

Individual Portfolio in Sustainable Development

Name: Margot Dops (r0788280)

Academic year: 2024-2025

Learning goal 1

Learning goal 1: Critically analyzing Belgium's progress toward a plant-based food transition and exploring how this shift can be achieved in a socially just manner.

Motivation: The overproduction and consumption of animal proteins, such as meat and dairy, are widely recognized as unsustainable due to their high land and water use, as well as significant carbon emissions. Shifting towards a more plant-based diet is therefore a crucial part of the solution to environmental challenges. However, what remains unclear to me is how quickly this transition can be achieved in Belgium and who the key drivers of change are—whether consumers, retailers, policymakers, or a combination of these actors.

At the same time, I recognize that food is deeply personal and culturally embedded; it shapes our identities and daily lives. Dietary choices are not made in isolation but are influenced by socioeconomic factors, traditions, and accessibility. This raises an important question: how can a shift toward plant-based diets be realized in a socially just way, ensuring that people from lower-income backgrounds are not left behind?

Given the potential of food choices to drive meaningful and lasting change, I am eager to critically examine Belgium's progress in this transition. I aim to explore whether the country is on the right track, what obstacles remain, and whether there are exemplary cases that could serve as models for a fair and effective protein transition.

Learning goal 2

Learning goal 2: Comparing strategies for addressing plastic waste – reduce, reuse, recycle – by examining effective solutions at the community and household levels.

Motivation: I have always admired the 'Mooimakers' initiative by the Flemish government, which mobilizes citizens to clean up their neighborhoods, fostering a sense of collective responsibility for our environment. Similarly, the book *The Zero Waste Project* has been a source of inspiration, illustrating how small lifestyle changes – such as shopping at packaging-free stores – can significantly reduce plastic consumption. Since reading it, I have become more aware of both the challenges and opportunities in minimizing plastic waste.

Despite ongoing awareness campaigns and increasing efforts within the circular economy to improve recycling, plastic litter continues to pollute our environment. This is particularly concerning given the growing body of evidence on the harmful effects of microplastics, not only on aquatic ecosystems but also on human health. I am eager to delve deeper into the latest scientific findings on this issue to better understand the potential risks we face.

This portfolio offers me the opportunity to explore and compare different strategies for tackling plastic pollution, particularly through the "reduce, reuse, recycle" framework. I want to investigate how communities and households can effectively contribute to waste reduction and whether certain initiatives have proven to be especially successful. By doing so, I hope to identify practical and scalable solutions that can drive meaningful change.

Learning goal 1 - Learning activity 1

Learning activity 1: To deepen my understanding of the plant-based food transition, I attended the webinar *“The Economic Impact of the Alternative Protein Sector in Flanders and Brussels”*, organized by Next Food Chain, an initiative by Bond Beter Leefmilieu and ProVeg. This session provided valuable insights into the economic potential of alternative proteins and their role in shaping a more sustainable food system. Additionally, I listened to the podcast *“De Eiwitshifters”* (*“The Protein Shifters”*). Through expert discussions, the podcast highlights why the protein shift is important and how it can be implemented in various sectors, such as supermarkets, schools, and healthcare centers.

Date/time/place: 8th October 2024, 14:00 – 15:00, online

link to the webinar: <https://www.nextfoodchain.be/webinar/economische-impact>

link to the podcast:

<https://open.spotify.com/show/2Orxr6ObNJ8GMkgOTYzPUK?si=014560832ebe43ec>

Nature of involvement: Online attendant

Motivation: This webinar was based on a study for the Flemish Green Deal *“A Protein Shift on Our Plate”* and provided an overview of the companies currently active in the alternative protein industry, along with their growth potential and job opportunities in Brussels and Flanders. It highlighted the promising rise of businesses in the plant-based food sector and their increasing market value. However, achieving a full plant-based food transition requires collaboration across multiple sectors. The concluding discussion, led by a representative from the think tank Oikos, explored the roles of key stakeholders such as supermarkets and farmers/producers. Notably, this discussion extended beyond economic aspects, introducing concepts of strong sustainability and emphasizing the broader systemic challenges of food transitions.

What made this session particularly thought-provoking was its critical reflection on the complexity of food systems. It raised an intriguing question: can this so-called ‘protein shift’ truly be considered a full-fledged transition?

Collaboration with other students to organize the learning activity: N/A

Title product:

Shifting our protein intake: not too slowly, not too quickly. The case of Flanders, Belgium.

This didactic video presents the Flemish government’s perspective on the protein shift, through self-created visuals made with Canva. It highlights key lessons for sustainable development and conveys the urgency of this transition. The video is intended for a broad audience with a general interest in sustainable food systems, though its format may be especially appealing to younger viewers. Additionally, it can be published on the Next Food Chain website, allowing those interested in the protein shift to quickly grasp its significance. Beyond informing, the video aims to spark critical reflection and invite viewers to engage in deeper discussions about the complexities of food system transitions.

Did you publish this product? No. We contacted Next Food Chain, but didn’t receive the permission to publish our product.

Collaboration with other students in the development of the product: Marie-Emilie Coopman

Learning goal 1 - Learning activity 2

Learning activity 2: I spent a day at the ECOPOLIS Fair(er) Futures Festival – which this year carried the slogan ‘*Hope Needs Action*’. During the event, I attended three thought-provoking sessions. First, I participated in the panel discussion “Right Actions in Times of Ecological Disruption”. Next, I attended the talk “How to Keep Democracy alive?”. The final and most relevant session in relation to my learning goal was the panel discussion “Bon appétit: des ingrédients pour le changement social” (“Enjoy Your Meal: Ingredients for Social Change”).

