

POLICY BRIEF

EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE 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.

Addressing FLW requires coordinated governance that balances incentives, accountability, and collaboration across diverse food system actors. This policy brief presents evidence-based recommendations to support inclusive, transparent, and effective governance frameworks aligned with the EU's Just Transition, which will guide the action plans of Member States for the newly adopted binding food waste reduction targets.

Policy Problem

FLW amounts remain high due to the lack of a coherent governance framework that ensures transparency, accountability, and coordinated action across the food supply chain. Companies are not consistently required to measure or report FLW, and current policies offer limited incentives for prevention, data sharing, or collaboration.

Key insights from ZeroW project

- A non-punitive, progressive, positive incentive-based approach, including tax breaks for verified food waste reduction and tiered taxation based on business size or waste volume, is both effective and equitable.





- Mandatory FW tracking is essential to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Horizontal peer learning and data sharing, as demonstrated in the SILLs, foster trust and collaborative progress.
- Clear governance, inclusive stakeholder engagement, and fast feedback tools are critical to overcoming digitalisation barriers.
- Performance-based public procurement, third-party verification, and tailored Small and Medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) support promote accountability and a Just Transition.

Actionable Policy Recommendations

1. Establish a non-punitive, incentive-based approach to food waste governance.

A non-punitive, incentive-based approach to food waste governance promotes voluntary action, innovation, and accountability across the food system. Exemplified by Spain's Law 1/2025, this model combines supportive measures, such as encouraging food donations and the sale of imperfect produce, with proportionate enforcement to reduce waste effectively.

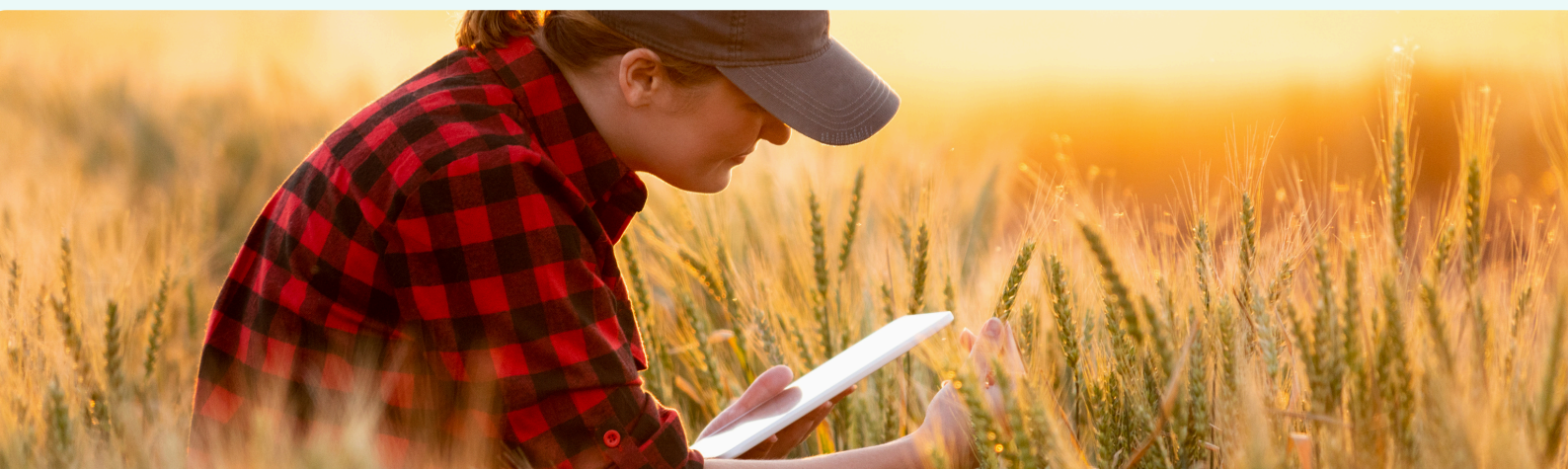
To enhance accountability, public procurement and financial support should be linked to transparent, standardised food waste reporting based on recognised frameworks (e.g., World Resources Institute, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations), scaled to company size and scope. Companies applying for public funding or contracts should disclose measurable FLW targets and progress, ensuring a level playing field and aligning with EU objectives and the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12.3.

Governance innovations, like performance-based contracts, procurement scoring systems, and bonus incentives, can reward businesses that demonstrate strong food waste reduction efforts. Oversight should involve third-party verification and proportionate enforcement (e.g., funding clawbacks, non-eligibility for future funding calls). To ensure inclusivity, SMEs must receive tailored support, including training, simplified templates, phased timelines, and cost-sharing mechanisms. These measures foster a culture of responsibility and make accountability both practical and equitable.

2. Increase accountability and transparency in digitalisation and public procurement

To accelerate sustainability and digitalisation in the food system, policymakers must enhance accountability and transparency through clear data governance, inclusive communication, and supportive regulation. Digitalisation is not a binary shift but a multi-stage journey, requiring trust, clarity, and safeguards to ensure stakeholders, particularly in rural and low-trust communities, feel secure and empowered.

Key actions include promoting accessible interpretations of regulations like the EU Data Act (2024) and the 2018 Code of Conduct on agricultural data sharing, ensuring data owners retain control, and clarifying accountability for unintended consequences of digital tools. Preserving traditional knowledge alongside digital adoption is essential for resilience, while inclusive engagement and coherent communication build public trust.



3. Create EU-level guidelines for co-governance of Just Transition in the food system

The EU should establish clear co-governance guidelines to support a Just Transition in the food system through inclusive, context-sensitive policymaking. Evidence from ZeroW confirms that neither top-down enforcement nor voluntary measures alone adequately address structural inequalities or avoid unintended impacts like waste shifting and burdening vulnerable actors.

Guidelines must foster collaborative governance among public authorities, food system stakeholders, and civil society. These should include differentiated FLW targets by sector and capacity, prioritise prevention over disposal, and encourage locally tailored tools such as digital solutions and incentive schemes. Drawing on ZeroW insights, public-private partnerships, inclusive data sharing, and support for community-led innovations should be central. EU leadership is key in harmonising policy, promoting knowledge exchange, and driving fair and effective transformation across Member States.

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