



HOW CAN WE HALVE FOOD WASTE BY 2030 IN A CONSUMERIST WORLD?*

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN KEEPING THE PUBLIC ATTENTION ON THE GREEN AGENDA

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Current debates and Policy evolutions in the field

Food Waste is a recent concern for world leaders and scholars, although it has existed for decades and is causing pollution and other side effects. The issue of food waste (FW) effects on the environment has been on international forums' agenda since 1979 along with the World Climate Conference, which called nations "to halt preventable environmental damage", and afterward with the creation of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988 (Smith 2020: 41). However, the awareness of FW as a global phenomenon came much later. After more than 30 years, in 2011, a few concrete initiatives emerged: "Save Food", which advanced the subject of global food losses onto the political and economic agenda in Germany and the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Communication informing that around 1/3 of the world's food was lost or wasted every year. Two years later, FAO launched the first study on FW's environmental impact. Following this study, the topic of food waste is gaining global attention. In September 2015, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets to mitigate the current economic, social and environmental challenges, and therefore food loss and waste. All world leaders have been committed to achieving the targets of this "ambitious vision for sustainable development." In this context, the European Union (EU) launched in 2020 the Circular Economy's Action Plan and the Farm to Fork Strategy as an essential part of the well-known European Green Deal (The European Commission 2024).

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Food waste is included in SDG 12¹ – Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns and is related to SDG 2 – Zero Hunger (UN 2015). Empirical data reveals that, in 2022, 1.05 billion tonnes of food were wasted in households, food service, and retail, compared to 931 million tonnes in 2019 (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2024: 46), causing 8% to 10% of global emissions GHG (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2021: 20). Households produce over 60% (i.e. 631 million tonnes), food service 28% and retail 12%. According to the Food Waste Index 2024, released at the end of March 2024 by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), this amounts to 132 kilograms of FW per capita per year, compared to 121 kilograms per capita per year in 2019. Related to these data, FAO (2023: 7–8) estimates that in 2022, up to 783 million people worldwide faced hunger. On the other hand, the World Bank estimated in 2020 that the food wasted globally is worth more than US\$1 trillion (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2024: 2).

At the EU level, data indicate that in 2021, there were more than 58 million tonnes of fresh mass food waste, from which 54% of the total FW (i.e. 31 million tonnes) were produced by households, with a 132 billion euro market value calculated for the underlying asset (The European Commission 2023: 42; Eurostat 2023).

As a member of the EU, Romania is aligned and committed to the European Union's green policies regarding FW² and started this process by preparing the accession to the EU (SFWR 2021: 6). With "low confidence" reported data, Romania produced 2022 over 1.32 million tonnes in households, representing sixty-seven kilograms of FW per inhabitant per year, but no data regarding food services and retail (Food Waste Index Report UNEP 2024: 166). Considering the purpose of public policies and active Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) but also the approaches and challenges regarding environmental and sustainable development issues, this article hypothesizes that *a robust civil society influences the adoption of efficacious and improved public policies regarding FW and contributes to maintaining green topics on the public agenda*. This paper aims to identify the factors that explain civil society's ability to influence public policies on FW and keep green topics on the governmental agenda. In this sense, I have carried out a literature review to identify the current situation and the levers available to Romanian civil society and data analysis. Data were gathered via eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of central public authorities, HoReCa, civil society, and Romanian consumers conducted in the spring of 2022.

1 Sustainable Development Goal 12 of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* includes a target 12.3, which provides: "halving food waste per capita at the retail and consumer level and reducing food losses during production and supply chains by the end of this decade" (UN 2015).

2 The Romanian authorities claim that they are concerned about the FW problem. Therefore, Romania adopted the National Action Plan on Combating Food Waste in 2014, the Law No. 217 on reducing food waste, the so-called "Anti-Food Waste Law", in 2016, the Sustainable Development Strategy 2030 in 2018, and modified the Anti-Food Waste Law in 2024. Few national campaigns, debates and conferences were initiated and conducted in partnership with academic and Civil Society Organizations.



