

Regional current state analysis – East Flanders

Spring 2026

PP08 Economic Council of East Flanders

Social Food Webs

1. Context: surplus food and social inclusion in the region

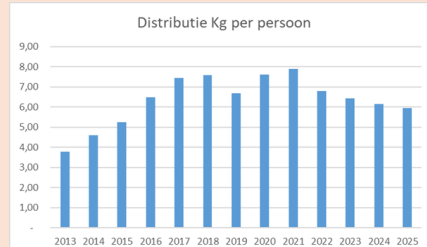
The geographical and administrative context

This regional analysis forms part of *Social Food Webs* (2025–2029), an Interreg Europe project that aims to improve policy on the redistribution of food surpluses through interregional learning, with environmental, social and economic benefits. The analysis covers the province of East Flanders in Belgium, which is a partner region, and explores at a provincial level where needs and opportunities lie and where policy action can make a real difference.

Strategic frameworks and objectives are established at the Flemish level, with a focus on prevention, the cascade principle, the circular economy and supply chain collaboration. This level determines the direction, the ambitions and the preconditions.¹

However, the practical organisation of redistribution takes place mainly at the local and intermediary levels. Municipalities, Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMWs), food banks, social distribution platforms and local initiatives organise collections, storage and distribution in practice. The province occupies an intermediate level in this context: not primarily responsible for food policy, but potentially acting as a link between local actors and supra-local strategies.²

Regional level: The East Flanders Food Bank³ distributed up to 20 tonnes of food surpluses per week in 2025. It is striking that the volume of food surpluses has been declining in recent years (see also distribution per person, as explained by the East Flanders Food Bank, for illustration).



The relevance of food waste in relation to regional climate and resource efficiency objectives

Stakeholders⁴ indicate that the majority of food loss occurs at the consumer level. Redistribution, on the other hand, operates downstream: it works with what is already available as surplus. This raises the question of the extent to which *Social Food Webs* can actually address the core of the problem. The group emphasises that this tension, between the prevention of food loss and the redistribution of surpluses, must be explicitly included in the analysis. At the same time, the group is also aware that there will always be food surpluses, e.g. at peak times in agriculture, and that these can then be put to good use for the benefit of society.

How food surpluses and social inclusion are linked within the regional food system

¹ Synthesis of the Flemish Food Strategy Go4Food (2022); Action Plan on Food Loss and Biomass (Residual) Flows: Circular 2021–2025 (2021).

² Oogst-Vlaanderen Food Plan (2023); Report on stakeholder consultation 1 (23/10/2025) and 2 (26/02/2026); Compilation of SFW interviews (07/12/2025)

³ Food Bank East Flanders: presentation of the 2025 annual report to associations

⁴ Stakeholder consultation 2 dated 26/02/2026: AS IS analysis with stakeholders

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In the second stakeholder consultation⁵, redistribution via donation for human consumption (specifically to people in need) in East Flanders is described as a multi-layered landscape of channels and practices: the food bank, Foodsavers, OCMWs (Public Centres for Social Welfare), charities, social grocery shops and restaurants, supplemented by digital matching tools such as the Schenkingsbeurs (Donation Exchange).

The day-to-day, operational nature of these practices is evident from the interviews. Redistribution relies on fixed collection times at shops and institutions, logistics heavily driven by volunteers (including the use of cargo bikes), and systematic selection and sorting in accordance with food safety regulations (best-before/use-by dates, visible spoilage criteria).

Within this East Flemish landscape, two main types of actors account for the bulk of the volumes: the food bank and Foodsavers, whilst smaller local initiatives run by local social services (OCMWs - Public Centres for Social Welfare) as well as through local charitable organisations and associations (e.g. Let's Save Food!) operate in a complementary and often context-specific manner.

Why the topic is particularly topical and relevant for the region at present

Ecef positions *Social Food Webs* as an opportunity to work specifically over a four-year period on the redistribution of food surpluses across East Flanders, in collaboration with cross-sectoral partners and with an emphasis on policy learning and strengthened cooperation. The ambition extends beyond the project itself: the insights gained and working models must be structurally embedded in the regional food system. The goal is to achieve sustainable policy impact, with lasting effects on organisation, coordination and management of redistribution, delivering added value for both consumers and producers.

2. The real problem behind current practices

From general ambition to concrete bottlenecks

The stakeholders describe the core problem regarding redistribution not as a purely technical “food loss” issue, but as a combination of (i) insufficient overview, data and coordination, (ii) the tension between “surplus reduction” and “the fight against hunger”, (iii) logistical organisational burden and fragile implementation capacity, (iv) administrative and planning burden, and (v) consumer perception and awareness.

Insufficient overview, data and coordination

The first stakeholder consultation indicated that whilst there are many actions and initiatives in East Flanders, they are highly fragmented. There is little overview of volumes and flows and little coordination between them.⁶

Data transparency is also perceived as limited at the Flemish level. This lack of shared monitoring is explicitly identified by stakeholders as a structural gap. This view was confirmed and expanded upon in the second stakeholder consultation: according to some participants, there is cooperation, but too little transparency regarding data, best practices, the network and its members.

⁵ Stakeholder consultation 2 dated 26/02/2026: AS IS analysis with stakeholders

⁶ Stakeholder consultation 1 dated 23/10/2025 Social Food Webs (Ecef, 23/10/2025): comments on (i) level of scale (Flemish vs. provincial), (ii) limited data transparency/provincial figures and (iii) need for monitoring. See also stakeholder consultation 2 dated 26/02/2026 where this is identified as a gap

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The Taskforce⁷ emphasises that food hubs are currently highly fragmented and that the lack of a shared ‘umbrella organisation’ leads to parallel initiatives without structural coordination.

Tension between ‘surplus reduction’ and ‘the fight against hunger’

Stakeholders emphasise that the prevention and redistribution of food surpluses are not opposing paths, but work in parallel and complement each other. It is not a question of “either-or”, but of “both-and”: the prevention and reduction of food loss remain a priority, whilst redistribution ensures a socially meaningful use of food surpluses.

