



# LIVING WITH LESS STUFF

**How we learned to eat better, to buy less wastefully and to have fun making more with what we had already.**

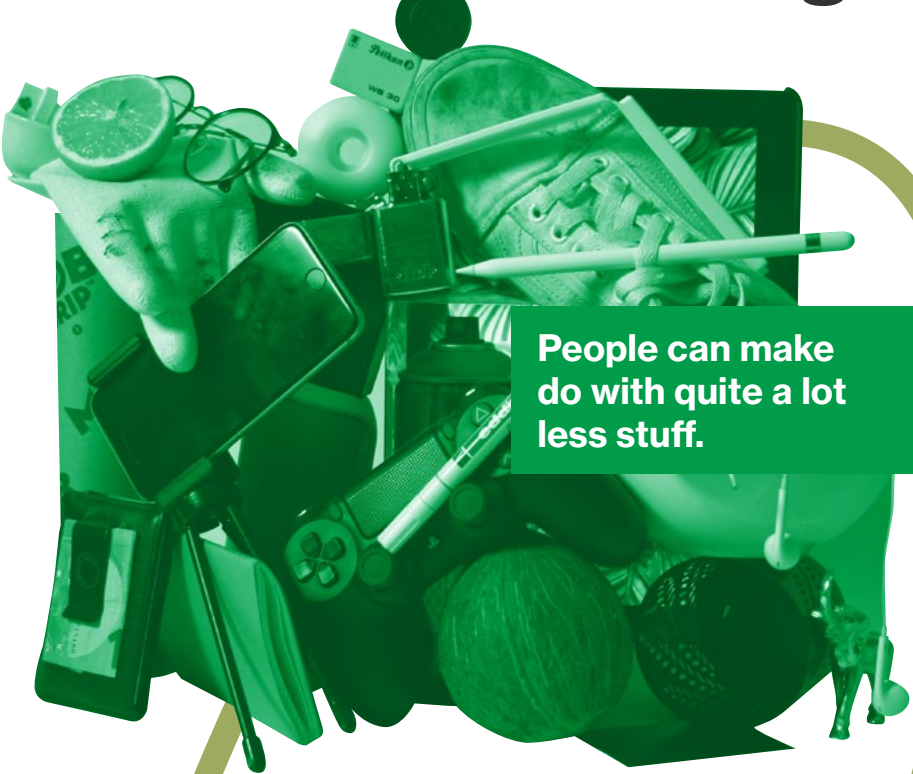
**Re**  **set**  
**lessons from**  
**lockdown**

# LIVING WITH LESS STUFF


Even as the human world paused in the path of a pandemic, it was obvious that people – both those in power and members of the public – were on a steep learning curve. Lessons abound as countries navigated the path of compromise between potential huge loss of human life and keeping the economy, with all its problems and inequalities, going as usual. The fragility of our food, healthcare and energy systems were revealed, but so also was humanity's extraordinary ability to work together and solve problems. We also learned to manage with what we already had – mending and making more of what we already had became a new norm that demanded ingenuity, creativity and the passing on of old skills. The ever-present backdrop was climate change and our relationship with the rest of nature. This is one of three briefings that look at a special time when there was almost universal acceptance that the health, well-being and safety of ordinary people comes first.

These briefings seek to capture some of those lessons from lockdown – insights that might help to reset how societies organise themselves if they are to build back better after the crisis. The pandemic hit at a time when chronic inequality and the climate emergency equally demand action. This briefing looks at how we adapted to create new, different, ways of living that turned out to be less wasteful, more thoughtful and kinder on our environment. And, given that ecological decline creates conditions for pandemics, how especially in relatively wealthy countries, better lives are possible with less 'stuff'. The other briefings look at the rapid introduction of steps to look after each other better and at efforts to make more space for people and nature.


## Some of the key lessons for less wasteful living that emerged were:




People can make do with quite a lot less stuff.



There can be pleasure in making more with what you have already, sharing with others, and in mending and repurposing stuff.



People don't need to go shopping so often or to buy so much.



People like and respond to a simpler lifestyle, growing their own food and shopping locally.



Different consumption patterns could help reduce debt

# EVIDENCE-BASED HOPE

Our community has been through a wide range of trauma during the covid pandemic. It has been a time of fear, about incomes and food, as well as fear of infection and danger for the people we love. But there have been positive elements of the experience too. For those in the global north in particular, most of whom are consuming well beyond current planetary limits, being shut inside has meant doing more with less. Millions have spent time at home with family or walking outside, grateful for the internet to enable communication, but also returning to homemade activities. There have been and are still many people struggling financially during this time and using foodbanks to keep themselves going. This briefing focuses specifically on those who are not in this situation.

Many have delighted in clear skies and clean air – even in cities – without airplanes and traffic jams, communities have emerged from nowhere to enjoy urban streets reclaimed from traffic for cafes and local businesses, support each other with mutual aid groups, and see how the return of nature was startling in its speed and variety. There are many potential lessons that could be sifted from the tragedy about how we might run the world differently – with more kindness, less waste and a greater awareness of our place in the natural world.

After months of self-isolation, it is clear that – in moments of crisis – people can get a great deal more out of a simpler life that they might have expected. In particular, this briefing is about how:

- People around the world have spent less money on most consumer goods, including snacks and clothes – partly, of course, because shopping was less convenient.
- Many have got used to shopping locally and cooking for themselves, rather than relying on ready meals or sweets.

- People have resorted to ingenious repurposing of what they already had to carry out activities – mending, sewing and DIY became mainstream again.
- New forms of self-made entertainment and ways of gathering virtually replaced other forms of consumption.
- Many people are healthier as a result of these different consumption patterns, and some have also worked their way out of debt.

This briefing also looks at some possible policy responses that might make sure we can keep the benefits of the crisis even though the virus itself has gone.



People can make do with quite a lot less stuff.

The Washington Post called it the '[great decluttering](#)', and the New York Post gave tips on how to do it. A tide that seemed to turn during lockdown was against the accumulation of 'stuff'. In one nation alone, the UK, more than four out of ten people took the opportunity of lockdown to divest themselves of 'stuff' with major clear-outs. Waste and resources body, WRAP, reported an astonishing [184 million textile items cleared-out](#)<sup>2</sup> with most heading to charity shops or recycling centres. Things cleared ranged from clothes to handbags, and bedding to shoes. In Ireland, the group monitoring recycling of electrical items [feared being overwhelmed by the volume of things being cleared out](#).<sup>3</sup> It looked like a wave of accumulated 'stuff' was crashing on the shore of a major opportunity to shed possessions and simplify home life.

