

Food ‘waste’ should be repurposed for the poor

By Sheree Bega



About 49% of food loss originates from the manufacturing industry. (Delwyn Verasamy/M&G)

If there's one term that **Andy du Plessis** works hard to discard, it's “**food waste**”. The millions of tonnes of food that are lost along the supply chain in South Africa is quality edible surplus food that can be recovered and repurposed to counter widespread hunger in the country.

“People call it food waste and I don't know why they do that when it is edible and it's usable,” said Du Plessis, the managing director of **FoodForward SA**, a leading food redistribution nonprofit. “And when we can use it to address problems relating to malnutrition like stunting etcetera. It is surplus food and there are economic opportunities around it.”

In South Africa, 30 million people experience various degrees of **food insecurity**, from starvation and daily hunger to chronic malnutrition. Yet, as much as **10 million tonnes of food**, most of which is of good quality, is dumped or incinerated annually, according to FoodForward SA.

It sources, collects and stores edible surplus food from the supply chain — farmers, manufacturers, and retailers — redistributing it to its network of vetted beneficiary organisations across the country.

During the 2022-23 financial year, FoodForward SA distributed 88 million meals, reaching 985 000 people daily through a network of 2 750 beneficiary organisations.

Repurpose the surplus

In September last year, FoodForward SA launched its “**Repurpose the Surplus**” campaign, with its food donations policy petition highlighting South Africa’s lack of a policy to govern food donation.

Among its recommendations were to amend the **Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act of 1972** to include policies regarding safety for food donations; to amend the date labelling regulations of foods and to create a policy framework for liability protection for food donors and food redistribution organisations.

Its petition received about 10 000 signatures. “But what’s happened in the interim with our petition is that it actually reached Nedlac [**National Economic Development and Labour Council**] and this is where we were able to make the greatest amount of impetus so far with regard to our submission,” says Du Plessis.

Nedlac has as a subcommittee, a food security rapid response task team, which is tasked with examining issues around food security and amplifying access to food, he explained.

“We were invited in March this year to present our petition and our regulatory changes to that task team and we specifically focused on the Foodstuffs Act that needs to be amended — the department of health is the custodian of that — as well as the Consumer Protection Act that needs amendment.”

The department of trade, industry and competition is the custodian of the latter legislation.

Du Plessis said the sub-committee resolved that there need to be bilaterals between their group and the health department , along with the **Consumer Goods Council of South Africa**, and, separately with the trade and industry department.

Bilaterals have been held with the health department. “They visited our offices and after they had a look at what we are doing in terms of surplus food recovery, they actually said to us ... “Tell us what you need to amplify what you need to do.”

The health department has said it will accommodate food donations in the guidelines, “which is history for South Africa”, Du Plessis said.

Labelling guidelines

A submission on **new labelling guidelines** was made this week by FoodForwardSA, the Consumer Goods Council of South Africa, the **Legal Resource Centre** and the **Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic**.

“The crux of the submission is ‘accommodate for food donations in your labelling guidelines so don’t just talk about sell’, encourage people to donate food and then also encourage that food is still good for human consumption after its best before date or what’s now been called the best quality before date,” he said.

That the proposed amendments to labelling guidelines, a critical aspect of food donation policies, are now in the process of conclusion, is groundbreaking. “This news

is not just a milestone for our organisation but a step forward towards a more sustainable and equitable food system for all South Africans.”

Du Plessis added that the health department said it needed a few months to go through the submissions and come up with a final document.

He cited how countries such as France and Italy have made it illegal to dump good quality edible food, which forced manufacturers to “onward donate” it to nonprofit organisations that are feeding people.

“But other countries are rather going the route where they are saying ‘no, let’s look at behavioural change and regulatory change because the regulatory change will encourage behaviour change and the behaviour change will reduce food loss and waste. That’s our view ... we need to engage the industry along that entire food system, from farm to fork, to ensure that people are conscientised around donating rather than dumping.”

National standard

FoodForward SA, too, is working with the [South African Bureau of Standards](#) to develop a national standard for food donations.

“When this standard is in place, industry will have clearer ideas about what they can donate and when they can donate it, especially around the labelling guidelines issue. That is going to encourage the reduction of food loss and waste and the diversion of organic waste away from landfill,” he said.

About 49% of food loss originates from the manufacturing industry.

“Once we have the labelling guidelines that accommodate food donations, once we have a national standard for food donations, it’s going to change the landscape,” Du Plessis said.