At the same time, stakeholders recognise that successful prevention leads to fewer available donations and thus to a lower inflow for redistribution actors such as food banks. Furthermore, it is emphasised that redistribution alone cannot structurally solve poverty. In policy terms, this calls for a balanced approach: incentives for donation must not have the opposite effect by generating surpluses. Awareness-raising and reduction measures therefore focus primarily on the B2C context, whilst redistribution is mainly organised within a B2B framework, aimed at the efficient and responsible use of existing surpluses.

Logistical organisational burden and fragile implementation capacity

Stakeholders describe the practical implementation of redistribution as challenging due to the accumulation of logistical and operational constraints. Transport, labelling, best-before/use-by date rules, distance, collection times, storage capacity, peak volumes, traceability and the availability of sufficient volunteers together form a complex organisational model. These requirements, which stem from food safety and tax regulations, mean that redistribution is primarily feasible for organisations with sufficient logistical capacity and professional support.

Administrative complexity and planning burden

Stakeholders also associate the logistical complexity with an administrative and regulatory planning burden⁸ (including issues relating to food safety and VAT), which can create barriers for both donors and distributors, and makes it difficult to scale distribution.

Consumer perception and awareness

The group⁹ notes that consumers are not always willing to work with “surplus”, partly due to a lack of clarity or misinterpretation of best-before and use-by dates. As a result, potentially usable food ends up in the bin more quickly, and some people experience shame or a sense of “inferiority” when receiving products whose best-before date has passed (even when they are still edible). It is also noted that there has been a noticeable improvement in this area over the years (including from Vlaco observations and according to Too Good To Go, which sees opportunities to work more with best-before dates rather than use-by dates, as with dairy products, thereby reducing potential waste of dairy products by 10%).

⁷ Vlaanderen Circulair (2026). *Food Chain Work Agenda – Task Force 24 February 2026*. Vlaanderen Circulair.

⁸ Stakeholder consultation 2 (26/02/2026): the administrative burden resulting from the combination of food safety requirements (FAVV - Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain) and fiscal/administrative obligations (VAT) is explicitly mentioned by stakeholders.

⁹ Stakeholder consultation 2 (26/02/2026): stakeholders link consumer perception (feeling that a product is ‘less good’ once the best-before date has passed) to a lack of understanding of best-before and use-by dates.

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3. What needs to change – and why

What needs to work better in the region?

The stakeholders have identified three clear areas of focus:

1. Firstly: **greater collaboration and mapping existing initiatives** (both urban and rural, with an emphasis on creating better connections throughout the entire chain). In addition, there is scope for social innovation through pilot schemes, collaboration, coordination and skills development.
2. Secondly: **better organisation of logistics and processing**, with centralisation/coordination via, for example, food hubs being mentioned to organise surpluses more efficiently (particularly given peak volumes, cold chain requirements and transport). Stakeholders see potential here, but the principle of food hubs requires further investigation.
3. Thirdly: **broadener awareness-raising** among all stakeholders throughout the chain to optimise processes, reduce food losses and add value to surpluses.

What kind of changes are expected from policy measures or governance?

Social Food Webs is seen by stakeholders as an opportunity to approach the redistribution of food surpluses on an East Flemish scale in a more targeted and structured manner, in collaboration with partners from various sectors. Several stakeholders emphasise the added value of a provincial approach: this can contribute to a clearer overview, highlight differences between urban and rural contexts, and enable economies of scale. Expected changes are primarily situated in a facilitating and connecting role for policy, with a focus on collaboration, knowledge sharing and transparency, rather than on new obligations or institutional commitments.

During stakeholder consultation 2, this was translated into a concrete proposal from the retail sector: a large-scale solution requires an ‘umbrella organisation’ or provincial coordinating role, comparable to the role that Foodsavers plays locally for Ghent. Such a structure would not only strengthen coordination and alignment but could also reduce administrative complexity and break down fragmentation.

Why this change is particularly important for those involved

The reasoning that emerges from the stakeholder consultation is that the current system simultaneously (a) involves many initiatives but still lacks sufficient coordination, (b) does not always run smoothly (logistics, planning burden, data uncertainty) and (c) therefore remains vulnerable. Stronger coordination, better monitoring/transparency and more structural cooperation should reduce these frictions and make redistribution more inclusive and robust.

4. Policy framework and instruments shaping the situation

The key instruments governing the use and redistribution of food surpluses in East Flanders are situated at federal, Flemish and provincial level. We focus on regulations with a direct impact on social redistribution, but in practice there is also a clear link with the circular and rural economy: measures relating to more efficient reuse, alternative valorisation and waste reduction also influence the availability of food streams for social redistribution.

Flemish policy framework

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At the Flemish level, the Go4Food strategy¹⁰ forms the overarching framework for a sustainable and circular food system. It is based on a systemic view of the entire chain, links economic, ecological and social objectives, and applies the cascade principle: prevention comes first, but where surpluses arise, human consumption takes priority. Redistribution is thus recognised in policy as a fully-fledged link within the circular economy. Go4Food encourages supply chain collaboration, knowledge sharing and monitoring.

The **Circular Food Loss and Biomass (Residual) Flows Action Plan 2021–2025**¹¹ puts this vision into practice with concrete objectives, including a 30% reduction in food loss, strengthening food banks and social distribution platforms, developing food hubs and coordinating digital tools. Through food deals – such as the **Food Hubs deal**, which focuses on the structural development, embedding and transformation of social distribution platforms into circular food hubs – actors across the chain are mobilised around shared ambitions.

The strategy's target group is the entire food chain: primary producers, cooperatives and auctions, the food industry, retail, the hospitality sector, logistics operators, the social economy, knowledge institutions and public authorities (Flemish and local). Civil society organisations and citizens are also considered relevant actors within the system transition.