Going shopping has become a major pastime for many populations across the world in recent years, but the pandemic stopped this in its tracks. Although shopping online remained, the casual consumption that happens through browsing reduced overnight. A 2019 report from online merchandising company [First Insight](#)<sup>4</sup> found that during a typical shopping visit consumers spend more in store than they do online; 54 per cent of

consumers spend over \$50 (£39) online – but that rises to 71 per cent when shopping in stores. The sense of constraint and emergency caused many people to think more carefully about making purchases and this looks set to continue in some fashion.

In a [survey](#)<sup>5</sup> of 42 countries, researchers from the consultancy McKinsey found that two thirds of them had seen a major scaling back by consumers on most items – except items considered important, such as health, fitness, baby food and household consumables. Sales of discretionary items such as snack foods, which are often displayed at point of sale in stores, fell away. Even so, [a survey](#)<sup>6</sup> in the US reported that some families with children found childcare savings eaten up by a higher grocery spend and additional purchases for home entertainment.

Overall, many people have successfully saved money, stopped unnecessary consumption long enough to experience what it feels like again, eaten better and feel healthier as a result. What is more, they expressed a desire to make these shifts permanent. Respondents to the McKinsey survey still intended to eat out and get their haircut once they feel they can do so safely, but plan to stick to buying more frugally, and more often online. People reluctant to shop online previously have become used to it and many will stick with it – or at least use both online shopping in tandem with occasional visits to shops for social reasons.



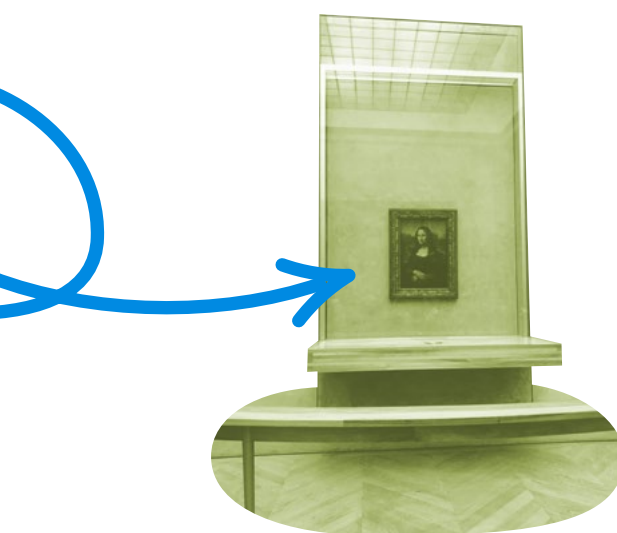
One of the main areas of consumption change during the pandemic has been food. Broadly speaking, people stocked up on basics for cooking from scratch and for foods to boost their immune system. This meant lots of people baking bread and growing vegetables in whatever green space was available to them. In the USA, people returned to drinking [orange juice](#)<sup>7</sup> because of its vitamin C content, and in many countries across East Asia, many consumers turned to traditional remedies to safeguard themselves from the virus.

The good news is that [over a quarter](#)<sup>8</sup> of consumers in the USA, UK, France, Germany and Canada say they now pay more attention to what they consume and what impact it has on the world. In some of these countries, shops and brands have been [running a campaign](#)<sup>9</sup> encouraging people to “only buy what you

need” and “shop responsibly”. Organisers called it “an urgent entreaty to consumers to behave responsibly and think about others”. Although designed to prevent immediate shortages, the question arises of whether “only buy what you need” should be the norm, rather than the exception.

The influential EY Future consumer index says that a third of consumers say they will be reappraising the things they value most and not taking certain things for granted. [Yvonne Keily of EY](#)<sup>10</sup> also told the Irish Times that we will probably see “traditional notions of status receding, replaced by purpose and social good. We are likely to see an increase in people buying local and, even more interest in transparency around the farm-to-fork and maker-to-model journey of our goods.”

## In Paris, the Louvre will require all visitors to book a time slot



## People don't need to go shopping or to buy so much.

A national [public opinion poll](#)<sup>11</sup> found that 41 per cent of consumers in the UK say they expect to reduce shopping – even after the covid crisis has disappeared. Fear is one of the drivers, as people hesitate to go out unless their purchases are vital. For example, spending in Sweden has fallen almost as much as in Denmark, despite the fact that [Sweden](#)<sup>12</sup> did not have a lockdown like other countries. Swedes are afraid to go out, particularly if they are old, because of fear of infection. Habits have also changed over the last few months – once behaviours change, they strengthen over time, and are particularly sticky once any given behaviour has been consistent for a [period of months](#)<sup>13</sup>.

On top of this, economic recession is hitting every economy. Unemployment in Australia jumped to [7.1 per cent](#)<sup>14</sup>, but this official rate hides the roughly 3 million people who will leave the protection of the government's Jobkeeper scheme in September – many of whom will lose their jobs. It is interesting that although much of China has been free of most government restrictions for months and manufacturing and infrastructure spending has largely returned

to pre-covid levels, consumer activity is still [below pre-COVID levels](#)<sup>15</sup>, and it is returning at a much slower pace.

In those countries in the McKinsey survey (see above) where they looked at people's 'spending intent' – what they were planning or hoping to spend – two thirds were reducing their intended levels of spending. And people in all 42 countries said they wanted to spend less on travelling. In India, that was true of more than half of them (55%). In Spain, it was down by 38 per cent, and in France and Japan it was down by almost a quarter.

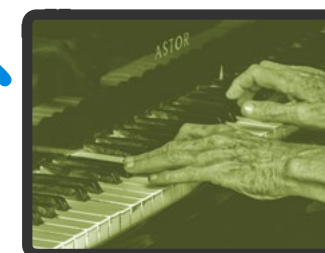
For those who do travel, the experience will be different: mandatory temperature checks; everyone in masks; rides, lines and seating at venues spaced to allow for social distancing; and less interaction face to face at close quarters. Provided museums and other cultural venues can survive financially, there will be less overcrowding and more managed spaces with time-slots for visitors. In Paris, the Louvre – which has long struggled with overcrowding – will require all visitors to book a time slot and many other venues will follow suit.