The state of Civil Society

Scholars highlight that, nowadays, civil society is in the attention of democratic governments, holding a pivotal role in maintaining the health of democracies, fulfilling international goals regarding the management of environmental problems, and achieving the ones related to sustainable development³. On the other hand, scholars consider the growing involvement of civil society in policymaking over the past few decades to be one of the most significant trends (Wuthnow 2004; Pirvulescu 2016; Anheier 2017). In addition, scholars consider that civil society is one of the most important stakeholders (Bryson et al. 2010; Caniato et al. 2014; Miles 2015; Morone–Imbert 2020; Archip et al. 2023).

Civil society is a polysemantic concept with “variable geometry,” depending on the specific context in which it is used, on the era and society, and the lexical or ideological evolution, being in a “continuous redefinition” (Pirvulescu 2016: 22). For Dinham (2009: 50), civil society is “understood as that intermediate realm somewhere between the nation-state and the individual”. The most popular definition is that of civil society as a collection of organizations functioning as intermediaries between the government, the family (e.g. individuals, households), and the economic production/the market (Kopecký–Mudde 2003: 5).

Moreover, Chandhoke (2007: 607) underlines that civil society was rediscovered and given prominence in political practices, becoming nowadays an “answer to the malaise of the contemporary world”. Afterward, in the 1990s, civil society became “a mantra for everyone from presidents to political scientists”, and civil society became a “key element of the post-cold-war zeitgeist” (Carothers 2000: 19). Furthermore, Fukuyama (1995: 4–12) underlines that “liberal political and economic institutions depend upon a healthy and dynamic civil society for their vitality”, explaining the crucial role of social capital and the trust level within society.

Furthermore, Anheier (2017: 4–5) considers that civil society is part of the New Public Management model, defined as “an arena of self-organization of citizens and established interests seeking voice and influence” and facing inevitable weaknesses such as *resource inadequacy*, *paternalism*, *free-riders*, and *particularism*.

Moreover, Dinham underlines that “the public policy matrix” is closely related to the members of civil society who “inform and influence it” (2009: 50). In this light, Anheier invokes that the relationship between Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and the state is “complex and multifaceted” (2017: 6). Thus, governments see differently the roles that civil society can play in the future: 1) primarily as service providers and disregard their advocacy capabilities; 2) sources of new ideas and innovations; and 3) organizations that interfere with the policy-making process, attempting to exert influence or even dictate governmental agendas (Anheier 2017: 6).

3 Fukuyama 1995; Carothers 2000; Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu 2002; Wuthnow 2004; Smismans 2006; Chandhoke 2007; Dinham 2009; Bryson et al. 2010; Böhmelt 2013; Dodge 2014; Caniato et al. 2014; Miles 2015; Anheier 2017; Morone and Imbert 2020; Archip et al. 2023; Bernauer 2023.



In a highly complex world, civil society faces numerous challenges and obstacles. In this regard, Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu (2002: 88) point out that also the “funding matters”, aiming at the funding co-dependency, which is unlikely to change but does raise some questions regarding the independence of NGOs research and analysis, calling for transparency and accountability. Furthermore, Heemeryck (2018: 257) states that “financially, the NGOs are fully dependent on their funders”. In addition, Nastase and colleagues (2019: 852–853) argue that the lack of civic culture is associated with both the dearth or fragility of independent CSOs⁴ and the non-participatory method of local administration.

Civil Society and the Green agenda

Over the past years, there has been a noticeable shift in the public and academic spheres towards environmental issues. This shift can be traced back to the intensified efforts of the UN and the EU in combating climate change and other environmental problems since 2015, and to the increased involvement of the political sphere. Smismans (2006: 174) argues that environmental policy, which initially emerged due to public pressure and environmental movements, has now expanded to encompass a wide range of issues, including tourism, agriculture, and transportation, as well as new areas like climate change.

In this light, scholars prefer to approach civil society involvement in global environmental governance (Gemmill–Bamidele-Izu 2002; Robert et al. 2004; Bernauer 2023), but they also approach the national and local dimensions (O'Brien 2009; Böhmelt 2013). Gemmill–Bamidele-Izu (2002: 77–78) identify five key roles of civil society regarding global environmental governance, which I also consider valid for domestic activities: a) information collection and dissemination; b) policy development consultation; c) policy implementation; d) assessment and monitoring; and e) advocacy for environmental justice.

