

Waste not, want not ideal drowns in Israel's garbage heap

Average Israeli family chucks away thousands of shekels a year in food that is still edible, non-profit says

BY SHOSHANNA SOLOMON | December 4, 2016, 10:43 am |

To tackle the negative impact food waste has on both the economy and the environment, the UN last year set an ambitious goal to cut waste by 50 percent by 2030, with efforts being implemented globally to reduce the amount of food households and businesses throw away each day.

Israel lags behind other Western countries on this matter, according to Leket, a non-profit that works to rescue and redistribute surplus food. There are 2.5 million tons of food wasted every year in Israel, accounting for 35% of domestic food production, Leket Israel said in a January 2016 report.

According to The Natural Step, 43% of Israel's food waste comes from households, and over 50% of the food that is thrown away is actually edible, and that the average Israeli family throws away about 4,200 shekels (\$1,096) a year in food that is still edible.

Since its foundation in Israel in 2012, The Natural Step Israel, part of a global network, has teamed up with some 40 partners, including government ministries, industries, academia and municipalities, to stem the flow of food that reaches the garbage.

"Sustainability needs to be a process developed and implemented by many," said Maya Milrad Givon, a co-founder of The Natural Step in Israel. "We are currently looking at food waste at the level of households and are looking to end consumer food waste."

The aim of the collaborations, she said, is to first build a relationship of trust with ministries and industries, and raise awareness to the problem at the consumers' level.

The group is also developing a platform for joint action on this matter, Milrad Givon said, called the Sustainability Transition Lab. The aim is to get together with partners to brainstorm ideas that will help to identify key and innovative ways to find solutions. Then they'll move to implement them.

"The chain has to work together, with an end vision to eliminate the problem with holistic and systematic solutions," she said.

"In Israel the government has not taken responsibility on the food sector," she added. "There is not just one body that is responsible for looking at the overall picture of food in general, on issues like health, food security and sustainability of the industry."

The Natural Step's main partners are Israel's Ministry of Environmental Protection, Unilever Israel, the Tel Aviv Municipality, Tnuva, Dizengoff Center and the food department of the Israeli Army.

At a workshop held last week in Tel Aviv, Maya Bitterman, the CEO of The Natural Step, held an interactive session with attendees, asking them to come up with ideas on how to avoid waste. "What do you do with vegetables that are edible, but ugly?" she asked the audience. "How can you avoid throwing away food that is left out overnight, by mistake?"

"Expiry date on products is one of the main reasons food is thrown away, how can this issue be solved?" she asked.

Participants came up with a variety of ideas, including creating a smart stove that alerts you if food is left overnight, and developing an app that reveals the freshness of leftovers. Increased education was the most prevalent message of all.

"There are many solutions," Bitterman said, highlighting the complexity of the subject. The aim is to pinpoint the most significant issues and then find solutions to them to reduce waste, she said.

The workshop was held as part of Israel's first ever Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) conference organized in Tel Aviv last week by Maala, Israel's CSR standards-setting organization.

"So much food is thrown away," said Doron Zilberstein, managing director at Unilever Foodsolutions in Israel, during the workshop. "We must think of the darker side of the rich Israeli breakfast and must be clever."

Unilever has set up a free guide to help restaurants, catering companies and hotels cut back on waste.

The multinational consumer goods firm last year also undertook a widespread survey of Israeli food habits at professional eateries, Zilberstein said, and attained "staggering" results: about 115,000 tons of food is wasted every year at Israel's 9,417 food establishments, totaling about 1.4 billion shekels (\$367 million).

Unilever's guide to help restaurants and kitchen managers cut down on waste includes tips on how to re-use vegetables from the breakfast buffet, how to waste less on meat cuts and how to prepare personal dishes as opposed to serve food on platters.

The group also set up a project with leading hotels and restaurants in Israel to study what processes generated most waste and how they could be changed. After the recommended steps were implemented, there was a 15-30% percent decrease in food waste, Zilberstein said.

"What we could not do, unfortunately, was find a way to stop people from piling up food on their plates, something that generates much of the waste," Zilberstein said. "But that too can be achieved, with education. Just as we teach our children not to pluck [wild] flowers in Israel, so we must teach our citizens to waste less."

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