Date/time/place: 9th November 2024, 11:00 - 16:30, Brussels. <https://ecopolis.be/en/program/>

Nature of involvement: on-site attendant

Motivation: The panel discussion ‘*Bon appétit: ingrédients pour le changement social*’ was enriching in many ways, offering valuable insights into the intersection of food, social justice, and sustainability. (1) Journalist Nora Bouazzouni (France) introduced her latest book, *Manger les riches*, which sheds light on often-overlooked forms of dehumanization and injustice related to food choices. She highlighted how people from lower-income backgrounds frequently lack the means to access a healthy diet—let alone one with a low ecological footprint—yet are still stigmatized for their presumed “unhealthy” food choices. (2) Le Pain Levé exemplifies an innovative, socially inclusive bakery model. It operates on a differentiated pricing system: those with lower incomes can pay in blue (a 20% discount), while those with stable incomes can choose purple (the standard price) or orange (paying 10% above the original price). This system promotes food accessibility and solidarity within the community. (3) AS BEAN, a student cafeteria in Brussels, strives to serve organic, appealing meals at affordable prices. By supporting local and organic agriculture and ensuring fair working conditions, AS BEAN demonstrates how sustainable food systems can be both ethical and accessible.

Collaboration with other students to organize the learning activity: N/A

Title product: “Foundations for a Healthy Diet. 8 Essential Tips for a Balanced Food System... Without Marginalizing Low-Income Communities”

This poster is designed for use in workshops focused on sustainable food systems, particularly for general audiences, and can also be published on the Flemish website *Gezond Leven* – where I sourced information on the *behavior wheel*. Its primary goal is to raise awareness about the often-overlooked social inequalities embedded in the food system, particularly those related to income disparities. While dietary change is very often presented as a personal choice, the reality is much more complex. Many people are unable to prioritize health or environmental considerations when making food decisions. For some, the most affordable options are the only viable choices. To address this, the poster offers 8 practical tips aimed at consumers, policymakers, researchers and others on how to accommodate food-related struggles faced by low-income households. These tips aim to foster a more equitable and sustainable food system that ensures no one is left behind.

Did you publish this product? N/A

Collaboration with other students in the development of the product: N/A

Learning goal 2 - Learning activity 1

Learning activity: I organized an interactive workshop titled “Bioplastics: Myths, Facts and Sustainable Solutions”. To introduce the topic, I designed a Canva presentation that guided participants through an interactive learning experience. The core of the workshop focused on comparing conventional plastics and bioplastics across five key aspects: Raw materials; Biodegradability; Environmental impact; Performance & use; Recycling & disposal. The section “Where do bioplastics go?” clarified the crucial difference between home composting and industrial composting, a distinction that many consumers overlook. Finally, we ended with a brainstorming session, where participants reflected on sustainable alternatives.

Date/time/place: 28th February, 11:00-12:00, Agora group work room ‘Granada’, Leuven
https://www.canva.com/design/DAGgTG9UI_E/w7-oAGxZ-WXc6BEJQd4ZOA/edit?utm_content=DAGgTG9UI_E&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link2&utm_source=sharebutton

Nature of involvement: Moderator / Presenter

Motivation: Organizing an interactive workshop on “Bioplastics: Myths, Facts, and Sustainable Solutions” is crucial in a world where greenwashing blurs the line between real and misleading eco-friendly claims. Many consumers believe bioplastics are inherently sustainable, yet their true environmental impact depends on factors like production, disposal, and composting conditions. This workshop fosters critical thinking, empowering participants to distinguish facts from myths and explore genuine sustainable alternatives. Through hands-on activities and discussions, we create a space for learning and reflection, equipping individuals with the knowledge to make informed, responsible choices in daily life.

Collaboration with other students to organize the learning activity: N/A

Title product: “Bioplastics unwrapped: Green Promise or Greenwashing?” [article]
This article summarises the content from my workshop, but also adds critical reflection. This article is intended to a broad leek audience with an interest in conscious living, sustainability, or eco trends. It can be published in a student magazine.

Did you publish this product? N/A

Collaboration with other students in the development of the product: N/A

Learning goal 2 - Learning activity 2

Learning activity 1: As part of our Waste Week, we organized a river shore cleanup alongside the Dijle river in Leuven. To promote the event, we shared a flyer through social media. To deepen my understanding of how visible plastic waste breaks down into invisible microplastics, I watched the documentary “Plastic People: the Hidden Crisis of Microplastics”.

Date/time/place:

Cleanup 22th March, 10:00 – 12:00, starting from Dijlepark, Leuven

Nature of involvement: Co-organiser, guide

Motivation: Organizing a cleanup in the city center of Leuven is crucial in tackling plastic pollution at its source, especially in recognition of the International Day of Zero Waste on the 30th March. Litter in urban areas often fragments into microplastics, which seep into waterways, soil, and even the air we breathe. These tiny pollutants pose serious environmental and health risks, impacting ecosystems and human well-being. By actively removing waste and raising awareness, we inspire behavioral change and encourage responsible consumption and disposal. This initiative highlights the urgent need for systemic solutions, linking individual action to broader efforts in reducing plastic waste and preventing microplastic contamination.

Collaboration with other students to organize the learning activity: Maya Roxanne (and fellow students of the Waste Week: José A. Borbolla, Tania Villarroel, Derya Kütüker, and John Paul Jose)

Title product: “The Positive Impact of City Cleanups and Zero-Waste Shops: Building a Cleaner, Greener, and More Connected Community” [blog post]

Linking zero-waste shops to city cleanups creates a powerful cycle of environmental action. Cleanups raise awareness of the waste problem in our communities, while zero-waste shops offer sustainable alternatives to reduce it. By supporting these shops, we actively minimize the waste that ends up in our streets and ecosystems. Both initiatives encourage mindful consumption and community engagement. Together, they promote a cleaner, healthier environment for all. Every small action contributes to a larger change, creating lasting impact. This message is especially relevant to readers with a keen interest in sustainable waste management, who are already invested in making eco-conscious choices and driving positive environmental change.