Considering the levers used by civil society to maintain or change the green agenda, Dodge (2014: 161) explains that CSOs are using storylines to influence the dynamics of the deliberative process and to promote their perspectives on environmental issues and the formulation of public policy, regardless of existing barriers or challenges. The scholar underlines that civil society specifically uses storylines to a) “set the agenda for environmental hazards; b) create the structure of public discourse by altering the rules; c) create the content of public discourse by forming meanings around environmental policy; and d) couple/align forums, arenas, and courts throughout the system (Dodge 2014: 161).

⁴ It is essential to distinguish between COSs and NGOs, as Non-Governmental Organisations is the term used for associations and foundations, which are considered a fundamental expression of civil society, and Civil Society Organizations, include a broad range of representation associations (Epure et al. 2001: 1–2).



In his turn, O'Brien (2009: 145–146) argues that the status of ENGOs has evolved, moving towards professionalism and collaborative efforts with administrative establishments. This shift signifies a departure from non-conventional social actions. The scholar further emphasizes that NGOs recognize the importance of increasing public involvement in shaping government actions and note that believing in the government's ability to provide solutions can hinder change in this area. In addition, Smismans (2006: 174–202) points out that, at the EU level, civil society players have "a crucial role in providing the Commission with information, expertise and strategies" and validation. The author concludes that the ENGOs are acting nowadays as "watchdogs" for how EU policies are implemented at the national level and as monitoring agencies in general (Smismans 2006: 205).

On the other hand, moving towards the domestic dimension, Böhmelt (2013: 702) explains that if governments are unable to gather data regarding climate change, they can turn to ENGOs, who invest significant resources in policy research and provide data, analysis, and knowledge. The scholar highlights that, given the history of civil society advocacy through participation in UNFCCC negotiation delegations, ENGOs will not be able to influence or alter state policy regarding climate change, compared to the corporate organizations' lobbying success (Böhmelt 2013: 710). Moreover, O'Brien (2009: 153) adds that ENGO participation is tolerated rather than being welcomed.

Furthermore, related to nations' international cooperative behavior, Robert, and colleagues (2004:39) invoke the importance of the number of ENGOs registered in a state as one of the most significant indicators. The scholars emphasize that "the number of [E]NGOs in a nation appears virtually synonymous with its likelihood to participate in environmental treaties" (Robert et al. 2004: 39). Extrapolating from this argument, one might consider that the number of ENGOs might be a crucial indicator for efficient environmental public policies and maintaining the green agenda at public and governmental attention.⁵

Therefore, the development and evolution of a solid and vigilant civil society are essential for influencing the adoption of efficacious and improved public policies regarding FW. It also contributes to maintaining green topics on the public agenda to achieve the ambitious goals set by the international community, which aim at the well-being of people and the Planet, as well as future generations.

5 In 2024, according to the Ministry of Justice, the Romanian NGO National Register accounts for 116,419 associations and 20,796 foundations without available data regarding the total number of ENGOs. As Albu–Zakota underline, the main issue with this record is that, while it lists the registered organisations, it is unknown how many of them are active (2022: 216). An EBRD report estimated in 2020 that only half of registered Romanian CSOs are active (EBRD 2020: 21).

The state of Civil Society in Romania

The Communist regime in Romania played an essential role in shaping the development of civil society. It hindered the establishment of inclusive and participatory modes of governance by replacing grassroots civil society organizations with top-down, centralized structures for control (Klůvánkóv-Oravsk et al. 2009; Stringer–Paavola 2013). Therefore, during the Romanian communist dictatorship, “civil society was almost non-existent and civic culture completely atrophied” (Albu–Zakota 2022: 207). The NGO sector, however, emerged swiftly following the fall of the Ceausescu regime in 1989, advocating for the preservation of the environment, cultural heritage, and democratic ideals (Parau 2009: 121). Despite the challenges it faced, such as the Romanians’ distrust of formal organizations and a preference for private/informal networking, the sector stabilized over time⁶ with the passage of the 2000 Government Ordinance on Associations and Foundations and other dedicated laws, and the growth of a more qualified labor force (O’Brien 2009: 150).

Furthermore, Parau (2009: 137) argues that, in Romania’s case, the empowerment of NGOs resulted from the Executive’s overriding desire for EU membership and its acceptance into the global community, giving rise to an advocacy network that has been trying to impede it. In this context, Romanian civil society made “a valuable contribution,⁷ which paved the way for future social dialogue, collaboration, and cooperation, specifically for a European democracy” (Ciot 2023: 240). In addition, Heemeryck (2018: 257) considers that the most influential NGOs in Romania are active in democratization and the development of civil society, most of them becoming solid due to the significant involvement of US and European organizations.

