

# WASTE NOT, WANT NOT



Awareness of food waste, and efforts to cut it down, are becoming increasingly widespread. With education as the driving force behind the EU LIFE FOSTER project, **Marie-Claire Grima** seeks to find out why curbing food waste makes sense for the planet, as well as for business.

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JOE TANTI

Global food loss and waste – food that is discarded or lost without being eaten – amounts to around one-third of all food produced, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Food waste and loss accounts for 8 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, according to the FAO, and an alarming 2018 report by the Boston Consulting Group predicts that the amount of food that is wasted each year is set to rise by a third by 2030, when 2.1 billion tonnes will either be lost or thrown away. This is equivalent to a staggering 66 tonnes of food wasted each second.

“Food waste has always been an environmental and a social equity problem. However, with intensive agricultural practices making food readily available all year round – including out of season – it has led to a drastic decline in the nurturing relationship between society and nature’s ability to provide humankind with food,” says Dr Alexandra Mifsud, who lectures at the Centre for Environmental Education and Research (CEER) at the University of Malta. “The inequitable abundance of food in westernised societies – as the rest of the world suffers famine and malnourishment – is undoubtedly a moral problem as well as an environmental one. It is a reflection of the self-absorbed attitude and short-sightedness typically present



in modern societies. Unless there is a radical shift in these societal traits, and in food production practices, I would be inclined to say that the rise of food waste is set to continue.”

Loss and wastage occur at all stages of the food supply chain or value chain. In low-income countries, most loss occurs during

production, whilst in developed countries, a great deal of food is wasted at the consumption stage, particularly in restaurants and other outside catering establishments. “Food service production accounts for 12 per cent of the EU’s total food waste, according to the results of the 2016 project FUSION,” say Professor Nadia Tecco and Professor Franco Fassio, from Northern Italy’s University of Gastronomic Sciences. “If no corrective measures will be adopted in the next years, such a major environmental problem, which also has economic and social repercussions, could get even worse,” they explain.

“By throwing away the equivalent of 21 kg per person each year in Europe, the hospitality industry is contributing to the depletion of an environment of limited natural resources and to the increase of the carbon impact of the food system for present and future generations,” Professor Fassio says, while Professor Tecco adds that, “apart from these material and quantitative aspects, we should also consider the immaterial, and less immediate side of waste, in relation to our value system in a world where 850 million people are still undernourished.”

If food waste continues at its current rate on a global level, Dr Mifsud says the hospitality industry will be responsible for reinforcing,



Prof. Nadia Tecco

and possibly encouraging, the inequitable access to food, resulting in a rise in the lack of food security across the globe. "It will pose waste management challenges and will contribute further to CO2 emissions and climate change. It will be sending a message of support for the continued use of harmful and polluting pesticides and fertilisers. It will also make it more difficult to shift to healthier and sustainable food production."

This is why the LIFE FOSTER project, a three-year collaboration between four partner countries – Malta, Italy, France and Spain – has been launched. The aim is to strengthen national capacity when it comes to food waste reduction in commercial settings, with education as the driving force behind the project. "Food waste is becoming an increasingly hot topic, not just due to environmental concerns, but also due to the economic implications that it presents," says Joe Tanti, CEO of the Malta Business Bureau (MBB), which, along with the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS),

announced its participation in the LIFE FOSTER project in February 2019. "The MBB strongly believes that education and training are key enablers of behavioural change. That is why, together with our European partners, the MBB started exploring possible solutions to help combat food waste in Europe. This good work has culminated into the LIFE FOSTER project which is running today."

Pierre Fenech, CEO at ITS, says that the project will complement the current drive on domestic food waste management by targeting the hospitality industry. "This project will contribute in part to immediately addressing Malta's waste problems and forms a good basis for future work dealing with food waste. It is an imperative step for ITS to tackle food waste, both to reduce it in our own training kitchens, as well as to teach tomorrow's hospitality workers the necessary techniques to reduce food waste as much as possible. In view of the fact that the restaurant industry contributes to 12 per cent of the total food waste in Europe, we believe that ITS, being an educational institution for the hospitality and tourism industry, should be at the forefront of such a project."

MBB's Mr Tanti says the organisation has been working in the area of sustainability for several years, mostly focusing on water conservation and energy efficiency. "There is a growing realisation, both within Malta and across Europe, that food waste reduction is not only an environmental issue, but also presents a strong business case. At the end of the day, wasted food represents wasted money. Apart from this economic incentive, there is a growing drive from the EU level, with food waste being included as one of the EU's priority areas for a circular economy," he says.

Mr Tanti continues by stating that as the EU Business Advisory of the Malta Hotels and Restaurants Association (MHRA) and the Malta Chamber of Commerce, the MBB is constantly looking for new

opportunities which bring tangible benefits to its members. "Last March, a group of lecturers working at the participating Vocational Education and Training (VET) centres, including ITS, received special training in Italy on the best scientifically-proven methods to reduce food waste in restaurant kitchens. This knowledge, provided by the University of Gastronomic Sciences, will now be transferred to their students and incorporated into curricula taught at the centres. Apart from lecturers and their students, we are also targeting established professionals working in the hospitality sector, through a number of training activities which will showcase practical methods they can use in their daily operations to cut down on food waste."

