



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

CASE STUDY #6



June 2015

THE STORY OF GIPUZKOA

The province of Gipuzkoa located in the Spanish Basque Country has almost doubled recycling rates in five years and made investing in an incineration plant obsolete. It is the living proof that a transition towards a circular economy system of resource management is possible and has established itself as a role model for those in Europe struggling to meet the EU 2020 recycling targets.

Gipuzkoa - A European model of transition from incineration to zero waste. How did it all start?

Spain averages a level of separate collection under 30%. Back in 2002, Gipuzkoa was sending 80% of its waste to landfills and following the trend of that time, the authorities considered that in order to increase recycling rates they needed to invest in an incinerator plant.

The Integral Waste Management Scheme for Gipuzkoa was drawn up for the 2002-2016 period and it declared for the first time that Gipuzkoa needed an incineration plant. The aim of that plan was to raise recycling rates to 30% for 2016 and the fact that organic waste could be separately collected was not even taken into consideration. Their scheme regarded raising recycling rates above 40% as totally impossible and predicted that the production of waste would continue to grow inexorably.

As soon as the name of town chosen to host the incinerator was announced the civil society got mobilised to oppose the model of waste management and started working on alternatives.



- Square km: 1,909
- Municipalities: 88
- Inhabitants: 732,468
- Waste generation: 315,000 tn
- Separate waste collection (2014): 51 %
- Residual waste per person/year: 232 kg



2009: First municipalities start to walk the ZW path

Usurbil is a town of 6000 inhabitants located across the road from where the incinerator was meant to be built. In 2009 it dared to implement a system of door-to-door separate collection with a special focus on the separate collection of organic waste. Until then nobody in Gipuzkoa had previous experience or neighbouring towns to imitate. **They only had the citizen mobilisation and the political will to build a better alternative.** With the support of zero waste experts from Catalonia, Usurbil planned an innovative system of kerbside collection that quadrupled the recycling rates the first month after implementation.

Following this successful experience two towns adopted the zero waste strategy in 2010, one of them was the town of Hernani with 20,000 inhabitants. Just like in Usurbil, the driving force for change was the mobilisation of the citizens together with the elected politicians. In towns where the door-to-door system has been implemented, a participatory process has preceded the rollout of the system. Over 20 meetings were held in each town in which the citizens decided on the collection times and frequencies for the different waste fractions.



For example, in Hernani organic waste is collected three times a week, light containers twice, paper and cardboard once, and once every two weeks residual waste is collected. As a result the separate collection for recycling rose from 28% to 82% within a matter of months, and similar rates were maintained over the years that followed.

More waste recycled might mean more expenses for collection, but it also means more income from selling the recyclables and less costs for waste disposal – **disposal costs are now 17% of the budget when they were 74% before the change.** As a result, in 2012 the small town of Usurbil created one new job for every 1000 inhabitants and saved €149,535, around €25 per person/year.



2011: The party supporting the incinerator loses the elections

In the meantime the regional government was moving ahead with the idea to build the incinerator despite the growing evidence of a viable alternative and despite the fact that the incinerator's planned capacity was already above the waste generated in Gipuzkoa. The public opposition and the stubbornness of the Gipuzkoa government to force the construction of an oversized and expensive incinerator played a role in them losing the elections in favour of a party which was committed to taking Gipuzkoa down the zero waste path.

In 2012, the new government presented an alternative infrastructure plan inspired in the Circular Economy roadmap presented by the European Commission. **The plan aimed at complying with the EU recycling targets of 50% for 2020, phasing out the disposal of recyclable waste and stopping landfilling of untreated waste.**

The new plan focused on rolling out intensive separate collection with special attention to the treatment of organic waste for which especially dedicated composting plants were foreseen. The new plan made incineration redundant and reduced three-fold the investment necessary for the new infrastructure. Moreover, with a lot less investment it managed to create 10 times more jobs in the treatment of waste and reduce emissions associated to transport by simply applying the proximity principle to the management of the organic waste.