Strengthening and limiting effects of the Flemish framework:

- The Flemish framework legitimises and supports redistribution as a policy priority within the circular economy and recognises the social dimension of the food system – accessibility, social innovation, inclusive chains – as a fully-fledged pillar. It encourages cross-chain collaboration, monitoring and the development of social distribution platforms and food hubs. In doing so, the framework provides direction, visibility and a strategic foundation for upscaling.
- At the same time, the Flemish framework remains broadly strategic. The concrete organisation, funding, logistics and implementation capacity must be defined at regional and local level. Consequently, the practical feasibility of redistribution remains heavily dependent on regional infrastructure, resources and organisational capacity.

Provincial policy framework: Food plan Oogst-Vlaanderen

Oogst-Vlaanderen¹² positions the province as a supra-local connector in the transition to sustainable food systems through five roles: catalyst for local food policy, driver of regional cooperation and leverage projects, supporter of future-oriented agriculture and horticulture, role model in sustainable (local) food policy, and promoter of East Flemish products.

The plan aims to strengthen local food strategies and focuses on cooperation, logistical optimisation, the exploration of hubs and the local processing of surpluses within a circular economy. The plan acts as a facilitator through networking, pilot projects and matchmaking around waste streams and product innovation.

Strengthening and limiting effects of the Food Plan:

¹⁰ Summary of the Flemish Food Strategy Go4Food (2022).

¹¹ Action Plan on Food Loss and Biomass (Residual) Flows: Circular 2021–2025 (2021)

¹² Food Plan Oogst-Vlaanderen (2023).

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- The plan creates scope at provincial level to explore logistical consolidation, hubs and processing, which addresses the need to cool and process surpluses more quickly and distribute them. The emphasis on collaboration and networking can strengthen the link between supply and (social)recipients.
- At the same time, the plan remains guiding and facilitating, without its own structural means of implementation for redistribution. The concrete organisation of logistics, infrastructure and sustainable cooperation models remains dependent on project-based initiatives and available capacity, meaning that upscaling is not a given.

Federal policy instruments that respond to preconditions

At federal level, **Royal Decree No. 59¹³ and Circular 2020/C/116¹⁴** determine the **tax framework** for food donations. It enables tax-neutral donations subject to accreditation and documentation requirements (in particular, donation documents and summary statements). The recent amendment extends the permitted remaining shelf life after donation, thereby taking better account of logistical lead times whilst ensuring control and traceability through accreditation conditions and mandatory documentation.

The scheme is aimed at VAT taxpayers who withdraw foodstuffs to provide them free of charge (including producers, distribution companies, retailers and intermediaries), and at formally recognised beneficiaries to whom donations may be made (recognised food banks, local authorities and recognised charitable institutions) as well as distribution platforms that receive, store and redistribute goods.

Reinforcing and limiting effects of the Royal Decree and the circular:

- The framework creates clarity and accountability, removes a significant financial barrier and extends the practical timeframe for donations, making systematic redistribution more legally and economically feasible.
- However, it also operates selectively: access to tax-neutral donations is limited to formally recognised organisations. Initiatives that focus primarily on combating food waste but are not recognised as charitable institutions fall outside this framework, even when they reach vulnerable target groups in practice.¹⁵ The recognition criteria and mandatory documentation also create a structural capacity barrier. The evidence required (donation documents, summary statements, compliance requirements) demands organisational and administrative capacity. Smaller or volunteer-driven initiatives are more likely to reach their limits as a result, because access and compliance assume the same underlying capacity. Furthermore, the framework is based on free donation, whilst some initiatives are seeking

¹³ Amendment to Royal Decree No. 59 concerning the extension of the remaining shelf life for donated foodstuffs (2026)

¹⁴ Circular 2020/C/116 concerning the VAT treatment of the donation of foodstuffs for charitable purposes (2020).

¹⁵ See also section 5C Accessibility and Inclusion, where the Let's Save Food! case study is discussed as an example of an initiative that operates outside the formal recognition framework but does generate social impact.

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models in which producers can still recover a limited residual value.¹⁶ Farmers and producers¹⁷ also point this out: free donation can create economic tensions, particularly when second-choice products are still sold at low prices through existing sales channels and donation puts further pressure on that market position.

The **operational framework for food safety** is defined by two **FAVV (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain) circulars: use-by dates¹⁸ and food donations¹⁹**. They clarify rules regarding use-by/best-before dates, the cold chain, transport, labelling and traceability, based on the principle that there must be no ‘two-tier food safety’.

Reinforcing and limiting effects of the circulars:

- Clear, uniform rules build trust among donors and support the food safety, professionalisation and scalability of redistribution.
- At the same time, strict operational requirements make redistribution heavily dependent on logistical capacity. When speed, refrigeration or traceability are not guaranteed, surpluses are more likely to be excluded from the flow towards human consumption. Small and fragmented volumes, and fresh products in particular, require frequent collections and intensive logistics. This is better suited to operators with sufficient scale and infrastructure, whilst smaller initiatives are more likely to reach their limits when limited volumes are combined with high operational requirements.
- The survey shows that food safety regulations are perceived by several respondents as a determining factor in how surpluses are handled. This confirms that clear regulations create trust, also among consumers, but at the same time present an operational barrier when knowledge or logistical capacity is lacking.

The survey of producers and farmers reveals that food safety regulations are perceived as the most impactful factor in dealing with surpluses (7 respondents), followed at a distance by tax regulations (2 respondents). Most respondents take a neutral stance towards existing regulations on redistribution. This suggests that it is not so much the fiscal framework, but rather the practical interpretation and application of food safety rules that strongly influence day-to-day decisions regarding surplus among food producers and farmers.

Role of policy frameworks in relation to the identified problems

The current policy frameworks provide clear legitimisation of redistribution as a fully-fledged link in a circular food system. They create fiscal and legal scope for donating surpluses and position food loss as a systemic issue for Flanders, thereby stimulating cooperation, monitoring and supply chain coordination at a policy level.

¹⁶ E.g.: Let’s Save Food! states in interviews that their status results in a VAT liability and additional administrative work, and that this puts pressure on an operation that runs almost entirely on volunteers (Compilation of SFW interviews (07/12/2025)).

