



European Economic and Social Committee

NAT/570
Prevention and reduction
of food waste

Brussels, 20 March 2013

OPINION

of the

European Economic and Social Committee

on

Civil society's contribution to a strategy for prevention and reduction of food losses
and food waste

(own-initiative opinion)

Rapporteur: **Mr Somville**

On 12 July 2012, the European Economic and Social Committee, acting under Rule 29(2) of its Rules of Procedure, decided to draw up an own-initiative opinion on

Civil society's contribution to a strategy for prevention and reduction of food losses and food waste.

The Section for Agriculture, Rural Development and the Environment, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 29 January 2013.

At its 488th plenary session, held on 20 and 21 March 2013 (meeting of 20 March), the European Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 159 votes to 1 with 1 abstention.

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

- 1.1 In a world where many people do not have enough to eat and resources are limited, the Committee believes that the prevention and reduction of food losses and food waste must imperatively be given a key place on the political agenda. The Committee is also pleased that the European Parliament has become active and the Commission has recently undertaken various initiatives in this field.
- 1.2 In order to ensure that policies are consistent, the Committee underscores the need for a definition and a common EU methodology to quantify food losses and food waste. However, it considers that in view of the current situation and the objectives set, steps need to be taken without waiting to see the results of programmes currently underway.
- 1.3 The Committee is in favour of developing and continuing platforms for exchanging experience on combating food waste in EU regions and Member States in order to make the best use of the resources devoted to these programmes and to promote initiatives which prove effective.
- 1.4 As the resources available to food banks are unfortunately declining and their needs rising sharply as a result of the economic crisis, the Committee draws particular attention to the need for the distribution and food service sectors to channel the greatest possible number of products still fit for consumption to them. Steps must be taken to disseminate initiatives in place in some Member States in the areas of taxation, discharge of liability for donors or

adapting certain administrative constraints to make donating easier while guaranteeing food safety.

- 1.5 Training has a key role to play as regards waste reduction. It would be useful to include this topic in the curriculum and ongoing training modules of future food service professionals in the collective and private sectors. The same approach could be taken in training establishments for packaging designers with regard to food conservation and ensuring maximum use of contents.
- 1.6 The Committee considers that communication with consumers is clearly essential and that it needs to be based on accurate analysis of the causes of waste. Alongside general awareness raising about the impact of waste, the main focus will be on how to interpret use-by dates of products, how to plan ahead as regards shopping, how to store food products, how to use leftovers, etc. Communication will be tailored to household type.
- 1.7 Research as a whole needs to prioritise this issue, as every link in the food chain is concerned. Applied agricultural research thus continues to be relevant as further improvements in production techniques are needed. Further on down the chain, progress with regard to packaging should also help to prevent and reduce waste (conservation, smart labelling, etc.).
- 1.8 As regards primary production, the interprofessional tools recommended by the CAP will need to be made effective and sustainable. Particular attention will be given to initiatives developing low-food-mile systems which can play a role in reducing losses and waste.

2. **Introduction**

- 2.1 Since the food crisis of 2008-2009, food security has been the number one concern of most groups of policy-makers and international organisations. The sharp rise in the price of cereals and other crops in 2012 has intensified this interest.
- 2.2 Efficient agricultural production will continue to be the key factor in feeding the world's population.
- 2.3 Agricultural production will need to increase by 60% in order to cope with the increase in the world's population (set to reach around 9 billion by 2050), despite declining resources and climate change; an effective drive to combat food losses and food waste will be needed as well.
- 2.4 These losses and waste, which affect every link in the food chain albeit to varying degrees, are globally estimated to represent one-third of the volume of food intended for human consumption(*Global food losses and food waste*, FAO).

2.5 In the EU 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 exclusion, and the number of beneficiaries of the European aid programme for the most deprived persons rose from 13 million in 2008 to 18 million in 2010¹. Food banks therefore need ever more resources in order to cope.

2.6 This opinion is in line with the strategic discussion on Europe 2020. Furthermore, the European Commission communication on the efficient use of resources² contains a section on food and the need to reduce food waste.

3. **An overview of the issue**

3.1 **Definitions**

3.1.1 The concepts of food loss and food waste need to be analysed holistically, from production through to consumption, including the intermediary stages of processing and distribution and without overlooking food services outside the home.

3.1.2 In the EU, the production stage is responsible for a relatively small share of food losses, particularly since any products which do not meet regulatory or market standards and which cannot be used directly for human consumption are fully or partly used for processing. Unusable products should be used for animal feed or bio-fuel or returned to the soil in order to boost the organic material content.

