

THE STORY OF FREIBURGCUP

HOW A CITY IS DITCHING DISPOSABLE
COFFEE CUPS

ZERO WASTE CONSUMPTION & PRODUCTION

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In November 2016, Freiburg decided to stop the flood of disposable coffee cups. One year and a half later, Freiburg has proven how a mid-size city can push for alternatives to the throw-away society and define the political agenda.

Freiburg is proud to be known as the “greenest city in Germany”. Located just next to the Black Forest, the 250.000-inhabitants city has long led the way in energy savings, renewable energy and green mobility. What’s more, its high-performing waste management system reaches 70% recycling and generates 335.3 kg of waste per inhabitant, well below the German average of 462 kg of waste per capita.

Despite the utopian first look, the city has not escaped from one growing problem affecting most European cities: disposable coffee-cups. In few years, single-use cups boomed as a convenient and fashionable solution for busy lives. While they are presented as a new way to consume coffee on the go for those who do not have time to slow down and sit in, it remains just another expression of the throw-away society.

As in the rest of Germany, disposable coffee cups soon became a problem in Freiburg, for three main reasons: they are an preventable source of waste that is not even recyclable, they are voluminous and fill quickly the street waste bins, and finally, they are a source of littering.

Deutsche Umwelthilfe calculates that 2.8 billion disposable coffee cups are consumed every year in Germany, which represent indeed a growing waste stream. That is why in mid 2016 the mayor of Freiburg decided it was time to take action and stop “the flood of disposable coffee cups”, and that is when it all started.



The background

Aware of the growing “the coffee cups problem”, the mayor of Freiburg, Dieter Salomon, pushed for having a specific campaign under the frame of the European Week of Waste Reduction of 2016 that was taking place four months after. ASF, the public company in charge of waste collection and treatment, waste prevention and cleaning services, was then requested to prepare a campaign targeting single-use coffee cups.

For ASF, the campaign on disposable coffee cups had to have three main goals: promoting an alternative to single-use cups, reducing litter, thus making Freiburg cleaner, and promote a more sustainable consumer behaviour.

A voluntary scheme of reusable cups under a deposit appeared as the preferred solution to allow the progressive phase out of single-use coffee cups for two main reasons: it was simple and it allowed progressive involvement of cafés and

citizens. However, Freiburg was a pioneer of this approach at the time, with no other cities working on disposable coffee cups and no referents to follow.

The pressure to release the campaign by the European Week of Waste Reduction gave ASF only four months to look into alternatives and options and yet, many questions persisted, including the type of cup to use and the acceptability from customers and cafés.

The preparation

During the four months of preparation, ASF focused mostly on two key issues: choosing the right cup and getting the cafés onboard. Both questions were fundamental to offer a functioning alternative to disposable coffee cups.

For the cup, ASF looked into several alternatives and it finally chose a light but solid plastic cup, made in Southern Germany with an attracti-

ve design to make it appealing to coffee drinkers. However, the financial viability of the cup limited their possibilities to consider other materials and formats, particularly with regards to having a reusable lid, as silicone ones would have trebled the cost of every cup. In spite of willing to move towards a fully reusable system, the economic limitations of the campaign made ASF choose a single use (yet recyclable) coffee cup lid.

In addition to choosing the cup, ASF held public meetings with café-owners during the months prior to the launch, to test their interest in the initiative and better understand their needs and concerns. Café-owners showed a broad interest, and some were even convinced of the need to phase out single-use coffee cups, which encouraged ASF to carry on.



The first steps

The city of Freiburg officially launched the FreiburgCup on 22 November 2016, at a press event organized jointly with ASF. It resulted into massive media coverage, with the FreiburgCup appearing on front pages and getting media coverage on national newspapers, magazines, radios and TVs. Before even being implemented, the FreiburgCup system had already achieved one key objective: bringing the topic of disposable coffee cups high in the agenda and putting forward an alternative.

The simplicity of the campaign, along with the high resonance in mass media, made the FreiburgCup go beyond ASF expectations. Indeed, if the campaign had temporarily started with 15 cafés, four weeks after there were 45 involved, which became 60 after two months. That is how, just few weeks after the launch, the Municipality had already decided that the FreiburgCup was there to stay.

How the system works

The system is very straightforward: ASF provides reusable coffee cups free of charge to the cafés and shops that join the FreiburgCup project, along with posters and stickers to promote the cup and make it visible for customers. The system remains voluntary for customers and cafés, but ASF encourages them to phase out single-use coffee cups.

