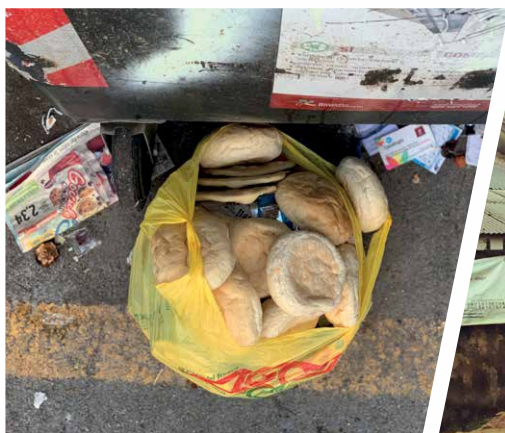




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Edited by  
JOACHIM VON BRAUN  
MARCELO SÁNCHEZ SORONDO  
ROY STEINER

# REDUCTION OF FOOD LOSS AND WASTE



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# Reduction of Food Loss and Waste

*11-12 November 2019*

*Edited by*

Joachim von Braun  
Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo  
Roy Steiner



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“Fighting against the terrible scourge of hunger means also fighting waste. Waste reveals an indifference towards things and towards those who go without. Wastefulness is the crudest form of discarding. I think of the moment when Jesus, after the distribution of the loaves to the crowd, asks for the scraps to be gathered up, so that nothing would go to waste (cf. Jn 6:12). Gathering in order to redistribute; not production that leads to waste. To throw food away means to throw people away. It is scandalous today not to notice how precious food is as a good, and how so much good ends up so badly”.

*Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Members of the European Food Banks Federation, Consistory Hall, Saturday, 18 May 2019.*

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# FOOD WASTE – SOME ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

MICKEY GJERRIS<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Humanity faces a number of very serious and interconnected crises, as visible in the United Nation's 17 Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2020). Many of the goals are directly or indirectly connected to food waste and food loss, most obviously Goal No. 2: Zero hunger. But the goals: eradicate poverty (1), clean water (6), responsible production and consumption (12), climate action (13), life below water (14) and life on land (15) also carry implications for current food production practices and consumption patterns. A growing world population, climate change, pollution from food production, scarcity of vital resources such as water and agricultural land and the rapid loss of biodiversity that by some has been characterized as the "sixth mass extinction" (Ceballos et al., 2015) necessitates that global food production and consumption undergo rapid and extensive transformation. Part and parcel of this is reducing food waste and loss.

This can hardly be said to be a controversial statement. Further, neither is it a controversial statement to say that the abovementioned issues are not only a question of developing technological solutions or new ways of "food governance". Both are obviously necessary to achieve a rapid and extensive global transformation of food production and consumption. However, underneath these issues lie ethical issues concerning who has the responsibility to initiate the transformation and not least whether food waste and loss is "only" a problem in terms of negative effects for humans, or if food waste and loss is a symptom of a deeper crisis between humanity and the rest of the natural world.

## Food waste and loss – a complex and contested concept

Initially the issue of food waste and loss seems very easy. The obvious thing to say, when confronted with the issue, is: "Let's stop doing that". Things are, however, rarely that simple. For one, food waste and loss happens in all links of the chain from primary production to end-consumer

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and there are very different reasons for it, depending not only on what link it is, but also on local socio-economic structures. Discussing food loss and waste as such is therefore much too general an approach to take (Bagherzadeh et al. 2014). Solutions to food loss from small farms in developing economies due to lack of infrastructure are obviously very different than solutions to food loss from intensive production systems in developed economies due to standardization of e.g. processing machinery, just as food waste in households in developing economies due to lack of electricity must be handled differently than food waste in households in developed economies due to lack of knowledge about how to utilize foodstuff.

A further problem is that there is no clear and agreed upon definition on what constitutes food loss and waste, which creates problems when comparing data from different regions etc. Further, it complicates things when estimates of food waste and loss differ, as the difference in estimates can also create a difference in both the understanding of the severity of the problem and subsequently the resources spent on preventing it. One of the reasons that it is difficult to agree upon a definition is that all definitions carry with them certain cultural norms of what is considered “loss” and “waste”. What is considered waste in some countries may not be considered waste in others, e.g. internal organs of some animals (Gjerris & Gaiani 2013).