¹⁷ Survey on food surpluses among producers and farmers dated 15/04/2026

¹⁸ FAVV circular on use-by dates (THT/TGT) and their interpretation in relation to foodstuffs (20 January 2023). (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain)

¹⁹ FAVV circular on food donations (23 March 2023). (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain)

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However, the current policy frameworks and instruments do not yet succeed in structurally addressing several of the identified bottlenecks (see sections 5 and 6):

- **Scale mismatch and lack of an ecosystem**

In practice, redistribution is organised locally, whilst the policy frameworks have been developed at a higher level. Stakeholders do not naturally find one another and an integrated mapping of initiatives is lacking, meaning that collaboration and coordination remain ad hoc.²⁰

- **Limited implementation capacity**

The policy frameworks provide guidance but do not provide for an implementation structure or structural resources for logistics, hubs or staff. As a result, upscaling remains dependent on project-based and volunteer-driven initiatives and local capacity, which hinders logistical efficiency and a systemic approach and means that some of the available surpluses do not find their way into redistribution.²¹

- **Administrative burden and logistical friction**

Administrative requirements and food safety regulations are necessary but demand knowledge, organisational and logistical capacity. Smaller or volunteer-driven initiatives are more likely to reach their limits as a result, which limits the accessibility and scalability of redistribution.²²

- **Tension between prevention and redistribution**

Policy rightly prioritises prevention. At the same time, successful reduction of surpluses leads to a declining inflow for redistribution and increased pressure on food aid. The structural conditions required to manage these shrinking and fluctuating flows are still not being adequately addressed.²³

5. How the system works today

5A. Surplus food flows

Various sources attribute the way the system currently operates to a combination of differences in volume and logistical requirements. Stakeholders refer to a ‘tangle’ of factors: distance, collection times, storage capacity, peak volumes, traceability and the involvement of volunteers. Interviews confirm that donations rely heavily on trust and one-to-one relationships. Donors are primarily looking for a solution that feels professional, reliable and administratively manageable.

The supplementary documentation fleshes out this operational framework. OVAM²⁴ (the Flemish Public Waste Agency) outlines the macro level²⁵: food banks collect surpluses from the food

²⁰ Report on stakeholder consultation 1 (23/10/2025) and 2 (26/02/2026); Compilation of SFW interviews (07/12/2025).

²¹ Report on stakeholder consultation 2 (26/02/2026); Compilation of SFW interviews (07/12/2025).

²² Report on stakeholder consultation 1 (23/10/2025) and 2 (26/02/2026); Compilation of SFW interviews (07/12/2025)

²³ Report on stakeholder consultation 1 (23/10/2025); Compilation of SFW interviews (07/12/2025).

²⁴ OVAM progress report on food loss 2024 (Flemish Public Waste Agency)

²⁵ Macro = system and policy level (chain-wide, Flemish scale) – OVAM progress report (Flemish Public Waste Agency)

Meso = intermediate/organisational level (platforms, hubs, distribution structures, food bank)

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industry, distribution centres and retail chains, supplemented by occasional supplies from auctions. In practice, social distribution platforms focus more on local retail (such as individual supermarkets) and on donations from food companies and commercial kitchens. The Foodsavers manual²⁶ describes a strict daily routine (collection – quality control – sorting – registration – delivery on day X+1) with digital monitoring via a calendar and dashboards.

Food surpluses therefore arise at multiple stages of the chain but vary significantly by segment and product type. Stakeholders indicate that the largest share of food losses occurs at the consumer level, whilst in practice redistribution mainly involves surpluses from retail, industry, auctions and commercial kitchens. Farmers²⁷, primarily those in the short chain circuit, confirm that food surpluses are limited or occur only occasionally on their farms.

In the retail sector, this mainly concerns fresh categories (fruit and vegetables, bread, chilled products, meat), where fluctuations in demand, quality standards and stock management structurally generate surpluses. Farmers²⁸ and producers agree that surpluses are primarily linked to fluctuations in demand, quality and aesthetic standards, and variations in yield per harvest year, rather than deliberate overproduction. At the same time, stakeholders indicate that retailers have stepped up their forecasting and monitoring in recent years, thereby smoothing out peaks. This reduces food loss but also diminishes the supply for redistribution. From a waste and climate perspective, this decline is positive, but for redistribution actors it means a shrinking supply over which they have less control.

For auctions, the picture has changed. Stakeholders indicate that surpluses have fallen sharply since the pandemic. Moreover, there is no auction in East Flanders itself; collections occasionally take place outside the province and are declining. The structurally largest volumes today come mainly from industry and central retail channels. The East Flanders Food Bank works explicitly with pallet volumes, not with small crate flows.

Major donors include those in the dairy, ready-meals, frozen bread and meat products sectors. At the same time, the pattern of surplus is shifting here too: production is being tailored more closely to orders, leading to a decline particularly in short-shelf-life chilled products.

5B. Actors and practices (approx. 1 page)

The East Flanders system for the redistribution of food surpluses is characterised by a layered structure in which a few major backbone actors²⁹, primarily the East Flanders Food Bank and the Foodsavers activities, operate alongside a wide range of local organisations. The documentation shows that these actors are embedded in a complex network connecting farms, auctions, producer organisations, retail, the hospitality sector, social organisations, Public Centres for Social Welfare (OCMWs), social grocery shops and volunteer initiatives.

Micro = local level (households, local practices, volunteers, practical logistics) – Foodsavers handbook

²⁶ Foodsavers Ghent, *Foodsavers handbook* (09/03/2026), “Collection, sorting, distribution” (daily routine; registration and dashboard).

²⁷ Survey on food surpluses among producers and farmers dated 15/04/2026

²⁸ Survey on food surpluses among producers and farmers dated 15/04/2026

²⁹ Project presentation/AS-IS synthesis Social Food Webs (stakeholder meeting 2 presentation, 26/02/2026)

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The short supply chain generally generates few structural surpluses, given the direct alignment between producer and buyer. Nevertheless, it constitutes a relevant supplementary stream. Initiatives such as Linked.Farm demonstrate how producers can offer occasional surpluses, e.g. during peak production or due to aesthetic imperfections, via existing sales or rescue platforms. The advantage of this is twofold: (1) surpluses still find a market, and (2) consumers are simultaneously introduced to the regular supply from local farmers and producers.

