NEWS LESSON

A Café Where Plastic Pays for a Meal



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What would persuade you to pick up litter you did not drop?
2. Can a free meal be a good reason to help a neighbourhood?
3. Would a small reward change a habit you already cared about?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**established**	☐	A	continues to exist, often for longer than expected
2	**symbolic**	☐	B	a worrying lack of safety or certainty
3	**accumulates**	☐	C	gradually collects in one place
4	**retrieve**	☐	D	connected with the basic way a society is organised
5	**persists**	☐	E	set up and started
6	**structural**	☐	F	take in and deal with something large
7	**insecurity**	☐	G	get something back from where it is
8	**absorb**	☐	H	representing an idea rather than being practical

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A kilogram of plastic waste buys a hot meal at the Garbage Café in Ambikapur. It collects little by tonnage, but it shows the link between waste, work and basic needs.

1 At the Garbage Café in Ambikapur, India, a bag of discarded plastic can pay for a hot meal. The exchange gives waste an immediate value to the person who collects it. It also connects two everyday problems a city might otherwise handle separately: rubbish on the streets and people needing food.

2 Established in 2019 with municipal involvement, the café offers a meal in exchange for approximately one kilogram of plastic waste, and the collected material is then fed into the city's waste-management network. For informal collectors, who may receive very little money for the plastic they recover, this exchange can turn hours of unpleasant and physically demanding work into a more dependable form of immediate support. A meal, unlike a fluctuating scrap price, is a known quantity.

3 The project's appeal lies partly in its symbolic simplicity. Rubbish is ordinarily treated as something valueless, to be cleared away and put out of sight as quickly as possible. Here, discarded packaging becomes a form of purchasing power. The exchange also makes visible the labour performed by people whose contribution to urban cleanliness is routinely overlooked, and whose work is seldom counted as work at all. Recognition of that kind costs nothing, yet it is in remarkably short supply.

4 Ambikapur's wider approach includes sorting, collecting and recycling waste, so the café is best understood as one modest element within a larger system rather than a strategy in its own right. It cannot absorb the vast quantities of plastic that consumers produce, and its popularity is certainly no proof that incentives alone can undo the environmental damage caused by disposable packaging. Schemes of this kind work best when they sit on top of functioning collection services, not in place of them.

5 Part of what makes the problem so stubborn is the material itself. Single-use plastic is cheap, light and convenient, and those same properties make it extremely difficult to contain once discarded: it blocks drains, accumulates on open ground and fragments into pieces too small to retrieve. Waste that goes uncollected does not quietly disappear. It persists, dispersed and largely unrecoverable.

6 There are social questions as well, and they are not easily brushed aside. Providing food through waste collection is inventive, but it does nothing to remove the insecurity that makes some residents dependent on such exchanges in the first place. A policy can be compassionate and still leave the structural causes of poverty entirely untouched. Nor should an eye-catching recycling initiative distract attention from the more difficult task of reducing unnecessary plastic production.

7 Even with those qualifications, the café offers a valuable example of local problem-solving. Measured by tonnage it collects a drop in the ocean, yet its real achievement may lie elsewhere: in the relationships it exposes between waste, work and basic needs. Sometimes an effective public idea begins not with new technology but by changing the perceived value of something everybody else is ready to throw away. Once a discarded bottle is understood as lunch, it becomes very hard to walk past.

Sources: BBC Future. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. A meal at the café has a more predictable value to a collector than the money from selling scrap. T F NG
2. The writer sees the amount of plastic removed as the café's main achievement. T F NG
3. Other Indian cities have copied the café's approach. T F NG
4. The writer thinks schemes like this work best alongside regular waste collection. T F NG
5. The text claims a compassionate policy will necessarily tackle the causes of poverty. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

dependable **dispersed** **fluctuating** **inventive** **municipal** **overlooked** **perceived** **unrecoverable**

1. Because scrap prices keep _____ from week to week, small dealers find it hard to plan ahead.
2. The needs of the poorest residents were repeatedly _____ in the budget.
3. A _____ income, even a small one, helps a household plan its spending.
4. After the storm the debris was _____ across several kilometres of open ground.
5. The charity's biggest challenge is changing the _____ value of rubbish in people's minds.
6. The designers made an _____ use of old tyres, turning them into playground equipment.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The scheme's long-term _____ depends on continued funding. (SUSTAIN)
2. Critics point to the _____ of relying on charity to feed a city. (ADEQUATE)
3. Public _____ of their labour is long overdue. (RECOGNISE)
4. Without proper collection services, such schemes are largely _____ . (EFFECT)
5. Some residents resent being _____ on handouts. (DEPEND)

7 Language focus: phrasal verbs

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Many C1 phrasal verbs are formal or figurative. Notice the idea behind the particle: out means gradually removing, down means taking firm action.

away down off out over round up

1. The council plans to phase _____ single-use plastic bags over three years.
2. Campaigners urged the government to clamp _____ on illegal dumping.
3. Many dealers shy _____ from paying collectors a fair price.
4. Supporters hold the café _____ as a model for other cities.
5. Critics fear the scheme merely tides families _____ until the next crisis.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What would make a rubbish-for-food scheme feel welcoming rather than embarrassing?
2. Should people need a reward to look after shared spaces?
3. Which everyday problem could your neighbourhood tackle with a simple exchange?

9 Role-play: one kilogram, or nothing?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the café manager

The rule is one kilogram of plastic for one meal. A collector arrives with a bit less. Ask what is in the bag and why it is light. You can say no, or find a fair solution.

Student B · the waste collector

You've worked all day and your bag is a little under one kilogram. You haven't eaten. Explain your day and ask for a meal. Offer something in return.

Useful phrases

I've been collecting since early this morning.
It's only a bit under a kilogram.
I'm sorry, but the rule is the same for everyone.
Could you make an exception just this once?
I'd be happy to give you a smaller meal.
That's fair, I'll bring more tomorrow.

Afterwards, tell the class: was the manager's decision fair, and would you have decided the same?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 E · 2 H · 3 C · 4 G · 5 A · 6 D · 7 B · 8 F

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 fluctuating · 2 overlooked · 3 dependable · 4 dispersed · 5 perceived · 6 inventive

6 Word forms

1 sustainability · 2 inadequacy · 3 recognition · 4 ineffective · 5 dependent

7 Language focus

1 out · 2 down · 3 away · 4 up · 5 over

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