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Belgium, Food Waste

Food Waste in Belgium

Belgium is a Western European country bordered by France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the North Sea. It has a population of about 11.5 million people, and about 98% are urban (Belgium Population (LIVE, n.d.)). The average family in Belgium has 2.3 people (Doing Better for Families, n.d.) with an average income of 18,768 euros per working individual (Chini, 2020). Belgium's total territory is 11,849 square miles. About 39% of the territory is used for some kind of agriculture. Stock farming or livestock production dominates Belgian agriculture; it accounts for 65% of the nation's farms. Belgium also imports raw crops to process and then export them as prepared foods (Belgium - Agriculture, n.d.). Belgium is a highly developed country with subsidized public health care for everyone in the country; it is a fairly wealthy country and does not struggle with finding food resources. In fact, Belgium's food waste averages about 10,400 tons per day (Ruiz, 2018). Therefore, the issue is not food availability in Belgium; it is food waste.

The average urban family in Belgium cooks and cares about the quality of their food. In the past decade they have become more aware about eating sustainable foods. The urban Belgium families are more adventurous in their food choices because they live with people of many different backgrounds. People in rural areas of Belgium tend to stick to more classic dishes with lots of meat, vegetables, and potatoes (De Backer, 2016). Since the Belgium culture promotes food quality and sustainability, most Belgian citizens, both urban and rural, would probably be open to food waste solutions if given the opportunity.

Belgium's government is a representative democratic, constitutional monarchy. The King of Belgium is the head of state, and the Prime Minister of Belgium is the head of government, which is a multi-party system. The regional governments of Belgium have jurisdiction over water policy, public health, and the environment. Most of the taxation and social security is controlled by the national government (*Politics of Belgium*, 2021). This means that new policies to decrease food waste would be the work of regional governments, but for taxing businesses or allocating tax money, the national government would have to be in charge. Food waste is caused by mismanaged resources and a disconnect between consumer and producer, so most of the solutions would have to be implemented and enforced by the government.

Belgium exports metals, chemicals, machinery and equipment, and foodstuff; they import most of the same products (Importing and Exporting in Belgium, n.d.). About 35% of Belgium's farms produce crops. Belgium also re-exports many fruits. The nation imports raw crops to process and then export as prepared foods such as chocolate and pastries (Belgium - Agriculture, n.d.). Belgium's agricultural exports are worth about 40,961 million EUR, and their agricultural imports are worth about 33,833 million EUR (Importing and Exporting in Belgium, n.d.). This shows us that Belgium makes money off foodstuff and agriculture in general. They do not have much food insecurity, resource wise. Therefore, it is not a main concern for their government or people. This is one of the reasons they have so much food waste; they are simply not conscious of it because it is not a problem for them. Therefore, to solve the food waste problem in Belgium, the people need to be educated and aware that not all countries have the same food

resources they do. If they used their resources more efficiently, it could help many other people around the world in need.

In developed countries, such as Belgium, more than 40% of food losses occur at the retail and consumer levels. At the retail level a lot of food is wasted because of the over emphasis on what the food should look like (15 Countries That Waste the Most Food, 2021). Many people in countries such as Belgium believe food should appear nearly perfect. If a carrot is twisted instead of straight, it does not get sold. If fruit is too bruised or brown, it does not get sold. If a set of food is not uniform enough, it does not get sold. There is also plenty of food that is expired according to the date on the package, but it is still good for another few days. Unfortunately, it normally gets thrown out anyway. Food waste averages about 10,400 tons per day in Belgium, but charities have only been able to collect 10 tons of food a year. Charities are not offered the resources because the food gets wasted before charities get a chance to pick it up. More than 1 million people suffer from hunger in Belgium alone while about seven tons of food goes to waste every minute in Belgium alone (Ruiz, 2018). Belgium needs a more efficient way of distributing and selling food to their citizens. They have more than enough food to feed themselves, so they should also find a way to organize and transport their food to other countries in need. These countries could pay a reduced fee for unattractive food and help Belgium subsidize the cost of their food waste reduction programs. Realistically, some of the food is just too unattractive for people to want to eat, and much of the world's corn supply is sold for animal feed anyway. Producers just mash up the food and put it in chicken or pig feed. Factories that package food could separate some of the worst looking food and put it aside for the animals. This way, unattractive food will not go to waste; instead, it can be used as valuable livestock feed and the same for pet food.

More than 820 million people (11% of the world population) suffer from hunger around the world; about one-third of all food goes to waste, according to the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Belgium alone wasted about 192 lbs (87.1 kg) per capita in 2018, while Belgium's GDP per capita was \$43,218 in 2018 (Countries That Waste the Most Food, 2020). Food waste also squanders about a quarter of the water supply. This is about \$172 billion in wasted water, but that is not the only environmental impact of Belgium's food waste. Rotting food in a landfill is a very large source of methane, which is very bad for the environment (Simon, 2018). The UN has committed to taking action on this to help address climate change, and Belgium is part of the UN. All of the countries in the Paris Agreement, including Belgium, are looking for ways to show progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. It would be ideal if Belgium could meet their targets for action against climate change and action against food waste with the same programs.