Did you publish this product? Yes, I published my blog post on the Green Forum:

<https://thegreenforum.org/post/positive-impact-city-cleanups-and-zero-waste-shops-building-cleaner-greener-and-more-connected>

Collaboration with other students in the development of the product: N/A

Process portfolio 1

The webinar provided valuable insights into the expanding plant-based food industry, particularly in Belgium, by showcasing the growth of alternative protein companies in recent years. While the focus was primarily on the supply side of alternative proteins, the discussion also encouraged critical reflection on the sector's future developments, emphasizing the complexity of consumer behavior and the role of other key actors, such as supermarkets. However, I found that the limited time available prevented a deeper exploration of these critical issues. One particularly intriguing concept was the "Alpro-effect," which refers to Alpro's dominance over smaller alternative protein companies. However, the webinar did not delve into the underlying mechanisms driving this phenomenon or the challenges it poses for market diversity. A more in-depth discussion could have provided a better understanding of the broader economic and sustainability implications.

When it comes to my personal engagement, I remained a passive participant, silently following the webinar behind my laptop screen. This experience made me realize that I could push myself further in similar settings. In the future, I plan to prepare in advance by outlining my expectations and potential discussion points, allowing me to engage more actively – even in an online environment.

A few days after the webinar, I reached out to the moderator (initially intending to interview one of her colleagues) and discovered that a new podcast series, "De Eiwitshifters" (The Protein Shifters), was about to be released. Listening to its eight episodes significantly enriched my understanding of the protein shift, particularly in its practical implementation across supermarkets, schools, and healthcare centers. One key takeaway was that governments tend to avoid radical shifts, as evidence suggests that drastic dietary changes rarely lead to long-term behavioral change. This perspective is reflected in the Flemish government's target of a 40/60 ratio between animal and plant proteins, which primarily focuses on consumer choices rather than systemic production changes.

While this approach acknowledges consumer behavior as a key driver, I believe it falls short of being the most sustainable solution. From a sustainability science perspective, more ambitious measures – such as reducing animal-based protein production itself – could lead to a more profound transformation of the food system. However, this remains politically controversial, as it directly challenges traditional agricultural practices and raises concerns about economic consequences for farmers. This ongoing tension between economic interests and socio-ecological sustainability highlights the complexity of food system transitions.

To bridge some of the gaps left by the webinar, I created a short didactical video to introduce key concepts related to the protein shift in an accessible way. This video addresses fundamental questions such as What is a protein shift? Why is it important? How does it work in practice?, integrating insights from both the webinar and the podcast. Throughout this learning process, I explored new strategies for promoting plant-based proteins and reinforced my belief that reducing animal protein consumption cannot be solely the consumer's responsibility – it must be a collective effort involving policy changes, industry shifts, and structural interventions.

Additionally, this experience challenged me to consider the economic dimensions of food system change, an aspect I had not previously engaged with in depth. Understanding these economic and political trade-offs broadened my perspective and will undoubtedly resurface throughout my academic and professional journey in sustainability.

Product portfolio 1

Access the video via this link: [Portfolio Product1](#)

Process portfolio 2

The ECOPOLIS event was beautifully introduced by Brussel's city poet, Lisette Ma Nesa. It immediately became clear to me that slam poetry – although completely new to me – has a very strong bonding power, it grabs you by the throat, it leaves you with goosebumps. And she ends with those three words that stick into the head of every listener: Hope Needs Action. To my surprise, the audience was then invited into a grounding exercise, in which we are asked to close our eyes, to picture the person we love the most and then extend this feeling of care to all human beings, no matter how different they look, and just try to humanize others and consider them as our siblings. Doing this grounding exercise allowed me to step into the event with a compassionate state of mind.

The panel discussion brought up many intertwined socioeconomic topics, from food accessibility to systemic inequality. The Covid crisis and the ongoing war in Ukraine has made it extra visible: one third of the world population cannot afford a healthy diet. Because the truth is that eating a healthy diet is expensive – the food may be available, but not *accessible* to them. This mechanism is a very invisible one. Not having the means to choose a healthy diet is a much more invisible problem than for instance homeless people living in the streets. Even though the panel did not specifically focus on protein alternatives per se, it did give inspiration on how to re-organize our food system in a more solidaristic way. Moreover, this talk allowed me to make key nuances in pro-environmental behaviour, and explore its constraining factors. A food system can only be sustainable when systemic inequalities (e.g. in this case based on social class) are tackled first.

The product portfolio allowed me to connect the topic of alternative food systems to social (in)equality – a topic that is close to me, as a sociologist. It allows me to put the take-home-message into practice: “Hope Needs Action”, and to share best practices in a socially responsible food system. By designing this poster, I aim to convey the main message of the panel discussion and to raise awareness about the relationship between socioeconomic status and (lacking) food accessibility, by using the ‘behaviour wheel’. In sum, my learning goal has been answered, I now completely understand that dietary change is not that self-evident: it can only reach those people who have the *competencies, drivers and context* to opt for a protein shift. With these 8 concluding tips, I hope to provide opportunities or inspiration for research and policy, as well as our every day life. We can learn a lot from exemplary websites/shops/associations/... Bakery Le Pain Levé is already leading by example.