3.1.3 Food losses and food waste can be defined as any product initially intended for human consumption, excluding products which are not for use as food, which is thrown out or destroyed at every stage in the food chain from farm to consumer. According to the FAO, food losses occur at the start of the food chain (primary production, post-harvest and processing stages) whereas food waste is observed at the end of the chain (distribution and end consumer stages).

3.1.4 Inedible crop residues and processing by-products do not, therefore, fall within the scope of food losses and food waste. However, as knowledge and technology advance, it may be possible to use items which are not currently edible and cannot be processed into by-products. These definitions should therefore not be considered to be set in stone.

3.1.5 Still with regard to the production stage, successive CAP reforms in recent years have adapted mechanisms so as to prevent and improve management of market surpluses. However, improvements in the way the chain functions, for example genuinely boosting the negotiating powers of farmers, still need to be put into effect.

¹ EESC opinion on *Distribution of food products to the most deprived persons in the Union* ([OJ C 43, 15.2.2012 p. 94-98](#)).

² COM(2011) 571 final, *Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe* p. 21.

3.2 **The scale of the problem in the food chain**

- 3.2.1 Food losses and food waste occur in every part of the world. However, according to the FAO, in developing countries over 40% of these losses take place in the post-harvest and processing stages, whereas in industrialised countries they occur chiefly in the distribution and consumption stages.
- 3.2.2 According to a European Commission study published in 2010, the volume of food waste is 179 kg per person per year. This is divided between the various links in the food chain as follows: 42% for households, 39% for food industries, 5% for distribution and 14% for food services outside the home. Without a policy shift, by 2020, this quantity is likely to rise by 40%. It should also be pointed out that this study does not factor in food losses and food waste during the farming and fishing stages.
- 3.2.3 A study carried out in Brussels on the content of household dustbins showed that food waste makes up 11.7% of overall household waste. This can be broken down as follows: 47.7% partly eaten products, 26.7% out-of-date products and 25.5% leftovers.

3.3 **The causes of food losses and food waste**

- 3.3.1 In developing and low-income countries, the bulk of losses occur in the production and post-harvest stage owing to financial resources insufficient to improve existing infrastructure.
- 3.3.2 In industrialised countries, however, the problem is more behavioural in nature. In recent decades in the EU, rising agricultural productivity has made it possible to guarantee a reasonably priced food supply for the public. This development, coupled with a rise in disposable income, has had the effect of slashing the proportion of people's budget which is spent on food. This trend can partly explain the increase in consumer waste.
- 3.3.3 Sociological reasons such as changes in family structure or lifestyle are also contributing factors in food waste.
- 3.3.4 Some visual quality standards applied to fresh produce by distribution chains can be a source of waste: products fit for consumption are rejected at the production stage for reasons other than food safety.
- 3.3.5 Some processors could adapt certain techniques in order to help reduce waste. It is difficult to completely empty some packets, some products are packaged in a way which does not reflect households' sociological development, some types of packaging do not reseal properly, etc.
- 3.3.6 Although the primary aim of business practices is to encourage people to buy, some of them can also promote a specific form of waste (for example, purely price-based communication;

three for the price of two, etc.). Here again however, studies have pinpointed major behavioural differences between different types of families.

- 3.3.7 There is considerable confusion among consumers on the difference between "use-by" and "best before" dates, which leads to food being wasted. In the United Kingdom, research into labelling has shown that 45% to 49% of consumers misunderstand the use-by dates on products, accounting for 20% of total avoidable food waste WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme).

3.4 **The impact of food losses and food waste**

- 3.4.1 Food losses and food waste have an economic, a social and an environmental impact.
- 3.4.2 The environmental impact is the most tangible, as it translates directly into an increase in the degradable part of household waste. In addition to the waste generated, any food waste means that the resources used to produce, process and distribute the product have been thrown away. The further along the food chain the food is wasted, the more resources are wasted.
- 3.4.3 The production of greenhouse gases contributes adversely to climate change. The household stage has the greatest impact in this respect, with 45% of estimated emissions linked to food waste; the processing sector accounts for around 35% of annual emissions. However, according to this study, estimates of greenhouse gas production should be viewed with caution, as they are dependent on the reliability of food waste figures (Preparatory study on food waste across the EU-27, executive summary, October 2010).
- 3.4.4 For the consumer as well as for the other links in the chain, any waste is a financial loss. Waste policies will become more vigorous in future, imposing additional costs (cost of transport to landfills, taxes, etc.) for the various players in the chain. This trend will necessarily encourage investment in prevention.
- 3.4.5 Both socially and ethically, it is inconceivable that no political action should be taken to reduce the scale of food losses and food waste, particularly at a time when the economic crisis is dragging increasing numbers of people down into poverty across the EU. The ever-growing needs of food banks illustrate this worrying trend.