## There can be pleasure in making do with what you have already, sharing with others and in mending and repurposing stuff.

'How to spend it' magazine is a hyper-consumerist offshoot of the [Financial Times](#)<sup>16</sup> newspaper, but by June 2020, the paper itself was reporting that, rather than buying new things, lockdown had turned us all into fans of repairing what we already have (whilst lamenting that too many new items 'resist repair'). With the sales of many kinds of goods falling rapidly, one area where sales increased was in the materials used for making things. One major retailer which describes itself as the home of arts, crafts, making and baking saw sales [rise 200% in a 12 week period](#)<sup>17</sup>. At the same time, the rapid emergence of mutual aid groups helped redistribute all kinds of goods from those with more than they needed to others with less. With High Streets in many countries in economic shock with no conventional recovery in sight, a combination of all these dynamics points to an opportunity to reimagine local, neighbourhood economies in such a way that could steer away from passive, overconsumption towards a more dynamic, engaged circular economy with less waste and stronger social ties.

The global pandemic has brought home to populations across the world the practical importance of the principle of “think global, act local”. People who might previously have been unfamiliar with their local communities, turned towards neighbours for assistance and to offer help; to share resources and to learn from each other. After all, people in many countries around the world were tackling some of the same issues – fear of infection, isolation, the challenge of finite resources and social trauma. Much of this was indirectly about reducing consumption – there was an understanding that unnecessary shopping was wasteful and a distraction for key workers and that many needs could be met locally by sharing, or globally by using the internet to learn, inspire and create together.

## a 92-year-old Holocaust survivor teaches piano via FaceTime from her iPad



People across all communities have responded to the crisis by supporting each other via mutual aid, but they have also worked together on creative projects and shared resources simply to make life easier and more enjoyable. [The Global Citizen](#)<sup>18</sup> organisation live-streamed performances by musicians from across the planet, while the [Good News Movement](#)<sup>19</sup> Instagram page shared videos of community spirit, such as street sing-alongs on the balconies of Milan and [community workouts](#)<sup>20</sup> in public or shared spaces in Copenhagen. Making do with what was already to hand became a challenge for many. A [Russian Facebook group](#)<sup>21</sup> gained over half a million members recreating hilarious parodies of famous artworks at home using their imagination, homemade props and a phone camera. And a huge range of musicians around the world staged [free concerts online](#)<sup>22</sup> for people to enjoy, showing what can be done with an instrument and the human voice. US guitarist Jorma Kaukonen performed from his mini theatre at home, answering fan questions from his wife to keep his invisible audience entertained.

This sense of resourcefulness exploded, with online and local groups knitting, sewing and mending together. One London sewing store [Ray Stitch](#)<sup>23</sup> experienced a huge swell in online orders of darning wool and haberdashery items – usually considered niche craft items, but suddenly mainstream essentials. [Mend It](#)<sup>24</sup> Australia held a series of virtual community repair events with contributors from all over the world taking part to share tips and expertise via their facebook live link. [Online sewing classes](#)<sup>25</sup> and “sewalongs” helped people to use their existing clothes and fabric to make new items and mend old ones, cutting consumption and giving isolated people a sense of community and a shared activity.

Stuck in their homes, people started to share ideas for cooking, crafting, art, games and fitness. Food culture is particularly important in Italy, which was struck early by the pandemic and where many spent their time preparing [impressive meals](#)<sup>26</sup> for their households, sharing online with Zoom dinners to relieve the isolation. Without restaurants, there was a resurgence of amateur cooking and sharing of recipes and menus. [Furloughed Foodies](#)<sup>27</sup> in the UK are not professional chefs, but volunteers (most of whom are not professional chefs) who have been cooking homemade meals for healthcare workers and have already delivered over 6000 meals to 15 hospital trusts across London. They have now extended their scheme to deliver goods to food banks and homeless shelters. In Germany and in Belgium, top chefs [opened their restaurant kitchens](#)<sup>28</sup> to provide meals [for homeless people](#)<sup>29</sup> in their respective cities.

In Mexico, [a chef](#)<sup>30</sup> taught people worldwide how to make streetfood online, while in the UK, healthy food guru Jamie Oliver's ran a TV show to help people develop new skills during the lockdown. The San Francisco Bay came alive with Zoom [cooking](#)<sup>31</sup> classes and sourdough in particular – this lengthy process became more possible for a larger number of people trapped at home.

Online and home learning became vital, keeping children occupied and engaged, while also supporting parents who found themselves having to be teachers – not something everyone relishes it or is equipped to be. The World Bank has worked with multiple countries to

form an accessible [database](#)<sup>32</sup> of learning innovations across different nations that can be shared and used by online educators. According to the [New York Times](#)<sup>33</sup>, a 92-year-old Holocaust survivor Dr Cornelia Vertenstein continued to teach piano to students from her home in Denver via FaceTime from her iPad. 'It helped me know more about my students – what kind of life they have,' Vertenstein told the newspaper. 'It's not much, just one room, but it is illuminating to me because I know where they come from. I know a little bit better who they are.' The Times of India looked at the opportunities to teach young people [life skills](#)<sup>34</sup> and reading for fun – not just formal education.



### People like and respond to a simpler lifestyle, growing their own food and shopping locally.

Although the demands of the pandemic did not feel like a positive force for many and remains a daily struggle for some, others have managed to use the opportunity to cut down on the unnecessary complexity of their lives, opting for quality of life rather than quantity of consumption, spending time walking or on friendships, family, relationships, active exercise. As they take more notice of the world around them, people are mostly aware that living this way makes them feel better.

The New Zealand government has published a document to encapsulate the importance of these aspects of mental healthcare called [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#)<sup>35</sup>. The World Health Organisation (WHO) emphasised in its advice that people should try to use "helpful coping strategies such as ensuring sufficient

rest and respite during work or between shifts, eat sufficient and healthy food, engage in physical activity, and stay in contact with family and friends".

