

Our common vision and policy recommendations for "Working socially with food surplus"

INTRODUCTION & SITUATION

This paper is drawn up with and by the participants of the learning network "Working socially with food surplus". The unique feature of this learning network – and therefore this paper too – is that there are organisations present from all different types of initiatives who are active in food aid and "working socially with food surplus" in Flanders: the Belgian Federation of Food Banks, food distribution organisations, social neighbourhood and town restaurants, social grocers, ... in the lap of poverty organisations, Public Centres for Social Welfare and welfare and social economy organisations.

The learning network 'working socially with food surplus' forms part of an order by the Flemish Minister of Poverty Reduction to KOMOSIE n.p.o.¹ to support existing and start-up initiatives who are working with food surplus or would like to do so.

OUR VISION

Food surplus is not acceptable for ethical, social, environmental and economic reasons. We are indignant about the enormous scale of food lost in the world and in Flanders. According to the FAO 1/3 of produced food ends up in the bin (1.3 billion tons per year), and that while 870 million people are starving. In Flanders approximately 2 million tons of food and waste (non-edible parts of food production) are lost each year².

The consciousness of the Flemish government, food industry, distribution sector, etc. is growing and several measures for addressing food waste were taken or provided such as the commitment declaration "Together against Food Loss" of the Flemish government and chain partners (31/03/2014)³. There are indeed many more possibilities and opportunities to support working socially with food surplus and reducing the mountain of waste.

Despite these actions on various levels in the food chain, food surplus is unavoidable. The Flemish government – fortunately – uses the cascade of value retention⁴ as guidelines for dealing with food surplus. It is logical to focus firstly on the first step, namely the prevention of food surplus. We have however determined that (too) little structural policy attention is given to the second step, "the application for human feeding". There are still large quantities of quality food surpluses that have low-grade application in the form of animal feed, manure or biomethanisation.

Valorised food surpluses should, in principle, be accessible to everyone. Free distribution is a possibility and for some people in poverty it may be the only access to food. By making the current food surpluses safely accessible for disadvantaged groups, healthy, cheap and varied feeding is available. The theme "Working socially with food surplus" allows for working from an emancipatory vision for fighting poverty. The guarantee to the basic right to food, and also possibly allowing people to pay a lower price for the chosen products, has a positive effect on their self-esteem. By giving people in poverty a say we can involve them in the manner in which social initiatives are built around dealing with food surplus. For people in poverty, who work as volunteers, a low-threshold approach can be offered to introduce training and employment opportunities; all promoting their reintegration back into society.

We are also convinced of the (economic) potential of jobs for low-skilled and long-term unemployed for this particular niche. Social economy and mainstream businesses can still bring about various sustainable and innovative solutions which reduce food surplus and which goes hand in hand with the creation of social employment. There are many examples in practice at the moment, usually with the participation of many

1 More info: www.komosie.be/thema's/voedselverlies

2 See www.vlaanderen.be/landbouw/voedselverlies

4 Cascade of value retention: prevention of food surplus at the source – application for humane feeding – application in animal feeding – raw materials for industry – processing into fertilizer through fermentation and/or composting – application for renewable energy: goal is generating energy – incineration as waste (without generating energy) – dumping (illegal in Flanders)

3 Source: "Voedsel in ketenperspectief", OVAM, 2012

volunteers. And there are many initiatives starting up or in the pipeline. This also provides opportunities for reintegration of unemployed people into the mainstream labour market to existing mainstream sectors (e.g. logistics or catering), which can help solve some occupations experiencing bottlenecks.

The food banks, food distribution initiatives with whom they work, social grocers, social restaurants and other social (economy) organisations each have their own way of working; each method has its own value. However, what they all have in common is that they can use structural support to work in a qualitative manner with food surplus or to start with it.