On the other hand, Margarit (2018: 219) underlines that Romania’s public sphere had one of the most turbulent and persistent periods of popular mobilization and civil unrest in its recent post-communist history between 2013 and 2015, beginning with the anti-fracking campaign and the protests against mining exploitation in Rosia Montana and culminating in the Colectiv Revolution. “In a country where the communist past left deep scars, the social movements of the past (...) years could

6 Nevertheless, after a decade, Romanian NGOs needed more financial and human resources in most areas, including internal organisation management and fundraising. Few were involved at the regional, national, or international levels; most of them worked on small-scale projects that provided social services (e.g. child protection or health care), or they educated the public about new topics like environmentalism, human rights for minorities, the rule of law, and government accountability (Epure et al. 2001: 8-33). Moreover, closer to the accession moment, Romania had only a few influential NGOs, while the rest of civil society remained “generally weak and etiolated, partly due to overdependence on donor funds” (Nicholson of Winterbourne 2006: 64, cited by Parau 2009: 121).

7 Ciot (2023: 237) explains that Romanian civil society made a substantial contribution to 11 negotiating chapters: the four freedoms of movement; competition policy; agriculture; transport policy; taxation; social policy and labour force employment; energy; education, professional training, and youth; regional policy; environment protection; and justice and home affairs.



not pass unnoticed. Moreover, these events marked the rise of an authentic civil society, willing to prove its opposition toward the political actors and decisions and, simultaneously, to demand them to act accountably and legitimately,” argues the scholar (Margarit 2018: 219). On the other hand, Albu–Zakota (2022: 213) recall that “the Romanian civil society is a construction without a solid foundation” considering the early age of the democracy. The authors explain that it is essential for CSOs to be “strong, independent of political and commercial factors, and able to constantly monitor the activity of the authorities”, to carry out the watchdog function (Albu–Zakota 2022: 213).

The evolution of the Romanian ENGOs

Romania's environmental preoccupations began to take shape with a conservation attitude emerging spontaneously after the fall of Communism in 1990, despite the initial governmental indifference to the environment and the development of Romanian ENGOs⁸ (Stringer–Paavola 2013: 141). In this light, Stringer–Paavola (2013: 141) highlight that the interest of the government and the nation's scientific community in environmental policies increased with the EU accession, which required and expected the Romanian authorities to address ecological issues, such as biodiversity conservation and environmental degradation. With the advent of Europeanization, the Romanian environmental sector, though weaker, presented more opportunities for social players, albeit with limited capacity to utilize them (O'Brien 2009: 150–153). In contrast to Hungary and Poland, Romania was considered an “environmental laggard,” and therefore, Europeanization⁹ had a profound influence on Romanian environmental action (Börzel–Buzogány 2010: 718). Stringer–Paavola (2013: 144) also underline that Romania's transition towards more inclusive environmental governance methods has been significantly bolstered by its EU membership, but “the lack of civil society remains a barrier to the more widespread internalization of conservation”.

In addition, Jigla (2016: 221) invokes that the collaborative efforts of Romanian ENGOs with European associations or networks of associations, their participation in international conferences and events, and their experience exchanges with other NGOs have played a pivotal role in the professionalization of environmental organizations. Furthermore, O'Brien (2009: 155) underlines that, in Romania, environmental issues are still low on the political agenda, and participation is seen

8 These ENGOs represented only 5% of the total number of NGOs, and most of them were local or regional players with limited influence or awareness on a national scale (Stringer–Paavola 2013: 141).

9 The scholars pointed out that the ENGOs in CEE nations like Poland, Hungary, and Romania have grown in professionalism and strength due to the Europeanization of environmental policy. However, state-civil society interaction has remained relatively poor (Börzel–Buzogány 2010: 717–728).



more as a duty than a necessity.¹⁰ The author concludes that, although Romanian ENGOs participate in decisions that are peripheral to themselves, and environmental issues continue to be side-lined in favor of economic development, there are indications that they are starting to take a more active part in influencing policy and decision-making processes (O'Brien 2009: 155). Nevertheless, following the "two big scandals" that sparked environmental protests and made authorities aware of the influence of NGOs – the Dracula Land in Sighisoara in 2001 (an investment projects project with a significant impact on the environment) and the Rosia Montana mining operation in 2002,¹¹ Romania's environmental status changed (O'Brien 2009: 152).