And when life is simpler, one of the first aspects of life that tends to return – both to our cities and to our attention – is the natural world. This is why we have seen deer venturing into town centres, why we hear the birdsong again, and why so many people have returned to growing their own food. When we notice the rest of nature around us, we also remember that we are dependent upon it for our survival. For the past decade, the World Health Organisation and national health agencies have promoted a concept they call "[One Health](#)<sup>36</sup>". Its premise, as the [US Center for Disease Control explains](#)<sup>37</sup>, is that "the health of people is closely connected with the health of animals, and our shared environment". This has of course been illustrated by the arrival of the covid-19 virus at the human-wildlife interface and its deadly spread into our population.

The lockdown has turned a lot of people who previously may have depended solely on supermarkets for their food into gardeners and would-be farmers overnight. As the shortages triggered a basic need to make sure we have food supplies closer to home, gardens and allotments became not only places of escape for space and exercise, but also vital for our future supply of nutritious food. In many households, teaching children to cook – and grow their own food – has become popular. One UK [survey](#)<sup>38</sup> found that half the population had been enjoying 'cooking from scratch' for their families during lockdown, as they found it improved both their nutritional intake and their mood.

[Singapore](#)<sup>39</sup> is accustomed to importing more than 90 per cent of its food, but now sees urban farming – including vertical and rooftop farms – as an increasingly possible solution to food security. The city-state aims to produce a third of its own needs by 2030, by increasing

the local supply of fruits, vegetables and protein from meat and fish. Similar [urban farming projects](#)<sup>40</sup> are springing up around the globe.

The long supply chains that make global just-in-time trading possible crumbled quickly under the restrictions of the pandemic – not just because of the distances involved, and the low stocks kept locally, but because people bought more than usual and the system has little slack in it for times of emergency. Because their old suppliers were forced to let them down, many people rediscovered (and now value more) [local distribution](#)<sup>41</sup> of food – so much so, that this now looks like a longer-term trend – and particularly in the countries most affected by the pandemic, including China (87%), Italy and Spain. In fact, alongside ecommerce, local food and local brands look set to be the biggest [post-pandemic trend](#)<sup>42</sup>.

### Different consumption patterns could help reduce debt

Some people even escaped debt by spending less, and not going out eating and drinking. British households were able to [pay £7.4 billion of consumer credit back](#)<sup>43</sup> in the first month of lockdown. Figures from the [Bank of England](#)<sup>44</sup> show the largest net repayment since records began in 1993.

Italy is planning to help this process along with a major [debt moratorium](#)<sup>45</sup>. There seems little inclination among consumers to 'shop till you drop', however much their governments beg them to go shopping to rejuvenate the economy. Shopping has gone from leisure activity to exhausting chore, except sometimes in small local

stores. In the UK, people reported finding [shopping more stressful during the lockdown](#)<sup>46</sup>, partly because it has involved queuing and negotiating complex social distancing measures.

Pictures in the media showing queues outside the cut-price fashion chain Primark suggest that not everyone feels this way – but clearly enough people do to engender concern for the mainstream high street stores based on past performance. Recent [UK research](#)<sup>47</sup> indicated that people are turning to more traditional savings patterns, given the uncertainty about the future; 38 per cent of people claimed they want to put more money into savings, and a further 28 per cent planned to improve their budgeting in the coming months.





# HOW CAN LESSONS FROM LOCKDOWN BE LOCKED-IN?

We have seen multiple examples of how the global pandemic has paused consumption in many areas, making people more cautious and more aware of some of their purchasing choices. So how can these lessons from lockdown be locked-in to ensure future action? How can the option of a simpler lifestyle, with less shopping, less debt, and healthier eating be maintained as the crisis changes shape and moves down the news agenda?

Businesses will be desperate to get spending up and governments reliant on the revenue and employment this brings, will be doing all they can to encourage consumers to spend. How might we cut the proliferation of stuff that over-complicates our lives and threatens the planet by buying only what we need, mending things when they break and repurposing them when we no longer need them? Could we see ourselves shift permanently from being passive consumers to being creators of things<sup>48</sup> we need – both physical, practical and creative?

This is also important because it appears to be what so many people want. In the USA<sup>49</sup>, as many as 59 per cent of people said they wanted to stay working from home as much as possible and, in New Zealand<sup>50</sup>, that figure rose to 89 per cent. In the UK, for example, as many as 85 per cent want to see<sup>51</sup> some of the personal or social changes they have experienced continue afterwards, whilst only 9 per cent want everything to go back to just the way it was before the pandemic.

The same survey<sup>52</sup> found that:

- Social bonds are stronger, with 40 per cent feeling a stronger sense of local community and a similar proportion more in touch with friends and family.
- Over 40 per cent say the outbreak has changed how they value food as an essential, and one in ten have shared something like food or shopping with a neighbour for the first time.
- More than 19 million in the UK (38%) say they are cooking more from scratch and 17 million are throwing away less food (33%). About 3 million people have tried a veg box scheme or ordered food from a local farm for the very first time.
- More than half say they have noticed cleaner air, and 27 per cent have seen more wildlife since the outbreak began.

There is a growing demand for what is authentic, local and trustworthy and homemade is definitely top for the moment. In order for this to remain so in the longer term, we need to take action to retain some of these positive effects of lockdown:

