

## Reinventing the wheel: Paving the Way to a Circular Food Economy

*A workshop to connect various stakeholders to explore a circular food economy - concrete action steps and summary of the event.*

Thank you for joining us at our “Reinventing the Wheel: Paving the Way to a Circular Food Economy” event. We valued all of your feedback, and we hope you were inspired! As promised, here is the summary of our discussions, as well as concrete action steps that you can hopefully take away with you in your personal and professional lives & work!

The workshop was opened & facilitated by Neil Williams, Design Strategist from Circular Community HK, followed by an introduction from the experts, who each introduced their sectors, which included food producers, retailers, food and beverage, and governance & policy.

Participants were divided into groups of 8-10, and each group was assigned one of these sectors. The task was for each group to provide solutions from the perspective of the challenges faced by the other group's industries. For instance, the group covering food & beverage was to give possible insights and solutions from their viewpoint to the food producers, retailers, and policymakers. Let's dive into your ideas!

### FOOD PRODUCERS

Pol Fàbrega of Rooftop Republic introduced his sector, the food producers, and the following challenges faced by them.

#### **The Challenges:**

- How might the other groups support the **Hong Kong food producers** to turn every piece of fallow farmland and available urban space (including rooftops) into a productive and sustainable/regenerative food production source?
- In what ways might they support **Hong Kong food producers** to become fully circular?

**Food producers** had solutions such as farm to table, bring your own packaging, composting, and creating rooftop gardens. **The retailers** could plan production in line with anticipated consumption to avoid wastage. **Policymakers** could make it a legal requirement to use all rooftops for urban farming. Set-up co-operatives to share agricultural knowledge, equipment, supply chain management (harvesting, collecting, marketing, delivery). Support community action at the community level.

Some of the **hurdles** were cost and availability. Urban farming in a densely populated high-rise country is a very uphill task. A lot of the land available is not suitable for agriculture. The supply of local produce cannot match the demand. The variety of produce is limited due to the climate conditions. Most farmable land is owned by developers and not accessible for farming. Composting is time-consuming and in a fast-paced place like Hong Kong may not be something businesses and people are interested in. Subsidies or rent-free land in HK may lead to misuse of residence or business.

#### **The final solutions:**

- Produce as per demand.
- Use recycled and reusable bags or a chic alternative like banana leaf packaging for produce.
- Strategise a viable local farming plan.
- Branding: eco-friendly packaging & composting.
- The restaurants and food producers can find a middle ground to the pricing of products.

- Policymakers could offer tax-breaks, composting facilities, education, land, and subsidies to support the food-producers.

### RETAILERS

Kai & Dora of Slowood discussed Hong Kong retailer's challenges.

#### **The Challenges:**

- How might others support **Hong Kong retailers** in reducing their carbon footprint?
- In what ways might the others support **Hong Kong retailers** in encouraging Hong Kong consumers to adopt a mindset of refill and reuse?

A few of the suggestions by the **food producers** were for farmers to repurpose leftover fibers into biodegradable packaging materials. **The retailers** can give incentives to customers to bring their own bags. Also, they can offer subsidies to environmentally friendly suppliers. **Food & beverage** can ask retailers to bring their own disposables. Place a ban on imported food and drink. A fresh idea was to keep wet markets open for longer so office goers can still shop for fresh produce after work.

Some of the **hurdles** they could face were; these ideas may not be financially viable for businesses to implement. In large chains, usually, all decisions are centrally made, and an individual outlet does not have the authority to make changes. To carry reusable may not be a practical option for customers. The wet markets start very early and may not be willing to wait long hours. Hong Kong imports 98% of its food and drink, and a ban on these would cripple the country. Circular usage of containers is a challenge in terms of return, clean, re-use.

#### **The final solutions:**

- Government and private incentivized initiative to manufacture biodegradable packaging by creating a system of collecting farm waste for free.
- Use marketing to encourage the purchase and educate customers on locally grown or made products.
- Use customer feedback to develop better products.
- Offer solutions for work-life balance for wet-markets workers, infrastructure for food to be kept fresh longer, subsidy for refill/reuse.
- Keep on the right track; the HK government has plans to build 4-5 recycling centres for organic food-waste disposal for wet-markets, farmers, and retailers. They are also currently working to reduce carbon emissions in accordance with the Paris Agreement.

### FOOD & BEVERAGE

Heidi Spurrell from Food Made Good HK outlined the challenges faced by Hong Kong F&B industry, restaurants, and cafes.