Hitherto, the most famous example of an environmental social movement in Romania was the one caused by the Rosia Montana mining project that generated the Salvati Rosia Montana (SRM) movement,¹² also known as "the Romanian Autumn." Margarit (2018: 220) considers that this movement is the most complex of all the Romanian protests because of demonstrated cooperation on local, national, and international levels, serving as the impetus for future Romanian civic movements and undoubtedly had an impact on how they developed and were implemented. The non-heterogeneous environmental mobilization brought together residents of Rosia Montana and its environs, NGOs¹³ operating locally,

10 O'Brien observes that this result from the upkeep of closed political institutions and processes derived from the legacy of non-democratic governance. According to the scholar, ENGOs are still perceived as agitators who impose limitations on government actions rather than partners whose voices validate issues that should be discussed and resolved (O'Brien 2009: 155).

11 Related to these two cases Parau (2009: 136–137) points out that the Nastase government was less willing to compromise over its initiated project Dracula Park, considering that the negotiation occurred at the beginning of the EU pre-accession process, compared to Rosia Montana, which took place at the end of the process and saw more willingness to compromise. The author recalls that, initially, the Nastase Executive was reluctant to constrain itself in the case of Dracula Park, a project they had initiated, but constrained itself much more quickly in Rosia Montana, as it was not 'their' project and offered uncertain benefits (Parau 2009: 136–137).

12 The SRM movement is the most significant environmental movement in post-communist Romania, which opposed in 2002 the most prominent open pit in Europe, a cyanide-leaching gold and silver extraction project proposed by Rosia Montana Gold Corporation (RMGC), a subsidiary of a Canadian multinational mining company Gabriel Resources Ltd. (Branea 2015; Heemeryck 2018). Branea (2015: 266) explains that the case developed into Romania's most significant and intricate environmental dispute, with a large cross-border and international component. Moreover, the case was closed earlier in March this year, after Canada's Gabriel Resources, which sought compensation after its plan to construct Europe's largest open-pit gold mine in the western Romanian town of Rosia Montana failed, lost an arbitration trial against Romania carried out by the International Court of Arbitration of the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (Reuters 2024).

13 The SRM movement had at its core a small non-governmental organization organized by locals against the mining project, Alburnus Maior, helped by an activist, and only a few NGOs which worked closely: Greenpeace Romania, ReGeneration, the Independent Centre for the Development of Environmental Resources, Rosia Montana Cultural Foundation, Terra Millennium III, and Architecture. Restoration. Archeology Association (Branea 2015: 268). The scholar reveals that the civic movement was possible only with the involvement of a Swiss-French environmental activist, who assisted Alburnus Maior's local organization in formulating a plan of action that



nationally, and internationally, coalitions of NGOs, unofficial organizations, trade unions, professional associations, universities, and other academic bodies, student organizations, churches, sports fans, artists, public intellectuals, and private citizens (Branea 2015: 266).

Regarding the FW agenda, Archip and colleagues (2023: 6) included civil society as a critical sector involved in food waste reduction, along with public administration, food business, and consumers, which have a considerable influence on the formulation and application of plans and directives. The scholars conclude that there are still significant issues to tackle when approaching waste management in Romania, including *path dependency*, *fragmented and ineffective decision-making*, and the lack of proper communication and engagement between various stakeholders (Archip et al. 2023: 16).

Besides all this, in Romania, food waste is not seen nowadays as a subject with major environmental consequences, such as mining and deforesting projects, which is why only a few NGOs manage it. At the governmental level, the FW dimension is regulated in Romania by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), which has a limited partnership with food waste NGOs.

Qualitative research on Food Waste and Civil Society implications

In 2022, I researched food waste management at the household level. I gathered qualitative data via eleven semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of central public authorities, HoReCa, civil society, and Romanian consumers. From the beginning, civil society was considered one of the stakeholders responsible for managing FW in Romania, second after the state.

