

# **It takes a village to valorise waste: Insights into the experiences of professionals engaged in food waste valorisation**

Madhura Rao, Aalt Bast and Alie de Boer

*Maastricht University, Maastricht 6211 LK, The Netherlands*

## **Abstract**

Food waste is a persistent, multidimensional, and loosely defined, socio-environmental problem (Närvänen et al., 2020). With the exception of consumer-centric topics, food waste is usually regarded as a side effect of a today's highly developed and controlled food supply chains. This view of food waste ignores the human side of the food system. Non-consumer actors are often regarded as rational, robot-like cogs in the system and are thought to perform predefined tasks without any flexibility or independent thought (Gruber et al., 2016). However, in reality, professionals engaged in food waste management are impacted by the moral burden of the phenomenon and in turn shapes how the sector deals with the various challenges it faces. Despite efforts to prevent the generation of surplus food, a certain volume of excess food always ends up leaving the supply chain as waste. This food can be circulated back into the food supply chain through various routes such as redistribution via social organisations or creating new, value-added surplus products (Papargyropoulou et al., 2014). The aim of this study was to explore the phenomenon of food waste and surplus valorisation by drawing on the experiences of professionals engaged in it. Based on a phenomenological analysis of 16 in-depth unstructured interviews, our results point out that food waste valorisation professionals in the Netherlands consider local embeddedness, societal perception, and food safety to be important aspects of their work. They often grapple with legislative and logistical uncertainties and face various ethical dilemmas such as competition for surplus food and having to pay for products that were once considered waste. Based on these results, we discuss the differences in perspectives of professionals working with for-profit and non-profit organisations and propose that professionals with a penchant to help the food system transition to a circular way of operating could be suitable candidates to broker such a transition. We also posit that private standards and voluntary agreements could be a way for the sector to better manage the various uncertainties that are characteristic of food waste valorisation endeavours.

**Keywords:** VASP, circular economy, food waste, private governance, qualitative research

## **References**

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