

## Consumer Rights Day 2021 - Tackling Plastic Waste

### Introduction

Today, consumer co-operatives join the celebrations of the Consumer Rights Day 2021 and welcome its focus on tackling plastic pollution and consumers' right to a fair, safe and sustainable marketplace. Consumer co-operatives are deeply committed to increase plastic recycling and tackle the use of unnecessary food packaging. Euro Coop members' initiatives are varied and their efforts are continuously renewed to meet new ambitious targets, making their operations more resource-efficient and circular.

The past years have been of paramount importance in raising consumers' and industry's awareness on the negative impact of plastic waste when released into the environment, and its harmful effect on terrestrial and marine biodiversity and ecosystems. Food safety and human health concerns are equally relevant when discussing plastic food packaging. Recent studies found microplastics in the air, in drinking water and other food products such as salt or honey, but its consequences on our organisms are still mostly unknown.

While in 2018 the EU has introduced a [Plastic Strategy](#) and, a year later, a specific piece of legislation to reduce [single-use plastic products](#) (SUPs), giving a strong input for the development, marketing and uptake of ecological alternatives, on a global scale there is still a lot to be done to adapt our economic model to the circularity principle. Major changes are therefore required at the policy level to stimulate innovation across the different sectors where plastic materials are used, as well as to ensure actors at every stage of the plastic value chain, from producers to consumers, implement the 3Rs - Reduce, Reuse & Recycle - approach cutting down on the amount of waste.

### **Consumer Co-operatives are frontrunners in tackling plastic waste and investing in consumers' engagement.**

Conscious of the crucial role played by plastic waste management in ensuring sustainable food systems, consumer co-operatives have taken swift actions in this field, being amongst the first ones in the retailing sector to offer consumers more environmentally safe options such as cotton buds with paper sticks (**Coop Norway**), in-store bulk detergent dispensers and compostable coffee pods (**Coop Italy**), as well as refill stations for milk and dry products (**Channel Islands Co-op**, **Scotmid Co-operative**). **Coop Sweden** was also the first chain to launch a plastic-free, 100 percent biodegradable chewing gum in the country. Moreover, in December 2020, **The Co-op Group** in UK cut 8 tonnes of plastic (1.1 million pieces) by removing plastic and glitter from their entire Christmas celebration range. Many Euro Coop members also banned the use of microbeads from their own-brand products.

Consumer co-operatives operate on the principle of education, training and information. This means that their action goes well beyond the store and translates into a broad spectrum of activities aimed at changing consumer behaviour at home and in the society. Numerous are therefore the initiatives that seek a direct engagement with local communities and consumers, in a bid to raise awareness about the environmental impact of current excessive plastic waste. As part of their 'One Change Campaign' to tackle the issue of single use plastic, **Midcounties Co-operative** in England linked up with local schools to produce 1,000 eco-bricks which

enabled them to build a Turkey Shed at Fairy Tale Farm. Plastic bottles were filled with plastic wrappers, cling film etc., and then used as eco-bricks. In Czech Republic, **Coop Czech** partnered with the packaging company EKO-KOM and, in cooperation with the Ministry of the Environment, initiated in 2019 the campaign 'We Sort, Sort with Us' which aimed to explain to shoppers the meaning of correct sorting, nature conservation, and the need for reusable carrier bags. Emphasis is placed on reaching out to consumers in the countryside, where Coop operates the vast majority of its 2,600 retail stores. The ambition is to contribute to a higher recycling rate of waste in the country by reduction of waste, landfilled or incinerated.

In Italy, as part of the 'Pledging Campaign' launched by the European Commission for the reduction of plastics pollution, in 2020 **Coop Italia** installed several "seabins" to collect plastic garbage in a number of rivers, seas and lakes across the country. The initiative allowed Coop Italia to reach its goal of saving 6,400 tons/year of virgin plastics by 2025, equal to the volume of 60 trucks.

Run by Euro Coop Spanish member **Hispacoop** together with consumer co-operative retailer **Eroski**, the 'Join sustainable consumption: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle', aimed at raising consumer awareness on the issues of food waste reduction, resource reuse and correct leftovers and general litter disposal. Up North, the **S Group** in Finland has coupled its ongoing actions with the pledge to reduce food waste produced by its own operations by 15% by the end of 2020.

The great work done so far by consumer co-operatives around Europe to decrease and optimise plastics use and their role in educating and informing their consumers, vital for reaching a truly circular society, was discussed and presented in 2018 in occasion of the Euro Coop Roundtable "[Consumer Co-operatives & the Plastics Challenge: Partners, Vision and Solutions for a Circular Economy Future](#)" in partnership with the European Economic and Social Committee.

**More about Euro Coop members plastic reduction strategies and on-going successful initiatives.**

### **The Co-op Group in the UK.**

To address the important issue of maximisation of recycling rates, the Co-op Group in the UK has for example changed the colour of their milk bottle caps to prevent colour contamination and banned all black plastic packaging. Their efforts in facilitating recycling allowed to progress from 46% recyclability to 78% in 2017. In 2020, Co-op announced to have moved forward the deadline for meeting its plastic target and that it would have had 100% own-brand recyclable packaging by that summer. They have also reduced their reliance on virgin or 'new' plastic and now use almost 37% recycled content across own-brand packaging. Through other plastic reduction projects, Co-op has eliminated a total of 1.438 tonnes of plastic.