#### **The Challenges:**

- How might the others support **Hong Kong restaurants and cafes** in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, in the foodservice sector?
- In what ways might the others support **Hong Kong restaurants and cafes** in reducing food waste in the foodservice sector?

**The food producers** provided solutions like composting, freezing leftovers, and sell the next day, and for suppliers to offer pre-cut and washed vegetables to communities, also to reduce the volume of waste

overall. Another line of thought was to promote local produce, introduce the concept of ‘veggie weekend’ or ‘veggie month,’ and shared Tupperware solutions, in collaboration with food delivery services/applications. By keeping up to date with technology, an application can be developed to track consumption and wastage, to help determine portion sizes. **The retailers** discussed the option of freezing leftover food and also selling leftover food at a discount. To educate staff and customers about the impact of food waste on the environment, and perhaps introduce a food wastage surcharge. **The policymakers** came up with solutions like categorizing waste in terms of vegetable, meat, and sauce. Allocating a government penalty for food waste and implementing a method of paying businesses for less waste and an incentive to reuse. Another suggestion was to create a meat use cap for restaurants and encourage creative vegetarian options.

Some of the **hurdles** in achieving these goals were cost, probable customer resistance, and difficulty to implement due to feasibility. For example, the customers might view leftover food as stale, or the retailers want customers to spend more money at their establishments. Idea’s like penalty and paybacks are hard to implement in a fast-paced industry. Infrastructure to sort waste is needed; this may be challenging to achieve. Hong Kong is a meat-loving city and may resist vegetarian options. In reality, Hong Kong doesn’t have enough fresh local produce for supply to restaurants. Finally, awareness doesn’t necessarily mean action.

#### The **final solutions**:

- Marketing in partnership between food producers and restaurants.
- Creating a certification for local produce and working with restaurants to match seasonal demands.
- Educating the customers by introducing concepts like carbon emission statistics on their meals and accounting for the amount of food wastage.
- Retailers to charge a green fee for meat items on the menu.
- Create more interesting vegetarian options on menus, adding supplier information to highlight organic foods and other benefits.
- Follow by example: in Germany, they have implemented a system of a ‘waste tax’ for food waste in restaurants. We could learn from their example to create a similar system in Hong Kong.
- The government can help encourage local production by making more land available for farming.
- Promote and educate on locally grown food, especially vegetables.

### **GOVERNANCE & POLICY**

Susan Evans spoke on challenges faced by the framers of policies and governance.

#### The **Challenges**:

- How might the others support and influence **Hong Kong policy makers** in shaping a more circular Hong Kong food economy?
- How might they support the **Hong Kong Government** to promote and provide healthier food options for all sections of the community?

**The food producers** suggest appealing to policymakers to improve research and programmes to educate on the health benefits of eating fresh. To encourage and support local farms and locally grown produce like organizing community gardens and providing training and employment to farmers. **The retailers** could help policymakers identify and secure areas like rooftops, parks, school gardens, empty plots for organic farming. Establish strict laws to ban excessive plastic packaging in supermarkets, for

example. Develop smarter ways to re-use recycled containers. Promote a healthier lifestyle in partnerships with the governments. Highlight the financial benefit of lower health care costs due to healthier consumption. Another option could be to tax overseas food imports and subsidize local produce. **Food & beverage** suggested incorporating more plant-based, whole-food, healthy options on menus, and taking initiatives to build relationships between retailers and producers to tackle carbon emissions. Finally, to initiate composting options on-site for various restaurants.

Some of the **hurdles** were that land in Hong Kong is very scarce and too valuable to spare for farming. Ownership of rooftop farming may involve legal complications. Changes at a retail and restaurant level are difficult as businesses are dependent on customer demands, and any interference of governmental policies will affect revenues and overall business. Composting can be complicated and smelly; customers could object. Health care may be ignored, as it could be perceived as trivial. The government is mostly slow to respond and limited by its budgets; hence, these ideas may not be feasible. Also, the retailers could find these policies difficult to implement due to a lack of funding. Customers may reject a change in the menus to vegetarian options.

**The final solutions:**

- Hong Kong has a thriving outlying island culture with many villages. Farming can be recommended to these people as an additional source of income.
- The government can subsidize and facilitate on-site composting and distribute the final product.
- Try and build a long-term benefit and profit proposal.
- Revamp education by using social media to convey fun messages on food waste, composting, packaging, etc.

The overall conclusion is that most of the suggestions, hurdles, and final solutions overlapped each other. Perhaps a circular food economy could work if food producers, the food & beverage industry, retailers, and policymakers would **jointly work together** towards overcoming these hurdles and implementing the solutions.

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