Customers willing to get their coffee in a FreiburgCup pay a one euro deposit that they can get back once they return the cup to any of the cafés or shops in the programme. The cafés and shops must wash the cup themselves so the next customer can use it again.

Today, 105 cafés in Freiburg have joined the initiative, which, according to ASF, means that between 60% and 70% of the sector in the city participates in the FreiburgCup project. This makes it easier for customers to redeem their deposit, as most cafés take part in the system.

In the case a café runs out of cups, it can request more to ASF. According to ASF, the system remains balanced internally, and there is no need to financially compensate the cafés.

So far, ASF has provided 26,000 FreiburgCup, to which they calculate that 15% has been unredeemed, as tourists or visiting students like to take it as a souvenir. However, the exact number is hard to know because customers may accumulate their Freiburg Cups and bring them back together instead of doing it one by one.



The results

One year and a half after the launch of the FreiburgCup, ASF has managed to achieve the three main goals they had set for themselves. Firstly, the system has succeeded in providing consumers with an alternative to single-use coffee cups, as today the FreiburgCup is present in the majority of the cafés in the city. Secondly, the FreiburgCup has helped to reduce litter in Freiburg. Lastly, it has significantly contributed to raise awareness about disposable coffee cups and the need to take policy actions to tackle them.

Beyond the policy impact, the level to which the FreiburgCup has managed to reduce the use of single-use cups is unclear, as ASF has not tracked or measured the evolution

in their consumption. In any case, ASF acknowledges that, in general terms, the FreiburgCup is probably not yet the most preferred option for coffee on-the-go in Freiburg. ASF understands that more customers need to get involved and, for that, they have planned specific promotion campaigns both for customers to choose the reusable cup and for cafés to proactively offer the FreiburgCup.

The challenges

The current design of the FreiburgCup faces important challenges to fully or almost fully substitute single-use coffee cups with reusable ones. These are inherent to a voluntary scheme that does not include

incentives for consumers to opt for the reusable cup, or for cafés to get more customers onboard.

Although choosing reusable coffee cups has no cost for customers once they bring the cup back, according to ASF, having a take-away coffee has become a habit for many customers and having access to a sustainable alternative is not sufficient to make people change their habits.



For cafés, the situation is even more advantageous, as currently they do not have to pay for the FreiburgCups they use or for being part of the system, and every single-use cup they spare results into savings for the café. However, some are still reluctant to actively promote the FreiburgCup, and they are even less keen on charging their customers when using single-use cups, as they fear to be in disadvantage with respect to their competitors.

ASF acknowledges that there is a lack of level playing field between the single-use cups, that are free of charge and do not require additional effort, and the reusable ones, that require taking them back to a café, but finds that cities are somehow limited to economically incentivise reusable cups. In the case of Freiburg, the municipality is not only limited but it is leading on its own without the support of cafés, who have little incentives to get rid

of disposable coffee cups. This implies that the financial costs of the FreiburgCup are born exclusively by the city, which has hindered the possibility of having a fully reusable cup with a reusable lid, and makes the project dependent on the political will of the city.



Looking beyond

Regardless of the challenges to fully succeed, the prospects for initiatives to phase out disposable coffee cups look promising. Disposable coffee cups are increasingly receiving attention from policy-makers and the media and, what is more, the FreiburgCup has inspired other projects to emerge in Germany and abroad, with municipalities, startups and civil society organizations pushing for sustainable alternatives to the flood of disposable coffee cups.

It is the case of Cupforcup that operates in several cities in North

Rhineland, or Recup, originally from Munich but also operating in other cities, that has recently managed to find a solution to make the lid reusable too. NGOs like NABU and Deutsche Umwelthilfe are also contributing to phasing out single-use cups: NABU has launched its own deposit scheme "Mehrweg fürs Meer" ("Reusables for the sea") for the island of Fehmarn and Deutsche Umwelthilfe has a specific national campaign on single-use coffee cups.

All these experiences show that zero waste alternatives are getting their way through in spite of the

difficulties and the lack of a level playing field with disposable cups. The adoption of bold policies to incentivise waste prevention and reusable systems at both the local and national level will only improve the prospects to fully phase out single-use cups.



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Sources

FreiburgCup, www.freiburgcup.de

Statistics Office of Baden-Württemberg

Zero Waste Europe is the European network of communities, local leaders, businesses, experts, and change agents working towards the elimination of waste in our society.

We empower communities to redesign their relationship with resources, and to adopt smarter lifestyles and sustainable consumption patterns in line with a circular economy.

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