

THE STORY OF ROUBAIX

CASE STUDY

#8

Lacking the powers on waste management, Roubaix had to find its own way to zero waste. The town is addressing waste at source, by creating a constellation of actors committed to reducing waste, like families, schools, associations and businesses.

FIRST STEPS

Municipal waste in France is collected, managed and treated by associations of cities and towns. This means that those municipalities willing to transition towards Zero Waste need to count on the support of the neighbouring towns, or they find themselves unable to act.

The town of Roubaix, situated in Northern France, just on the border with Belgium, isn't well-known for being a beacon of environmentalism in France. Rather on the contrary, Roubaix is a post-industrial area, considered to be the poorest town in France, with 46% of people below the poverty line and high unemployment rate. However, who said zero waste was reserved for well-off towns?

Municipal elections of 2014 were hotly contested in Roubaix with the emergence of four civic lists that were challenging the traditional parties. One of them, Dynamiques Roubaisiennes ultimately integrated a centre-right coalition that won the elections with the proposal of implementing a zero waste strategy for Roubaix. Once elected and willing to start moving towards zero waste, Alexandre Garcin, Deputy Mayor for Sustainable Development, got in contact with Zero Waste France and participated to a study tour in Contarina and Capannori that enhanced their commitment to go zero waste.

Despite this commitment and the good examples showing the way, Roubaix found itself in a minority position in the Lille Metropolitan Council of Waste and couldn't manage to

shift its neighbouring towns' positions. Stuck in a low-performing system of separate collection, relying mostly on end-of-pipe solutions for waste, Roubaix started developing a new approach to Zero Waste.

THE CITY AS ECOSYSTEM

In order to implement a Zero Waste Strategy, Roubaix initiated an original strategy. Lacking the competences of collection and treatment, the town changed the approach. Rather than considering waste as a set of streams to manage, the strategy considered it as the consequence of a certain lifestyle and pattern of consumption. In this sense, Roubaix's strategy focused, therefore, on the source of the problem, aiming at developing a transversal policy.

The town is, thus, perceived as an ecosystem where all actors are related to each other and hence the involvement of all of them is needed. In this sense, the Zero Waste Strategy intends to mobilise citizens, small businesses, public authorities, companies, associations and schools with the aim of creating a grassroots movement of citizens and stakeholders to leverage a new dynamic for change. The town hall aims at spreading change and new consumption patterns by working hand in hand with all the stakeholders in Roubaix and with the leading example of the municipality that has already shifted to zero waste.



Roubaix

- > 95.866 inhabitants
- > Part of the Metropolitan
- > Area of Lille (1,1 M inhabitants)
- > 13,23 Square km

THE TOWN'S STAKEHOLDERS



ZERO WASTE FOR A NEW URBAN DYNAMIC

For a town like Roubaix that presents several economic and social challenges, focusing on waste reduction wasn't an obvious choice, particularly when the municipality doesn't hold the competences of collection and treatment of waste.

However, because of its characteristics, Roubaix wasn't only sensitive to the topic (problems related to street cleanliness, economic savings for low-income population) but could also benefit from this transition (dynamisation of small businesses, improved welfare, pride about Roubaix and closer link between citizens and Town Hall).

In this sense, the zero waste strategy of Roubaix was crafted to tackle the challenges of the town (cleanliness, precariousness), but also to improve the image and self-perception of the town while bringing together many different actors in this transition. In this context, the zero waste policies don't only make part of the environmental agenda, but of the transformation of the town and are highly supported both by the local government and the opposition.

FAMILIES

With the aim of engaging citizens in the move towards zero waste and of illustrating that it is possible to reduce waste generation significantly in a sustained way, in early 2015 Roubaix launched a 1-year voluntary challenge calling on families to halve the waste they produced. 100 households joined the first call.

These households were provided with a weighing-scales to measure the non-residual waste they produce and were coached by the municipality with 14 different work-

shops taking place across the year. These workshops teach about homemade cleaning products and cosmetics, food waste reduction and composting. Whenever possible, the municipality involves local associations in the training modules. The modules don't follow any specific order but they are repeated all over the year to adapt to everyone's rhythm and path to zero waste.

