

# POLICY BRIEF

## BUILDING CONSUMER CAPACITY FOR A JUST ZERO FOOD WASTE TRANSITION



*ZeroW tackles Food Loss and Waste (FLW) through a coordinated set of innovations piloted in nine real-world Systemic Innovation Living Labs (SILLs) aiming to achieve significant reductions across all stages of the food supply chain - from pre-harvest to consumption. A dedicated Policy Team complements this work by defining a 'Just Transition Pathway' toward near-zero FLW, offering a practical framework to bridge systemic barriers (e.g., fragmented and lengthy nature of the food supply chains, the digital divide, challenges in scaling innovative waste reduction technologies) and on-the-ground FLW solutions. Drawing on economic modelling and insights from the stakeholders and the SILLs, the team identified key recommendations promoting a flexible, equity-focused transition.*

Consumer-level food waste significantly contributes to overall Food Loss and Waste (FLW) within the EU, notably within households, restaurants, and retail. This issue is shaped by behavioural patterns, insufficient information, and systemic barriers disproportionately impacting vulnerable consumer groups. Addressing this aligns with the EU's Fair Transition and the European Pillar of Social Rights, offering substantial opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, ease food system pressures, and achieve sustainability goals.

### Policy Problem

Household food waste constitutes the largest share of FLW in the EU, yet traditional awareness campaigns alone are inadequate. Effective strategies require more targeted consumer incentives, behavioural interventions, and comprehensive policy frameworks that foster significant social innovation and consumer engagement, without disproportionately placing responsibility on consumers.





## Key insights from ZeroW project

- Meaningful behavioural change must accompany systemic reforms.
- Food should be reframed from merely a tradable commodity to a valuable social, cultural, and nutritional good.
- Consumer acceptance of innovations (e.g., smart packaging, food-saving apps) necessitates targeted guidance and support.
- Technological innovations must be integrated with behavioural interventions, ensuring accessibility, inclusivity, and practicality.

## Actionable Policy Recommendations

### 1. Implement data-driven, consumer-centric interventions, and more targeted consumer engagement

Reducing household food waste requires a holistic and data-informed approach that places consumer behaviour at its core. Educational initiatives should be embedded into school curricula and community-based learning environments, offering practical tools to build awareness and influence everyday habits. These programmes should also tackle the cultural norms that underpin wasteful practices. Engagement strategies should move beyond conventional campaigns; interactive and participatory tools such as gamified challenges and peer-driven initiatives are proving more effective in sustaining behavioural shifts.

Financial support is also key. By providing tax incentives and targeted subsidies, especially for low-income households, governments can encourage adoption of waste-reducing technologies like smart fridges. However, accessibility should be a guiding principle. Technological solutions need to be tailored for diverse users, including simplified interfaces and multilingual guidance. Dedicated training for underrepresented groups, such as women entrepreneurs or older adults, can help address digital literacy gaps and ensure equitable participation in this transition.

## 2. Foster social innovation and reframe food waste perceptions

Shifting societal perceptions of food waste is essential for systemic change. Rather than framing food waste solely as an environmental issue, policies should encourage community-driven projects that promote it as a matter of social responsibility, tied to values such as solidarity, economic resilience, and food security. These projects offer a dual benefit: reducing waste and strengthening social cohesion.

Equity must be at the centre of this effort. Vulnerable groups require bespoke interventions, such as subsidised food preservation tools and offline, accessible platforms. Technological innovation requires a foundation in behavioural insight. Comprehensive training, culturally tailored outreach, and personalised feedback mechanisms are necessary to build trust and ensure adoption. As demonstrated in SILL9, fostering data sharing between consumers and retailers can further enhance mutual accountability and system efficiency. Inclusivity in the design of these solutions - by involving women, older adults, and those with varying levels of digital fluency - is essential to create user-centric and impactful tools.





### 3. Incentivise urban consumers to reduce food waste through local policy initiatives

Cities are critical arenas for food waste reduction and should be equipped with tailored, grassroots policies. Municipal authorities can introduce smart incentive systems, including reward schemes linked to actual waste reduction.

Community-led initiatives, such as shared refrigerators, composting hubs, and food-sharing networks, should be supported through local grants and public recognition programmes.

Economic incentives can also drive behavioural change. Reduced waste collection fees for households demonstrating lower waste volumes can be an effective motivator. At the same time, local governments must promote collaborative governance, bringing together public authorities, businesses, NGOs, and residents to co-create food waste solutions. Building local capacity through practical workshops and training sessions ensures that urban populations are not only aware of the issue but also equipped to take action. This approach fosters both systemic and behavioural transformation in the everyday management of food waste.

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#### AUTHORS

- **Anouck Guillou** (SAFE - Safe Food Advocacy Europe)
- **Antonio De Carluccio** (SAFE - Safe Food Advocacy Europe)
- **Caroline van der Weerd** (TNO: Innovation for Life)