The road towards my end product has not been easy: I have changed my mind multiple times when choosing the right product format to convey my message and the topic of food system changes interests me so much, that I find it hard to stick to one idea. Nevertheless, this learning trajectory has made me enthusiastic to continue using posters in my future professional life or to choose a job that allows for enough creativity.

Product portfolio 2



Foundations for a Healthy Diet

with a low ecological impact

A plant-rich diet is great for our health and better for the planet. But it's not always that simple, especially for low-income households, where eating healthy can be a complex and challenging choice.

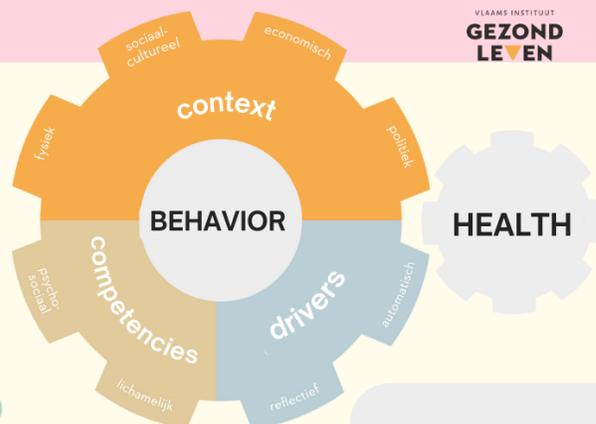
8 Essential Tips for a Balanced Food System... Without Marginalizing Low-Income Communities



Three Key Factors in the Behavior Wheel:

- **Competencies:** You have the ability to maintain a healthy, sustainable diet. This includes knowledge on nutritious food, critical skills and the physical ability to make healthy choices.
- **Drivers:** You have the motivation to consciously choose a diet that is both healthy and environmentally friendly, driven by personal values and awareness.
- **Context:** Your personal context allows for these choices to be feasible, taking into account economic, socio-cultural and political factors that shape access and opportunities.

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"The food we eat is the most powerful tool we have to change the world." - Marie Farmer



1 Join organizations that promote both **social and food security**.

Example: La CLASS (Caisse Locale de l’Alimentation Solidaire de Schaerbeek) helps ensure access to healthy, local and sustainable food for everyone, especially those in need.



2 Support stores with **differentiated pricing schemes**.

Example: *Le Pain Levé* bakery offers a pricing system where customers can choose to pay in *blue* for a 20% discount (for those with lower incomes), *purple* for the standard price, or *orange* to add 10% to the original price, helping fund the discounts for others.

3 Explore websites offering **plant-based recipe inspiration**.

Example: ProVeg provides over 1000 plant-based recipes suitable for any meal of the day, including options for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, making it easier to integrate more plant-based meals into your life.

4 **Make plant-based meals the highlight of your menu** if you run a food establishment.

Example: “*12 Hour Slow-Cooked Aubergine - Our Chef’s Speciality*” can be a delicious and attractive plant-based dish on the menu, showing that plant-based meals can be just as appealing as traditional ones.

5 As a policymaker, create environmental policies that **ensure low-income households are included** in the plant-based food transition.

Example: Implementing subsidies for food delivery services for low-income communities, similar to programs like the *Flemish Food Distribution Network*, which ensures access to affordable, healthy food for all.



6 **Set clear standards** for ‘healthy food’ based on plant-rich diets and low sugar, low salt.

Example: Schools and care centers can use the *NUTRI* score, which rates food products based on their nutritional value, encouraging the use of foods rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, while limiting processed items.

7 **Support innovative small businesses** that drive healthy food systems.

Example: *De Wikke* is an SME that produces locally grown, organic products, creating jobs within the community while promoting sustainability.



8 As a researcher, continue **studying the barriers and drivers of pro-environmental behavior**.

Example: Research shows that understanding the psychological and socio-economic factors influencing food choices can help develop targeted interventions, such as nudging people towards plant-based options in cafeterias or supermarkets, without feeling coerced.

References

Vaughan, E. et al. (2024). Exploring the world of food with families: perspectives of low-income families on factors influencing their food choices. *Public health nutrition*, 27(1). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898002400020X>
TED Climate (2022, May 11). *The future of the food ecosystem – and the power of your plate*. Ndidi Okonkwo Nwuneli. [Podcast episode] Consulted via Spotify: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4XJC0EBgrl0iDvBdGehHpo?si=d0a55d1d8502475d>
Bouazzouni, N. (2023). *Mangez les riches: La lutte des classes passe par l’assiette*. Paris: Nouriturfu.

Process portfolio 3

Before diving into this project, bioplastics were a topic I knew very little about. Like many, I used them daily without questioning their true sustainability. Researching this topic opened my eyes to the complexities of greenwashing, where eco-friendly claims can be misleading rather than genuinely beneficial for the environment.

One of the most engaging aspects of this third portfolio project was organizing my own workshop. This involved advertising the event on Instagram, managing subscriptions via Google Forms, designing an engaging structure, and adapting content to the audience. Striking a balance between providing key insights and keeping discussions accessible was a challenge, but ultimately, it was rewarding.

Participants engaged in a ranking game, where they guessed the decomposition time of different litter items. Their difficulty in ranking these correctly highlighted a gap in public awareness – a clear opportunity for better education and campaigns on waste degradation. During the final brainstorm exercise (developing ideas for sustainable alternatives to bioplastics), participants' responses varied – from reducing plastic use altogether to embracing reusable solutions like water bottles. Interestingly, innovative material solutions (like seaweed wraps) were not widely mentioned, likely because they remain unfamiliar in daily life. This underscores a key sustainability challenge: scaling up alternative materials while ensuring they are well understood and accessible to consumers.

