

The fight against food waste

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Food waste, though it must be fought, also serves social functions. It is important to put into perspective the responsibility of consumers seen as failing to manage their food waste adequately and to recognize that waste is above all the result of overproduction that has ultimately led to food being devalued.

Human societies have often had to save and protect their resources when they were scarce and there was a risk of shortage (Jarrige and Le Roux, 2020). In farming, this has involved preventing ‘losses’ caused by climate hazards, animals (rodents, insects, birds) and microorganisms that degrade food (such as mould). These losses received considerable international attention in the 1960s and 1970s, as the quantities of food produced did not seem to be, or risked not being, sufficient to meet populations’ needs. Much effort thus went into fighting plant diseases and pests as well as reducing post-harvest losses, particularly in countries where increasing food availability was a strategic priority for food security.

A seemingly consensual cause

Since the 1980s, as a result of the industrialization of food systems, global food availability has increased significantly. The world has shifted from a state of relative food scarcity to a situation of overproduction, which has gone hand in hand with a rise in waste. In their report for the FAO, Gustavsson et al. (2011) argued that almost a third of global food production is lost or wasted. In France, a study conducted for the National Agency for Ecological Transition (Ademe) in 2016 estimated that 10 million tonnes of food are diverted from human consumption each year, worth €16 billion. This contributes to climate change, accounting for 3 per cent of national greenhouse gas emissions (Income Consulting and AK2C, 2016).

The definitions of loss and waste do however differ depending on the authors and the scope or nature of the surpluses studied. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, the HLPE¹ defines food ‘loss’ as a reduction, at any stage of the food supply chain prior to consumption, in the mass of foodstuffs originally intended for human consumption, irrespective of the cause. The organization defines food ‘waste’ as food fit for human consumption that is discarded or spoiled at the consumption stage, irrespective of the cause (HLPE, 2014). The FAO (2019), for its part, defines ‘losses’ as the decrease in the quantity or quality of food resulting from decisions and actions taken by food producers and suppliers, and ‘waste’ as the product of decisions and actions taken by retailers, food service providers and consumers. In both definitions, losses tend to occur upstream and waste downstream in food supply chains.

While food loss has been less prominent on the political agenda since the 1980s and the topic of waste is still emerging, the two issues have regained prominence since the late 2000s. First, the surges in international prices in 2008 and then 2011 revived the productivist goal of doubling, or greatly increasing, food production to meet the challenge of feeding the world’s population, which is set to reach 9 to 10 billion people by 2050 (Bricas and Daviron, 2008). Combating food losses and waste has also been presented as a way to increase food availability. Second, the rise in environmental awareness has contributed to making this problem – which places unnecessary pressure on non-renewable resources and causes environmental degradation (Chapter 7) – a priority on political agendas. Since it supports food security and the reduction of environmental impacts, the fight against food loss and waste is seen as a moral duty (FAO, 2015). In 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres described food waste as an ‘ethical outrage.’² This fight is an ‘uncontested’ cause – one that can only give rise to consensus, which no individual or organization publicly opposes (Juhem, 2001). Therein lies one of the strengths of this issue, which partly explains why it has prevailed on the international agenda.

At a national level, the fight against food loss and waste is also a non-partisan and essentially consensual cause, which political actors can take up to address social concerns (the fight against food insecurity) and environmental commitments (resource preservation, impact reduction) simultaneously. As this cause can easily be linked to sustainable development goals, supporting

¹ High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.

² According to a tweet by António Guterres on the occasion of the First International Day of Awareness for Food Loss and Waste on 29 September 2020.

it is politically advantageous. In France, this is exemplified by the Garot law of 2016, which required large supermarkets to give any unsold food to non-profit organizations (Chapter 15), and the 2017–20 National Pact against Food Waste, signed by multiple public, private and non-profit actors. As it is currently approached, however, the fight against food waste risks focusing policy and reforms on strategies to address the consequences and symptoms of waste, without eliminating its causes.

The social and cultural function of food

Although human societies save and protect their resources, they also waste some of them, even in situations of relative scarcity. Wastage is a way to create temporary or permanent abundance and consume without (over)monitoring. Festivities and ceremonies are opportunities to stage such abundance: for wedding meals, funerals, and banquets, people prepare more food than necessary. This waste – if it can still be called waste – is not the product of poor management. It is socially accepted, even sought after, as food plays more than a nutritional role; it also serves a social and cultural function.

