

**Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions — Food Waste**

(2017/C 017/06)

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**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

THE EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS,

**Introduction: overview of the global situation; terminology**

1. regards food waste and waste generated in the production, processing, distribution and consumption of food as a serious global problem which significantly inhibits the achievement of economic, social and environmental development goals. The problem can only be addressed through broad and determined cooperation bringing together different levels of government and areas of policymaking. Civil society and businesses must be fully involved in measures;
2. regards as unsustainable the current situation <sup>(1)</sup>, in which:
  - fully one third of products intended for human consumption are lost at various stages of the production process (as raw materials, semi-finished products or finished products),
  - 28 % of global arable land (1,4 billion hectares) produces food every year that goes to waste,
  - the climate impact of unutilised products generated at various stages of the process amounts to 3,6 Gt of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent (without taking into account emissions resulting from changes in land use),
  - wasteful production and consumption patterns entail substantial loss of global water resources, pose a threat to biodiversity in the form of arable land that has been unnecessarily cleared or is unproductive, impoverish the soil, and squander other finite natural resources,
  - the great volume of food lost along the production chain or at the finished product stage devalues agriculture and food production, and skews distribution between every player — also at the level of the consumer — in the food product value chain, with unfair results; the annual financial loss due to food waste is estimated at USD 1 trillion, the environmental cost at USD 700 billion and the social cost at USD 900 billion;
3. has drawn up this own-initiative opinion to support and encourage the entire international community, as well as the UN and its specialised agencies, in their endeavours to improve the current situation, namely, on achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) 2 and 12 (Zero hunger and Responsible consumption and production) which aims at halving food waste by 2030 <sup>(2)</sup>;
4. believes that the initiatives of the European Commission relating to resource efficiency and the circular economy also provide a good opportunity to develop projects and legislation to improve the sustainability of food production and consumption;

<sup>(1)</sup> Figures used to represent the situation are based on the report of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) entitled *Food wastage footprint — Impacts on natural resources* (2013).

<sup>(2)</sup> SDG 12.3 (By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses) and SDG 12.5 (By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse) in particular call for programmes and measures developed jointly by the different levels of government. SDG 2 (End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture) can be addressed by all local and regional authorities locally and internationally.

5. asks the European Commission to take action to develop standard terminology and definitions in this area at European level, and urges it to take part in and shape international dialogue and also to ensure that international observations and recommendations inform EU action. This would make it easier to identify the problems and draw comparisons, and to take the issues into account in the EU's own legislation and cooperation with its trading and development partners <sup>(3)</sup>. The EU is among other things an internal market and it has a common agricultural policy, and common concepts, procedures and comparable indicators are therefore needed. This could be the basis for establishing comparable criteria at regional level and interregionally for reducing and preventing the generation of food waste.

### European Union policies

The European Committee of the Regions considers that the European Union's own policies and common policies with the Member States offer considerable potential for addressing the food waste problem.

6. The proposal for revision of the *Waste Directive* (Directive 2008/98/EC) signal an attempt to further reduce the generation of waste, including food waste.

7. As far as the *common agricultural policy* is concerned, more effort should be made to ensure that both resource-efficient food production and measures to protect nature and the environment are considered fields of activity in their own right. 'Farming for subsidy' and restricting production effort are practices that lead to low yields and crops remaining unharvested, which entails waste in terms of both the end result and the entire effort of production.

8. Both on the domestic market and in international trade, *trade and consumer policy* should promote contractual practices and processes that reduce waste. For instance, packaging sizes adopted by the retail trade and standards applying to the shape and size of food products result in significant waste of edible food; promoting the sale of bulk products involving the use of recyclable household containers and so reducing the cost for consumers can help to teach people to buy only what they need rather than set portions which are often over-sized or attractive because they are cheaper.