When I started the qualitative research process in February 2022, I established a list of stakeholders, as potential interviewees, comprising institutions of the central public administration in Romania, such as the MARD, the Department of Sustainable Development of the Romanian Government or the Romanian Parliament, NGOs running programs to combat FW, the Federation of Food Banks in Romania, social shops, retailers, chefs and restaurants that promote the concept of zero food waste, young people who develop applications to combat FW and also consumers. Because the process of reaching all the representatives of the stakeholders taken into account was difficult and time-consuming, although I reached some contact data, primarily such as e-mail addresses or profiles on online services (e.g. LinkedIn, social media), the list was permanently changing.

Therefore, at the end of the allocated period for collecting qualitative data, February-June 2022, I conducted eleven in-depth interviews with important actors

mostly involved contesting any papers released by government agencies at Gabriel Resources' request (Branea 2015: 267). Moreover, Branea points out that the SRM movement was also instrumental in pressuring the European Parliament to adopt a resolution urging the European Commission to ban cyanide gold mining across the continent (2015: 286).



within the FW process. One of the missing stakeholders was the retailers, who were reticent about having an interview or avoided answering the e-mails or the messages. Ten interviewees were activating in Bucharest, and one in the Romanian city of Sfantu Gheorghe, from Covasna County. Moreover, ten interviewees were Romanians, and one was an Austrian established in Romania. The interviews were held in three diverse ways as follows: five using Google Meet online meetings, five on the phone, and one using e-mail. I prepared a set of fourteen questions, which were not applied entirely to all the interviewees, and during the discussions, there were some other supplementary ones. One of the fourteen questions addressed, the 10th, was related to the responsibility for tackling FW. It was formulated as follows: "Who has the responsibility to take action to combat food waste: the state, the business community, civil society, or citizens? Argue, please!" The interviews were held between May 13 and June 07, 2022.

Discussion and findings

The interviews revealed that civil society as a soft power could influence Romanian public policies regarding FW and has a crucial role in covering the key areas of education, communication, awareness, and changing consumer behavior. Moreover, the data underline that, after the central authorities, civil society is the next stakeholder that has the responsibility for taking action to reduce FW. Regarding the responsibility to act on reducing FW, five interviewees consider that *everybody/all the stakeholders* have such responsibility. Moreover, eight of the participants in the research identified the *state* as being responsible, and seven interviewees pointed out the *civil society*. Furthermore, six of the respondents opted for the *business* and for the *citizens*. In addition, the interviewees identified other responsible stakeholders such as the *mass media*, the *Church* with all its cults, and also the *influencers* and *food bloggers*. In addition, the research, underlines that ENGOs should cover *education, communication, awareness, and changing consumer behavior* by "implementing as many projects as possible by Chefs and NGOs", and "educating citizens from a financial perspective – *FW means money thrown in the trash bin*", and "social movements such as the one created by the *Eat Foundation*".

On the one hand, the data reveal that interviewees consider civil society more as a "doer" that acts rather than as a party that influences the policies and maintains the green agenda in public and governmental attention. On the other hand, the identification of civil society as a stakeholder responsible for taking action to combat FW also involves the action to influence public policies regarding reducing food waste, as it results from the broader discussions with the interviewees. Moreover, it should be noted that the Anti-Food Waste Law in Romania as a public policy was only possible with the contribution and influence of a few Romanian ENGOs,



as noted by one interviewee. Thus, the adoption of the first Anti-Food Waste Law is an excellent example of influencing the public policy regarding FW in Romania.

The initiator of the Anti-Food Waste Law, a young liberal deputy, explained, in the interview we had in May 2022, that the law was based on a broad consultation and improved at the initiative and argumentation of an NGO:

The first legislative initiative [on FW] was in 2013, and it took a long time because it involved a broad consultation. Romania was unprepared and did not have the institutions and NGOs ready. There had to be debate and preparation of the market and the actors involved. Then, when the law was in the plenary of the Chamber of Deputies, and it was on the final vote, an NGO appeared and told us that the law is very good, but, practically, through it, we were closing the possibility of social stores, of those who sell at low prices for the population with low income. Expressly, the law stipulated that goods approaching their expiration date should be donated 100% free of charge and should not be sold at a reduced price, precisely to avoid a black market. However, there were civil society representatives who said that this possibility exists in France, Denmark, Austria, and Germany. It also exists in Romania through two stores, one in Bucharest and another in Sibiu, that sell at a reduced price on a list of low-income people. So I had to close and stop the law that was on the final vote and come back after a year or so of debate to find an appropriate form that would also allow this form of social economy, these social stores, to develop in Romania and exist. (The Anti-Food Waste Law initiator interview May 26, 2022)

