

SEI Asia Podcast miniseries: “Optimizing Urban Food Systems Resilience”

Episode 01: Food Waste Minimization

By Kuntum Melati and Louis Alban

00:00:32 – 00:01:07

Welcome everyone to SEI Podcast Series on Optimizing Urban Food Resilience. I’m Kuntum Melati from Stockholm Environment Institute Asia. This is the first episode of a series of podcast episodes on promoting circularity approaches in Food Systems. Adopting circularity approach meaning we aim to apply a strategy that aims to transform our food systems to become more regenerative and to mimic nature, resilient and sustainable with resource efficiency strategies, and tackling climate change through waste reduction.

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For today's episode, we will discuss innovative action in fighting food loss. We are joined by a food waste fighter, Louis Alban, who has started a food surplus delivery app called “Yindii” in Thailand. Luis and his team were concerned that despite being one of the world's most renowned food spots, Thailand food waste problem is on the rise with over 17 million tons being thrown away every year, every day, mountains of unsold food are being discarded while being perfectly edible and good because local merchants like bakeries or grocery stores don't have enough buyers before they close the store.

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It's not only a terrible ways when so many people in today's world are going hungry, but it's also damaging to the environment. So then they created an answer called Yindii, a food surplus telling for the app connecting Bangkok restaurants and cafes with overstock to consumers at highly discounted price. It could be up to 80% of the normal price and it create last wish and extra revenue for food sellers and bargain meals for the hungry eaters. So it could be a win win situation.

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Welcome Louis to our podcast. So I've mentioned a bit about Yindii, but why don't you tell us more on what encourage you to start Yindii and how did you do it?

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Thank you for inviting us for highlighting this massive problem. To tell you a little bit about myself, two years ago during COVID, I volunteered for a food bank in Bangkok that was redistributing food to people in need and it really woke me up to a massive problem food waste.

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So I started researching about the problem and and was trying to find a way to prevent it. The problem of food waste is bigger than whatever we think. Today, around 40% of all the food produced worldwide is wasted. Everyday, food retailers throw away perfectly good food worth around a billion dollar that because they can no longer sell it.

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On the other hand, healthy and quality of food is getting more and more expensive. We are hitting record for food price and that's terrible. And if you think about it, it's even worse, because when you throw away food, you also throw away resources, water, gas, electricity with the food and now food waste is contributing to 10% of our greenhouse gas.

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If you think about it, that's roughly four times, but the airline industry is polluted, so when I saw that, I thought to myself, there must be a solution so I created Yindii and so its platform where we connect consumers like you and me to restaurants and food retailers like supermarket hotel that can now sell their daily surplus at discount to improve obviously their bottom line while helping consumers get access to quality food and by doing so we are all working to make the world a better place.

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So it's a win win win, save food, save money, save the planet so that's our slogan. We started this two years ago. We built a website to test if people would like it and you know, in just a few months we already registered like thousands of users, only through word of mouth.

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We were featured in Bangkok Post. I think after four months and the story really started and we have now around 80,000 people who downloaded our app. We have on boarded some of the top food brands from major supermarkets like Gourmet Markets and Big C that will join Yindii soon. Prestigious hotels like Centara and Marriott. Food restaurants like Texas Chicken or S&P and a lot of local and small businesses like Sunshine Market, Paris Mikki or Drop by Dough if you like Donuts.

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So this is a sustainable revolution that we've started in the food industry in Thailand. We're really, really proud of it, and it's just the beginning.

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Thanks, Louis, it's really remarkable what you're doing. It's very interesting that you targeted restaurant and cafes for this app and linking it with consumers directly. I just want to quote, well, from the report of the high level of final report on food security and nutrition on food loss and waste. So it is mentioned that food surfaces in the hospitality sectors such as hotels, restaurants, canteens, catering, etc. can play a double role, input loss, waste reduction strategies.

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So once by reducing their own losses and waste and also as key places to raise awareness of consumers, to experiment and to understand consumer behaviors. And for me, listening for your explanation, it seems like Yindii is taking this role. Based on your experience, what would you see as the biggest challenges to promote sustainable consumption related to food and how did you overcome it?

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Yes, you're totally right. I think that the first point of Yindii is to empower people to fight food waste, but the first point is you need to know more the impact of food waste before tackling it. I think that the awareness level in Southeast Asia is pretty low. I think it's linked to, for example, in Thailand to the country history. Thailand is a country of plenty. They never really run out of food.

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So if you think that resources are unlimited and there's no impact. Well, you order food a lot. You don't pay attention to what you want but now today we know that our resources are actually limited units. As a French person, I would say my education was totally different. I think it also come from history.

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France was conquered by Germany during Second World War, so our grandparents were actually running out of food during a period of time. To get food, you had to queue for hours and you had to buy tickets, and so every piece of bread that you were getting for your family was super important and we grew up with that.