Home-composting and community composting were encouraged and the number of villages which are managing the organic waste in-situ has grown since, reducing the costs of collection and treatment.



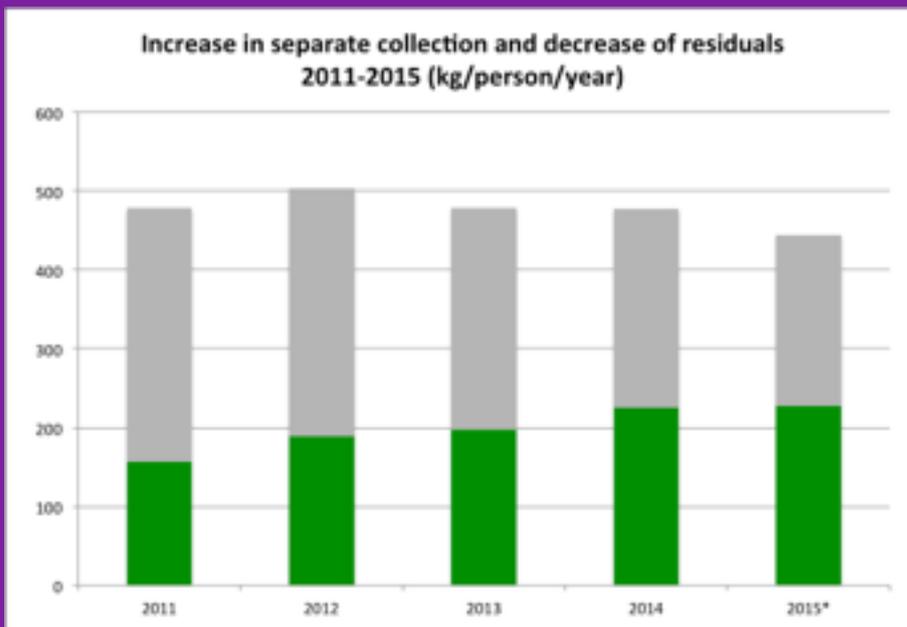
Specific projects were developed with the social players to build awareness about waste reduction and reuse. In addition, a number of interesting social experiments have been started up in this area to tackle the current economic crisis.

To prevent food waste, in 2013 the government collaborated with the Food Bank of Gipuzkoa to work with people with risk of social exclusion to distribute 741 tons of food to those in need.

The food that the large retail outlets were going to dispose of, due to either the sell-by date had passed or because the packaging was damaged, was collected and sorted and the food suitable for human consumption was distributed. In order to encourage reuse, in collaboration with the EMAUS social foundation, Ecocenters were built to recover materials and promote a second-hand sales service. This measure has

also made it possible to create jobs for people at risk of social exclusion.

Regarding the incinerator, the fact that it was not built represents a breach of contract with the banks and the European Investment Bank and the citizens of Gipuzkoa ended up paying 8,19 million euros for an investment that didn't take place in an infrastructure that was not needed. Yet even with the payment of these fines the zero waste plan for Gipuzkoa has saved 258 million euros in comparison with the incinerator and will continue to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits for the next years.



*For 2015, only data for first trimester was available.