4. **Current initiatives**

- 4.1 Many initiatives are taking place at global, European, national and local level, ranging from behavioural and quantification studies to grassroots projects.
- 4.2 International projects include the FAO's Global Initiative on Food Loss and Waste Reduction (Save Food) that establishes public-private partnerships and evidence-based policy development and investment support based on resource mobilisation, coherent and

coordinated assessments and data analysis of food losses and wastage; awareness raising; networking and capacity building among stakeholders of the food and agricultural system.

- 4.3 On 19 January 2012, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on the strategy for a more efficient food chain. It called on the European Commission to take practical steps to reduce food waste by 50% by 2025. The Parliament wants a coordinated strategy with European and national measures to be implemented so as to reduce losses at every stage of the food chain.
- 4.4 In its communication on the efficient use of resources³, the Commission dedicates a chapter to food, and calls on the Member States to solve the problem of food waste in the context of their national waste prevention plans. It is stated here that food waste should be halved by 2020.
- 4.5 The Commission has published on August 2011 Guidelines on the Preparation of Food Waste Prevention Programmes which aims to help Member States to develop national waste prevention programmes in the domain of food waste. Furthermore the Commission has set up a dedicated food waste website with information on food waste prevention (i.e. 10 Tips to reduce food waste, clarification sheet on the difference between "best before" and "use by" dates, a compilation of good practices, etc.).
- 4.6 Lastly, the Commission is currently preparing a communication on sustainable food, which will devote a key chapter to food waste, due to be published at the end of 2013. Within the advisory group on the food chain and animal and plant health, a working group on food losses and food waste has been set up so that the Commission and all major stakeholders in the food chain can hold discussions on this subject.
- 4.7 Greencook is an initiative partly funded by the EAFRD (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development) which aims to reduce food waste. The cross-sector partnership makes it possible to discuss the various initiatives being carried out on the ground, helping these to move beyond the experimental stage and become widespread strategy. Progress reports are encouraging and the final conclusions are due to appear in 2014.
- 4.8 The Council, too, is looking into issues surrounding sustainable food production. The vision recently set out by Austria and endorsed by 16 Member States for a new European Food Model covers, among other things, aspects relating to the appreciation of food, which should help to avoid food waste (see 16821/12).
- 4.9 In the United Kingdom, WRAP has been active for several years, focusing on quantification and campaigns on preventing food losses and food waste. This association was behind an agreement (the Courtauld Commitment) between the main UK retailers and many of the

³ COM(2011) 571 final, *Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe*.

largest food and drink producers to promote and implement measures to reduce waste. There has been an improvement in the food chain since the project's launch in 2006/2007.

- 4.10 The food services stage is another critical point in food losses. A report published in the United Kingdom by the Sustainable Restaurant Association (Restaurant Food Waste Survey Report (2010)) sheds light on what goes on in this sector. The initial aim was to establish more accurate figures on the food waste generated by ten restaurants which are SRA members, divided into three categories: food left by consumers, food wasted during preparation and products which are damaged or unusable for various reasons. The analysis was intended to lead to practical recommendations for reducing these losses.
- 4.11 With the economic and financial crises, food banks are concerned that their resources are shrinking while their needs are growing, with variations between the Member States. There are agreements between various charitable associations and stakeholders in the distribution and processing industries which enable products withdrawn from sale to be used. Naturally, these food products comply fully with health and safety requirements.

5. **General comments**

- 5.1 Faced with the challenges of demographic developments, climate change and the need to use resources efficiently, combating food losses and food waste must be considered part of the solution to the problem of food security.
- 5.2 The first step must be to develop different approaches to developing and industrialised countries.
- 5.3 In developing countries, losses occur primarily during the first stages of the chain; the solutions proposed must therefore be different and have already been addressed in a number of EESC documents. In industrialised countries, including the EU, the fight against food losses and food waste needs to focus on the processing, distribution, consumer and food services stages.
- 5.4 In industrialised countries, however, the problem is more behavioural in nature: over the last forty years, food has become a much smaller item in terms of household expenditure, and this probably encourages consumers to be more careless of it. Some studies show that attitudes to food, both purchasing and consumption, vary according to family type (level of income, size and age of household, etc.). This will need to be taken into account to make the necessary education, awareness and information campaigns as effective as possible.
- 5.5 When considering the wide range of studies and initiatives on combating food losses and food waste, it is clear that reliable and comparable figures are crucial. Developing an EU-level definition and common methodology for quantifying losses and waste is thus a priority, and this will be done as part of the European programme for research and technological