The East Flanders Food Bank³⁰ operates according to a provincial distribution model in which surpluses from industry, retail and auctions are collected centrally and then distributed via a network of around 70 affiliated associations. The emphasis is on free redistribution. The food bank combines large, centralised flows (pallet volumes, efficient logistics) with selective collections from branches, but the scalability of the latter is limited. That is why local associations play a crucial role in the ‘last mile’, supported by FAVV (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain) inspections that build trust among retailers.

Auctions form a separate and important link. The ZeroW case study shows that producer organisations remove large volumes from the market each year (e.g. 13,750 tonnes in 2023), of which only a limited portion (approx. 1,650 tonnes) goes towards human consumption. The rest ends up as biogas or animal feed. Redistribution to social organisations is hampered by peak volumes in the summer, low product diversity, strict regulations and logistical constraints. At the same time, initiatives such as the Antwerp Circular Food Hub and the ZeroW pilots show that processing into long-life products (soups, juices, blends) represents a potential future avenue, although this is not yet legally permitted in Flanders.

Alongside the food bank, Foodsavers play an important role. Foodsavers Ghent³¹ operates on an urban scale and combines logistics, sorting and redistribution with social employment. Other regions employ variations of this model: *Foodsavers Mechelen* as a “flagship” for surrounding municipalities, *Foodsavers Kempen* as a business model within a social enterprise, *Depot Margo* in Limburg as a merger between a food bank and Foodsavers, and Voedsaam vzw, which operates as a social distribution platform in the Waasland region. This diversity shows that food hubs are highly context-dependent and combine different organisational logics (social economy, local authorities, voluntary work).

In addition, there are small-scale volunteer initiatives, such as Let’s Save Food!³², which operate using micro-logistics (cargo bikes, daily collections, real-time sorting and distribution). These practices illustrate how intricate and labour-intensive food redistribution can be when it takes place outside the major logistical structures.

³⁰ Interviews Social Food Webs (Compilation of interviews, 07/12/2025): East Flanders Food Bank on provincial distribution model, network of approx. 70 charitable associations (mainly non-profit organisations), collaboration with Public Social Welfare Centres (OCMWs) and focus on free distribution.

³¹ Social Food Webs interviews (Compilation of interviews, 07/12/2025): positioning of Foodsavers Gent as a local (OCMW) initiative combining redistribution and social employment; indications of capacity and staffing pressures

³² Interviews Social Food Webs (Compilation of interviews, 07/12/2025): detailed description of the operational workflow of Let’s Save Food (collection, refrigeration, sorting and distribution)

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Finally, the Schenkingsbeurs (Donation Exchange) is mentioned as a digital tool that connects donors and recipients and offers support regarding VAT rules, food safety and reporting. Some stakeholders highlight challenges such as the ‘first come, first served’ mechanism and the risk that reserved goods will not be collected. At the same time, the application allows for exclusive collaboration with one or more organisations, or for donations to be made available in phases, thereby mitigating these risks in practice.

5C. Accessibility and inclusion (approx. 1 page)

Access to redistributed food surpluses in East Flanders currently follows various routes, with different barriers and inclusion criteria. The East Flanders Food Bank describes a model in which distribution takes place via charitable associations (and increasingly through cooperation with the OCMW), with the explicit precondition that products are passed on free of charge and that associations are approved by the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain. In the stakeholder meeting, this is also cited as a possible factor explaining why ‘not everyone’ joins: strict FASFC rules and the fact that the model is strongly geared towards organisations focused on poverty.

In interviews, Let’s Save Food! describes a more accessible model: “anyone is welcome here”, including people with environmental motivations and those not registered as eligible via the OCMW (Public Centre for Social Welfare). Unlike food bank or PSCW-linked systems, where formal eligibility or income criteria apply³³, Let’s Save Food does not apply any prior selection criteria. As a result, the organisation positions itself as more inclusive towards target groups who are less likely to be reached through traditional referral models, such as single parents or the homeless.

At the same time, the interviews highlight two key limitations to inclusion. Firstly, there are constraints on the ‘suitability’ of the provision for specific diets³⁴, which limits access for some groups. Secondly, there are limitations to inclusion within the voluntary work itself: the physical nature of collection, sorting and transport makes it difficult to offer tasks to volunteers with physical disabilities (except for a few administrative or specific roles).

An additional trade-off explicitly highlighted in the interviews is the tension between ecological and social objectives. Let’s Save Food! emphasises that avoiding food surpluses is the primary objective, whilst for distributors such as Foodsavers, having sufficient stock is important because people rely on that food. This difference also influences the logic of ‘allocation’ and how competition between distributors is managed: for Let’s Save Food!, the use of surpluses is a priority, regardless of which channel they come from.

Finally, the stakeholder consultation highlights that urban/rural differences have a significant impact on accessibility: accessibility, transport and the presence of initiatives determine where inclusion works well and where it does not, and this explains why “reaching rural areas” keeps emerging as a challenge.

³³ Web link: <https://www.foodbanks.be/nl/zoek-hulp#:~:text=HOW%20DO%20I%20GET%20SUPPORT,OCMW%20office%20in%20your%20municipality.>

³⁴ e.g. Let’s Save Food! states that it cannot guarantee halal status and cannot provide certainty regarding gluten-free products or allergies)

6. What works and what does not (yet) (approx. 1–1.5 pages)

What is clear today is that not all segments of the supply chain generate structural surpluses to the same extent. From the perspective of the short supply chain, it can be observed that this sector is largely demand-driven and therefore generally experiences fewer structural surpluses. The alignment between producer and customer is more direct, product specifications are less strict than in retail, and there is often greater respect for the whole product. For instance, smaller or less ‘perfect’ vegetables in the short supply chain usually do find their way to the consumer. At the same time, food losses can certainly occur within the agriculture and horticulture sector, and particularly in crop production, for example when harvesting costs for second- and third-grade produce exceed the price obtained for them, or when harvest yields vary significantly depending on the season. Moreover, for primary products such as fruit or potatoes, the volume of surplus can depend heavily on whether the harvest is good or poor.