2011 - 2015

- 7% waste production
- 32% residual waste

Recycling rate:
from 32% in 2011
to 51% in 2015

2013 - 2015: ZW rolls out throughout the province

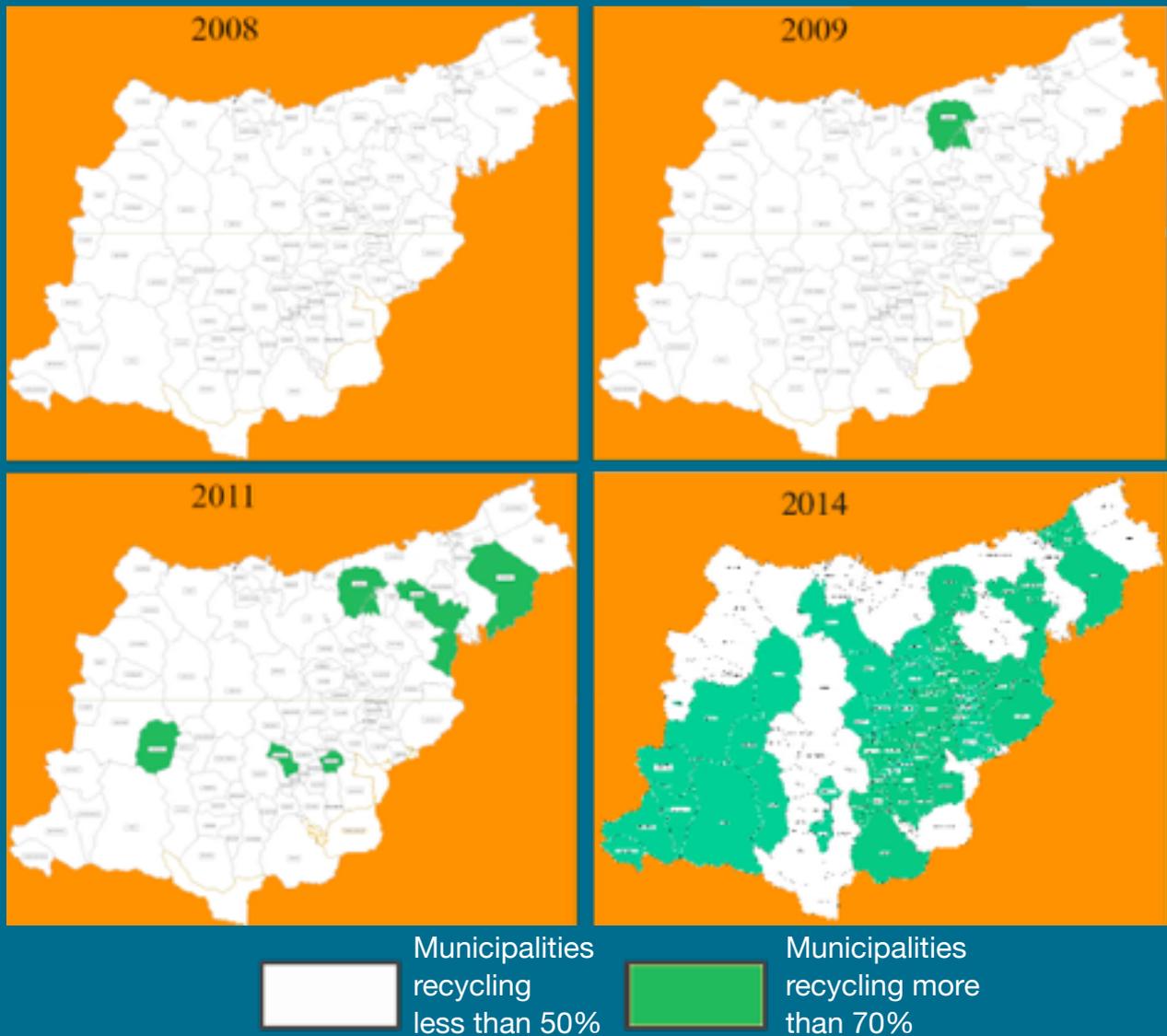
At the beginning of 2013 there were only five municipalities in Gipuzkoa that had gone through the transition and were collecting over 70% of the waste separately. By the end of 2014 the number had grown to 60, that is 2/3 of the municipalities in Gipuzkoa that were collecting over 70% of its waste separately, with many of them recycling above 80%.