9. The food expiration practices and labelling made to promote *consumer protection and public health* are not fit for purpose in the case of all products, with the result that edible food is unnecessarily thrown away. The Commission has a key role to play in establishing whether it would be possible to draw up guidelines on better resource use, for instance with respect to donating food products to charities and food banks, and employing as fodder food that has passed its use by date, subject to compliance with food safety requirements. It is necessary to educate all stakeholders, producers, retailers and consumers to improve understanding of expiration date labels; for instance, it should be made clear that the 'best before' date does not mean that the food will become toxic after that date.

10. In its *development policy* the European Union must join forces with other major donors to secure regional economic and trade cooperation agreements, and to invest in processes that are better at linking production with consumers, in infrastructure and technology, and above all in sustainable development of the natural resources and agriculture sectors. Fair trade programmes, not least those supported by local and regional authorities, can be an important tool in this respect. It is important to enhance the functioning of local markets and access to them for local products, not least through the internalisation of external costs (e.g. transportation of food).

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<sup>(3)</sup> Different definitions and calculation methods can lead to different conclusions. For the FAO, *food loss* is the decrease in quantity or quality of food reflected in nutritional value, economic value or food safety of all food produced for human consumption but not eaten by humans, while *food waste* is part of food loss and refers to discarding or alternative (non-food) use of safe and nutritious food for human consumption all along food supply chains. (FAO, 2014) [http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/save-food/PDF/FLW\\_Definition\\_and\\_Scope\\_2014.pdf](http://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/save-food/PDF/FLW_Definition_and_Scope_2014.pdf). FUSIONS (2014) defines food waste (or 'food spill') as any food, and inedible parts of food, removed from the food supply chain unutilised.

11. Measures to provide *assistance to deprived people* should continue to include a food aid component and should improve the link between relief organisations and local producers, retailers and catering services, as well as providing for the sale of food products approaching their use-by date directly at a token cost and guaranteeing dignity and privacy for people receiving or buying products under these terms. Cooperation with the third sector should be based on proximity, with the focus on local networks and donations or home deliveries to individual towns or networks of towns, as far as possible avoiding storage and distribution of donations via major regional networks. The amount of food that goes to waste will be reduced by diversifying food products and including local and seasonal products in such programmes <sup>(4)</sup>.

12. *Public procurement* rules could contain clauses aimed at reducing and preventing food waste.

### **Proposals for practical measures from the perspective of local and regional authorities**

The European Committee of the Regions

13. reminds the European Commission of its past call for more specific objectives to be set for reducing food waste by 30 % by 2025 <sup>(5)</sup> and urges the Commission to develop uniform methodologies for data collection in order to review the food waste reduction targets;

14. welcomes the European Commission's commitment to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals through appropriate steps, the involvement of stakeholders, the sharing of valuable and successful innovation and relevant benchmarking <sup>(6)</sup>;

15. urges the Commission to consider the possibility of setting individual reduction targets for every phase of the food production chain: production, processing, selling and distribution, catering services, households and food waste treatment. These targets could form an overarching common EU target, with country-specific programmes and targets being drawn up to achieve it, based on each country's characteristics in each of the phases mentioned, as has been done for example with climate change policy. In order to fully take into account the technical, economic and environmental context, country-specific programmes and plans would be drawn up by all levels of government in cooperation;

16. recommends that the European Commission set up a European platform bringing together different levels of government and relevant stakeholders for the purpose of preventing and reducing food waste and improving the ways in which food waste is managed; expresses its interest in being involved in activities relating to benchmarking of practical measures and promoting best practice;

17. calls on the European Commission to promote and encourage the creation of conventions between the retail food sector and charity associations in EU Member States (i.e. the initiative taken by France who recently passed a law preventing large shops from binning good quality food approaching its best-before date as well as from destroying unsold food fit for consumption). Food donation guides are also needed for industry and charities to clarify liability and encourage businesses to integrate redistribution mechanisms in their supply chain processes. Similar procedures should also be created in other parts of the food sector, such as catering and tourism services. Safety and public health concerns should be assessed in each area of application, using criteria tailored to these areas;

