

# We need to talk about food waste

## *Telling the story: City Lab Tartu, Estonia*

My name is Helin and I work in the Science Centre AHHA, based in Tartu, Estonia, as the coordinator of external funding. I am passionate about educating people on how to reduce food waste in their lives.



*Helin in Science Centre AHHA, photographed by Sven Začek.*

In April 2020, after being on maternity leave for 2 years, I came back to work and immediately took over leading FIT4FOOD2030's City Lab in Tartu and all of its activities. The most important of these activities at the time was organizing a 'Future of Food' conference in AHHA in order to highlight the issues and opportunities in the local as well as the global food system.

Right before I took office, however, COVID-19 hit and the original organizational plans for the conference were cancelled with the conference being postponed to autumn 2020. So, during my first days back in the (home)office, I found myself cancelling bookings and informing potential speakers that the situation has changed, asking them to stay in the loop and hope for the best.

Watching the crisis gain momentum over the summer, the biggest shortcomings in the local food system became more apparent. One of the main issues I noticed straight away was food waste – in particular, people buying food in bulk but not using up all the supplies bought and throwing the leftovers away

in the end. On the other end of the spectrum, the stores also started stocking up on too many perishables, which they ended up throwing out in the end.

This inspired me to rephrase the focus of the conference and set food waste issues as the focus for the opening topic of the event. However, this decision created some internal conflict for me as I became worried, both that focusing on food waste might make some stakeholders dissatisfied and that the wider public might not consider it a problem at all. I was afraid that the supermarkets might not like us talking about commercial food waste and people might not like such an event to draw attention to some irresponsible consumerist behaviour.

I started feeling anxious and second guessing my decision.

In September, with the new time slot for the conference approaching fast, I was still missing the speakers. To avoid the possible shortcoming of the event becoming too confrontational, I decided to include experts from various fields and ask them to voice their opinions in a panel discussion during the first session of the conference, titled 'Why does 1/3 of the world's food end up being thrown away?'. To ensure a broad spectrum of experts, I, together with my team, set out to tirelessly research and choose the best potential speakers.

Not unexpectedly, the first potential panel discussion speakers we contacted were reluctant to join due to not wanting to become the spokespersons of commercial food waste or draw too much attention to themselves in this field.

As the situation seemed dire, I decided to ask the manager of AHHA's marketing and communications department for help since I knew she had the contacts of various good speakers.

The marketing and communications manager looked into their contact list and came up with some good ideas – for instance, a researcher working at the Stockholm Environmental Institute in Tallinn who had conducted several studies on food wasted in homes agreed to speak since she was passionate to share her findings. She also suggested a speaker from the Rimi Foods grocery shop chain who was happy to shed some good light on what shops do to reduce food waste, focusing on the commercial aspect but from the perspective of good practices.



*The 'Future of Food' conference – panels and hands-on activities. Photographs by Laila Kaasik.*

Most of the speakers contacted with the help of the marketing and communications manager agreed to speak and the conference was well on its way! The fact that we had found a “winning team” of speakers was later confirmed at the conference itself that was attended by 100 people on-site and over 250 people online.

In the feedback questionnaires we collected from the audience after the event, many respondents noted that the conference gave them a confidence boost and inspired them to start making even greener and more conscious food-related personal choices in the future, such as trying to buy food that is not over packaged or focusing on compiling a meal plan that helps to prevent food waste.

So, what have I learned from all this? I realised that no topic is too controversial or hard to tackle in a conference or public event, if only you let the body of knowledge that lies within your institution and network guide you towards good solutions.