

THE STORY OF RECIRCLE

ZERO WASTE CONSUMPTION & PRODUCTION

1

Recircle has arrived to transform take-away restaurants. In two years, more than 400 restaurants across Switzerland are already using Recircle's 70,000 reusable meal boxes.

A winning solution that prevents waste and saves money to restaurants and cities.

Anyone who walks through the city centre of Bern at lunchtime will notice: there are take-away restaurants everywhere and hundreds of people carrying around their warm food in styrofoam boxes, their salads in plastic or multi-layered bowls, their sandwiches in single-use wrappers. This happens every working day. The flood of non-reusable and non-recyclable take-away containers and wrappers is not only a waste of natural resources, but it also results in higher street cleaning costs. During the summer, the sunny weather takes even more people out, resulting in street bins having to be emptied up to 6 times a day in the centre of Bern, not to mention the need to clean up the containers having been littered. The good news is that Recircle is here to solve, at least, part of the problem.

The background

The origins of Recircle can be found

in the initiative Refiller of the municipality of Bern, aimed at preventing waste generation from take-away restaurants. The campaign intended to promote reusable lunch boxes and it was coupled with specific taxes on take-away restaurants. Although the tax was brought to Court and declared illegal, the judges opened the door for potential surcharges in waste management fees for restaurants selling take-away food, in order to cover the costs of littering. This required changes in the law, which fell out of Bern's competency as a municipality. Yet this marked the end of the Refiller campaign, it planted the seed of what later would become Recircle.

What is recircle

Recircle is a Swiss social enterprise that provides reusable lunch boxes to restaurants for take-away food and, along with these, it has created

a system enabling a deposit scheme for reusable take-away boxes. Jeanette Morath is the entrepreneur who in 2016 created Recircle with the idea to offer alternatives for citizens to live sustainably. After studying carefully the marketability and scalability of a system of lunch boxes with a deposit, she started the adventure with the support of several municipalities.

Based in Bern, Recircle's deposit scheme has 182 restaurants associated in most of the big cities in Switzerland. In parallel, Recircle also serves 230 extra restaurants of the Migros chain, which use their own customized Recircle's boxes under deposit too. Recircle now employs 7 people and helps preventing hundreds of single-use lunch containers every day.



reBox, Recircle's reusable food container

The Swiss-made and BPA-free re-Box is an innovative plastic container carefully designed to be reused: it is durable, and its spherical shape makes it fit perfectly in restaurants' dishwashers.

Since the primary aim of the idea was to burst the single use bubble, it was important to make alternatives fully visible. That is why the choice of the colour was a key part of the design. The boxes are currently made in an intense purple colour, which makes them easily recognisable. This helps spreading the system among customers and convincing restaurants to offer reusable boxes. Migros' boxes are exactly the same, except that they are bright green, which makes them also visible.

A total of 70,000 reBox boxes have been distributed so far to a total of 412 restaurants in Switzerland and in the city of Stuttgart in Germany. Their popularity is based on the fact that they are useful for a wide vari-

ety of meals, as they come in several shapes, they are leak-proof and they have volume measurement lines. The system is also ready to be used with weight-measurements since tares are provided to restaurants. Despite the adaptability, new transparent boxes are being designed to make them more convenient for ready-to-go lunches.