18. invites local and regional authorities, regarding foodstuffs withdrawn or removed from the primary distribution, to establish effective secondary distribution chains (like the model of social grocery stores) and guaranteeing access disadvantaged people to still usable food; recommends that financial support be granted for charities and food banks to increase their operating capacity;

19. draws also the attention to the fish discards which represents one of the important sources of food waste; invites the European Commission to envisage a comprehensive plan (recommendations/guidelines) for the processing and marketing of fish products originating from bycatch. Such a plan could include recommendations on how to use unwanted catch that is suitable for human consumption;

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<sup>(4)</sup> The CoR reiterates its position on the content of the FEAD Regulation.

<sup>(5)</sup> CoR Resolution on Sustainable Food.

<sup>(6)</sup> COM(2015) 614 final.

20. urges local and regional authorities that provide catering services to draw up their own programmes to prevent the production of food waste and for efficiently utilising the food waste that is produced. The Committee urges that companies commissioned to provide catering services to authorities be required to introduce the same measures <sup>(7)</sup>;

21. stresses the importance of promoting the exchange of good practice on a wide scale. This should primarily involve promoting programmes supporting local consumption of products marketed by local producers through short supply chains and donations. Use of good practice can, through accumulated experience, promote the adoption of appropriate measures by providing local administrations with sufficient information to implement such development programmes, while encouraging administrations which have not yet made any progress in this regard;

22. recommends that as far as possible local and regional products and seasonal products be used as raw materials for catering services (including public catering services, tourist facilities and guest houses, restaurants and other establishments carrying out similar activities) and advocates lobbying on behalf of locally produced food to shorten the production and consumption chain, which reduces the number of processing stages and thus also the waste generated during the various phases;

23. recommends implementing codes of good practice in businesses in the food, catering and hotel sectors to aim to make optimal use of products so that excess food is used for social purposes, through effective distribution networks and with all the guarantees so it can be used by social entities and disadvantaged families;

24. encourages municipalities and local authorities delivering basic school education and other education services to include the issue of food waste and its mitigation as part of the curriculum, for instance through theme days, study visits and students learning how food is managed in their own institution, as well as for instance involving students and other catering service customers in developing catering services. It is important that as many schoolchildren and students as possible get an overall picture during their studies of the way food production and consumption affect the economy, the environment and socially and ethically sustainable consumer behaviour;

it is also important to carry out information and training campaigns on responsible consumption aimed at all consumers, not only schoolchildren, focusing particularly on buying products that meet actual needs and conserving these products;

25. advocates also including the reduction and prevention of food waste in lifelong learning programmes, in which learning methods and approaches geared to different age groups and life stages can be developed;

26. calls on municipalities and local authorities to mount campaigns in cooperation with civil society organisations to raise awareness of the importance of meal planning for households;

27. stresses the key role and commitment of regional civil society organisations and stakeholders which collect and redistribute food derived from food waste; with a view to subsidiarity, thinks there should be closer collaboration between local and regional administrations and welfare organisations responsible for collecting and redistributing food derived from food waste;

28. recommends that local and regional authorities responsible for waste management develop waste sorting and recycling schemes, indicate the proportion of food waste more clearly and make the data collected universally accessible, so as to help increase the level of recycling of food waste, for instance as biogas and compost. This could also have a positive effect on the local economy, employment and local innovation;

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<sup>(7)</sup> For instance, the EESC and CoR have their own eco-management rules and practical cooperation to recycle surplus food with the help of local organisations.

29. encourages all CoR members in their own local or regional authorities to publicise the objectives of this opinion and to implement their own food waste reduction and prevention programmes. This is one of the most efficient and rapidly effective methods that local and regional authorities can deploy directly to achieve ecologically and economically sustainable development.

Brussels, 15 June 2016.

*The President  
of the European Committee of the Regions*  
Markku MARKKULA

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