OUR POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

We specifically ask that:

1. Sustainable action is taken to support this 2nd step in the cascade of value retention: "valorise as much food surpluses as possible for human consumption". This can take place through a combination of:

a. 'Hard' measures in the form of financial support for:

- i. Investments and equipment for transport (refrigerated-/trucks, cooler boxes ...), storage (fridges/-cells, deep freezers, respecting cold chain logistics) or processing (kitchen equipment ...) of food surpluses in a food-safe manner up to the social (economy) organisations who have contact with the disadvantaged.
- ii. An adequate registration and product follow-up system for the products which have been taken out of the mainstream sales circuit.
- iii. "Leverage projects" which channel the current surpluses in the food chain for social redistribution. These are usually not self-sustaining, but besides economic advantages (lower purchase costs, reduction of waste disposal costs ...) there are also big (direct or indirect) social gains that exceed the direct financial costs. e.g. at the level of:
 - fighting poverty,
 - reducing food surpluses,
 - promoting healthy eating habits and healthy food,
 - creation of social employment for disadvantaged groups (low-skilled job seekers ...).

Examples of these leverage projects can include:

- on the model of ANDES in France: fruit and vegetables withdrawn from the market at auctions can be maximally redistributed to disadvantaged groups with the assistance of a social economy project which manages sorting, distribution and possible processing or storage of the surpluses in an efficient and food-safe manner.
- smoothly structured cooperation between local supermarkets and local food aid initiatives where products which might be unsellable are collected as early as possible before the expiry date and redistributed to people from disadvantaged groups, with the help of volunteers and/or socially employed.

By connecting smartly the existing fragmented budgets within the separate policy domains or by aligning them better; such leverage projects around food surplus can be sustainably financed.

b. 'Soft' measures: more support for:

- i. Dialogue and sustainable partnerships between the government, food industry and social organisations active around food aid and working socially with food surplus.
 - e.g. (keep) promoting to food companies the possibilities of working together with these social organisations.
 - e.g. with the chain role-players, detect where quality and healthy food surpluses are as early as possible so that these can be made available as long as possible before the expiry date to food aid initiatives who distribute these to the disadvantaged groups.
 - e.g. a representative of the social organisations formally taken up in the "Vlaams Ketenoverleg Voedselverlies" (Flemish Consultation between Chain Partners on Food Loss).

- ii. quality care (which includes compliance with food safety regulations)
 - iii. establishing cooperative agreements and clear procedures for the collection and distribution of quality food surpluses for social redistribution. For surpluses which cannot be distributed in time, procedures are to be made available for better preservation (freezing ...) and/or processing into new healthy products (soups, juices, jams ...).
 - iv. involve people from disadvantaged groups in a participatory manner with discussions and seeking solutions so that their voice is also heard.
 - v. exceptions to the 'free' story. Donated food can be, but need not be, made freely available to people in poverty. Under certain conditions, it should be allowed to charge a (very) low price for this. This is desirable from an emancipatory vision on fighting poverty as it strengthens the self-image of people in poverty. It also enables social (economy) initiatives to partially recoup unavoidable costs (e.g. transport, storage, distribution and/or processing/preparation of food). A price range can be determined objectively.
- c. Financial stimulation for companies: make the application of food surpluses for human consumption more attractive by:
- i. widening the recent VAT exemption for donation of food to food banks to other social (economy) organisations whose primary goal is to assist people in poverty.
 - ii. e.g. in-kind donations from companies that donate food to food aid initiatives can be made tax deductible and/or be given exemption from waste disposal fees; such as those which currently exist in France.
2. Project-based support and expansion for social workplaces, initiatives in the local service economy and other employment programs in the social economy as a lever to start-up these new activities in the food surplus niche.
 3. Make goals, actions and commitments concrete rather than non-committal, such as the future Chain Road Map based on the commitment declaration 'Together against Food Loss' of the Flemish government and chain partners (31/03/2014). Supply legal goals for the prevention of food surplus.
 4. Continuation of the support at Flemish level to stimulate getting started with working socially with food surplus.

A combined timing of the above measures will have a leverage effect and ensure that 'working socially with food surplus' can grow throughout Flanders and in keeping with a qualitative and professional level.

The organisations that a.o. endorse these policy recommendations are:

the Belgian Federation of Food Banks, Flanders Social Grocers, Leren Ondernemen, MetSense, KRAS (Umbrella organisation of poverty organisations in Greater Ghent), Teledienst Ninove, Community Development Ghent, Wijkcentrum De Kring, MIVAS - afdeling Goed Gevoel, Kommaraf, Welzijnsconsortium Zuid-West-Vlaanderen, Sociaal winkelpunt, Samenlevingsopbouw RIMO Limburg, 't Gebeurte en 't Sociaal Profijtje.

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