

## Case study 10: Regulatory instruments and voluntary action to reduce food waste (France, Denmark, Belgium)

### Description of the policy instrument

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), about one third of the food globally produced for human consumption is lost or wasted. To address this issue, the UN has introduced a target to cut global food waste at retail and consumer levels by 50 per cent and to considerably reduce food losses along supply chains by 2030.<sup>247</sup>

In line with this broader global goal, and supported by national or regional regulations, several initiatives have emerged across Europe to raise awareness of ways to minimise food waste and to foster change in consumer behaviour. Some examples include regulations banning supermarkets from throwing away or destroying unsold food, or incentives to redistribute surplus food.

France was the first country to ban supermarkets from throwing away/destroying unsold food, instead obliging them to donate any surplus food to charities or food banks.<sup>248</sup> The measure, which has been implemented as part of a wider goal to halve food waste in France by 2025, started from a bottom-up campaign led by citizens and activists, before being passed into law in 2015. This law also introduced an education programme on food waste for schools and businesses.<sup>249</sup>

Another pioneer in the field is Denmark. In 2016, a Danish charity NGO DanChurchAid (DCA) set up Wefood, the world's first supermarket selling exclusively surplus goods. Wefood sells goods that regular supermarkets can no longer sell due to overdue 'best before' dates, wrong labels or damaged packaging.<sup>250</sup> This market-based initiative has been successful in offering city-wide holistic solutions to reduce food waste in Copenhagen. The profits from Wefood are used to tackle famine in countries where DCA works, including South Sudan, Ethiopia and Bangladesh.

Much of Wefood's success can be explained by its unique structure, which is based on a collaborative agreement between Wefood and Føtex, one of Denmark's largest supermarket chains.<sup>251</sup> Føtex has set very ambitious goals to reduce food waste, with the aim of halving its food waste by 2030. This is supported, and enabled, by the business partnership between the NGO and Wefood. Promotion of such partnerships, and ensuring that the required regulatory framework is in place to support them, could allow these types of partnerships to be scaled up and adopted across many EU countries.

Since 2014 and 2015 respectively in the Brussels and Walloon regions of Belgium, supermarkets have had to offer their unsold food products to redistribution/charitable organisations in order to renew their environmental permits. As stipulated by these local regulations, supermarkets must offer unsold products before the 'best before' date to at least one food redistribution charity before sending them to other forms of disposal.<sup>252</sup> This is another model that could be easily applied to other regulatory contexts. Moreover, it can achieve two positive outcomes at once: a reduction in food waste (and therefore emissions) and access to free or very low-cost food to low-income households during the current cost of living crisis.

To help keep track of the global shift towards more resource-conscious food packaging, the Food Packaging Forum has developed the Brand and Retailer Initiatives Database of voluntary initiatives and commitments by food brands (including manufacturers) and retailers (including stores, restaurants, caterers).<sup>253</sup> This is a searchable, online resource which provides information about numerous promising business initiatives.

### Why did it work or not work?

The emergence of supermarkets engaged with sustainable strategies for surplus food has been incentivised, supported and reinforced by broader policy developments at various governance levels to reduce food waste and improve circular practices.

However, there are numerous examples of companies that take voluntary action, entirely without government incentives or support, to reduce waste in their operations. Small-scale supermarkets and food businesses across Europe have introduced, or opted to participate in, various promising solutions to make shopping more sustainable. These include innovative ideas such as Original Unverpackt in Berlin,<sup>254</sup> Albert Heijn Packaging Free shopping concept in the Netherlands,<sup>255</sup> unPacked in Madrid and YES FUTURE in Barcelona,<sup>256</sup> or 'Too Good to Go'<sup>257</sup> in many countries across Europe, to name but a few.



A common feature of these pilot-scale, voluntary endeavours is that they are all bottom-up initiatives that did not emerge in response to a certain policy initiative or regulation. Indeed, some of them have been motivated by the lack of policies and regulations. As such, these provide good examples of what companies can do independent of all levels of government, to lead by example and demonstrate that the business sector is ready to implement more sustainable practices. This can also encourage regulations to be applied to enforce these rules more broadly.

## Key learnings

Successful initiatives to reduce food waste in the retail sector are often explained by a combination of three supporting factors, as the example of Denmark illustrates. Firstly, the existence of a leader who becomes 'the face' of an initiative. This can be either a company or an individual. Secondly, strong support from local, regional or national government as real change can take place through voluntary action but is complemented by government policies and regulations. Thirdly, strong support and co-operation from the retail and hospitality sectors.<sup>258</sup>