On a personal level, I believe I fulfilled my role as a moderator effectively – maintaining a clear structure while allowing space for meaningful discussions. This experience reinforced my belief that open, safe discussion spaces have immense potential in sustainable development. It is through debating advantages, drawbacks, challenges, and solutions that we reshape our perspectives and, perhaps, even become more conscious and empathetic individuals. This realization has influenced my aspirations: I now see myself in a career centered around knowledge sharing, critical reflection, and collective problem-solving for sustainability.

As a continuation of this learning experience, I developed an article aimed at consumers struggling to navigate the overwhelming world of green claims – where labels such as 'Green,' 'Eco-friendly,' 'All-natural,' and 'Organic' often lack clear meaning. How can consumers distinguish trustworthy labels from empty marketing jargon? This article is directed towards readers of a student magazine like Veto – and especially directed to people interested in conscious living, sustainability, or eco trends.

This product-creating experience has reinforced a key truth: sustainability is not just about individual choices – it is about collective responsibility and systemic change. Tackling issues like plastic pollution and greenwashing requires consumer awareness, corporate accountability, and stronger policies. As we move forward, fostering critical discussions, accessible education, and transparent regulations will be essential in shaping a more sustainable future.

Product portfolio 3

Bioplastics unwrapped: Green Promise or Greenwashing?

By Margot Dops

Plastic pollution is one of the defining environmental challenges of our time. As images of ocean waste and microplastic-contaminated water circulate widely, many of us are seeking more sustainable alternatives. Enter bioplastics – marketed as the eco-friendly future of packaging, cutlery, and even clothing. But what exactly are bioplastics? And can they truly deliver on their green promises, or are they sometimes just greenwashing in disguise?

What are Bioplastics, really?

Despite the "bio" label, bioplastics are not one single thing. They fall into two overlapping categories:

- **Bio-based plastics:** These are plastics made (partly or fully) from renewable biological sources, such as corn starch, sugarcane, or cellulose, rather than fossil fuels.
- **Biodegradable plastics:** These are designed to break down over time through the action of microorganisms. However, they may be made from either renewable or fossil-based materials.

Here's where things get tricky: Not all bio-based plastics are biodegradable, and not all biodegradable plastics are bio-based. For example, Bio-PET is made from sugarcane (so it's bio-based), but it behaves like regular PET (polyethylene terephthalate) and does not biodegrade. On the other hand, PBAT, a biodegradable plastic, is fossil-based.

Understanding this distinction is key to making informed choices, and avoiding being misled by the term "bioplastic" alone.

The Greenwashing Trap

The growing demand for sustainable products has led many companies to overstate the environmental benefits of bioplastics. This is where greenwashing creeps in – when products are marketed as eco-friendly without sufficient backing.

Here are common misleading claims:

- **"Compostable":** Many products labeled as compostable require industrial composting facilities, which operate at much higher temperatures than home compost bins. If these products end up in nature or regular landfills, they behave much like conventional plastics.
- **"Biodegradable":** This doesn't mean the plastic will break down quickly or safely. Some biodegradable plastics still take years to degrade, and may only do so under specific conditions (moisture, heat, microbes).
- **"Eco" or "Green":** These vague terms are not regulated. They often serve as feel-good labels with no environmental standards behind them.

When consumers assume these products are automatically harmless and toss them into nature or the wrong bin, it can increase pollution, not reduce it.

Red Flags and How to Avoid Greenwashing

To avoid being misled by vague claims, look out for:

- ✓ **Third-party certifications.** Labels like the EU Ecolabel, TÜV Austria, or OK Compost Home/Industrial provide verified sustainability standards.
- ✓ **Clear disposal instructions.** True eco-conscious brands will inform users about how to dispose of their product responsibly – whether it's composting, recycling, or industrial processing.
- ✓ **Transparency about materials and impact.** Ask: What is it made from? Will it biodegrade at home? How long does it take to break down? Vague or absent information is often a red flag.

Are Bioplastics the Solution?

Bioplastics are not a silver bullet. While they can reduce reliance on fossil fuels and offer improved end-of-life options, their production still has a carbon footprint. Large-scale use of crops like corn or sugarcane for plastic raises concerns around land use, food security, and biodiversity.

The more sustainable path is often much simpler:

- **Reduce** plastic use where possible
- **Reuse** containers and bags
- **Recycle** properly
- And, where bioplastics are used, **ensure proper disposal**

The challenge isn't only technological, it's also *systemic*. We need better waste infrastructure, clearer regulation, and stricter rules on environmental marketing.

Final Thoughts

Bioplastics can be part of the puzzle – but only if we understand their limits. Without awareness and transparency, they risk becoming a greenwashed distraction from deeper structural changes.

So next time you see “eco” printed on your plastic-looking cutlery or cup, ask yourself: Is this a sustainable solution – or just a plastic problem in disguise?

What can you do?



- Read labels carefully
- Bring your own containers
- Join or host a sustainability workshop
- Share what you've learned with friends

Further reading

WWF (2022, April 8). <https://www.worldwildlife.org/blogs/sustainability-works/posts/is-biodegradable-and-compostable-plastic-good-for-the-environment-not-necessarily>

EU Green Claims Directive. https://environment.ec.europa.eu/topics/circular-economy/green-claims_en

B4Plastics. <https://b4plastics.com/>

Plastic People: The Hidden Crisis of Microplastics. <https://plasticpeopledoc.com/>

