

Civil society's contribution to the prevention and reduction of food waste

Position paper – January 2015

A society which wastes one third of its edible food while so many human beings are suffering from hunger cannot call itself human.

EESC President Henri Malosse, 7 July 2014, Brussels

Introduction

Nearly half of all food gets wasted in the EU each year. This statistic is even more shocking when one considers that 79 million EU citizens live beneath the poverty line and some 16 million depend on food aid from charitable institutions. In 2011, in the wake of the economic and financial crisis, 24.2% of Europeans – 119.6 million people – were on the brink of social exclusion¹.

Food waste prevention and reduction strategies are vital in the wider context of food security – better resource management is needed to feed an ever-growing global population for example – but should also support the most deprived in society. In this respect, food banks can play a crucial role in the food donation process by recovering food from manufacturers, distributors, retailers or individuals (food still fit for consumption that might otherwise be wasted) and redistributing it to civil society organisations and social services.

At present however, there is no common EU policy on food donation. Though many companies and individuals would be willing to donate surplus food, various legislative and practical barriers – which vary between Member States – prevent them from doing so. In a world where people do not have enough to eat and resources are limited, the prevention and reduction of food losses and food waste should be a political priority.

What the EU is doing

The EU has acknowledged the social and economic importance of reducing food waste. In 2011, the Commission's Roadmap to a resource-efficient Europe² identified food as a key sector where resource efficiency should be improved and called for ambitious action to tackle food waste.

In January 2012, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution³ on how to avoid food wastage, calling on the Commission to take practical steps to reduce food waste by 50% by 2025. A working group on food losses and food waste, which supports the Commission in sharing best practices in food waste prevention and in identifying possible EU actions, was established later that year⁴. The four-year EU-funded FUSIONS project⁵ is currently developing a common methodology for quantifying food loss and waste.

The Council has also looked into issues surrounding sustainable food production. The vision set out by Austria in November 2012 and endorsed by 16 Member States for a new European Food Model⁶ covers, among other things, aspects relating to the appreciation of food, which should help to avoid food waste.

In 2014, the Commission's Communication "Towards a circular economy: a zero waste programme for Europe"⁷ – and the related legislative proposal to review recycling and other waste targets⁸ – puts forward objectives for food waste reduction in the EU. It includes a proposal for Member States to develop national food waste prevention strategies with the aim of reducing food waste by at least 30% by 2025.

The EESC's position

In March 2013, the EESC tabled an own-initiative opinion on civil society's contribution to the prevention and reduction of food waste. The opinion, which was adopted by the Committee by 159 votes to 1, with 1 abstention, addresses food loss and food waste in the EU, with a particular emphasis on the need to channel food products still fit for consumption to food banks.

Firstly, a clearer definition at EU level of food loss and food waste is needed, along with an acknowledgement that different approaches are required in developing and industrialised countries. In contrast to developing countries – where losses occur primarily during the first stages of the food chain – the fight against food loss and food waste in industrialised countries should focus on the processing, distribution, consumer and food service stages.

Furthermore, efforts to reduce food losses and food waste should respect a waste hierarchy. "Prevention" comes first, followed by "use for

1. <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.25955>.
2. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/resource_efficiency/pdf/com2011_571.pdf.
3. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2012-0014+0+DOC+XML+Vo//EN>.
4. http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food_waste/eu_actions/stakeholders/index_en.htm.
5. <http://www.eu-fusions.org/>.
6. <http://register.consilium.europa.eu/doc/srv?i=EN&f=ST%2016821%202012%20INIT>.
7. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52014DC0398>.
8. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52014PC0397>.

human consumption" (such as donations to food banks), "use for animal consumption", and lastly, "energy production and composting". The EESC's Opinion underlines the fact that food banks across Europe are faced with falling resources and increasing demand for their services.

EESC recommendations

Food loss and food waste can be defined as any product initially intended for human consumption, which is thrown out or destroyed at any stage of the food chain from farm to consumer (excluding products not for use as food). According to the FAO, food loss occurs at the start of the food chain, whereas food waste is observed at the end of the chain. The Committee points out, however, that inedible by-products which currently fall outside this definition – such as crop residues – could one day be turned into something edible. While an accepted definition of food loss and food waste is needed, this should not be set in stone.

Education has a key role to play with regards to waste reduction. Future chefs should be made aware of the various aspects of food waste, such as stock management, recycling and the potential financial benefits of using resources more efficiently. This topic should be included in the curriculum and ongoing training modules of future food service professionals in both the collective and private sectors. The same approach could also be taken in training establishments for packaging designers with regard to food conservation and ensuring maximum use of contents.

Similarly, the Committee is in favour of developing and continuing platforms for exchanging experiences and best practices on combating food waste across the Member States. This would help ensure that resources are devoted to programmes that have proven to be effective, such as the (now finished) EU-funded GREENCOOK initiative⁹.

Although food safety must remain a priority, the EESC believes that authorities need to adapt certain administrative requirements in order to smooth the way for distributors who wish to channel goods towards food banks, rather than disposing of food which is still fit for consumption. The same applies to the food services sector. Steps should be taken to promote pilot schemes carried out in some Member States in the areas of discharge of liability for donors and tax incentives.

Finally, while communication with consumers is essential, this must be based on accurate analysis of the causes of waste. Alongside general awareness-raising about the impact of waste, the main focus should be on issues such as how to interpret the use-by dates of products, how to store food products and how to use leftovers.

Following the adoption of this Opinion, the EESC commissioned a study on food donation in the framework of an initiative promoted by EESC president Henri Malosse. The study provides a comparative overview of current legislation and practices concerning food donation in the EU Member States by mapping key hurdles, identifying best practices in the field and developing recommendations on how to legislate or interpret legislation in order to facilitate food donation. The recommendations of the study – which included EU-wide guidance on fiscal instruments, food-use hierarchy, liability and durability – were discussed at an EESC-organised conference on "Fighting food poverty and addressing food waste" in July 2014.

This study represents a valuable basis for the next crucial steps in making donation easier while guaranteeing food safety. We now need to take action at EU level.

Yves Somville, rapporteur on EESC Opinion "Civil society's contribution to a strategy for prevention and reduction of food losses and food waste

Further information

EESC opinions: www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.nat-opinions.25955

EESC Comparative Study on EU Member States' legislation and practices on food donation: <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-eu-food-donations>

EESC conference on food donation "Fighting food poverty and addressing food waste": <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.events-and-activities-eu-food-donations-programme>

Commission Roadmap to a resource-efficient Europe: http://ec.europa.eu/environment/resource_efficiency/pdf/com2011_571.pdf

Commission's Communication "Towards a circular economy: a zero waste programme for Europe": <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52014DC0398>

European Commission page on food waste: http://ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food_waste/index_en.htm

9. <http://www.green-cook.org/?lang=en>.