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SOLIDARITY

VALORISATION

**BUSINESS
OPPORTUNITY**

Three narratives about food waste and their social impact

RESULTS IN BRIEF

France's **Law Against Food Waste** has become an international model for sustainable food policy. Many consider the law to combine economic efficiency with environmental protection and social equity. Yet, stakeholder narratives cast doubt on whether this French circular economy law really contributes to social justice in the long run.

A discourse analysis of the development in France shows:

- **The ban on food waste institutionalised a narrative about food waste that prioritises profit over social equity**
- **The traditionally dominant solidarity narrative about food waste has been pushed back by the emerging circular economy discourse**
- **As a consequence of the discursive attention shift, activities enacted in the name of the circular economy possibly counteract social equity goals (e.g. by establishing competition with charities)**

Based on the findings, we recommend the following strategies for stakeholders who want to further sustainable food policy:

- Place **distributional justice and equity goals at the heart** of the debate on material cycles and food waste
- For example, call for a **circular society** instead of a circular economy



WHY WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT NARRATIVES NOW

Around 88 million tonnes of food are thrown away in Europe every year (EU, 2021). While most of it ends up in the trash, a portion is traditionally sent to charitable food banks. Some stakeholders are now calling for a **ban on food waste** inspired by the French model.

Over the last few years, France has passed several laws in the name of the circular economy that prohibit supermarkets and other distributors such as restaurants from throwing away food unless it is further valorised (MAAF, 2021).

The ban **creates business opportunities** for companies in the composting, bioenergy and logistics sectors. At the same time, it promises to promote **environmental protection** and **social justice**, according to proponents.

Scholars agree that meaningful, visionary narratives such as the circular economy are **essential for social transformation** (Abson et al., 2016). Narratives allow us to collectively prioritise problems, identify causes and find corresponding solutions.

Yet, exactly how circular economy narratives contribute to the achievement of social goals remains largely unknown (Leipold & Petit-Boix, 2018). Therefore, we analysed how the vision of a circular economy and the associated law has impacted the food waste debate in France. In particular, we examine how they influenced the perspectives on underlying social problems.

HOW HAS THE DEBATE ON FOOD WASTE CHANGED IN FRANCE?

Three narratives about food waste can be distinguished in the statements of participants and observers of the debate in France (see table on next page):

- The formerly prominent solidarity narrative of charities, consumers and companies highlights the gap between abundant food waste and **limited access to food**. Accordingly, the reduction of food waste and its redistribution are considered central solutions in the context of a broader social transformation.

With the rise of the circular economy discourse, two more narratives emerged and pushed social problems to the back:

- First, an economic narrative of **food waste as a valuable resource** that should be used efficiently to maintain the sector's autonomy from scarce resources.
- Meanwhile, the Law Against Food Waste has above all institutionalised a third narrative of **food waste as a business opportunity**. This narrative particularly sees

need to create market opportunities, e.g. by obliging further valorisation through waste bans, so that companies have profitable incentives to create the link between supermarkets and consumers.

In terms of social goals, this institutionalisation of a business narrative in an area previously characterised by solidarity is problematic. **Stakeholders believe that profit-oriented companies** which valorise waste energetically or industrially instead of using it to feed the financially weak **will compete for food waste with donation-based food banks** in the long run. This could further deteriorate access to food for the needy. Additionally, it could remove incentives to reduce over-production.

This decline of attention on social problems is also evidenced by the fact that most of the companies that have acted under the French Law Against Food Waste until 2018 **are not officially recognised as charitable** and some do not even claim to pursue social goals.



Circular Economy



Law Against Food Waste



Narrative	Solidarity	Valorisation	Business opportunity
Problem	Poor people's limited access to food	Unutilised resources	Unused economic potential from food waste in supermarkets
Cause	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ignorance towards limited access Lack of social and environmental costs of food waste No burdens for wastefulness of individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of recognition for the value of wasted food Inefficient management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of individual creativity Lack of market opportunities
Solution	Awareness raising; Reduction of waste; Creation of jobs; Reuse by redistribution of edible residues	Awareness raising; Recycling; Collaboration within the value chain; Management of costs and supplies	Awareness raising; Creation of jobs; Reuse by redistribution; Creation of logistics; Market/business opportunities

HOW DO WE KNOW?

This discourse analysis is based on:

- 17 stakeholder interviews
- 20 policy papers
- 118 newspaper articles published before 2019 about the debate on the French policy

Discourse analysis as a method can reveal which consequences participants expect, but not how the situation will change in reality.

Therefore, we have additionally examined those companies that have acted under the French Law against Food Waste until 2018.

ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS



PLACE SOCIAL JUSTICE CENTRE STAGE

Circular economy has evidently become an influential discourse. Our findings demonstrate that if we want circular initiatives such as a law against food waste to address social problems, we need to place social concerns like **distributive justice and equity at the heart of the debate around material cycles and food waste.**



CALL FOR A CIRCULAR SOCIETY

One approach to bring social concerns more into focus is to call for a circular society instead of a circular economy. The narrative of a circular society would allow us to think more about the necessary **societal change** and encourage a fair distribution of the associated **costs and benefits of the transition for different members of society.**



FURTHER INFORMATION & SOURCES

Full research article:

“Do we need a ‘circular society’? Competing narratives of the circular economy in the French food sector” (2021) by S. Leipold, K. Weldner, M. Hohl.

Access here: doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107086

Food waste in Europe:

EU [European Union]. (2021). About food waste. ec.europa.eu/food/safety/food-waste_en

France’s Law Against Food Waste:

MAAF [Ministère de l’Agriculture et de l’Alimentation France]. (2021). Lutte contre le gaspillage alimentaire: les lois françaises. agriculture.gouv.fr/lutte-contre-le-gaspillage-alimentaire-les-lois-francaises

Narratives for societal transition and social goals:

Abson et al. (2016). Leverage points for sustainability transformation. doi.org/10.1007/s13280-016-0800-y

Leipold & Petit-Boix. (2018). The circular economy and the bio-based sector: Perspectives of European and German stakeholders. doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2018.08.019

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The **Circular Economy Series** presents research results of the research group “Circulus - Opportunities and challenges of transition to a sustainable circular bio-economy”. The researchers are developing a comprehensive understanding of possible pathways to a circular economy in Germany and Europe. To this end, they combine perspectives from the social, environmental and engineering sciences to analyse the ecological and socio-economic consequences of the circular economy in various sectors.

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