### **Indirect avoidable food waste**

As mentioned above, the disagreement around food waste definitions is not merely a technical discussion but reflects both underlying cultural and social assumptions and ethical values. An example of a food choice which, to some, involves food waste and loss, whereas to others is an acceptable use of resources is feeding animals with plants that could have been used for human consumption.

This is an example of “indirect avoidable food waste”: the use of resources in an inefficient manner. Thus, animal products in general can be said to constitute food waste unless they have been produced in such a way as to only utilize resources (land, water, energy etc.) that could not have been used more efficiently in producing plants with the same nutritional value.

Obviously, this goes against many cultural traditions and socially embedded practices. Animal products are seen by the vast majority of western consumers as a normal part of their diets and the environmental impact of e.g. feed production as a necessary part of production. But seen from a resource efficiency perspective one might ask, in the light of the severe



crisis threatening us, whether (at least some) animal products should not be counted as food waste or loss. How one thinks on this issue is not only related to food waste, but also to other values concerning the human-non-human animal relationship and thus, to some degree, by where one finds oneself in the spectrum from carnism to veganism.

### **Food waste and “the good life”**

Another issue is the way that food waste, to some extent, can be seen as an expression of “the good life”. According to the report “Food Waste Prevention in Denmark”, Danish households are responsible for around 260,000 tonnes of avoidable food waste each year (understood as “food and drink items which, at some point, prior to being thrown out, were edible”), which constitutes 36% of the total food waste in Denmark of 715,000 tonnes per year (Tonini et al. 2017).

There are many reasons behind this food waste as shown in Stancu & Lähteenmäki (2018), poor planning and lack of kitchen skills being some of them. When asked what could motivate to diminish food waste, Danish consumers mention economy as the most important, but also that it could save time from shopping to food preparation, lessen their environmental impact and give them a more “orderly” kitchen.

It is, however, worth noting that the typical Danish household spends only approximately 10% of their available income on food, meaning that food is relatively cheap in Denmark when compared with overall income. Not wasting food might be harder to stop than one would think, as there is little economic reason to do so. And as Western hyper-consumerism is, among other things, characterized by providing the individual with a multitude of available choices, wasting food as the price of experiencing having these choices might be tempting.

The claim here is that the majority of us do not want to shop at a supermarket where choices are limited, but at one with a wide variety of fresh products – even though this leads to food waste. The same thing happens when we open the refrigerator. In a culture where individuality and freedom of choice is constantly promoted through commercials, there is happiness to be found in being able to ask the question: “what would I like to eat now?” compared to the question: “what do I have to eat?”.

This creates a conflict in the individual that is also known in the areas of e.g. climate change and animal welfare. We are caught in a conflict between what we can intellectually understand is the right thing to do according to our values and what we feel like doing, based on our more or

less conscious understanding of what constitutes “a good life”; a conflict between duty and preferences so to speak. And here many of us become “willfully blind”, managing to forget what we know or writing down our responsibility to the neglectable to be able to continue living as we do without having to experience cognitive dissonance in our day-to-day lives (Gjerris 2015).

### **What is wrong with wasting food? – Anthropocentric concerns**

In the beginning I described the areas where food waste and loss constitutes a problem in relation to the United Nation’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals. It seems clear that it is detrimental to vital human interests and – as long as the waste is of the kinds discussed above – it seems ethically problematic as most ethical theories would find that harming another human being’s vital interest to satisfy a non-vital interest is wrong (Gjerris et al. 2013).

One of the interesting aspects of food waste is that it seems to be agreed upon universally as ethically wrong. And often, it seems, not only from an intellectual stance, but also based on a gut feeling that something is inherently wrong. This is probably partly due to the fact of wasting food while around 800 million humans on the planet live in hunger (FAO et al. 2017). And even though it does not make much sense to try to force your children to eat up by reminding them of hungry children elsewhere, as they will never receive the leftovers anyway, it can be seen as an expression of a deep-felt worry that something is wrong, when some of us live in unimaginable wealth whereas others struggle to fulfil their most basic needs.

Two things immediately pop up here. One is that if these concerns really are so deep felt, it seems weird that we do not act more upon them, other than using hungry children elsewhere to try to bring some manners to our own children. This, from my point of view, points back to the “willed blindness” mentioned earlier, which allows us to continue using resources on non-vital needs such as luxury items, holidays etc. while another’s vital needs are not met.