Large quantities of foods are also wasted because they are a little past the expiration date. These foods are often still good for another few weeks. Food dating started in the 1970s when consumers bought more food than they made themselves, so they wanted more information about the food they were buying. The expiration dates are to tell consumers how fresh the food is and when it is at its peak. Therefore, when food passes an expiration date, it is not inedible and will not necessarily make one sick. There is also no national regulation over the dates used as expiration dates (Alexandra Sifferlin, 2013). One solution is to put the food on sale with a warning, so people know it has to be eaten shortly after purchase. This could be very successful because people love a bargain. Once the food is too expired for stores to sell but not too expired to eat, charities or a home delivery service can come and pick it up. From there, they can be in charge of organizing who gets the food and how.

To encourage stores to offer up their leftovers to charities instead of simply throwing them away, the Belgian national government could offer incentives such as reduced taxes. They would also need the local government's help organizing this with the local charities and businesses. For public education on food

standards, the state and local governments would have to be in control of advertising and promoting those ideas through schools, news outlets, or businesses. For putting less attractive foods or expired foods on sale, the local government would have to work with individual stores to get these kinds of policies introduced and implemented, but the national government would also be needed for tax reduction rewards as an incentive for the local government policies. Belgium is also part of the UN Paris Agreement where they work to address climate change. The Belgian government probably has a budget for that, and since eliminating food waste would be very beneficial to the environment, it could count as climate change action for the Paris Agreement. That way, Belgium could use some of those funds they set aside to meet agreed upon targets to finance these food waste programs.

Another solution to the food waste problem in Belgium is having a food delivery service. Lower income families that do not make the average Belgian income could apply for a food delivery service. All the food the stores are not willing to sell could be given to an Amazon delivery style service. The food truck could pick up the food from the stores or factories and drive around to the houses signed up for food delivery. It could be at a discounted price or free depending on the family's income. This could not only help stop food waste in Belgium by using up all the food that stores and restaurants will not sell, it could also help the 1 million people in Belgium (10% of the population) that are malnourished, which is about the average rate of malnourishment worldwide.

There are about seven tons of food that goes to waste in Belgium every day. This could feed even more than the one million people who are in need of food in Belgium. Belgium could expand the food delivery service to other nearby countries in need. If all the countries could start cutting down on food waste and sharing food resources more cheaply and effectively, the strain on the agricultural industry would be much less. This is very necessary since by mid-century, there will be approximately 9 billion people in the world. To meet the food needs, agricultural production will have to increase by about 70% (15 Countries That Waste the Most Food, 2021). To do this, there will need to be some really big developments in agricultural technology. The planet can not afford to have one-third of food going to waste each year. That is why the food delivery truck system is a very practical and necessary service for Belgium. Instead of having trucks transport perfectly good food to a landfill, they just transport it to people's homes.

It is a lot to ask of the Belgian public to immediately adjust to this new system and trust it right away. Many people might be afraid the food is not safe or as good, but they would be more likely to test it out on animals. So, to build trust, test this program out, and get it started, they could use farmers as a focus group. They could take the same food that would be used in the home delivery system and turn it into animal feed. Then, they could deliver the animal feed to farmers at a discounted price. This would be a way to test out the delivery system and get the public used to it with animal food before they go to food for humans. This would use up the unwanted food from stores and some from restaurants too. They could fund this the same way.

Food waste solutions also help protect the forests, natural environments, and unique ecosystems that farming and other agricultural practices often damage. Farming can have a very large negative environmental impact when done carelessly; food waste is also terrible for the environment. Many of these problems are interconnected, so to solve them, understanding and working together are very important to their success. Belgium should work toward solving the food waste problem to prevent the waste of one quarter of the water supply and large amounts of methane. Therefore, it is notable that the food delivery truck system would have a positive impact on the environment and the water supply by greatly reducing the yearly harm food waste normally causes.

Food waste in Belgium is a very serious problem that needs more attention and action at individual, local, and national levels. It must be faced now before it is too late. The food waste problem in Belgium affects more than just food; it also affects the environment and the water supply. It also happens to be very economically wasteful as well as wasteful of the natural resources. Luckily, there are many things that can be done. One, Belgium can educate its people on what healthy food looks like, and that not all food has a perfect appearance. Two, Belgium's local governments, stores, and restaurants can work together to reduce the cost of some less attractive foods or expired foods that would have otherwise been thrown out. They can also donate leftover foods or foods that are not able to be sold in stores or restaurants, that are still edible, to charities. Some of the less appealing food could go to animal feed or pet food as well. Lastly, there could be a delivery truck system that takes the leftover or unusable foods from stores and restaurants and gets them to Belgian citizens in need. As the food waste grows more problematic every day around the world, it is vital that Belgium do its part to help combat the food waste problem that grows more problematic every day around the world.

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