Process portfolio 4

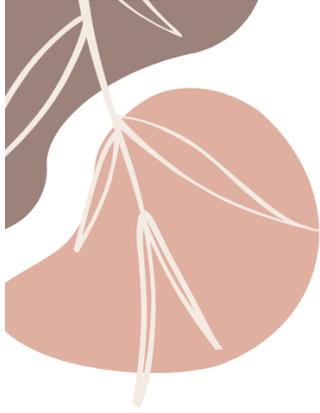
We organized our cleanup starting from the Dijlepark on March 22, on Leuven's annual cleanup weekend. We initially wanted to include a post-cleanup webinar, so I reached out to various organizations, including B4Plastics, the PLUXIN project, Blauwe Cluster, VITO, and Capture, hoping to secure a guest speaker. However, it proved too challenging to find someone available, possibly due to the timing (a Saturday). We got in touch with Paul, a retired man who was about to participate in a cleanup with his comrades at the same time at the same place (!) as us, and decided to merge efforts and split into two teams to cover different routes. While speaking with regular volunteers, I learned that the amount of litter has been decreasing each year – a hopeful sign that awareness campaigns and policy measures may be having a real impact. Among the volunteers were members of Leuven's 'Transitiehuis' – a transition house for individuals reintegrating into society after serving time in prison. It was inspiring to see community-driven actions like this cleanup fostering both environmental responsibility and social reintegration.

Participating in a neighborhood cleanup was an incredibly rewarding experience. With minimal effort we made a visible impact. Keeping an area clean also has a preventive effect: the cleaner the space, the less likely people are to litter. Beyond the environmental benefits, the cleanup strengthened community bonds. Passersby expressed gratitude, and one person even engaged in a conversation about the importance of such initiatives. These small interactions create ripple effects, spreading awareness and encouraging civic engagement. As a sustainable development student, I believe in leading by example. This cleanup not only allowed me to exchange ideas with like-minded volunteers but also expanded my network of people committed to environmental stewardship. Moving forward, I plan to organize more cleanups in my own neighborhood using Mooimakers, a platform that facilitates local cleanup efforts.

With my product, my blog post, I aimed to express the above-mentioned sentiments and lessons learned from the cleanup experience, and I added one more dimension: zero-waste shops. Cleanups raise awareness of the waste problem in our communities, while zero-waste shops offer sustainable alternatives to reduce it. By supporting these shops, we actively minimize the waste that ends up in our streets and ecosystems. Both initiatives encourage mindful consumption and community engagement.

My learning goal centered on comparing strategies for addressing plastic waste – should we prioritize reducing, reusing, or recycling? While recycling plays a crucial role in managing plastic waste, and reusing helps limit the demand for new plastic production, the documentary "Plastic People" reinforced a critical point: the most sustainable solution is to reduce plastic production altogether. Plastics never fully disappear; they fragment into microplastics, which are now found in our water, soil, air, and even inside the human body. Scientists are only beginning to understand the long-term consequences, including potential risks to brain health and organ function. This underscores the urgency of rethinking plastic dependency at both an individual and systemic level. The cleanup itself illustrated how individual actions have a direct community impact. However, systemic solutions are needed to prevent plastic waste from entering the environment in the first place – through policy changes, corporate responsibility, and consumer awareness.

Product portfolio 4

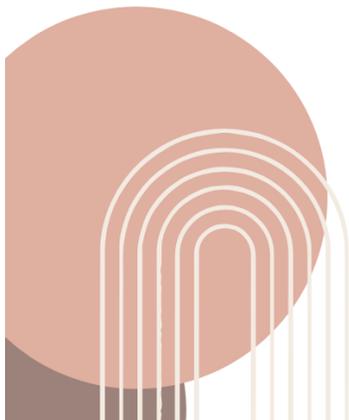


The Positive Impact of City Cleanups and Zero-Waste Shops: Building a Cleaner, Greener, and More Connected Community



By *Margot Dops*
March 31, 2025

On March 22, I had the incredible opportunity to organize a city cleanup in Leuven. What started as an initiative to reduce waste and improve the environment turned into a heartwarming experience that showed me the true power of community and collective action. It's easy to feel like environmental challenges are too big to tackle, but moments like these remind me that every small effort can create a ripple effect for change.





City Cleanups: Revitalizing the Environment and Strengthening Community Bonds

City cleanups, at their core, are about more than just picking up litter. They're a chance to take responsibility for the spaces we live in and make a tangible difference. During our cleanup in Leuven, I saw firsthand how powerful these efforts can be.

1. Environmental Benefits

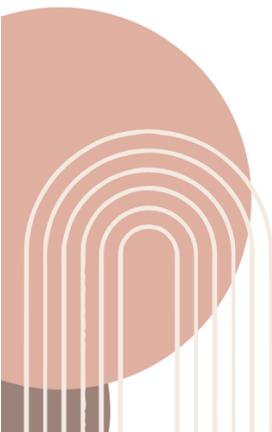
As we worked our way through the city, I could see the immediate impact of our actions. Removing trash from parks, streets, and public spaces not only makes the environment look better, but it also helps protect local ecosystems. We kept plastic, litter, and other waste from making its way into our waterways or harming wildlife, and that alone felt incredibly rewarding.

2. Aesthetic and Psychological Impact

There's something about cleaning up a space that brings an undeniable sense of peace. The transformation was visible, and it felt like we were giving the city a breath of fresh air. For me, there was a psychological benefit, too. Being part of something that made a real difference in our environment was uplifting and reaffirmed my passion for environmental stewardship.

3. Building Community Spirit

What truly made this cleanup special was the sense of community it created. The cleanup wasn't just about international students. Older volunteers – local residents of Leuven – joined in, bringing a wealth of experience and a shared passion for preserving our city. It was heartwarming to see so many different people coming together for a common cause. We worked side by side, learned from each other, and formed bonds that reminded me how much we can achieve when we unite.





