

Final Report

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Major: Humanities

22-06-2016

Community Project

Taste Before You Waste, Amsterdam, the Netherlands

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Graduating: June 2016

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Period: January – June

Word count: 2.521

Introduction

Food waste is normal in the Netherlands. I grew up with parents whose fridge was always way too full, and in which half of the food was already rotting. We are used to abundance. Many people buy and eat what they want without considering what is still left in the fridge. As a rough estimate, I would say my parents throw away almost one third of the food that they buy. The scary thing is that they are not an anomaly, but rather the norm. When I learned about the Amsterdam-based initiative Taste Before You Waste (TBYW) I immediately wanted to help them out, but often had little time to volunteer. However, I was lucky enough to be able to do my community project with them and thus got to spend a lot of my time on actively fighting food waste. In the next sections of this report I will elaborate on my activities within the organization and the knowledge and skills I gained. Moreover, I will evaluate the expectations I had and on how this community project has contributed to my long-term life goals.

1. Taste Before You Waste and my activities

Taste Before You Waste was founded in the end of 2012 by Amsterdam- and AUC-based student Luana Carretto, and the organization has ever since thrived with the help of dedicated volunteers. Their aim is to raise awareness about the enormous food waste occurring all around the globe through relatively ‘small’ actions, and in that sense the organization can definitely be considered a grassroots initiative. TBYW has multiple partners across Amsterdam (mostly independent grocery stores) from which they pick up food weekly. Food that would otherwise have been thrown away. Moreover, they collaborate with an organic farmer from Flevoland and with the organic food co-operative Vokomokum. They give away a lot of the ‘saved’ food at weekly markets to anyone who is interested, and who promises to reduce food waste at home. TBYW also does catering for several events, ranging from AUC-related occasions to informing

sustainable business managements about food waste through serving them “consciousness on a platter”. Moreover, TBYW often hosts informative events such as documentary screenings, which of course will always be accompanied by good food. To show people how delicious food waste can be, TBYW also organizes a weekly dinner at the Meevaart, a community center in the East of Amsterdam.

This weekly TBYW dinner is put together by several amazing volunteers, and I was the one in charge of the cooking process for the last few months. I started in January when Luana was still there to supervise and explain the cooking and cleaning process to me. But after a few weeks, I was on my own. It was my job to come up with inventive recipes with the food we had, and I had to make sure we had to buy as little extra food as possible. It might sound contradictory that we buy food at all if the initiative is about reducing food waste, but if you receive 5 crates full of tomatoes then there is really nothing you can make with this without buying some essential ingredients like onion and garlic. It was always a matter of what the pick-up was for the day, and we never knew beforehand what we were going to cook that day. Even though I was the person responsible for the cooking and cleaning process, we often decided what to cook together, which helped strengthen the communal vibes.

Because I am a vegan and because we usually only receive fruits, veggies and dried bulk foods such as rice and beans, I decided to make the dinners fully free of animal (by) products as well. For me, veganism corresponds to the TBYW philosophy in that they both go against the commodification of food and the mindless consumerism of today’s society, and that is why I actively tried to incorporate veganism in the fight against food waste. Moreover, because of the communal structure of the dinners (everyone sits together at one big table), it perhaps presents a statement against extreme individualism. Instead of going to a restaurant where you completely get to decide what you eat (and where a lot of food is wasted), you have to eat what is on today’s

menu and do not get to be so demanding. My activities at TBYW led to the creation of a delicious dinner every Wednesday, and more broadly helped to inform people about food waste and on how to prepare food that is often considered 'bad' or 'past date'. In that sense, my activities positively contributed to TBYW's goals in two ways. First, cooking dinner with otherwise wasted food helps to reduce food waste because the waste is actively being used, simultaneously showing people how delicious waste can be. And second, because the dinners were always accompanied with information about food waste and about how people can change their habits to fight it, these dinners also made people more aware of the necessity of addressing food waste locally, nationally and globally. Every time someone would see what food we picked up for the day, or what amazing dinners we made with it, you could see their confusion and slight enragement when asking "this would have been thrown away?".

2. Skills, knowledge and insights gained at Taste Before You Waste

As I touched upon before, I was the person responsible for the cooking and cleaning processes, which meant that I had to instruct and coordinate several volunteers. Some days there were only a few, other days more than 10 volunteers showed up! In any case, I had to take the lead and instruct people on what to do, which was new for me. As much as I enjoyed cooking, as little experience I had with cooking with more than one person. Moreover, I was used to cooking for a few people, not for dozens. My community project definitely forced me to take a leadership position. Instead of being shy and insecure, I had to be direct and clear. Thus, through helping at TBYW, I got to work on and improve my communication skills and leadership skills. More so, through the very act of cooking, we communally speak out against the oppressive power structures of our society, which make the waste of so much food seem normal.