The implementation to new municipalities continues to be rolled out and in the beginning

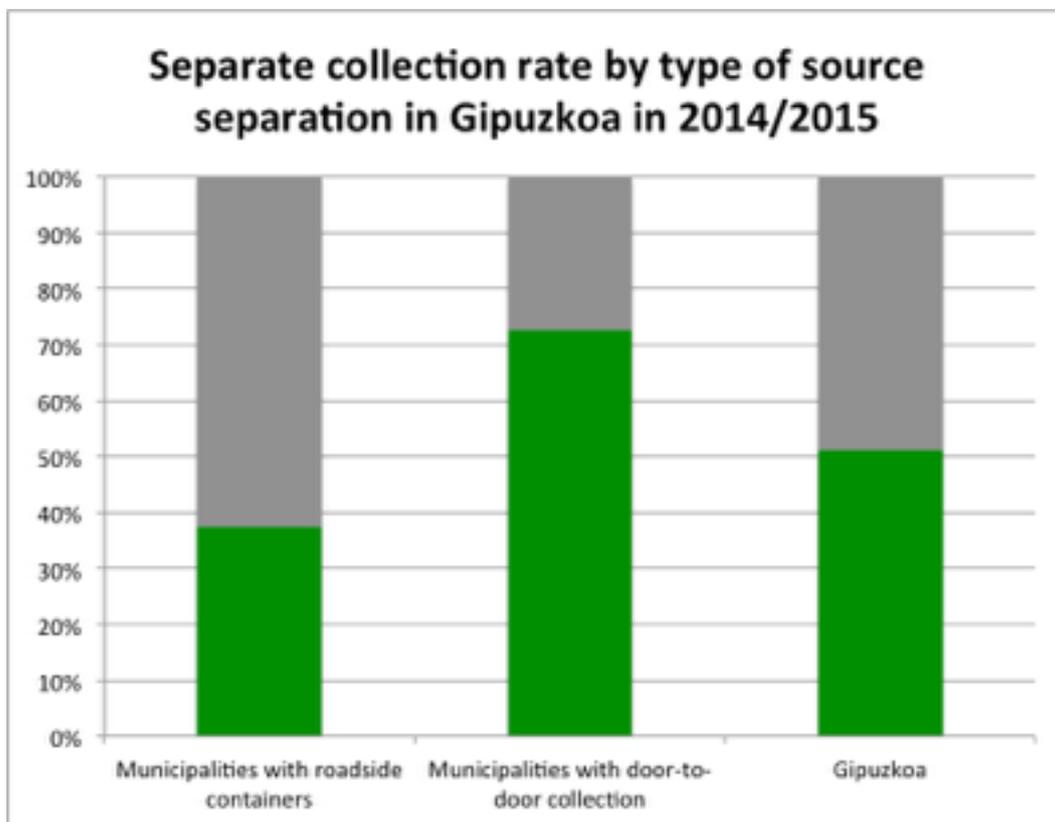
of 2015 Gipuzkoa was at 53% separate collection and therefore had met the European recycling targets set for 2020. The target for 2020 is to achieve 70% meeting the targets that the EU is considering to set for 2030.

Proactive waste prevention continues to throw results with waste generation decreasing despite the GDP growth of the last years. 57,218 inhabitants (1/10 of the population) are either home-composting or doing community composting, saving money for them and the community.

The evolution of separate collection in Gipuzkoa



The improvements are even more significant when considering that only one fifth of Gipuzkoa's population live in municipalities that have followed a transition, which prove that the results of these municipalities are outstanding, some of them above 80 or even 90% of separate collection.



Next steps & conclusions

Gipuzkoa represents the fastest transition from disposal based system to zero waste in Europe, almost doubling recycling rates in four years and with perspectives to continue increasing over the years to come.

It confirms that leapfrogging incineration is not only possible but also advisable for it is cheaper, allows faster and higher recycling rates, generates more jobs with substantially lower environmental impact.

It proves that it is possible to transition from low recycling rates to 70% in only 10 years, making it perfectly possible for the EU to set recycling targets of 70% for 2030.

Written by
Joan Marc Simon
Zero Waste Europe
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Sources

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Ibaiondo Industrialdea 27-3,
20120 Hernani Gipuzkoa;
www.ghk.eus



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www.zerowasteurope.eu
www.facebook.com/ZeroWasteEurope

Or contact:
info@zerowasteurope.eu
Twitter @zerowasteurope