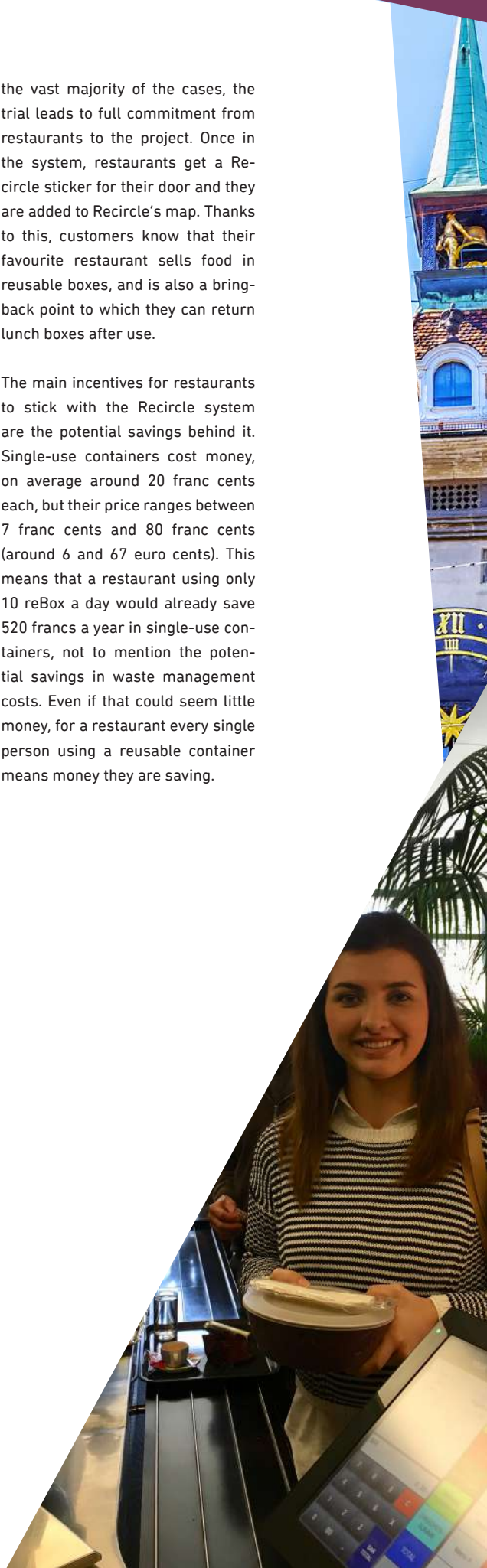
Quite importantly, the reusability of boxes does not only help preventing single use plastics, but also makes them perfect to store the remaining food and save it for another moment, which helps preventing food waste too.

The restaurants

Restaurants join Recircle through a three months trial period, during which they test the functioning of the system and customers' acceptance. Restaurants pay a 150 francs fee that includes 20 reBoxes, as well as communication materials to inform consumers, and the support of Recircle during this period. In

the vast majority of the cases, the trial leads to full commitment from restaurants to the project. Once in the system, restaurants get a Recircle sticker for their door and they are added to Recircle's map. Thanks to this, customers know that their favourite restaurant sells food in reusable boxes, and is also a bring-back point to which they can return lunch boxes after use.

The main incentives for restaurants to stick with the Recircle system are the potential savings behind it. Single-use containers cost money, on average around 20 franc cents each, but their price ranges between 7 franc cents and 80 franc cents (around 6 and 67 euro cents). This means that a restaurant using only 10 reBox a day would already save 520 francs a year in single-use containers, not to mention the potential savings in waste management costs. Even if that could seem little money, for a restaurant every single person using a reusable container means money they are saving.



In addition, restaurants join the Recircle scheme because of environmental awareness, or simply because other restaurants around are already offering the reusable option and they fear being in a disadvantaged position with their competition.

For most of the restaurants, Recircle is still a complementary service that they offer to their customers, a voluntary scheme that coexists with disposables. Although Recircle encourages restaurants to charge a fee on disposables so as to help creating a level-playing field with reusables, restaurants are still reluctant to implement it, as they fear losing clients.

Despite the evidence of savings, the environmental benefits and the easiness of the system, it remains challenging for Recircle to get new restaurants on board. The inertia to keep business as usual, the lack of policy incentives to discourage single-use containers or the fact that Recircle is still a young initiative and is not well-known to all restaurants are among the key barriers. Building a visible critical mass remains a key issue to convince restaurants and new customers to join the scheme. For that reason, the design of Recir-

cle boxes plays an important role to make the system as visible and as attractive as possible.

The customers

Customers willing to choose reusable boxes pay a deposit of 10 CHF (around 8.5€) that they will get back once they return the box to any of the restaurants partnered with Recircle. The restaurants take care of washing the boxes, but some customers are happy to wash them themselves and reuse them for their next meal.

As spending 10 Swiss francs may constitute a psychological barrier for some customers, Recircle has created member cards that are worth 10 francs and can be used to buy the boxes. With this system, customers can buy and return the boxes without having to pay 10 francs at every purchase, which facilitates their participation.