Furthermore, as one of the young people who developed applications to combat FW in Romania stated in her interview, civil society actions and collaborations bring hope for changing the food waste situation:

Associations and NGOs have started to move a lot in Romania. I am delighted that this mentality of - "This is not done here, and no one shows interest" or "The authorities do not show interest here" has changed. Nowadays, there are all kinds of civic workshops and small groups that have started to move a lot, and some concentrated hubs that at a given moment meet and say: "Let us collaborate." We are all optimistic that change will come from there and opportunities will open up. (BonApp Developer interview May 27, 2022)

The Romanian FW public policies

One could say that the public policies on FW in Romania could be easily reduced to the Anti-Food Waste Law No. 217 adopted in 2016, and entered into force after two years of blockade and a substantial change in the provisions, and another amending and supplementing Law promulgated in March 2024. It is noteworthy that the Anti-Food Waste Law in Romania, before its drafting, was not a subject of genuine public interest or debate. However, a small segment of Romanian civil society, particularly the non-governmental sector through organizations like SOMARO



– Social Store, More Green, Workshops without Borders, Carousel, Resource Centre for Public Participation, Terra Millennium III, Food Bank, and Romanian Food Consumers Association *Optimum Cibus*, played a pivotal role in formulating this law (Gheorghica 2019).

Moreover, at the initiative of the MoreGreen Association and the Resource Centre for Public Participation, 34 other ENGOs asked the Romanian parliamentarians to adopt the law and to allow them to participate in the plenary session of the Chamber of Deputies dedicated to this vote on October 18, 2016 (Horeca Romania 2016; Green Report 2016). In that context, the Romanian civil society representatives highlighted in online statements that the most significant initiatives¹⁴ undertaken in Romania to address FW in a direct/practical way belong to the private sector, especially the non-profit and non-governmental sectors (Gheorghica 2019).

Conclusions

Food Waste is a recent concern for world leaders and scholars, although it has existed for decades and is causing pollution and other side effects, gaining global attention since 2013. The United Nations' target for halving FW and the related actions required by *the 2030 Agenda* should be achieved in just six years, and there is a lot to be done. Scholars consider civil society an essential stakeholder in public environmental policies, the so-called *green agenda*, although it faces many challenges, limitations, and blockages.

In recent years, both the public and academic spheres seem to pay much more attention to environmental issues, starting, on one hand, with the intensification of actions regarding combating climate change and other environmental problems by the UN and the EU since 2015 and, on the other hand, through a more visible involvement of the political sphere. Taking into account academic writing, the consumption-based economic model, and the governmental approaches, the development and evolution of a solid and vigilant civil society, considered as part of the New Public Management model (Anheier 2017: 4–5), is not just essential but powerful in influencing the achievement of sustainable development goals.

14 Among the notable initiatives of Romanian ENGOs in addressing FW are: the "Bio & Co project" – a food solidarity program organised by the Workshops without Borders Association; the "Romania against Food Waste" project by the MoreGreen Association, in partnership with www.foodwaste.ch and the Resource Centre for Public Participation; the "Too good to be wasted" educational project for students; and the "Romanian values food" project by Terra Millennium III. These initiatives, along with the efforts of social NGOs like SOMARO – Social Store and the network of food banks in Romania, have significantly contributed to the fight against FW.

Another known project is the launching of the first Food Bank at the initiative of a German international discount retailer (i.e. Lidl) and Junior Chamber International (JCI). The first Food Bank opened its doors in Cluj in 2016, and the second opened in Bucharest in 2018 (Cantaragiu 2019: 511). Another JCI project with Lidl's support is "Food Waste Combat", launched in 2021 (Gheorghica 2019).



At the EU accession moment, Romania was seen as an “environmental laggard” (Börzel–Buzogány 2010: 718), and scholars pointed out, besides the negative aspects related to funding, state authorities’ ignorance and societal challenges, the significant influence of Europeanization, and progresses registered after the EU membership (O’Brien 2009; Parau 2009; Börzel–Buzogány 2010; Stringer and Paavola 2013; Jigla 2016; Heemeryck 2018). Some might consider that Romania is still a “laggard” on some specific issues, and food waste seems to be among them.