The challenge of families has been the driver of the whole zero waste strategy, as it helps creating a critical mass of people in town leveraging change. At the same time, it doesn't only impact those people taking the challenge, but also their neighbours and the shops where they buy.

The participants to the challenge are far from being a homogeneous group of people. Rather on the contrary, the profiles are quite diverse in terms of age, size of the household, profession, level of education and level of income, showing that anyone can start its own path to zero waste. The proof is that after one year 25% of households participating managed to reduce their waste generation over 80% and 70% of them reduced it by 50%.

The motivations for taking the challenge were very diverse. Indeed, some participants already cared about the environment and decided to finally take action thanks to the support of the municipality, but for many others, the motivation for changing their lifestyles, the search for economic savings or the fact of taking part in a collective project were decisive. In the 2016 challenge, 120 households have joined the initiative, many of which after observing the positive changes of their neighbours and the proof that it was feasible.

ANDRÉE, 'ROUBAIX'S BÉA JOHNSON'

One day, Andrée found in her mailbox a leaflet of info sessions about the zero waste programme. Although she wasn't separating waste at home before and she was unsure of the meaning of zero waste, she decided to give it a chance and attending the info session, after which she joined the challenge.

She explains that she used to spend 500€ in her shopping for three weeks and had nothing left for the rest of the month. Food was stocked in the fridge and much of it went bad before being eaten. She says it was a total nightmare to make ends meet. Now, she buys differently, she and her husband grow their own vegetables and they certainly waste much less.

Andrée and her family are the vivid example that moving to zero waste isn't only good for the environment, but it also makes economic sense. Zero waste has saved her 250€ a month in shopping costs. Now money isn't a nightmare anymore and they even have a bit of extra disposable income!

For the second intake of participants to the challenge, she has coached a young student who is willing to move towards zero waste. She also sees some changes in the community around her. She's optimistic about convincing other people: "There's no need to exaggerate it, it's a matter of explaining it in a way that people understand and feel comfortable and able to do it. Then, people will start doing it"

Andrée and her husband Guy
in their kitchen



BIOWASTE

In order to bypass the lack of separate collection for bio-waste imposed by the Lille Metropolitan Area, the town hall has been supporting community and home composting. Six different community composting sites exist now and there are plans to support new ones. Although some of these were existing before the strategy, the municipality has supported the refurbishment when required (e.g. installation of a source for water).

Those households participating in the challenge but lacking a garden have been provided with a tower garden, a vertical composter that has been designed by the municipality to allow both composting and gardening on terraces without access to the soil.

SCHOOLS

The strategy for turning schools towards Zero Waste is aimed, on the one hand, at minimising waste from one of the large sources of waste in town and, on the other hand, at leveraging changes in families and society by engaging with children.

Roubaix started with four pilot schools of different sizes with a holistic programme. However specific actions are being taken in more schools, with 10 school-canteens working against food waste and 15 schools having their own composting site. The aim of the pilot is to gather relevant information and knowledge to roll-out the holistic programme to all the centres of education in Roubaix by 2020.

The actions taken are diverse, but address primarily canteens, with the aim of optimising separate collection, minimising food waste and the substitution of single-use tableware with reusable (e.g. trays, napkins). The actions include the training of up to 150 staff members of school canteens, the introduction of a new distribution of separate collection systems, raising awareness of separate collection, provision of reusable ta-

bleware for classrooms or specific advice for school parties, among others. On top of these actions, master composters are supporting the composting sites at schools.

The first results are promising. Staff and children have integrated the changes and are satisfied. At the same time, parents are starting to talk about the zero waste changes when picking their children up, helping the transition to spread. Now the town hall expects to prepare specific guidelines on how to go zero waste in schools, with the aim of replicating it more easily and reaching even beyond Roubaix.

MERCHANTS & BUSINESSES

The town hall has also engaged directly with merchants and businesses to support their transition towards zero waste. On top of working directly with the stalls in public markets to reduce waste and effectively implement the ban on plastic bags, Roubaix is also working with shops, cafés and restaurants of all kinds to integrate the zero waste strategy in their business model.