In this context, the short supply chain primarily fulfils an economic function: it offers farmers the opportunity to generate a fair income through direct sales. In practice, products are often priced too cheaply rather than too expensively for competitive reasons vis-à-vis the retail sector, whilst the cost structure of short supply chain businesses does not allow them to operate at a structurally lower cost. In this light, the systematic channelling of any surpluses to social channels raises the question of the extent to which this would create additional price pressure and thus undermine the income objective of the short supply chain.

Furthermore, redistribution in East Flanders relies on a clear foundation of established channels. Stakeholders identify food banks and Foodsavers as the main supporting structures, supplemented by smaller local initiatives from OCMWs (Public Centres for Social Welfare), local associations and initiatives. Interviews confirm this picture: the East Flanders Food Bank operates via a provincial distribution model with affiliated associations, whilst Foodsavers Ghent functions on an urban scale with social organisations and social restaurants as recipients. These differences in scale are complementary.

However, the regional reality on the ground is highly stratified. There are significant differences in volumes, logistical capabilities and spatial context (urban versus rural). As a result, solutions are not automatically scalable or transferable within the province. What works in an urban context is not automatically applicable in smaller municipalities or more fragmented municipalities, such as those formed through amalgamation.³⁵ The food chain task force³⁶ from Vlaanderen Circulair confirms this complexity and shows that food hubs in Flanders take on very diverse organisational forms (non-profit organisations, social enterprises, public social welfare services), each embedded in its own political, economic and socio-cultural framework. This variation illustrates that redistribution does not follow a uniform model but requires an ecosystemic logic in which different types of actors operate complementarily.

³⁵ Report on stakeholder consultation 1 (23/10/2025); FWF Session 1: Maximising the repurposing of food surpluses, with a social focus, and Session 3: *Cooperation in the chain* (24/10/2025).

³⁶ Vlaanderen Circulair (2026). *Food Chain Work Agenda – Task Force 24 February 2026*. Vlaanderen Circulair.

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A third viable approach is prevention. Both stakeholder consultations and interviews confirm that retail and industry are placing greater emphasis on monitoring, forecasting, and made-to-order production. Product specifications also play a role here: quality and uniformity criteria help determine which products enter the regular sales stream and which are considered surplus. This reduces food loss in the supply chain. From a waste perspective, this is positive. At the same time, it has a direct impact on the volumes that remain available for redistribution.

Finally, Balázs Cseh's chapter in *Food Banks Reimagined*³⁷ shows that not all retailers are convinced to donate, partly due to image concerns (food safety, reputational risk) and uncertainty about the associated (financial) risks. This can be countered by demonstrating professional operation, being transparent about the processes surrounding food redistribution, by highlighting and communicating the social impact, and by fostering a *sense of belonging* (shifting from an 'us versus them' narrative to a 'we' narrative).

The operation of existing redistribution structures is also supported by quantitative data. OVAM (the Flemish Public Waste Agency) reporting³⁸ shows significant tonnages, a growing share of donating retailers and a substantial contribution from food banks and social distribution platforms, including additional social added value through the employment of disadvantaged groups.

When the system has not yet achieved its objectives

Although the system is currently functioning, stakeholders describe it as 'fragile'. This fragility can be broken down into five parts:

1. Rural areas and smaller, scattered volumes remain difficult to reach

Stakeholders highlight the difference between urban and rural contexts: accessibility, transport and the presence of initiatives determine where redistribution works and where it does not. In the interviews, this is linked to practical capacity (refrigeration/storage and flexibility in collection times), meaning that small and scattered flows are more likely to 'fall out of the system'.

2. An ecosystem approach is still lacking

Stakeholders indicate that many initiatives exist, but that there is a lack of overview and coordination. The mapping of initiatives is still lacking today, making it difficult for initiatives to find one another. Consequently, the combined effect at provincial level remains unclear. This has practical implications: organisations maintain their own records, but without joint monitoring, a fragmented picture emerges and cooperation remains ad hoc. Farmers³⁹ confirm that cooperation regarding surplus is currently rather limited: the majority do not collaborate systematically with other actors for the distribution of surpluses.

3. Implementation capacity is vulnerable due to reliance on volunteers and limited resources

Interviews make it clear how heavily the operation relies on volunteers. The East Flanders Food Bank largely organises transport and traceability itself with a large volunteer base; this works but makes continuity dependent on availability and a small core group that handles administration and

³⁷ Cseh, B., in: *Food Banks Reimagined*, 2025, chapter on social norms and *corporate* donations.

³⁸ OVAM progress report on food loss 2024 (Flemish Public Waste Agency)

³⁹ Survey on food surpluses among producers and farmers dated 15/04/2026

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organisation. Foodsavers Ghent also notes that operations are at their limit in terms of processing capacity and that attracting (young) volunteers is difficult because the work is physically demanding.

4. Planning burden and short time windows increase challenges in logistics and compliance

Stakeholders and farmers/producers⁴⁰ cite the accumulation of logistical requirements (transport, labelling, best-before/use-by dates, storage, peak volumes, traceability) as a structural barrier. This combination of requirements and the planning burden in retail (and indeed generally) makes the system vulnerable: those without sufficient logistical capacity are less able to accept last-minute offers, even when the need is great.

5. Governance of digital matching is not automatically “fairer” or “more efficient”

On the one hand, the Schenkingsbeurs (Donation Exchange) is cited as a tool that supports donors (VAT, food safety, reporting). On the other hand, stakeholders highlight drawbacks such as competition between organisations and no-shows due to a lack of moderation. This suggests that matching is not merely a technical problem, but also requires governance (rules, moderation, fairness).

Key findings relevant to policy development and decision-making

The characteristics of fragility translate into three patterns, which we currently observe:

1. The system is operationally robust but structurally thinly organised.

Redistribution works thanks to professional key actors and strong local networks. At the same time, the model relies heavily on volunteers, relational trust and ad-hoc coordination. This makes it functional, but sensitive to fluctuations in capacity, intake and staff continuity.