Wasting is in fact a sign of ‘being able to afford’ to plan for more than the careful management of our primary needs. François Jarrige and Thomas Le Roux (2020) describe waste as a ‘manifestation of freedom and abundance’. Acquiring or accumulating more food than we need to meet our nutritional needs means leaving room for enhanced well-being. It means lightening our mental load by avoiding the need to manage supplies as tightly as possible, having the opportunity to choose between several types of food or to wait until the last minute to decide what to eat, being able to host unexpected guests, trying new foods without being sure they will be liked or protecting ourselves from a health risk. The pursuit of such a ‘possibility of consumption’ is not specific to food. Over the course of our lives, we acquire or wish to acquire many things that we may not consume, such as clothes that we will rarely, if ever, wear and books that we will never finish.

Being wealthy makes it easier to increase one’s possibilities of consumption. Seeking to create a sense of abundance, if only for a moment or a particular event, is a way of freeing oneself from the daily and burdensome constraints of managing scarcity. In particular, this explains the likely disconnect between people in precarious situations and well-meaning volunteers seeking to help them, who find it difficult to understand why these individuals would rather

buy a very expensive mobile phone than feed their families better. Acquiring consumer goods is a way to pamper oneself, to boost one's self-esteem or to gain social status. These goods therefore play a fundamental role, as has long been shown by socio-economists, guided by Thorstein Veblen (1899) and his concept of 'conspicuous consumption'.

This perspective questions the prioritization of consumption objects based on the needs they fulfil. According to Abraham Maslow (1943) and the hierarchy of needs he described, any consumption that fulfils secondary or higher needs while basic needs are not fully met constitutes a form of waste. This implies that acquiring works of art, spending time decorating or wearing jewellery amounts to mismanaging resources. Yet all societies, even with modest resources, engage in such activities. This observation has led to criticism and relativization of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Nevertheless, the latter still significantly informs value judgements about poor people, who often continue to be stigmatized as not knowing how to manage their money properly. With regard to food, this entails considering foods that provide the most important nutrients at the lowest cost as fundamental and those that build bonds of belonging, bring pleasure or allow one to be well regarded by others as secondary. Yet even in situations of hardship, the pursuit of food that fosters social ties, provides recognition and is a source of pleasure for the taste buds and for the eyes is not a superfluous effort that is 'wasted' at the expense of 'basic needs'.

The causes of food waste therefore do not really lie in irrational decision-making by consumers who do not know how to adjust their consumption to their basic needs. The issue is not so much the existence of food waste as its current scale. The drop in food spending as a share of households' budgets (especially wealthier ones), due to food overproduction, has facilitated and generalized wasteful practices that previously remained exceptional, especially in times of lesser abundance. This overproduction exceeds societies' need to protect themselves from the risk of food shortages. It has led to a decline in the economic and symbolic value of food, which has become a mere commodity.

Consumers' responsibility?

The fight against waste has so far largely involved calling on consumers to better manage their purchases and supplies. There has been a proliferation of media articles and awareness campaigns explaining how to avoid waste. Non-profits have organized the collection of unsold goods and shared ways of reusing them. Digital apps have been developed to help consumers manage their food supplies. Putting

the onus on consumers in this way aligns with the interests of food industry actors, who keep seeking to increase their sales. They do so using advertising and promotional offers. Consumers end up having to deal with waste at home that was in fact generated by the overabundant supply from the agri-food industry and mass retail. In rich countries, where food consumption is relatively saturated (i.e. supply exceeds demand), the market for ‘possibilities of consumption’ remains a source of economic growth.

In France, food manufacturing and retail businesses have in the past drawn on quantitative data to push responsibility for waste onto consumers, as a way to avoid criticism. For example, in 2013, the National Association of Agri-Food Industries stated on its website that households accounted for 67 per cent of food waste, while the agri-food industries produced only 2 per cent. Arguing that companies had no economic interest in generating waste in their production or distribution processes, it shifted responsibility to the last link in the chain – the consumer. Yet the responsibility of each actor in the food supply chain cannot simply be measured as the share of total waste that they directly throw away. For example, a retailer – a supply chain actor in a position of strength – that returns an unwanted order to a supplier or that donates its unsold products to non-profit food assistance organizations at the last moment (and receives a tax rebate for it) generates little waste itself but transfers the waste upstream and downstream of its activity.

