

Summary

The Road to Zero Waste in Newfoundland: Challenges and Opportunities¹

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¹ This event was the first of a two-day event. As of March 2020, we're planning the second part, which is a circular economy workshop. With the data from both events, we'll put together an action plan for supporting waste reduction and circular economy in Newfoundland and Labrador.

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⁴ The NL Chapter of Zero Waste closed in February, 2020. Members joined the [Social Justice Cooperative of Newfoundland and Labrador](#) and created a working group on zero waste. Contact us at the emails above if you'd like more information.

1.0 Event Summary and Background

Waste is a significant part of our economies, our cultures and our everyday lives. A number of waste reduction programs and policies have been promoted across the globe but with varying levels of adoption and success. With the mounting challenges of climate change and oceanic pollution, dealing with our waste is a pressing issue. This event highlighted two specific, yet related, approaches to waste reduction that have gained recent attention: Zero Waste (ZW) and the Circular Economy (CE).

According to [Zero Waste International Alliance](#), ZW is “the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of products, packaging, and materials without burning and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health.” Similarly, the CE is an agenda aimed at ‘closing the loop’ to promote the reuse, repair, refurbishment, and recycling of materials, as well as ‘designing in’ greater product longevity and repairability.

Together, ZW and the CE represent a palatable and practical approach to meeting our growing waste challenges. However, the successes, the challenges and the experiences of local stakeholders engaging in ZW and CE activities remain underexplored. Key questions underlined our approach: i) What do ZW and CE look like in NL? What are local communities, government sectors, nonprofits, businesses, and academia doing in NL to build ZW and the CE?

The event “The Road to Zero Waste in Newfoundland: Challenges and Opportunities” has begun exploring local contexts, solutions, and barriers to waste challenges and represents an important step forward toward building local strategies for waste mitigation, circular economies, and cultural change in St. John’s and abroad.

2.0 Findings

In the event, we conducted a World Café style engagement that involved small group brainstorming and experience sharing around four key themes related to zero waste issues: success stories, main challenges, moving from individual to collective action, and motivations to move toward zero waste. In the following, we present a summary of the conversations around these questions.

What are your waste reduction/ Zero Waste success stories?

Participants were very specific when listing their actions to reduce waste. Common and overlapping topics include:

- Educating themselves: learning from relatives, participating in activities led by the government (e.g. consultation) and university (e.g. research), creating spaces for discussions.
- Making their own things such as food (bread, oat milk, wine, preserving/pickling, growing vegetables) and hygiene products.
- Reducing plastics: reusing “Ziploc” bags, buying in bulk food and cleaning products, refilling products, bringing replacing with glass containers.
- Reducing disposable items such as toilet paper (use old cloth instead), plastic film (use beeswax wrap instead), paper hand towel (use cloth towels instead)
- Reducing emissions: driving less, cycling more, and eating less meat
- Reducing energy consumption: replacing traditional bulbs with LED
- Swapping, repairing, and buying second-hand furniture and clothing.
- Going digital to replace paper

What are your frustrations when trying to reduce waste?

Participants noted that they as individuals are having a hard time avoiding waste. They know less waste is possible, that it is done in other places, but that in this province we lack funding and infrastructure to make it a reality. Common themes were:

- Greenwashing: initiatives that appear on the surface to be helping reduce our waste turn out to be just a wasteful or simply ineffective in their goal (for instance, promoting recycling as the answer to our waste problem rather than reducing/reusing). Greenwashing makes it difficult to know what initiatives are truly productive in reducing one’s waste (for instance, some grocery stores have bins for people to recycle their plastic bags and a participant learned that these bags were being thrown in the garbage).
- A culture that encourages convenience over sustainability: there is a small increase in effort needed to manufacture, use, and reuse sustainable products compared to single use, throwaway items. Individuals noted that when your peers, employers, and customers all expect convenience, it becomes hard to resist. Fast fashion clothing stores, chain restaurants, drive-thrus are welcomed to the island without thinking about what these companies are doing to our culture, economies, and environment.
- No regulations when it comes to excessive packaging.
- No support for food producers in Newfoundland who could provide better quality food at similar prices.
- Waste “Education”: often a farce. Kids should learn waste reduction and responsibility through actual participation in these activities in their school and community.
- The degradation of our once pristine environment: pollution from industry and from residential garbage is destroying our oceans, wetlands and forests.
- No infrastructure for glass recycling.
- Individual vs. collective effort: it is discouraging and hard to make an impact when those creating the waste (industry) are not held accountable for what they manufacture.