2. The scale at which the problem occurs and the scale at which it is organised do not fully coincide.

Food loss is primarily approached as a Flemish and European policy issue, whilst redistribution is, in practice, set up and implemented locally. At the provincial level, there is a lack of an integrated framework for monitoring, coordination and management, meaning that differences between urban and rural contexts are considered less systematically. At the same time, interviews and stakeholder consultations reveal that the limited scalability of local initiatives is linked not only to this scale mismatch, but also to specific constraints such as transport costs, logistical complexity, planning burdens and the vulnerability of volunteer-driven models. As a result, many initiatives function well within their own context but encounter structural organisational and financial limits when attempting to expand.

3. Professionalisation and inclusivity require structural preconditions.

Stakeholders indicate that reliability, traceability and logistical capacity are essential for retaining regular donors. At the same time, planning burdens, short timeframes and digital governance issues increase the complexity. Without clear coordination, shared data and investment in infrastructure, the system remains dependent on individual commitment rather than structural safeguards.

⁴⁰ Survey on food surpluses among producers and farmers dated 15/04/2026

7. Development and learning priorities

The key learning points that emerged from the analysis

The above analysis shows that the East Flemish redistribution system is operational but structurally vulnerable. This vulnerability does not lie in a single link, but in a combination of factors: a fragmented overview, logistical barriers, dependence on volunteers, planning burdens, limited monitoring, differences between urban and rural contexts, and varying levels of involvement from producers, retailers and medium-sized businesses.

The following learning questions arise directly from these findings.

1. How can we improve oversight and coordination at provincial level without creating additional administrative pressure?

The analysis shows that many initiatives are active, but that there is a lack of oversight and structural coordination. Organisations record their own data, but there is no shared picture of volumes, needs or capacities. At the same time, extensive data collection is not feasible for many stakeholders. This hinders policy steering and collaboration.

The learning question therefore focuses on organising a form of management or coordination that facilitates connection (mapping, knowledge sharing, transparency), without generating new administrative burdens for donors or distributors.

2. How can we make the system less logistically fragile?

Redistribution remains heavily dependent on speed (best-before/use-by dates), refrigeration capacity, transport and sorting. Smaller and scattered volumes require intensive logistics.

The learning question concerns realistic models for consolidation, temporary storage, processing or hub operations that create economies of scale, so that not every local actor has to invest in infrastructure individually.

3. How do we strengthen implementation capacity in a system that relies heavily on volunteers?

Food banks, Foodsavers and local initiatives function thanks to strong commitment, but remain vulnerable due to limited structural support.

The learning agenda must explore how core functions (coordination, data management, logistics planning, compliance) can be supported more structurally, so that continuity is less dependent on individual commitment.

4. How do we address the tension between prevention and redistribution?

Successful prevention leads to fewer surpluses. From a climate and waste perspective, this is positive, but it reduces the supply available for redistribution.

At the same time, redistribution raises questions among producers and short-chain actors regarding price pressure and income levels. The key question is how policy can provide maximum support for prevention without undermining redistribution or having the opposite effect by perpetuating surpluses or weakening the economic position of producers.

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5. How can we involve retailers, producers and medium-sized companies more structurally in redistribution?

The analysis shows that not all potential donors find their way to redistribution with equal ease. Some retailers remain cautious (partly due to risk assessment or image concerns), whilst medium-sized companies and producers often lack a clear channel or point of contact.

The learning question is how barriers – whether logistical, administrative or perceptual – can be lowered, and how trust, guidance, clarity and scalable cooperation models can be strengthened, without creating too much additional administrative burden or economic disadvantages.

Which thematic policy learning groups of Social Food Webs the region will participate in and why

Given the East Flemish priorities identified through stakeholder consultations and interviews, the most direct alignment lies with (in order of priority):

- Management & monitoring technologies: because the need for a coordinating role/platform and for regional monitoring and data is a recurring theme (stakeholders and retail interviews).
- New business models: because hubs, logistical support, and the demand for a structural organisation (rather than project-based/fragile) are central in East Flanders, including the question of how to make this financially and organisationally sustainable.
- Networks for social & environmental benefits: as a third pillar, because the demand for an ‘ecosystem approach’, mapping and better connecting existing initiatives (including social restaurants and local initiatives) is explicitly mentioned, and because this is a prerequisite for making the other two pillars workable.

What the region expects to achieve through interregional learning

The learning objectives are primarily practical: gaining insight into effective governance models (coordination/platform), logistics/hub solutions (including managing peaks and the cold chain), and measurement and monitoring systems that enable policy guidance without unfeasible data requirements at local level. This ties in with the planned interregional learning activities (semester 3) in which the core themes within the partnership will be ‘finalised’.

8. Looking ahead: what success would mean for the region (*approx. 0.5 page*)

In this context, meaningful change in East Flanders does not mean generating more surplus food, but rather strengthening a system that reallocates the available surplus more efficiently, safely and effectively. The focus here is on optimising redistribution within the existing food chain, with particular attention to the role of producers, processors, retailers and social organisations. In addition, a forward-looking system takes into account the spatial diversity within the province, explicitly incorporating differences between urban and rural contexts into organisation, logistics and accessibility.

Environmental sustainability

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Success means that less edible food ‘leaks’ into fermentation/animal feed because it cannot be collected or processed in time, particularly at peak times in the chain (e.g. seasonal peaks, closure periods). In interviews, explicit efforts are made to find ways of processing surpluses (e.g. fruit and vegetables that would otherwise be left unsold or withdrawn from the market) into products with a longer shelf life (soups, sauces, ingredients) so that they can indeed remain in human consumption.

At the same time, stakeholders also warn that ‘innovation’ is not always the answer: traditional preservation techniques can be highly efficient, but today they come up against constraints of cost and organisational capacity. Success therefore also means making simpler solutions viable again.

Economic efficiency

Economic efficiency primarily means less friction and lower transaction costs: less planning burden, fewer ad-hoc firefighting exercises, and a logistics model capable of absorbing peaks without every organisation having to invest separately in refrigeration, storage and transport. Stakeholders identify centralisation/coordination via food hubs to organise logistics around surpluses more efficiently.