The other thing is that reducing food waste in itself is not the whole answer. Going back to the Danish consumers who expressed that the possibility of saving money would be the strongest incentive to reducing food waste, if this money is then spent on practices that are just as damaging to e.g. the climate (flying on holiday instead of taking the train to a local destination) only little is gained. Moving my overconsumption from one area to another will not fill the bellies of hungry children.

## **What is wrong with wasting food? – Ecocentric concerns**

However troubling it is that food waste has the consequences it has for humans around the globe, the question is whether the problem does not go a bit deeper. Perhaps food waste is not only one more example of “man’s inhumanity to man” as the Scottish poet Robert Burns famously wrote, but also an expression or a symptom of an understanding with nature that does not give room to nature in its own right, but only to human needs and preferences.

Within environmental ethics there is a distinction between anthropocentric concerns and ecocentric concerns. The first is focused on how an action influences humans. Thus, nature degradation is of ethical concern only if it has a negative influence on humans – nature in itself is only indirectly ethically relevant. Ecocentric concerns, on the contrary, find that nature has an ethical importance itself. It is not only stupid to harm nature as it harms us, but also wrong in itself as nature is part of the ethical community that humans have ethical responsibilities towards.

Ecocentric thinking comes in many colors and flavors (see e.g. Hourdequin 2015). From a virtue-based ecocentric perspective, food waste can be seen as a basic lack of virtues such as humility, awe and respect for and towards nature (see e.g. Hursthouse 2007). Another environmental ethicist, David Abram, talks about the need to understand ourselves as part of a “more-than-human community”, if we are to adequately address the crisis that faces us (Abram 1996).

The basic idea is that we belong here. This planet is our home and the biosphere is our extended family. Food waste is wrong not only because it harms humans, but because it harms the larger community we are a part of. And thereby it harms us as well. Following the community analogy, there is no meaningful happiness to be found at the expense of your community. Being part of a community means that your happiness is tied to the happiness of the other members of the community. Happiness is what follows when the community thrives. This might sound as a banality... and it is. But sometimes we cannot see the obvious because we have become too self-obsessed, too willfully blind to accept that we are putting our own preferences above the needs of the communities we live and breathe in.

## **Oh, what to do?**

Caught between what we ought to do and what we want to do when discussing the types of food waste described above (avoidable direct and indirect food waste), the next question becomes: what to do? How do

we act on almost universally agreed-upon values when our hearts cannot follow? Again, the answer might seem like a banality... and again it is. But it is the only one I have: We need to change what we ought to do into something we have a deep-felt desire to do.

Information in itself is not enough. There is nothing wrong with enlightening people about the consequences of food waste in relation to climate change, hunger, loss of biodiversity etc. But it is not enough, because many of us know already and the more we are told, the more we bury our heads in the sand to remain willfully blind and avoid being confronted with our own moral shortcomings.

Indignation in itself is not enough. Some years ago I took my students dumpster-diving and on the inside of the lid of a supermarket container filled with food that was perfectly fine, but just did not fit into the logistics of filling up the shelves and presenting fresh food all the time, someone had written: "if you are not outraged, you are not paying attention". The problem with indignation is, however, that it carries a moral accusation. And most people react to that by pointing at the person bringing on the accusations saying: "Well, how about you?" So it becomes a battle between the morally imperfect and we end up feeling justified by having pointed out that the ones accusing us are just as hypocritical as we are – and (although unrightfully) feeling justified by this.

So what is needed is a change of heart. Virtues. A deep held belief that avoiding food waste is not only the moral thing to do, but a meaningful thing. A thing that makes the community thrive and thereby ourselves. Not in an egoistic manner, but in the sense that we believe that a good life is a life where we carry the responsibility we can and contribute what we can to our community. From this a meaningful existence follows. So we are not acting to secure ourselves or sacrificing ourselves for the sake of others. We are living lives that basically make sense.

This is not easy. Adopting new virtues having been brought up in hyper-consumeristic societies might initially feel like a sacrifice. So duty kicks in and you might have to act against your preferences. Hope lies in that if we try this, we will be given meaningful, good lives – even though they are different from what commercials have brainwashed us to believe in.

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