached as a break-even analysis, in order to find out if at a given point 3D printing appears to be less preferable than conventional construction methods.



**Figure 6. Break-even analysis for 3D printing and conventional construction regarding the number of mould reuse cycles.**

Figure 6 shows the results of this break-even analysis for the Global warming indicator. On the one hand, the graph shows a flat line at 617 kg CO<sub>2</sub>-eq, corresponding to the GHG emissions for a 3D printed pillar. On the other hand, GHG emissions for a traditionally-produced pillar decrease exponentially as the number of mould reuse cycles increase. There is, however, no break-even point as such, but rather a convergence, as the value for the conventional pillar slowly approaches that of the 3D printed pillar when multiple mould reuses are considered. In this way, 3D printing appears environmentally preferable when few pillars need to be produced, but there is

no environmental benefit if the alternative is a conventional casting method with a mould withstanding multiple reuse cycles.

#### **4.5 Discussion**

Impact assessment results have shown that most of the environmental damage associated to the pillar's supply chain, when monetarized with the Stepwise 2006 method, is caused by emissions of fine particulate matter (respiratory inorganics) and Global warming. This is consistent with other studies applying the Stepwise 2006 method, even in completely different sectors, such as soil and groundwater remediation (Huysegoms et al. 2018), wastewater treatment (Muñoz et al. 2019) or meat and dairy products (Weidema and Wesnæs 2008), where these two indicators dominate the environmental damage, together with nature occupation in the case of bio-based production systems.

When looking at the most and least important aspects in the life cycle of 3D printing, one of the most outstanding outcomes of this study is the relatively low contribution of the printing process (life cycle of the entire printing machine: production, energy consumption during use, end of life stage), when compared to e.g. concrete production. This seems to be in agreement with the results of the meta-analysis carried out by Saade et al. (2020), where GHG emissions for additive manufacturing case studies in the construction sector were consistently dominated by production of materials rather than by the manufacturing process itself, which contributed up to 10-12% of the total emissions in the worst case. This is in contrast to case studies in other industrial sectors, where the opposite was true, i.e. the additive manufacturing step had a dominant role in life-cycle GHG emissions.

The comparison of 3D printing vs. traditional construction has shown that when a single unit of the pillar needs to be produced, 3D printing is preferable to using a mould that is discarded after a single use. This seems to support the claims made by Perkins and Skitmore (2015) that concrete 3D printing is superior in environmental terms as it eliminates the need for moulds and formwork. A superiority in terms of raw material use and process waste, as claimed by other authors (Achillas et al. 2015; Khosnevis 2003) cannot be supported based on our case study, where both 3D printing and casting have a similar performance. In our opinion, a key result in our study is the finding that when many pillar units need to be printed, the preference for 3D printing rapidly decreases, since in this case the alternative is likely to be a reusable mould. As a consequence, in a context of mass production of construction elements so far produced by casting, 3D printing performs approximately the same as traditional construction, where the environmental impact is dominated by production of the required concrete and steel reinforcement. Further LCA studies with different and more complex construction elements should be conducted to get a wider view of the potential benefits



(or otherwise) of this new manufacturing approach. In particular, an advantage that could not be explored in this research is that 3D printing, with its ability to deposit material where needed, rather than just pouring it - as it is done in casting - has a huge potential to save raw materials such as concrete, and therefore environmental impacts. In our case study, designing and printing a 'hollow' pillar was not feasible, as it would not comply with European construction standards.

Another interesting point of discussion is logistics. Our case study has shown that for a distance of 100 km to the construction project, transport of the hollow printed pieces is not a major environmental concern. A completely different strategy would be to have a mobile 3D printer that would be set up at the construction site in some indoor space. As a rule of thumb, this would be justified from an environmental point of view only if the weight of the pieces to be produced at the construction site exceeds the weight of the 3D printer.

As for limitations of this study, we can mention that the inventory for casting did not include infrastructure, such as the use of a crane and skip to pour the concrete. Also, another limitation is that EXIOBASE does not currently allow to discriminate between different plastic products and therefore it was not possible to tell the difference between producing ABS and an average plastic product in China. Finally, a limitation of our study is that it did not address potential rebound effects associated to differences in life cycle cost (Consequential LCA 2015). In the event that 3D printing shows a lower life cycle cost than traditional methods, this is expected to lead to additional disposable income that can be spent in other activities, which in turn have an environmental impact. Assessing life cycle costs, however, was not in the scope of this research.

## **5. Conclusions**

LCA has been applied to an innovative concrete 3D printing system with both additive and subtractive capabilities and based on a cable robot. The production of a 4-m height structural pillar was assessed, comparing it to production with traditional methods, namely using a mould.

The results show that when only one pillar needs to be produced, 3D printing has a lower environmental impact in all the environmental indicators assessed when compared to using a mould that is discarded after a single use. GHG emissions, for example, are lower by 38%. It was also found that the contribution of the 3D printing operation (printing and polishing, including the entire life cycle of the machine) appears to be almost negligible, representing less than 1% of the total GHG emissions. Most of the environmental impact appears to be associated to the supply chain of the materials embedded in the pillar, namely concrete and steel.

However, when the same pillar needs to be produced in higher numbers, the results show that 3D printing and conventional production have a similar environmental

impact, given that the mould used in conventional production can be reused, becoming a comparatively efficient option.

Based on these results, 3D printing appears to have a lower environmental impact as a method for production of unique architectural elements. In a context of mass production of construction elements, however, 3D printing performs approximately the same as traditional construction, where the environmental impact is dominated by production of the required materials.

An interesting feature of 3D printing that deserves further attention in future LCA studies is that this method, with its ability to deposit material where needed, rather than just pouring it - as it is done in casting - has a huge potential to save raw materials such as concrete, and therefore environmental impacts.

### **Funding information**

This research has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 723611.

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