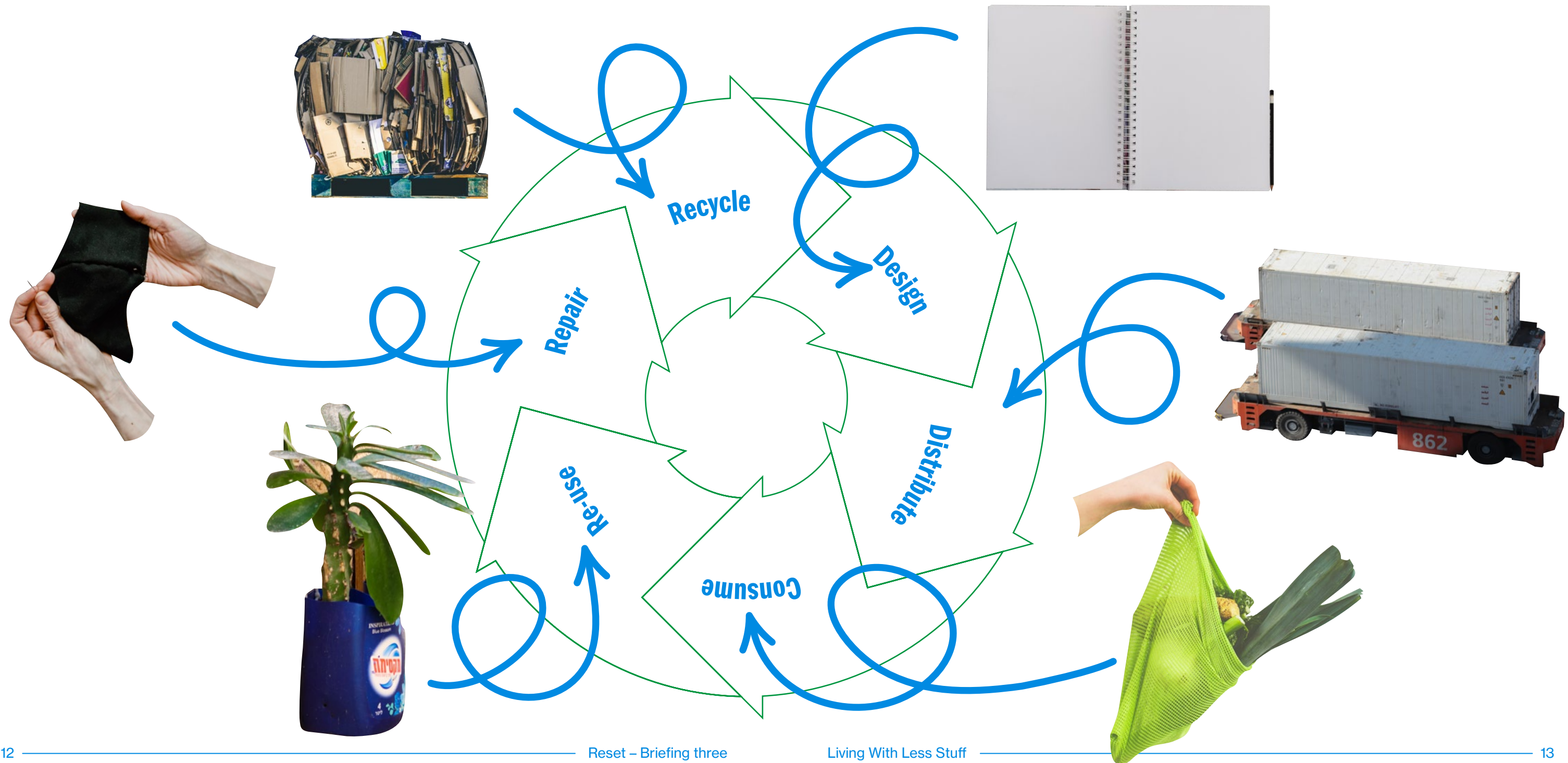
# 1

## Make reducing 'stuff' and increasing its quality, repairability and shareability, central to reviving high street industries

Few expect High Streets to return to their pre-pandemic state. The economic impact left many shops closed, and changed behaviours mean High Streets having to adapt. But they could thrive again if they embrace and underpin the circular, repair and share economy. We can give communities and emerging initiatives like [mutual aid groups](#)<sup>53</sup>, [repair cafes](#)<sup>54</sup>, [share sheds](#)<sup>55</sup>, [urban food growing schemes](#)<sup>56</sup>, and more localised production the right to use empty properties, and adjust regulations and incentives to encourage them still more.

To help reduce the tide of stuff, [the repair of existing products can also be made easier](#)<sup>57</sup>. New European Union rules will apply to a range of everyday items such as mobile phones, textiles, electronics, batteries, construction and packaging. The "[right to repair](#)"<sup>58</sup> movement is growing and these EU regulations are part of the wider Circular Economy Action Plan. As well as reducing overconsumption and building stronger, social models for doing business, a more decentralised, circular and regenerative economy can tackle anger at the loss of manufacturing industries in the global North, and the vulnerability of just-in-time supply chains made visible by the corona virus pandemic.

Grassroots innovators have driven the movement for products that create zero waste, with DIY-ers 'hacking' products to extend their life. In this way expected norms can shift. But legislation could also prompt a step change, such as the proposal in a 2012 manifesto for rethinking our relationship with stuff, the "[New Materialism](#)"<sup>59</sup>, which argued for all appropriate products to be designed to last at least 10 years.





## 2

### Reduce advertising

Advertising can send us into frenzies of wanting. Where it promotes behaviours which are damaging to public health and well-being – such as smoking and eating junk food – people have chosen to put the good of society before profits of advertisers and introduce controls. Increasingly the negative impacts of advertising are being challenged and the same logic that was applied to ending cigarette advertising could now be applied to other products that threaten health and the environment. With precedents like these in place, it is a short logical step to stop actively encouraging other products which have fatal health consequences and that fuel the climate emergency. One example is SUVs, which disproportionately take up precious urban space, are increasingly bigger than most parking spaces and dominate as the most polluting cars. With less of the visual pollution of advertising, towns and cities can also become more relaxing, peaceful places.

Reducing advertising is possible; cities like Sao Paolo, Chennai and Paris have all banned or limited [outdoor advertising](#)<sup>60</sup>. London Transport in 2018 [banned advertisements](#)<sup>61</sup> for foods high in fat, salt and sugar from their whole network. Companies are no longer allowed to tempt commuters with their sugary drinks, cheeseburgers or chocolate bars. Food and drink brands, restaurants, takeaways and delivery services can only place adverts that promote healthier products, rather than simply publicising brands. In Sweden, there is an [outright ban on advertising](#)<sup>62</sup> to children under 12 and before or after children's programming. The reasoning behind that ban is that children cannot tell the difference between ads and actual TV programmes, a stance that is supported by numerous pieces of research, including a 2009 study from Yale University.