He explains that the LIFE FOSTER project will have ambitious, but reachable, objectives. "It aims to impact 70 VET centres, 7,000 students, 500 trainers, 200 policy-makers, 3,600 companies and 10,000 professionals across the four participating countries. The techniques developed through this



Prof. Franco Fassio

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project should enable food service establishments to experience a real reduction in their food waste levels, allowing them re-invest these savings into more productive business activities. The fact that the techniques are also being incorporated into VET curricula means that the LIFE FOSTER project will maintain its impact well into the future.”

The role of the MBB in this project will be to raise awareness, and actively engage with local food service establishments through dedicated training activities and

other events. “The MBB very often acts as a bridge between EU priorities and Maltese businesses. Similarly, it will be handling the policy dimension of the project, which needs to be informed by the real needs and concerns on the ground,” Mr Tanti explains. “To this end, the MBB will be meeting with local and European policy-makers, discussing what does – and what does not – work in the fight against food waste.”

Meanwhile, ITS’s Mr Fenech says that the Institute will act as Malta’s vocational educational trainer in this project, along with ENAIP NET for Italy, AFPA for France and CECE for Spain. “With education being a key factor, ITS has identified lecturers who will attend various food waste management training sessions in Italy, and they will be instructed in methods of food waste reduction in restaurant environments. They will, in turn, train other ITS lecturers, and all these lecturers will train the students. Students will use these techniques immediately, during work placements locally and abroad, which will result in these methods being adopted by restaurants in the short term through placements, and in the long term, through employment.”

Dr Mifsud believes that the LIFE FOSTER project will definitely assist in raising awareness on the topic of

food waste. “I would like to see the project offer the local audience an insight into the global scenario on food security and take people out of their comfort zone in order to sensitise them on the inequitable distribution of food around the world.” She goes on to suggest a number of strategies which the hospitality industry could carry out in order to minimise food waste, including performing a thorough audit of where the ingredients are sourced from; changing to local and seasonal fresh produce; and assessing the onsite storage facilities to verify whether fresh produce can be frozen to be used at other times of the year, if necessary.

“Menus should be redesigned to be in line with local produce, which is seasonal, healthier and more sustainable, while working with nature should be encouraged, rather than attempting to artificially ‘recreate’ what Mother Earth provides us with. Additionally, portion sizes should be smaller, with less meat and more vegetarian and vegan items on the menu. Most hospitality providers in Malta serve portion sizes that are in excess of the average healthy portion. Finally, menus, food preparation processes and storage facilities need to be designed to cater for making use of leftovers. This can be done and still be in line with food safety and food hygiene standards,” she says.

“Most of the factors that lead to food waste, can be easily remediated through simple changes in food purchasing, storing, preparing and consuming. The following steps need to be carried out: recognising the leakage points; fixing and being aware of the sources of the food waste; gathering data to get a tangible value to the food that is wasted; implementing a solution plan by assessing the resources at the user’s disposal; and last but not least, monitoring the progress,” says Professor Tecco.

“Beyond creating fashion and new market trends, chefs also have the potential to help to reframe food

system challenges and get people to rethink their eating habits, including how they waste food. We wish to see the hospitality industry be a bridge between farm and fork that informs, teaches and leads people with knowledge and offers viable alternatives,” says Professor Fassio. “In doing this, we believe that it could play a significant role in reducing food waste but also in creating a new awareness about the value of food at the restaurant, in our kitchens, classrooms and communities. The LIFE FOSTER project, with its training, educational and communication activities, can be a step in the right direction for the creation of a new generation of professionals who are able to prevent and reduce food waste because they value food and are skilled in managing it properly.”

Mr Tanti highlights that such projects would certainly be very difficult to implement without the support of the EU's direct funding – in this case, through the EU LIFE programme. “EU funds do not only provide financial support to help implement projects, but also create a platform through which like-minded organisations from all over Europe may collaborate, share best practices, and offer genuine solutions to the challenges we face today.”

And despite the LIFE FOSTER project being still in its early days, he reports that a lot of positive feedback has already been registered from local food establishments that want to do more to cut down on food waste. “In this respect, we are

confident that there will be strong participation by the Maltese business community during project activities. Seeing this strong response, we are now developing additional activities targeting Maltese enterprises and their employees. MBB is soon launching a separate national food waste campaign along with ITS, and with the support of Wasteserv Malta, the Malta Tourism Authority and other interested parties.”

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DR ALEXANDRA MIFSUD, LECTURER, UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

“We are sure it won't be an easy task at first because we will be changing normal practices. However, from feedback we are gathering, this is sought-after, especially because the restaurant industry will benefit from such practices, specifically in reducing costs,” says Mr Fenech. “But I would like people out there to understand that reducing food waste is easy and not complicated. When reducing food waste, in turn you will also be saving money and resources. Anyone can do it, and anyone should do it, both in the restaurant industry and also at home,” he concludes. ■