### **Coop in Norway.**

Coop Norway has committed to cut 25% plastics by 2025, to achieve this Coop is making its own-brand packaging 100% recyclable, banning all harmful chemicals from its products, and is innovating packaging which extends the natural lifespan of food products, reinforcing its zero-food waste vision.

### **S-Group in Finland.**

Approximately 4% of Finland's waste is generated by the S-Group's operations, because of this SOK's goal is to recycle 100% of own brand packaging by 2023 and 80% of its waste into raw materials for new products by the end of 2025. The goal is ambitious and challenging, and achieving it will require a number of measures, the most important of which is establishing effective cooperation with both partners and customers. Recycling in SOK logistics has grown in recent years: bottles, cans and cardboard are carried in the return load. Together with waste operators, the S-Group has found new solutions to recycle plastic and cardboard as well. The majority of private label packaging already has plain language recycling instructions to facilitate sorting. SOK has also been among the first to boost recycling of own-brand juice plastic bottles by setting up a return scheme. Consumers return their empty bottles to receive money back (from 10 to 40 cents depending on the size of the bottle).

### **Spain: Eroski & Consum.**

In Spain, 56,000 tons of plastic were used in 2018 in the form of a bag, according to the figures provided by the Ministry of Ecological Transition. That is the reason why since the beginning of 2019, **Eroski** consumers have at their disposal 100% recyclable paper bags with mixed FSC® seal, compostable bag of plant-based materials, bag made with at least 55% recycled plastic and reusable cloth bags, the latter made with 70% recycled plastic.

Eroski also joined the Citruspack project focusing on the development of alternative packaging such as juice or cosmetics bottles made of bioplastics and reinforced with natural fiber. The bottles must meet specific technical requirements and the residues from the transformation are used as natural additives for the reinforcement of bottles and containers of 100% bio-based, renewable and compostable polymers, whose origin is potato starch and orange fiber from natural juice. The cycle is completed using these ingredients in the composition of cosmetics, revaluing up to 80% of the raw materials used in the transformation process. Thanks to these efforts, the Basque group Eroski was considered leader, according to Greenpeace, in the fight against plastic.

As part of its Packaging Reduction Plan, the Valencia-based consumer co-operative **Consum** is eliminating 1.302 tonnes/year of plastic, through the substitution, reduction and reuse. Consum is assessing all its packaging with the aim to make it 100% recyclable, compostable and reusable by 2030. Compostable bags will replace the single-use plastic bags and, together with the incorporation of reusable jute and polypropylene bags, will mean that 592 tonnes/year of plastic will no longer be put on the market.

### **Coop in Sweden.**

Coop Sweden introduced a deposit on all PET bottles under its own brands and those collected are used to create new bottle (no other plastics materials) in recycled material, so-called r-PET. Although if released in nature they are very damaging, PET bottles are light, which reduces energy consumption during transport and pose no risk of breaking. In 2017, 84 percent of all PET bottles were recycled in the deposit system. Coop Sweden has also replaced single-use plastic bags for fruit and vegetables with paper bags in 2020. The initiative helped the retailer to reduce the company's annual plastic consumption by approximately 300 tonnes.

### **Coop in Italy.**

In 2019, Coop Italia has officially joined the [Circular Plastic Alliance](#), a EU Commission's initiatives which gathers 245 public and private actors for promoting the reduction of plastic materials and the diffusion of recycled ones, with a specific objective to reach the target of 10 million tonnes of recycled plastics used in products by 2025. In this way, Coop wanted to reaffirm its commitments to protect the environment signing an EU Plastics Pledge to contribute 2.560 tonnes/year of recycled plastic by 2023, and 6.400 tonnes/year by 2025, based on the recyclability of its own branded household and laundry detergent, fresh fruit and vegetables trays, water bottles, (upgraded) CPR System Boxes for the handling of fruit and vegetables and all brands of bottled water with mandatory recycled content.

### **\*Conclusion**

Today 40 percent of the plastic produced is packaging, used just once and then discarded, and only less than a fifth of this is recycled globally. This results in some 20 billion euros of plastic waste flowing into the oceans every year from coastal regions. A paradigm shift in the way we approach plastic production and consumption is needed especially considering that nearly half of all plastic ever manufactured has been made since 2000. This does not mean pushing out plastic materials completely but fighting plastic pollution with resolute actions. Plastic is today one of five priorities in the 'EU action plan for the Circular Economy', a common vision for a more sustainable Europe. Political initiatives at the EU and national levels are important to ensure equal and effective actions are carried out by all actors involved, exploiting synergies for rapid progress. Recent data also show that about 80 percent reduction in projected annual plastic leakage relative to Business-as-Usual is possible by 2040. If a clear framework for actions is provided internationally, this can be achieved without compromising social or economic benefits. In this context, it is undeniable that consumers are vital for the completion of any transition to a more sustainable world. If, on the one side, on-the-go consumption of food is raising with detrimental effects on plastic reduction efforts, on the other side, consumers have been increasing their demand for sustainable products and brands, pushing for systemic changes in global supply chains and a higher emphasis on reuse, recycling and sustainable food consumption. However, consumers should not carry the burden alone. This is why the 2021 World Consumer Rights Day must be an occasion to remind everyone is responsible in the fight against plastic pollution and to ensure that sustainable choices become easier for consumers.