- The lack of provincial-wide legislation on the right to repair or on the rights and responsibilities businesses have to accept a consumer's own bag or containers for refill.

How do we step up from individual zero-waste practices to a zero-waste town/province?

Participants gave suggestions for how to achieve a zero-waste province, but also how to determine what would work best for people in this province. The key themes were:

- **Local traditions:** we have a rich tradition of self-sufficiency, an example of which can be found in our older generation's ability to grow, make and fix everything they own. We should hold this up as something to nourish, celebrate, and take pride in.
- **Education:** the hazards of single-use plastic, food waste, and built-to-break products should be explored and taught in school so that the younger generation will not fall into the same traps as their parents.
- **Regulations:** local, municipal and provincial governments must recognize the climate crisis and implement regulations to slow its effects. Some suggestions were mandatory city-collected compost, sliding scale garbage pick-up (each additional bag of garbage is exponentially more expensive), a clear and publicised regulation that outlines the rights people have to use their own containers for food and other consumer goods.
- **Infrastructure:** there needs to be a concerted effort to make waste reduction easier for residents in the province. Some suggestions were community drop off points for reusable household products, community drop off points for compost, making recycling pick up every week, and garbage pick up every two weeks.
- **Incentives:** people recognize that regulations are not helpful in all cases, and so there was a call for those in power to implement efficient, low-cost waste reduction incentives that encourage good behaviour rather than punishing bad behaviour. Something similar to the happy faces on power bills that a consumer receives when they have a lower energy consumption compared to their neighbours. Look to research in this area to encourage people to change their waste habits in positive ways.
- **Economics:** there must be an economic penalty for producing products that are over-packaged or otherwise wasteful. Industry must be responsible for the waste created from the manufacturing and disposal of their products. It should be cheaper for industry, businesses and individuals to choose the less wasteful option, and more expensive to be wasteful. Repurpose and repair should be available and more affordable than purchasing new.
- **Planning:** we must look to other, similar places (such as Nova Scotia and PEI) for how they have reduced their waste or improved the efficiency of their recycling. There are places in Newfoundland itself to which we can look for inspiration, but also, more importantly, where we can get data and important lessons for how to

implement waste reduction practices on a wider scale (Cape St. George and curb-side compost pick-up).

What motivates you to work towards zero waste?

Participants expressed many positive and negative emotions that influence the choices they make about their lives in relation to waste. Common themes included:

- Environment and children (top two topics): caring for the environment and feeling obligations towards future generations were the most common reasons for participants to work towards zero waste. Some feel driven by negative emotions such as fear of negative consequences, suffering of animals because of plastic waste, vulnerability of human beings in relation to the planet, desperation towards helping the environment, existential crisis, or finding waste upsetting.
- Activism: positive emotions associated with restoring power to the people so they can recognize what their talents can do about the zero waste movement, feeling you don't need to be an expert to demand change, and motivated to become part of a movement that is radical now but must be the new norm.
- Social relationships: some people have felt motivated or influenced by friends, relatives or strangers through social media and direct interactions (e.g. this zero waste event). One person mentioned the importance of acknowledging the role that public praise for innovative change means for getting other people on the trend.
- Minimalism and detachment: feeling satisfaction and happiness when living with less, establishing a relationship with the stuff you have at home when having less plastics, avoiding getting tied emotionally to things or associate objects with how much people love each other. Minimalism is also important for practical reasons e.g. having less stuff to make travel easier.
- Planning and policy: learning from other places is key, while recognizing that experimentation is necessary given our context. Thinking big but finding ways to keep "your boots on the ground" is also important to move forward. Ensuring people in power are adequately informed about the interventions that are available to us such that they can be taken up by all levels of government.

We are very thankful to all the participants for their contributions and look forward to continuing working together towards zero waste in Newfoundland and Labrador.

St. John's, March 18, 2020.