However, the cost of the deposit is not seen as the biggest barrier by Recircle since the boxes used in Migros own circuit come with a cheaper deposit (5 francs) and are not used more often than the ones with a higher deposit fee. In fact, the real challenge is changing the consumers' habits: when actions such

as purchasing a take-away lunch are part of a daily routine, most people end up repeating them automatically, unless external factors trigger changes. In this, the lack of level-playing field with single-use boxes does not help but, fortunately, the Canton of Bern is considering introducing a specific tax on single-use boxes, which, similarly to the experiences on plastic bags, could help customers to rethink their daily habits.



Why restaurants join the scheme

Restaurants join Recircle mostly because of their potential savings in disposable boxes. Although restaurants do have to pay for the service provided by Recircle, with every customer using a reBox they are not only saving natural resources, but also money. All partners of Recircle pay a yearly fee of 150 francs, that is complemented with a subscription tailored on the basis of their size and the amount of boxes they use and have in circulation. The total yearly costs for a restaurant to make part of Recircle's deposit scheme range between 150 to 1800 francs, which means that, for the smallest subscriptions, selling 6 reusable boxes a day is enough to generate profits, while 32 are enough for the largest ones.

The subscription includes the provision of the reBoxes, the communica-

tions materials and the re-distribution of boxes, in case of imbalances between restaurants. The potential renewal of overused boxes is also included.

As the subscription is paid back by every disposable box avoided, once restaurants join Recircle's deposit scheme they have a clear incentive to promote the use of Recircle boxes.

The involvement of cities

Single use lunch boxes are a big problem for Swiss cities and cantons. Besides representing an important source of waste that did not exist some years ago, they are not recyclable, they quickly fill street waste bins and are prone to being littered. That is why several cities and cantons in Switzerland are promoting reusable lunch boxes and

trying to get restaurants on board, in partnership with Recircle. For a start-up like Recircle, receiving the support of municipalities is key, as it gives consistency and credibility to the project.

The partnership between Recircle and several Swiss local and cantonal administrations has resulted in an increase of Recircle's outreach to new restaurants, thus leading to a reduction of the waste generated in cities and cantons. In addition, several municipalities have procured their employees with reBoxes, as well as at events. However, with the increased visibility of the flood of single-use containers, further actions may be envisaged, among which a review of waste management fees to create a level-playing field between reusables and disposables.



The challenges for reusable boxes

In spite of the initial success of Re-circle, setting up such a deposit scheme remains very challenging for several reasons, including societal acceptance of disposables and lack of environmental awareness, as well as economic and legal reasons.

The lack of level-playing field between reusable containers and disposable ones is a key barrier for increasing the use of reBox among customers and for restaurants to join the system, which limits the potential benefits for the environment, for restaurants and in terms of waste management costs. Both in Switzerland and across Europe,

disposables remain free for customers and too cheap for restaurants, failing to reflect the costs of waste management and street cleaning associated to single-use take-away containers.

The traditional configuration of waste management fees – that is often based on criteria like the size of the restaurant, the volume of the bins used or the amount of times these are set out for collection – does not enable a transition towards reusable containers, nor it puts in place the “polluter pays” principle. Indeed, waste fees could contribute to create a level-playing field between reusables and single-use by taking into account elements like take-away sales, the recyclability of

the containers, and the potential litterability of these. In addition, visible charges on single-use lunch boxes would also support the spread of existing sustainable alternatives, while making the distribution of waste management costs fairer.

Besides, reusable lunch boxes sometimes face a restrictive health legislation that prevent customers from refilling their own boxes. Re-circle faces this situation in Stuttgart (Germany), where boxes must be washed by restaurants taking away the possibility for customers to wash and directly refill their own boxes.



Looking forward

Although Recircle is just starting its adventure, they have big plans for the future and aim to become a widespread alternative to disposable lunch boxes in Switzerland and beyond. Notably, Recircle intends to have 2000 restaurants in their deposit scheme in 5 years time and expand to other countries. They have recently started operating in Stuttgart, and are convinced that their model could be easily replicable in other countries with similar lunch habits.

Their success will largely depend on their capacity to overcome the challenges they face. Although the social perception of disposables is already changing, making reusables truly go mainstream requires a coordinated action of public authorities, restaurants and customers.



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Sources
Recircle, www.recircle.ch

Zero Waste Europe is the European network of communities, local leaders, businesses, experts, and change agents working towards the elimination of waste in our society.

We empower communities to redesign their relationship with resources, and to adopt smarter lifestyles and sustainable consumption patterns in line with a circular economy.

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