Through reading through the CP/I guidelines of this year, I became aware that this community project might not seem exactly what AUC hopes for. When looking at the learning outcomes, these mostly feel very vague and very ‘excellent’, as well as focused on intellectual abilities. Nevertheless, I consider my community project to be extremely valuable for my own curriculum, for it helped me to put thought into practice. My courses and intellectual interests are focused on postcolonial studies, intersectional feminism and sociology. I also focused on certain problems in the urban context, and took a lot of literature, history and culture courses. Overall, I became much more aware of the oppressive discourses around us. Of how everything is interwoven and for us to fix certain things, we must not separate them but rather look at the whole in which they play their part. I have been very interested in processes such as gentrification, and by cooking every Wednesday in Amsterdam-Oost, a neighborhood that is slowly gentrifying, I got to see how this affects the area and its inhabitants. There were some people who came to eat at TBYW’s weekly dinner because they really wanted to eat out, but could not particularly afford to do so in their own neighborhood because of the ongoing gentrification. These problems are also inextricably linked to veganism for me. In Amsterdam-Oost there are a lot of new cafés and restaurants opening that offer vegan options, but these very same places simultaneously reinforce gentrification and help construe veganism as something for a particular class of people (namely, middle-class people). Veganism should be intersectional, and has the potential for radical change, but it is often commodified and made into something to merely ‘consume’. I do not want to lose the radical potential of veganism, which is why I always actively fought to make the entire vegan. By doing so, I aimed to make veganism more inclusive for those who are often ‘excluded’ through processes of gentrification and discrimination (mainstream veganism also tends to be very racist).

Where courses I took at AUC and Charles University in Prague were always focused on the theoretical side of things, it was very helpful to actively participate in the fields I usually only read about. Helpful in a way that I got to apply a lot of my previously acquired knowledge, engaging with problems so often talked about in ‘academia’ now on a local level. This community project also aided my communication skills; as mentioned before, I was not used to a ‘leadership’ position, and it took me a lot of courage to take the lead. It is especially difficult because I do not want to be too “boss-like”, but I still have to instruct and direct people otherwise the kitchen will be a complete mess. Because I had to coordinate the dinners together with Evie (who was also doing a community project with TBYW), I learned how to effectively communicate with her, and how to set up a cozy, informal and safe space where everyone would feel comfortable to address food-waste related topics.

Regarding my own learning outcomes, this community project has contributed tremendously to my abilities as a cook. I always loved cooking, but as mentioned previously, I was not used to cooking for such big groups under such a time pressure. With this comes the whole logistics of getting the kitchen utensils and food from the dorms to the Meevaart community center, and of course the cleaning up after the dinner which sometimes lasted for a few hours. Through cooking for TBYW, I discovered how much I love cooking, but also how stressful this type of cooking can be, and it has thus taught me how to handle stressful situations in a more relaxed manner. But despite all the stress, this community project has made me feel so grateful and appreciated. Each dinner, people would come up to me and say how good the food tasted, and how much the food waste issues enrage them too. Everyone I talked to always mentioned how much more they became aware of these problems, and how this awareness has definitely affected their food choices. This showed me that, if we start from a local level and show people individually how delicious food waste can be while also informing them, real

change can come about. Moreover, with this CP I might be more qualified to work at any (vegan) restaurant, or perhaps even start my own restaurant one day, preferably cooking with wasted foods only of course.

3. Evaluation and reflection

I genuinely had the best time cooking for TBYW, and honestly I wish I could continue next year but I will not be in Amsterdam anymore. My expectations were definitely fulfilled, and I believe that TBYW was also quite content with my performance. My partner's supervision was very good, I always felt like I could ask Luana and Sophia anything if I did not get what I was supposed to do. Moreover, Luana supervised me once or twice before I had to cook on my own, so that was very helpful. At first, the logistics of the kitchen and the dinner seemed very complicated, but she explained them very clearly and I quickly got the hang of it.

Reverting back to my application/proposal for the community project, I indeed got to know a lot of amazing people with such 'diverse' backgrounds. I was surprised to find out it is not only young AUC people who volunteer, but even people from outside of Amsterdam came by to help. There were also quite some volunteers who were a lot older than I expected, and through all this our cooking and cleaning teams were very dynamic and enthusiastic. In general, most of the volunteers harbored a very spirited passion to fight against food waste, which was refreshing to see, especially given the fact that I usually spend my days learning about theoretical problems without really seeing practical answers. I met a lot of great people along the way, and we always had a lot of fun together. Conclusively, a lot of the parts of my community project turned out to be "better than expected".

The only issues I perhaps encountered were with the logistics. TBYW have stuff everywhere; in the dorms, at Majella, at some people's homes and of course at the Meevaart.

Sometimes, kitchen utensils would just get lost, and we often had to make way with what we had, causing us to become very creative and inventive at times (for example when you do not have a peeler and five crates of carrots...). Perhaps I had not expected that each week cooking would always be an adventure, but I would definitely not say that this part turned out “worse” than what I had expected. Just different, but that is okay.

I did learn that I should probably have done my community project a lot earlier. This was my last semester at AUC, and I was doing my capstone and two courses, so the community project was kind of like a fifth course. This meant I had four hours class every Wednesday morning, and then another six hours of cooking. I often came home so tired that I immediately fell asleep, and the community project really stressed me out at times. Thus, I learned to plan things ahead more accurately, and not let everything come down to the last months. But because it was so stressful, I learned how to handle my stress more effectively and actually sometimes found comfort and rest in the community project, because I was always accompanied by such a great team of volunteers. Still, I definitely learned my lesson concerning planning.

In the guidelines, it is asked how this community project contributed to my long-term career goals, but to be honest, I have none, so I cannot really answer that. It did actually show me that I might not want to pursue academic ambitions at all, but rather focus on something active and practical, something that makes you feel like you are making a change, however small it may be. Food waste is emblematic for the oppressive discourses and ideologies of Western society, and it should always be considered an intersectional problem. It is not just the food that is wasted, but the resources that were put into its creation. Everything is interconnected, and this community project really showed me that. Moreover, on a practical level it introduced me to the fun of cooking in a community kitchen, and I really want to continue that habit.