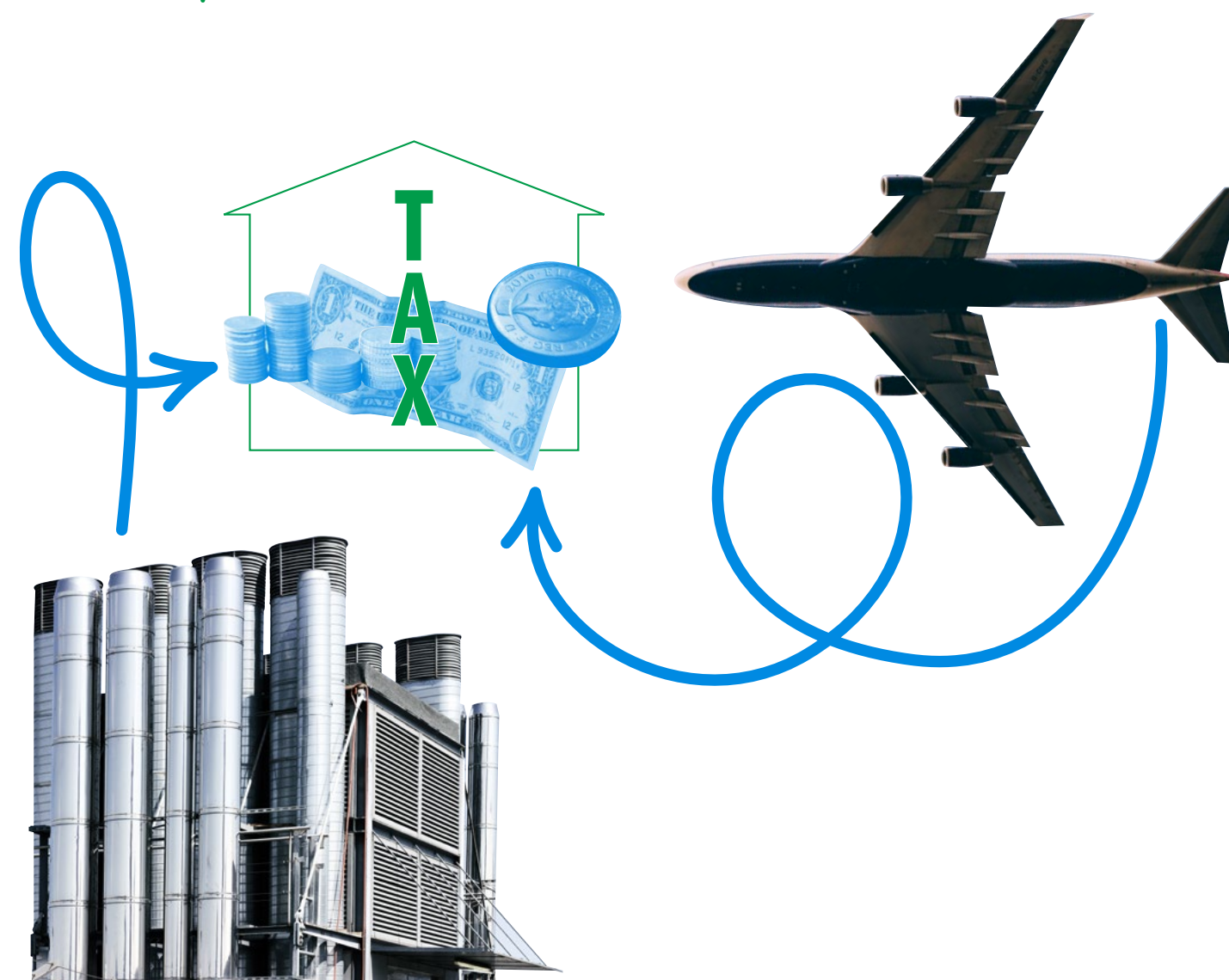


## 3

### Incorporate the full environmental costs of products

Outside of the demands of health, hygiene and safety, there are very few other product standards that relate to the true environmental cost of production. Such measures could be used to make sure that the price of food or energy reflects the true costs involved to produce, distribute, sell and clean up afterwards. This would include re-assessing current anomalies that incentivise behaviour that damages the planet, such as the use of [airplane fuel – which is currently untaxed](#)<sup>63</sup> in many countries.

Trade in many products that generate waste are effectively subsidised by those who have to pick up the tab – usually householders and taxpayers. Because our system does not reflect the environmental costs or health costs that products impose on other people – or on the next generation – they are not responsible for what they make. Systems such as the [circular economy](#)<sup>64</sup> or [doughnut economics](#)<sup>65</sup> include these “externalities” inside the model and are therefore more realistic.





# 4

## Let cities grow more food

It is often surprising how much food can be grown in urban environments, where the distance from producer to consumer is much lower and less energy intensive. In the most densely populated city in the US, New York, [a study by Columbia University](#)<sup>66</sup> found an astonishing 5,000 acres of land suitable for urban farming. A further 1,000 acres were identified in housing estates and other under-used land. Researchers at the Institute for Sustainable Food at Britain's University of Sheffield [found that domestic gardens, allotments and suitable public green spaces](#)<sup>67</sup> could together open up 98 square metres per person in the city of Sheffield for growing food – and that this was typical across UK urban areas. This is more than four times the 23 square metres per person currently used for commercial horticulture across the UK. If all this space was used for growing food, it could feed about 709,000 people per year their “five a day” – 122 per cent of the population of Sheffield. But even converting a more realistic 10 per cent of domestic gardens and 10 per cent of available green space, as well as maintaining current allotment land, could provide 15 per cent of the local population – 87,375 people – with enough fruit and veg. With just 16 per cent of fruit and 53 per cent of vegetables sold in the UK grown domestically, this change could significantly improve the nation's food security.

This kind of production is nothing new. During World War One, US President Woodrow Wilson asked Americans to plant “Victory Gardens” to prevent food shortages. In the UK, during the Second World War, a “[Dig for Victory](#)”<sup>68</sup> campaign successfully brought production into the heart of cities, digging up flower beds and filling in fountains to plant vegetables. In the space of four years, UK reliance on food imports halved to 14.65 million tonnes and it was estimated that around 55 percent of households were growing fruit and vegetables (1.4m of them). And in [Post Cold War Cuba](#)<sup>69</sup>, the US blockade and rising oil prices forced home production in cities to new heights, resulting in 25,000 allotments being farmed by 1995.