development (FP7) "Fusions" project launched in August 2012. This project also focuses on sharing and developing best practices, organising events involving various partners, raising awareness and issuing policy recommendations. However, the urgency of the matter and the goals that have been set mean that practical steps have to be taken alongside research into improving data.

- 5.6 In order to make the best possible use of the results of projects in place at EU, national and local level, a framework encouraging stakeholders to pool information and best practice needs to be set up.
- 5.7 As a general rule:
- efforts to reduce food losses and food waste must respect a waste hierarchy: first prevention, then use for human consumption (such as donations to food banks), then use for animal consumption and lastly energy production and composting;
 - actions need to be taken at every stage in the food chain. Incentive-based approaches will as far as possible be given priority;
 - all actions designed to reduce losses and waste must comply fully with food safety requirements.
- 5.8 Although large-scale distribution is not the worst culprit in terms of generating waste, it can play a key role in reducing waste by adapting certain business practices and ensuring that consumers are more informed and aware of the issues at stake.
- 5.9 However, when analysing studies of sales practices, it is not always easy to identify which practices have a clear impact either way on food waste. There is a range of criteria which dictate whether specific practices will have a positive impact on waste, such as household size, its type or the type of food concerned.
- 5.10 The conclusions of a study by the CRIOC (Belgian Consumer Research and Information Centre) on business practices in Belgium suggest a number of initiatives that could be developed in collaboration with the distribution sector to encourage consumers to make responsible choices. These could include opening up dialogue with consumers on origin, production method and nutritional value rather than just the price factor, or teaching people how to interpret use-by dates correctly.
- 5.11 Given that food banks are faced with falling resources and increasing demand for their services, the authorities must leave no stone unturned in helping food to reach them. Although food safety must remain a priority, 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 (subject to certain conditions) and tax incentives.

- 5.12 During the campaign encouraging the food services sector to use local products, it became clear that local producers and cooperatives can be discouraged by the existing red tape. Giving these actors easier access to public procurement could be part of the solution. Local authorities also have a role to play here, both as regards developing specific criteria for the canteens for which they are responsible, and in training staff on more sustainable food practices.
- 5.13 Still with regard to the food services sector, the various initiatives have demonstrated the need to communicate with staff and consumers in order to change behaviour.
- 5.14 The training of future chefs should be adapted to include raising awareness of the various aspects of food waste such as stock management, recycling, the potential financial benefits or the consumer-based approach.
- 5.15 Any prevention policy must be based on joint, coordinated action by all stakeholders. The measures will need to be tailored to the actors, types of food and methods of consumption in question, so as to produce tangible results as rapidly as possible.
- 5.16 One example is the need to open dialogue with the processing industry to urge it to market products which will help reduce food waste by households (packaging design, appropriate quantities and formats for certain food products, etc.). This issue should also be included in the training curriculum of packaging designers.
- 5.17 At primary production level, various lines of action could be encouraged and developed:
- to continue and even step up applied animal and plant research in order to reduce losses resulting from illnesses, technical deficiencies or weather-related issues; the European Innovation Partnership on Agricultural productivity and sustainability could be incorporated into this procedure;
 - to encourage interprofessional agreements, recommended by the current and future CAP, ensuring that they are effective and sustainable;
 - agriculture will continue to play a key role as an agri-food industry supplier, but promoting and developing low-food-mile systems can help reduce losses and waste by doing away with middlemen between production and consumption.
- 5.18 Currently, the scale and causes of food losses and food waste are in principle well known, but more accurate data on the amount of food lost owing to each cause is needed. The various studies quantifying food losses and food waste at the various stages are clearly crucial to improving our understanding of this issue and introducing prevention measures based on

valid, verifiable arguments. This is particularly important given that the costs linked to waste, via the volume of waste generated, will inevitably rise in the future.

- 5.19 There are many factors behind food waste by consumers and these vary from one Member State to another based on culture, climate, diet and type of household. This observation further complicates the choice of communication geared to the EU level.

Brussels, 20 March 2013.

The President
of the
Economic and Social Committee

Staffan Nilsson