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I think education from our grandparents that were given to our parents and then to us and on top of that a lot of campaigns to raise awareness on hunger in Africa, for example, really raised up our level in food waste so here in Thailand, I think that it required a strong communication. We need to raise the level of awareness and Yindii secrets do that is actually very attractive because we are matching sustainability with affordability, and we know that Thai people love discount.

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So discount come in Yindii app as a teaser which has an incentive to onboard people but also talk about a serious issue and we've seen that people have been really responsive so soon if students tried at the app. They started loving it for its purpose, and they start talking to their friends, colleagues and family, and say hey guys, you should know that the app. This is really cool what they're doing.

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And by doing so, they are also spreading the words and raising more awareness on this issue. You know we were talking a lot about plastic waste in Thailand, which is another really big topic. If you look at the trash of Thailand, 60-70% is food and this is also very important topic that we need to put on the spotlight so I really appreciate that you are actually talking about this issue.

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On top of the app and the impact that we're having, I think that we're now trying to see how we can involve more large organizations and maybe government to be part of the change so we've started Yindii awareness program with coworking spaces with schools and with corporation to start raising this awareness level.

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So we've organized corporate program with company like Sansiri, Thai Union, Pomelo and Agoda through different ways, like a surplus breakfast when we get surplus from hotels and we bring it to show employees that, well, these surplus are actually amazing and worth rescuing. We're organizing food waste visits among other activities.

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So we want to be more inclusive bring more players or stakeholders into the equation because the food waste problem is not just in one place. It's not just about retailers throwing away food, it's throughout the supply chain, so from farm to the table and it's also after at home that waste happens. 40% of the food waste actually happened once the food is arrived to your home. This is something that can only be tackled if people start doing something at home.

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Thank you, those are really great strategies and we do realize that it's not an easy thing to do to be a food waste fighter, but obviously you and Yindii have done some amazing work. So what would you say to our listeners on how they can also do small but powerful things to change our food system and be part of this journey in reducing food loss and waste?

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I think it's a fun journey. Everybody wants to be part of something bigger than themselves and food waste is literally something where everybody can have an impact. As a customer, as a merchant in the food business, you can do something. So the first point, I think is what can you do as a shopper? I would say to reduce food waste at home.

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It's not that complicated. I have some tips that I'd like to give when it comes about shopping. The first is very simple is maybe you should check your fridge before you start going to a supermarket so you can actually buy only what you need.

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The second is if you can plan in advance your meal for the week, it really helps you avoid you know buying impulse item and stick to your shopping list. This works very well and easy one is also to not shop

hungry so maybe buy some food before eat something, because when you're hungry you tend to buy more things and usually not the good thing, chips and stuff that you don't really need.

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And last one is be smart. Be smarter than the brands. They are trying to tell you in bulk you know when you see the Buy 2 get 1 free or Buy 10 get 2 free, it's exciting, but you end up buying actually too much. If you do that, you're actually saving at the same time. It's a good thing.

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At home, fighting food waste can also be really fun. It's about being creative with the surplus food that you have. You can learn recipes and you can invent new ones. I'm gonna give you one that I really love. You know what you can do with hard bread. When you order your baguette as you have a hard time to eat it as the next day it's hard and you won't eat. You're not gonna eat it.

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Well, there's actually a really cool recipe of a desert called “Pain perdu”. It's a French recipe. It means “lost bread” when you can turn that into a very nice sweet pancake so I really invite you to test it out. There are thousands of cool recipes and surplus recipe apps online so just go for it and try it out.

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You have some surplus noodle, surplus fruits and vegetable, what you can do is just look online. I think that the journey is important, so it's important to start one step at a time. You can take the elevator, if you're really motivated but there's no rush, you need to start somewhere. We really believe like for example, Yindii will become for a lot of people.

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I would say their first step in the their zero waste journey. You started and once you start, there's no going back. You're already a food fighter, and now you maybe want to learn how to do extra things.

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So on our social media we are spreading a lot of recipes or cool things to reduce waste and most of the time actually it's really cool because it saves a lot of money. So I give you a very simple example, if you buy a lettuce, or if you buy carrots, you know the routes that usually you cut and discard. Now you just put it in water and it will start growing back then you plant it and come on, you're getting a free salad or free carrot.

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I think it's fun because you're doing by yourself and you're doing something that matters and last but not least, I would say that if you care about this mission, I think you should spread it. You should talk to your friend. You should talk to your family. You should talk to as many people as you can because I think it's the number that makes the difference. So it's good to do something, share on your social media about what you're doing and spread the passion to other people and this is how we start a movement.

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Thank you Louis. I think those are great recommendations, very practical, very applicable. I think we all are already in the journey, right? Because all of us love food and we cannot live without food so whether we like it or not, we have to reduce our food loss and waste. Thank you so much for your time and for joining us. Thank you everyone for listening. Stay tuned for our next episode of the series. See you next time. Have a great day!