What is perhaps different today is that technology can help us farm in different ways and in places other than parks and gardens. There are proposals, for example, to combine a shift to a shorter working week with measures to increase growing spaces dubbed [National Gardening Leave](#)<sup>70</sup>. A pioneering project in Paris aims to cover the city's roofs and walls with 100 hectares of vegetation, with a third of this is to be dedicated to urban farms and food production. Paris is an unusually densely populated city with only 9.5 per cent of green space. “[Parisculteurs](#)”<sup>71</sup> was launched in 2016 by the city's mayor Anne Hidalgo and the city has already approved 75 projects which, together with those in this third stage of an ongoing project, are estimated to produce more than 1,240 tonnes of fruit, vegetables, mushrooms, and herbs, as well as fish, honey, and hops. Currently under construction in the south-west of the city, one urban oasis forms the largest urban farm in Europe, tended by around 20 gardeners using entirely organic methods. The farm is on top of a major exhibition complex, and will also have its own on-site restaurant and bar, with panoramic views over the capital and a menu featuring seasonal produce grown on the site. This is part of the [Green Hand Charter](#)<sup>72</sup> (Charte Main Verte), an initiative allowing Parisians to establish community gardens on public land in collaboration with the city. About 130 community gardens have already sprouted around the city.

Even before the covid-19, [urban farming](#)<sup>73</sup> was on the rise around the world, from mushrooms grown on coffee waste in Rotterdam to subterranean herb growing in the old deep air raid shelters of Clapham in London. The 8,500 square foot Food Roof in St Louis, Missouri epitomises the multiple benefits of such projects in transforming an industrial rooftop into a vibrant community hub. As well as growing over 200 varieties of edible plants, the collaboration of architects, horticulturalists, structural engineers, and agronomists has led to a system proven to capture up to 17,000 gallons of runoff water per storm event, mitigating flooding for downtown St Louis.

Urban farms could produce as much as much as 180 million tonnes of food a year – perhaps 10 percent of the global output of legumes, roots and tubers, and vegetable crops. There is evidence that poorer quality land can produce more because it is more carefully tended (it is also said that, if you take land and build ten homes and gardens on it, the gardens can produce more between them than the original land did).

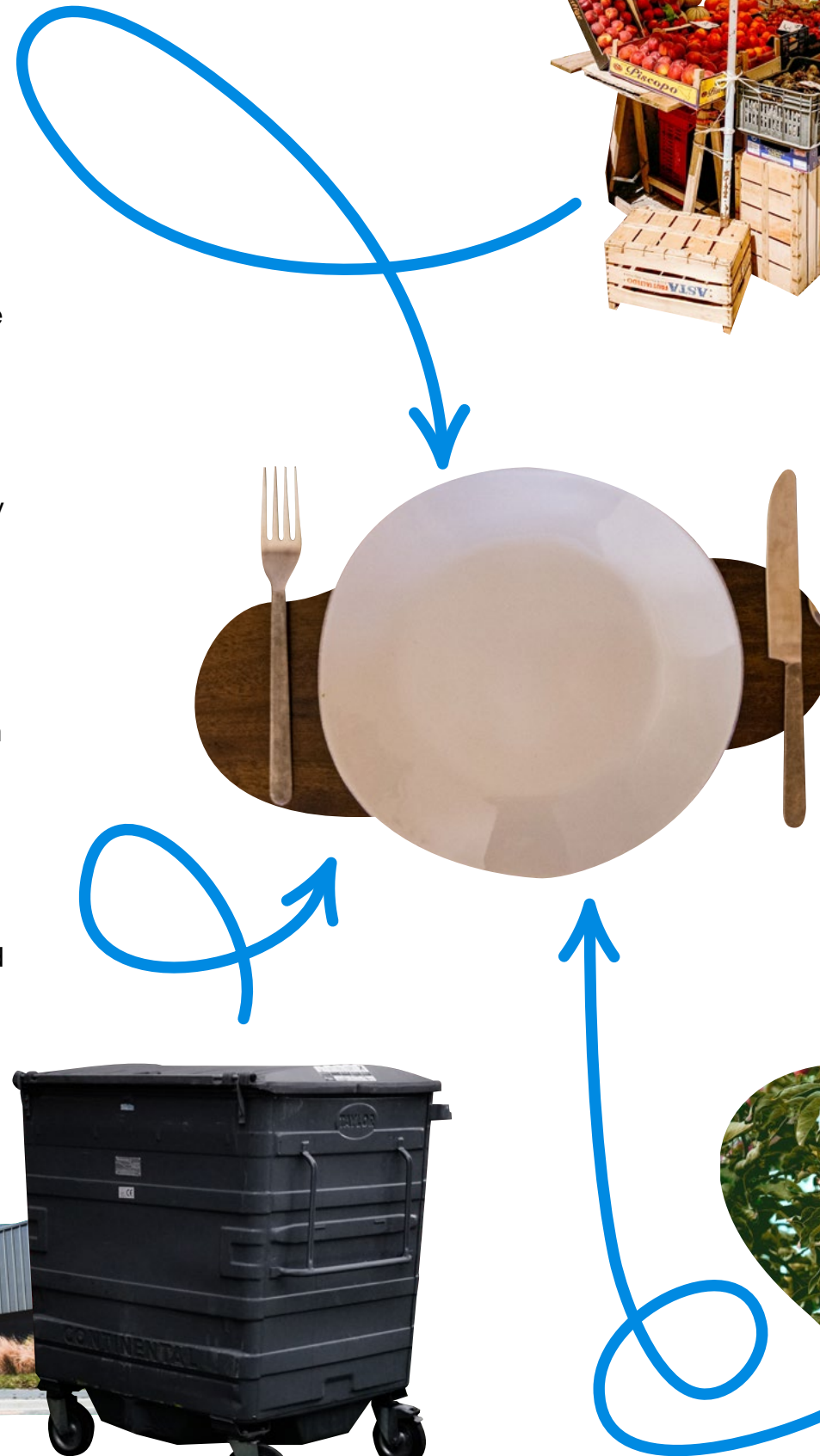


# 5

## Cut food waste

While the majority of the world's population still struggles to find enough to eat each day, huge quantities of food are wasted. In wealthy societies, this may happen through over-consumption, while in poorer countries ineffective storage and distribution causes huge losses. Changing this is entirely possible. Denmark, for example, was able to cut its food waste by a quarter between 2010 and 2015, while the UK managed a reduction by more than a fifth over a similar period. Around the world, from China to Hungary and Canada to Kenya, people are working together to reduce food waste in a variety of creative ways, each reflecting their cultures, challenges and resources. A new awareness of the need to reduce food waste has come partly as a result of increasingly available and robust data. Food security concerns, increases in food prices and negative environmental impacts are contributing to the urgency of addressing the estimated 1.3 billion tonnes of food [lost or wasted](#)<sup>74</sup> every year.

