



H 1111 Budapest, Saru u. 11.
Tel: +36 1 386-2648
Fax: +36 1 279-1844
e-mail: humusz@humusz.hu
honlap: www.humusz.hu

Zero Waste?!

An international three-day conference on waste reduction

Resource efficiency is not a utopia! This was the motto of Zero Waste conference held by HUMUSZ Alliance on 2-4th November. The event received great attention, and the participants had the opportunity to learn about a number of good practices.

„Zero waste?! That’s not going to happen, this NGO has gone crazy! That’s the first thing that comes to mind for many, but we have grown used to that.” said Sylvia Graczka, Humusz president, in her opening speech. She pointed out that even though it is not an achievable goal in the near future, we should not take our eyes off this target on the long run. To keep life sustainable we have no other choice than taking the path towards zero waste. The first step should be reducing the amount of waste we generate. It’s a responsibility of us all, it’s not limited to the waste management industry. It’s not just a matter of technology; the human factor is the major element. If we take a look at the issue of recycling we will find, that 96-7% of the population is familiar with the system and majority claims they practice selective waste collection. However, when we check the figures, we will find that only 5% of household waste is recycled.

The Conference took place at the Central European University, where participants were offered insight into experts’ opinions and the state of waste related matters. „Fulfilling public service obligations is becoming increasingly difficult for local governments due to measures and restrictions” according to Jenő Schmidt, head of TÖOSZ, alliance of local governments. „Hungarian society is not yet prepared to take on the zero waste existence, but eventually the gradual transition should be implemented.” he added.

Joan Marc Simon, director of Zero Waste Europe, presented the results the European Region has been able to achieve by now, highlighting Ljubljana, the first Zero Waste Capital in Europe, where the rate of recycling reached 61% from a level of zero, in less than 10 years. He also mentioned cities where the amount of household waste ending up in landfills is around 10-15%. “It is important to reduce not only waste disposal, but also incineration, to reach a higher level on the waste hierarchy. Incinerating waste produces less energy than we could save on raw material by reusing and recycling.”

Marco Mattiello, on behalf of Contarina, an Italian public utility company handling the waste of 50 local governments, and Elena Rastei, from Zero Waste Romania covering already 8 cities in the country, provided interesting implemented practices of waste reduction.

A month after Humusz Alliance started a Charta for local governments, aiming to link committed leaders and provide a shared knowledge base, the Charta is already signed by 9 members: Alsónémedi, our host, Budakeszi, Csömör, Kaposhomok, Nagyszentjános, Szorgalmatos, Tét, Törökbálint. The Charta is open to new members.

At the conference the audience consisted of 7 target groups. They are the ones that can help most sufficiently to reach the zero waste target according to Humusz. Besides local government experts, teachers and kindergarten teachers had their own sections, along with representatives of SMEs, local and foreign NGOs, and university students. Each section ended with a recommendation created by the participants with steps needed to proceed towards the zero waste goal. Local government section produced a feasible composting program, environmentalist teachers learned playful methods to raise awareness of waste problems. Members of the private sector were inspired by the good practices of Hungarian Donors’ Forum, Hungarian Telekom and Ericsson Hungary.

The conference ended with plant visits: after witnessing the waste management process at a complex waste management facility, our guests took a look at the good practices of waste reduction at Dreher Beer Factory. The latter not only sells self-produced beer exclusively in reusable packaging, but maximized the recycling of other packaging materials and even uses by-products of beer manufacturing in animal feeds.



HUMUSZ
szövetség

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The Zero Waste principal is proven to be wanted: the conference registration had to be closed more than a week early, and even the waiting lists were long. On the three days of the event, the organization, with 20 years working for waste prevention, was able to reach more than 200 participants.