Zero-Waste Shops: Championing Sustainability and Minimizing Waste

While participating in city cleanups helps address immediate waste problems, it's important to think about long-term solutions too. That's where zero-waste shops come in. These stores offer us the opportunity to shop more sustainably by reducing the packaging waste that often ends up on our streets, in our landfills, or in our oceans.

1. Reducing Packaging Waste

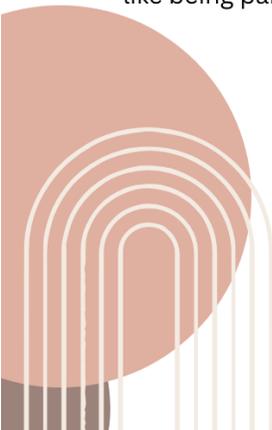
Zero-waste shops provide a simple yet impactful way to shop more responsibly. By offering bulk products and encouraging reusable containers, these stores help customers cut down on single-use plastics. I've personally found that when I buy from zero-waste stores, I feel empowered to make better choices for the environment. It's not just about the waste I avoid, but also the message it sends to the broader community about valuing sustainability.

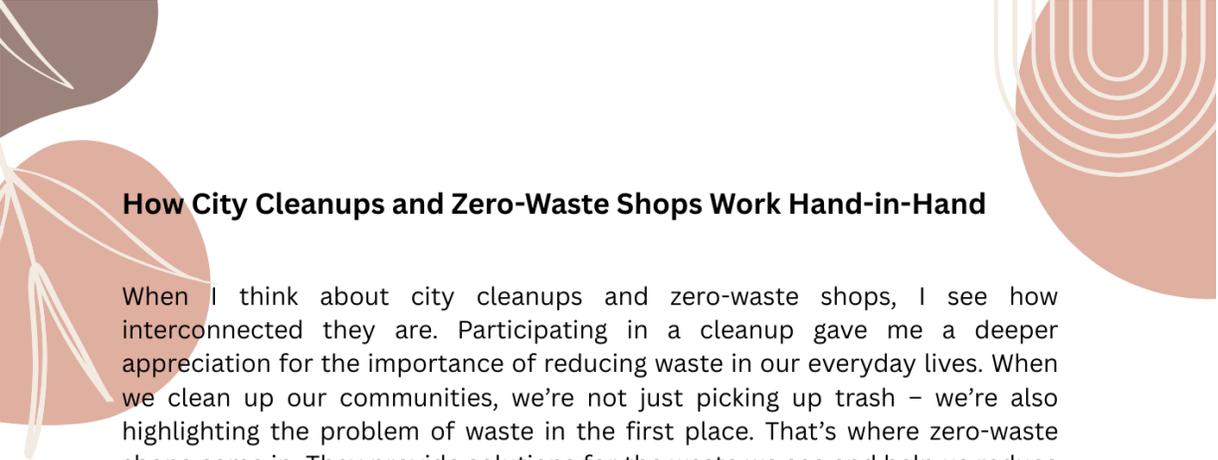
2. Encouraging Conscious Consumerism

These shops do more than just sell products – they inspire a shift in how we think about consumption. When we choose to support zero-waste businesses, we challenge ourselves to be more mindful of what we buy, how much we buy, and how we dispose of it. The more I shop at these stores, the more I realize how easy it is to live with less waste and how much joy it brings to know I'm contributing to a cleaner planet.

3. Inspiring a More Circular Economy

Zero-waste shops also encourage a circular economy – one where goods are reused, repaired, and repurposed instead of being thrown away. I love knowing that these stores support local farmers, makers, and artisans, fostering a sense of community while promoting ethical production. Shopping sustainably feels like being part of a larger movement that values both people and the planet.





How City Cleanups and Zero-Waste Shops Work Hand-in-Hand

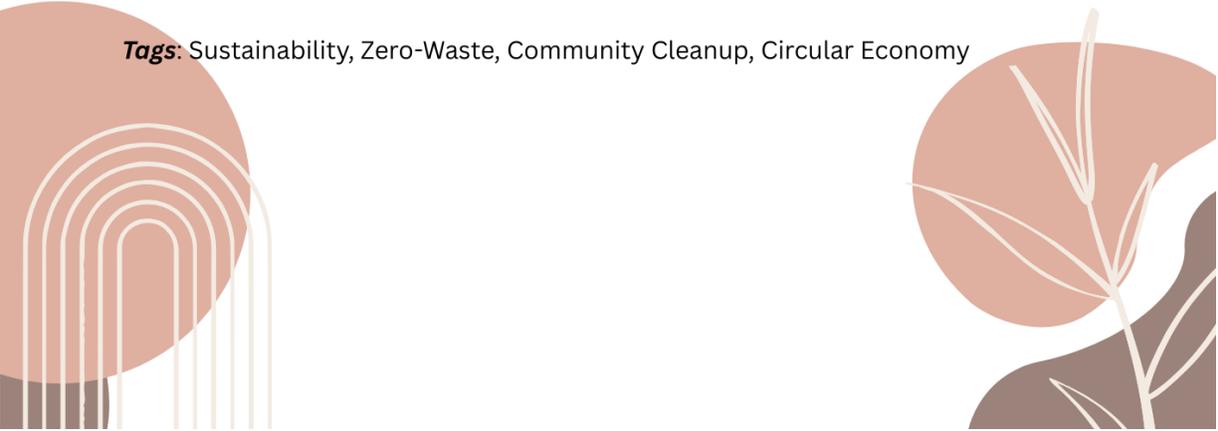
When I think about city cleanups and zero-waste shops, I see how interconnected they are. Participating in a cleanup gave me a deeper appreciation for the importance of reducing waste in our everyday lives. When we clean up our communities, we're not just picking up trash – we're also highlighting the problem of waste in the first place. That's where zero-waste shops come in. They provide solutions for the waste we see and help us reduce the waste we create.