The organisations that have sprung up in response to the challenge are as diverse as their approaches and targets. Both companies and city administrations are increasingly asking their operations teams to reduce waste. Collecting stuff thrown away by supermarkets, like the [Real Junk Food project](#)<sup>75</sup> in Brighton, England, and factories and farmers markets or – in a modern form of the ancient practice of gleaning – directly from farmers, has become acceptable practice. Finland's [Green to Scale](#)<sup>76</sup> initiative in Vantaa is one example, where they reduced retail food waste by one kilo per inhabitant using centralised collections. If all Nordic communities were to equal this, it could reduce emissions by 50 kt – equivalent to taking 20,000 cars off the road. Gathering nuts, fruits or other produce that are



no longer profitable to harvest or are a surplus nuisance to homeowners are an important source of food-bank donations and often the basis for interesting social enterprises like [Organiclea](#)<sup>77</sup>, which picks wasted fruits from city gardens. The city pickers' motivation is two-fold: partly in protest about tonnes of London fruit regularly left to rot, and partly out of environmental concern to promote locally-sourced food. Transition Towns groups have produced [maps](#)<sup>78</sup> showing where food can be gathered for free and are encouraging the planting of productive plants and trees in public spaces.

As part of the wasteful food chain, large amounts of food are also produced, sold and consumed without the health and wellbeing of people or the planet being paramount. For example, the UK-wide NHS costs of obesity are projected to reach £9.7bn by 2050, with wider costs to society estimated to reach £49.9bn every year. Ironically, those who grow the food – agricultural workers – are often the least well fed because they are poorly paid. By 2019, the [US farm wage](#)<sup>79</sup> (\$13.99) was equal to just 60 percent of the nonfarm wage (\$23.51). We need a fairer food system, in which every country grows their own supply of fruit, vegetables, nuts and pulses, and uses them more in everyday cuisine. It means using public procurement to transform the markets towards quality rather than quantity, and it means working more collaboratively with communities to help inform and implement national food strategies. It means treating people as citizens rather than consumers, so that information about the true cost of food to all of us is plain to see. The current system makes it hard to decipher which products are better for our planet and for our health.



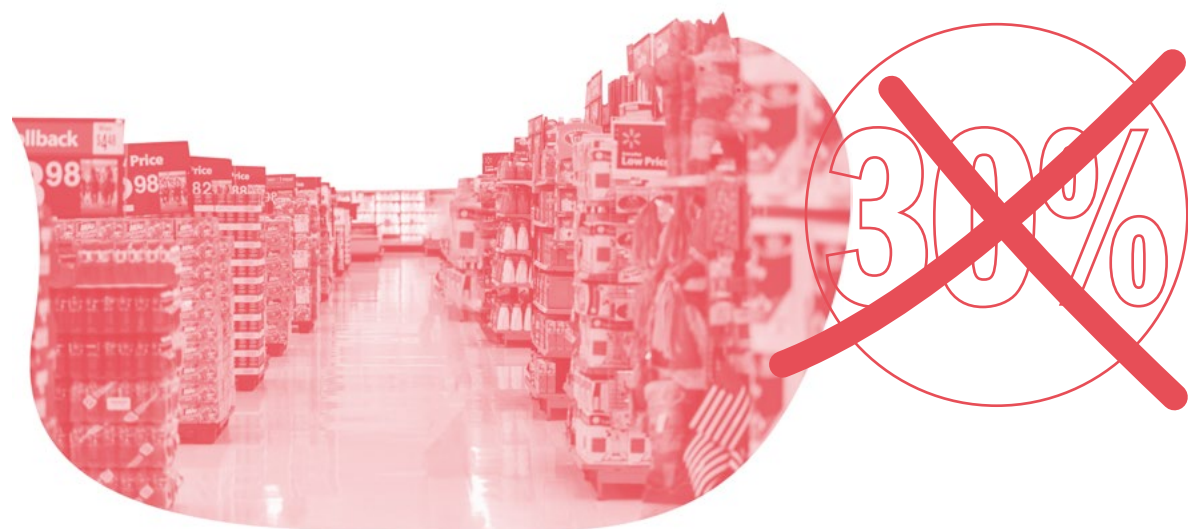
# 6

## Make business fairer for small and local producers

Big shareholder owned corporations rely on selling ever more stuff. Smaller businesses and those with mutual and cooperative ownership, or enterprises with a specific social or environmental purpose are less constrained and more flexible. But bigger companies use their power and influence to control things in their favour making change more difficult. What threatens small businesses is undercutting by large corporations that often have tax privileges on top of their economies of scale and disproportionate power in the marketplace. To tackle them, we need major global anti-trust (or 'anti-monopoly') legislation, repeated at a local level, to prevent concentrations of power that actively encourage wasteful practices.

For example, supermarkets use huge amounts of energy to heat and light their vast spaces with open doors and no insulation and are often open 24 hours. The UK Office of Fair Trading says that market shares of any more than eight per cent of any given market can allow anti-competitive distortions to occur. Yet regulators allowed the UK supermarket chain Tesco to build up a national share of over 30 per cent of the grocery market, rising to much more than that in some towns. During the pandemic, supermarkets were portrayed as part of the mutual aid effort. Workers there certainly laboured hard to keep the shelves full, but shareholders are the ones who profited. Little coverage was given to the small food stores who served their local communities, often run by a single family.

Efforts to diversify sourcing by government, to enable and encourage local producers to compete – particularly for catering contracts – are vital. Environmental standards must be upheld at the same time, to make sure that cheaper food is not compared with food that has been produced to a different standard – and that poorer families are not left with poorer quality food.



This briefing has demonstrated some of the ways in which people around the world have started to look at stuff differently in response to a global pandemic, when systems were put under immense strain and we started to see the cracks. An enforced hiatus in consumption allowed some to change habits, to cut back, reduce their debt and stop buying stuff they do not really need. There is now an opportunity to consider what we want from the future - the real price of things shown on labels, less choice but more quality, better lives for those who make and sell stuff to us, and an assumption that waste is unnecessary and will no longer be tolerated. These policy shifts might help to keep this element going as the world returns to health.

**Rapid Transition Alliance**  
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# Re→set

## lessons from lockdown

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