The town hall meets these businesses and assess their situation, after which they propose specific measures to improve their waste generation. In parallel, they have opened a call for projects to support the transition to selling in bulk. In order to become a zero waste business, these have to commit to some specific actions that vary depending on whether the merchant deals with food or not.

So far, more than 30 small businesses have joined the path towards zero waste and facilitate the transition of those already living zero waste. Indeed, those households taking the challenge receive a voucher equivalent to half their waste fee (150€) to spend in those shops, reinforcing, at the same time, the local economy.



Deputy Mayor of Roubaix, Alexandre Garcin, discusses with Flore Berligen, Director of Zero Waste France at Capannori's reuse centre.
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ASSOCIATIONS

Civil society and associations of Roubaix also make part of the town's transition towards zero waste. In this sense, neighbourhood committees and local associations are supporting and monitoring community composting sites, organising repair workshops and supporting the fight against food waste.

Furthermore, a Repair Café has recently opened in town, supporting the repairing and the reuse of products, while giving value to local knowledge and supporting social exchanges.

THE TOWN HALL

In addition to engaging with other stakeholders in the town, the local government emphasises its own role in driving the transition. In this sense, the municipality leads by the example by integrating the zero waste strategy in all the departments of the town hall, shifting public procurement and making the public buildings and offices a model to follow. Likewise, the local government is engaging directly with civil servants and making them agents of change of their units and departments, being now more than 400 those who have committed to zero waste already.

IMPACTS AND RESULTS SO FAR

Although waste management and collection hasn't improved significantly due to the reluctance of metropolitan authority to roll-out bio-waste separate collection and introduce a pay-as-you-throw scheme, societally speaking, the impact in the town has been positive and a new culture of waste is spreading quickly.

Families taking up the challenge have not only reduced their waste generation significantly, but also have seen important economic savings associated to the zero waste lifestyle. A network of actors involved in moving the town forward is growing fast, strong and inter-linked thanks to the support of the municipality and the multi-level action, which is helping to create a social fabric in town.

Significant media coverage (national and regional) for the actions of the municipality and to those families taking up the challenge has served to promote the initiative and frame zero waste as something feasible for the average family, particularly when it is being led by an economically deprived area, which supports the momentum the zero waste movement is living in France.

At the same time, the town hall acknowledges that something is starting to move within the Lille Metropolitan Authority and the initial scepticism about Roubaix's path has become interest. In fact, the city of Lille is considering to replicate the challenge of zero waste families.

The transition towards zero waste creates a consensus in Roubaix and what is more is managing to project a different vision of the town, based on sustainability, social inclusion and a dynamic and vibrant social fabric. Now Roubaix is not only contributing France path to zero waste but also to portray a new image of the city.

CHALLENGES & VISION FORWARD

Despite succeeding in creating a grassroots movement of people and stakeholders towards zero waste, the town hall acknowledges several challenges for the coming months and years.

The reluctance from the Metropolitan Authority to change the model of collection and management of waste remains the major challenge to fully move towards zero waste. However, Roubaix will keep pushing for the introduction of separate collection for bio-waste, to which external obligations set out in French law and soon in the Circular Economy Package may serve to finally shift the position of the Lille Metropolitan Authority.

At the same time, the successful experience with households so far opens the door for scaling up the project with the aim of reaching more citizens, while maintaining a

close relationship with those taking up the challenge. New formulas are being considered to complement the challenge while being able to reach to a larger amount of citizens.

While Roubaix is supporting the transition of existing businesses in town, the municipality keeps receiving petitions of support from new circular businesses and startups that would like to set up in the area. Structuring this support and finding new resources to create a hub for circular businesses are other of the plans of the municipality for the upcoming years.

All in all, the experience of Roubaix proves true the saying “where there is a will there is a way” for despite all the difficulties managed to find an innovative way to work towards zero waste.

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Sources

Roubaix City Council (www.roubaixzerodechet.fr)

Zero Waste France (www.zerowaste-france.org)

Zero Waste Europe was created to empower communities to rethink their relationship with the resources.

In a growing number of regions, local groups of individuals, businesses and city officials are taking significant steps towards eliminating waste in our society.

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