Interviews make it clear that economic viability is currently under pressure because much of the work relies on volunteers (and is therefore fragile) and because structural funding is lacking. Success here means a shift from temporary, project-based solutions to structural support for core functions (coordination, logistics, data management, volunteer support).

Social inclusion and justice

Success means that access to redistributed food becomes less dependent on random local capacity and that greater freedom of choice and dignity are built into the models. Interviews explicitly advocate for systems that better guarantee autonomy and dignity, as access today often involves referral (PCSW initiatives are only accessible to those eligible), freedom of choice is limited, and stigma can play a role.

At the same time, interviews also highlight the limits of redistribution: supply is unpredictable and does not automatically result in a balanced diet; success therefore also means that expectations are clear (what redistribution can and cannot deliver), and that the gap between rising need and falling supply becomes more manageable.

Regional resilience

Resilience means that the system becomes less vulnerable to shocks (e.g. falling surpluses due to better forecasting, seasonal peaks, closure periods, declining EU funding) and is less dependent on a limited core of volunteers and board members. This is illustrated in interviews: volunteer-driven organisations face limited managerial and administrative capacity, and the planning burden places additional pressure on volunteers.

At regional level, resilience also means better insight (monitoring) and a clearer overview. RSG2 emphasises that there are hardly any figures available at provincial level and that even at Flemish level data is not transparent, which creates a gap in monitoring.

How improved policy would be reflected in practice

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- At provincial level, a coordinating and connecting role could be adopted, bringing together stakeholders across the entire chain (producers, processors, logistics operators, retail, the social economy and food aid organisations) and facilitating cooperation.
- A provincial overview could be developed to map food surpluses, processing capacity, logistical capabilities and recipients, with explicit attention to differences between urban and rural contexts.
- Data and knowledge can be systematically collected and shared, including through the quantification of flows, the exchange of good practices, and the drafting of sector fact sheets and practical guidelines.
- Pilot projects and infrastructure can be supported to test viable and scalable models, such as food hubs, shared processing facilities and logistics pilot projects.
- A structured policy dialogue can be organised to identify and address bottlenecks, for example regarding taxation on donations, labelling and food safety, in collaboration with the relevant authorities.
- Communication and awareness-raising can be strengthened, including through initiatives on date labelling, surplus utilisation and local consumption, and by increasing the visibility of expertise and existing initiatives.

The stakeholder consultation outlines a clear ‘practical implementation’ of what provincial policy can do to help achieve success: taking on a coordinating and connecting role across the entire supply chain, developing a provincial overview (surpluses, processing capacity, logistics, buyers) and thereby highlighting the differences between rural and urban areas. In addition, the following are mentioned: collecting/sharing data and knowledge (including sector fact sheets and practical guidelines), supporting pilots and infrastructure (food hubs, shared kitchens/processing, logistics pilots), organising a policy dialogue on bottlenecks (taxation, labelling, food safety), and working on communication and awareness-raising (including date labels).

How Social Food Webs supports this change and the green transition

Social Food Webs supports the green transition by contributing to a sustainable and inclusive food system in which food loss is reduced and remaining surpluses are redistributed with an inclusive approach.

9. Sources and approach (brief)

How was the analysis carried out

With the assistance of an external evaluator, the evaluation was carried out as follows:

1. Gathering of input through stakeholder meetings, interviews and web searches
2. Desk research of all data sources
3. Drafting and summarising an initial concept
4. Interpretation of EU frameworks in relation to Flemish and federal legislation
5. First round of assessment by Erov, resulting in a second draft

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6. Second round of assessment by stakeholders, resulting in a provisional version

7. Delivery of the final report in Dutch and English

The data sources and methods used

- Input from stakeholder meetings (2) with: Erov, DBSE Gent – Foodsavers, HoGent, Plattelandscentrum Meetjesland, ILVO, Let's Save Food!, East Flanders Food Bank, Velt vzw, Aldi, Vlaco vzw, Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, Department of Agriculture & Rural Affairs of the Province of East Flanders, Ghent University and Comeos
- Input from interviews with stakeholders: Aldi, Comeos, De Wassende Maan, Vlaco, Velt, Herwin, ILVO, Plattelandscentrum Meetjesland, Compaan, Let's Save Food!, East Flanders Food Bank, Foodsavers Ghent, De Zuivelarij, Let Us, Artevelde University of Applied Sciences, Gent Samen Solidair and LIDL
- Online survey of food producers and farmers: 15 respondents – 5 in primary production (agriculture) / 4 in processing / 6 in both
- Analysis of policy documents and explanatory documents:
 - Action Plan on Food Loss and Biomass (Residual) Flows 2021–2025
 - Food Plan Oogst-Vlaanderen
 - Royal Decree amending Royal Decrees Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 18, 19, 22, 27, 41, 44, 53 and 59 concerning value added tax
 - Royal Decree No. 59 concerning the withdrawal of promotional gifts of negligible value and the withdrawal for charitable purposes
 - Circular 2020/C/116 concerning the provision of foodstuffs and essential non-food items for charitable purposes
 - Fevia newsletter “Donations made more attractive to businesses by new tax measures” (dated 10/02/2026)
 - FAVV circular on food donations (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain)
 - FAVV circular regarding use-by dates (Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain)
 - Work agenda of the Flanders Food Chain Task Force Circular dated 24/02/2026
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10. Project reference and contacts (approx. 0.5 page)

Content guidance:

- Interreg Europe Social Food Webs – priority GREEN
- Partners:
 - LP: South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences Ltd
 - PP02: Lille European Metropolis (MEL)
 - PP03: Vejle Municipality
 - PP04: Valles Occidental County Council
 - PP05: Wielkopolska Region
 - PP06: Riga Planning Region
 - PP07: Environment Company of Porto Municipality (EMAP)
 - PP08: Economic Council of East Flanders (Economische Raad voor Oost-Vlaanderen vzw (EROV))
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