This paper aimed to identify the factors that explain *Romanian civil society's ability to influence public policies on FW and keep these green topics on the governmental agenda*. In this sense, I have conducted a literature review to identify the current situation and the levers available to Romanian civil society and data analysis. Thus, I sought to map the situation of civil society in Romania in the context of the worldwide green agenda launched in 2015, with attention to the environment and focusing on the FW area. As far as I know, there is a limited literature regarding the subject of environmental civil society in Romania (O’Brien 2009; Parau 2009; Börzel–Buzogány 2010; Stringer–Paavola 2013; Branea 2015; Jigla 2016; Margarit 2018). It is worth mentioning that their focus is on the social movement Salvati Rosia Montana and the prevention of the the Dracula Park deforestation project in the area of Sighisoara (O’Brien 2009; Parau 2009; Branea 2015; Jigla 2016; Heemeryck 2018; Margarit 2018), other environmental issues or green public policies than food waste. I have yet to identify any academic article or book dedicated to FW and civil society’s implications in this field in Romania.

Therefore, my analysis brings attention to this topic, which does not seem to be a national priority nor to be framed in emergencies or phenomena with devastating environmental consequences, provides input, and opens the opportunity for further, more comprehensive analysis or research on this topic.

My qualitative research conducted in the spring of 2022, revealed that civil society as a soft power can influence Romanian public policies regarding FW and has a crucial role in covering the key areas of education, communication, awareness, and changing consumer behaviour. Furthermore, more than half of the interviewees underlined that, after the state, civil society is the next stakeholder responsible for taking action to reduce FW.

On the one hand, the data reveal that interviewees consider civil society more as a “doer” that acts rather than as a party that influences the policies and maintains the green agenda on the public and governmental attention. On the other hand, the identification of civil society as a stakeholder responsible for taking action to combat FW also involves the action to influence public policies regarding reducing food waste, as it results from the broader discussions with the interviewees. Thus, it should be noted that the Anti-Food Waste Law in Romania as a public policy was only possible with the contribution and influence of a few Romanian ENGOs, as noted by one interviewee.



The hypothesis I have formulated in this article, that *a robust civil society influences the adoption of efficacious and improved public policies regarding FW* and contributes to maintaining green topics on the public agenda, was confirmed by the vast majority of scholars.¹⁵ The second part of my hypothesis is also confirmed by Anheier's (2017: 6) consideration that the CSOs interfering with the policy-making process are attempting to exert influence or even dictate governmental agendas and by Dodge's (2014: 161) idea that civil society uses storylines to "set the agenda for environmental hazards". In addition, my research confirms the conclusions of Archip and colleagues (2023: 6), who included civil society as a critical sector involved in FW reduction, significantly influencing the formulation and application of plans and directives. Moreover, my findings contribute to several scholarly conclusions regarding the growing involvement of civil society in policy-making over the past few decades as one of the most significant trends (Wuthnow 2004; Pirvulescu 2016; Anheier 2017).

Nevertheless, my assumption can be considered refuted by Böhmelt (2013: 710), who concluded that ENGOs would not be able to influence or alter state policy regarding climate change (at the global level) compared to the corporate organisations' lobbying success. However, one might say that Böhmelt's outcome is invalidated by the Romanian Anti-Food Waste Law case, which demonstrated the power of civil society to influence public policymaking in an EU member state.

Recalling that, in Romania, environmental issues are low on the political agenda (O'Brien 2009: 155), the development and evolution of a strong and vigilant Romanian civil society is vital for the fulfilment of the ambitious goals set by the international community, which aim at the well-being of people, the Planet, and future generations. In this light, broader research is needed for analysing the number of active Romanian ENGOs in the food waste sector and for mapping their implication and outcomes in FW public policies as an essential topic on the international green agenda.

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¹⁵ Fukuyama 1995; Carothers 2000; Gemmill and Bamidele-Izu 2002; Wuthnow 2004; Smismans 2006; Chandhoke 2007; Dinham 2009; Bryson et al. 2010; Böhmelt 2013; Dodge 2014; Caniato et al. 2014; Miles 2015; Anheier 2017; Morone and Imbert 2020; Archip et al. 2023; Bernauer 2023.



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