As I saw during our cleanup in Leuven, when people become aware of how much waste exists in their environment, they're more likely to seek out solutions. Supporting zero-waste shops and making sustainable choices in daily life become part of the solution. It's a cycle that promotes responsibility, action, and, ultimately, change.

A Future of Clean, Connected Communities

Looking back on our cleanup day in Leuven, I realized how much potential these community efforts hold for making lasting change. Whether we're picking up trash in our neighborhoods or supporting zero-waste businesses, we are all part of something bigger than ourselves. These small, conscious actions build a cleaner, greener future where sustainability is the norm, not the exception.

The sense of community I felt during the cleanup reminded me that no effort is too small. Whether it's cleaning up a park or shopping at a zero-waste shop, every action counts. I'm excited for the future – one where communities come together to care for our planet, where sustainable living is accessible to everyone, and where we make a real difference, together.



Tags: Sustainability, Zero-Waste, Community Cleanup, Circular Economy

Concluding Self-Evaluation

In this final self-reflection, I revisit my learning goals and assess my progress toward achieving them.

(1) My first goal was to critically analyze Belgium's progress toward a plant-based food transition and explore how this shift can be achieved in a socially just manner. To deepen my understanding, I attended a webinar on the Belgian protein shift and participated in the Ecopolis festival. I also created a didactic video and designed an educational poster to help communicate the topic effectively. Eventually, I learned that reducing animal proteins should be based on collective effort and I deepened my understanding on the systemic constraining factors to pro-environmental behavior.

(2) My second goal was to compare strategies for addressing plastic waste – reduce, reuse, recycle – by exploring effective solutions at the community and household levels. I moderated a workshop on bioplastics and organized a city cleanup in Leuven. Additionally, I wrote an article on bioplastics for a student magazine and published a blog post reflecting on cleanups and zero-waste shops. Interestingly, even though this learning goal is very different from the first one, the solution also lies in collective responsibility and systemic change, based on consumer awareness, corporate accountability, and stronger policies. Most importantly, I can conclude that there is an urgent need for reducing plastics altogether.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed delving into sustainability topics that were either new or previously underexplored for me. For example, as a food system enthusiast, choosing the topic of protein shifts lies more in my comfort zone, while the topic of plastic waste solutions is relatively new to me. The learning process felt like a long journey, filled with both challenges and meaningful achievements. You could say that my journey follows an upward learning curve, evolving from passively attending the selected learning activities, to actively organizing an event and moderating a workshop – thereby recognizing the benefits of mutual understanding, brainstorming, discussion and collective action. I have to admit that the latter one (dare to act) feels way more rewarding and purposeful.

Working on the topic of the protein shift taught me the intricacies of sustainability communication. It can be particularly difficult to engage citizens and encourage them to adopt more sustainable and healthy diets without overtly aligning with a specific industry or ideology. At the Ecopolis festival, a Belgian journalist noted that they (people working for that particular news paper) are often criticized for siding with the green parties or the left side of the political spectrum. This highlighted for me that there is no such thing as purely 'objective' news or a singular 'most sustainable' path – every transition has its winners and losers. In the case of the protein shift, animal-based protein industries will be among those most affected. But, as I described above, the Flemish government promotes a "middle way" – not fully eliminating animal-based protein, but also not embracing a fully vegan approach. With so many actors involved in Belgium's food system, providing accurate and balanced information is more complex than I initially anticipated.

I was reassured to see how many forms of media can powerfully convey sustainability messages – highlighting harmful practices, encouraging critical consumption (like reading labels and green claims), and presenting innovative alternatives to plastic use. Reflecting on which portfolio pieces were suitable for publication across different media channels shifted my mindset: I stopped seeing these as assignments per se and started viewing myself as an agent of change. This realization significantly boosted my professional self-efficacy.

That said, at the beginning of the portfolio process, I sometimes struggled with imposter syndrome. I didn't immediately see myself as an 'expert' in healthy food choices while making the didactic video, nor as a 'good moderator' for the bioplastics workshop. To overcome these doubts, I proactively sought additional resources – such as the podcast *Eiwitshifters* and the documentary *Plastic People*. My blog post, which includes both personal reflections on cleanups and comparisons to zero-waste shops, also illustrates how I consistently try to broaden my perspective. I suppose I find it hard to take off my 'sociological glasses' – I'm always trying to understand how systems interconnect and influence each other.

This portfolio process also contributed to my personal growth in task management and group leadership. I reached out confidently to various organizations and tapped into my network of professors from the KU Leuven Sustainability Council – finally putting those connections to good use! Even when people didn't respond, I learned how to follow up, reach out to others, and communicate effectively within my Waste Week group. During the development of our didactic video on the protein shift, in collaboration with Marie-Emilie, we also did our best to combine our talents to the fullest.

What I found particularly meaningful was how the knowledge I gained began to spill over into conversations with friends and family. These discussions often uncovered common misconceptions and sparked more awareness. A critical question I continue to reflect on is: *How can we raise awareness of the harmful effects of plastics – not only in terms of environmental pollution but also their impacts on human health, particularly through microplastics and toxic additives?* Raising public consciousness about the varying levels of toxicity in plastics is essential to driving both policy change and responsible consumer behavior. By combining grassroots action, public education, and systemic reform, we can move from reactive cleanup efforts toward true prevention of plastic pollution at its source.

In sum, the learning experiences from this portfolio extend far beyond knowledge reproduction – they helped me grow as a sustainability advocate and broadened my worldview. Environmental challenges can often feel overwhelming, but the experiences I gained through this project have reminded me that small efforts can ripple outward and inspire meaningful change.