Are redistribution and recycling real solutions?

In France, the actors involved in the National Pact against Food Waste have institutionalized and formalized a ‘hierarchy of uses for surplus food’. This hierarchy is inherited from European regulations on waste and recommends first reducing waste ‘at the source’ across all stages of the food supply chain and then reusing surpluses. Reuse should prioritize feeding humans (mainly through redistribution to food assistance non-profits), followed by feeding animals and lastly recycling. This implies repurposing surpluses to create organic matter and energy, namely through composting and biogas production. Food industry and distribution companies, as well as non-profits working with vulnerable populations, have linked their actions to combat waste to this hierarchy, which both benefits them financially and enhances their image.

First, industrial actors have worked on optimizing their food production, manufacturing, storage, packaging and transportation processes to minimize the losses as much as possible. Such developments were particularly recommended

in countries where the infrastructure made it difficult to always ensure the sanitary quality of products (Gustavsson et al., 2011). In industrialized countries such as France, this form of waste prevention is driven by a 'managerial' approach, seeking economic efficiency throughout the food supply chain. It is based on technical and logistical adaptations, such as 'smart' packaging that incorporates electronic chips to improve flow and temperature management.

Another option to combat food waste is reusing food surpluses to feed vulnerable populations through food assistance. This activity is not new and has evolved since it was first institutionalized (Schneider, 2011). From the creation of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) in 1987, agricultural intervention stocks (bought back from farmers to support prices) were redistributed to food aid non-profits. This mechanism was guided by the idea of a win-win process, matching unused supply with unmet demand: redistributing (over)production stabilizes both the quantities present on national markets and food prices while also contributing to the food security of vulnerable populations. In France, food assistance was thus coupled with agricultural surplus management policies. Non-profits fighting food insecurity also receive donations from food processing and distribution companies, which in return benefit from particularly high tax rebates in France. Even though the benefits for people who use food aid are debatable (Chapter 15), private actors receive not only social recognition but also financial support from the state. This raises a question: if producing surplus food has become morally and financially profitable, how can we encourage the most reasonable management of production and stock?

The bottom level of the surplus food hierarchy of uses is the transformation of human food surpluses and waste into animal feed, compost or energy. The wasted products thus become raw materials for new industries and new markets. Yet feeding uneaten, cooked ready-made meals to animals instead of raw products, for example, is in fact a form of waste. Likewise, uses that involve processing and transporting surpluses across long distances, particularly in the case of large-scale biogas production or composting infrastructure, are more costly environmentally. Furthermore, in order to make such infrastructure profitable and legitimize its existence, the actors developing these solutions have an interest in maintaining food surpluses rather than reducing them at the source.

A problem of overproduction

These different solutions, widely promoted in France by corporate social responsibility (CSR) departments, non-profits fighting food insecurity and new

entrepreneurs involved in reuse or recycling, do not allow for the prevention of food waste in the long term. While they manage existing surpluses, very few structurally challenge the power relations, organizations and practices at the root of these surpluses (Mourad, 2016). On the contrary, redistribution and recycling solutions may even be favoured over reduction at the source, since they generate visible, concrete and measurable results (such as tonnes of waste avoided or the number of meals served to disadvantaged populations) to meet public policy objectives or CSR commitments. Prevention mechanisms, on the other hand, struggle to measure ‘the absence of something’ (Mourad, 2018). Each actor is ultimately free to align its actions against food waste with the recommendations stemming from the hierarchy of uses of food surpluses, and to derive financial, image or legitimacy benefits from them. This comes at the expense of structural change in the functioning of capitalist forms of organization (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005).

The way in which these food system actors have engaged in multi-stakeholder initiatives to combat waste (such as the National Pact) has influenced the institutionalization of the subject. Through the weight of their interests in negotiations, some actors are able to directly or indirectly block pathways to preventing losses and waste at the source. Such pathways include fighting the overexploitation of natural resources in farming, challenging certain promotional offer practices in retail or even initiating a movement towards decreasing consumption. The fight against food waste in France did of course give rise to welcome (and even necessary) changes in the 2010s: the Garot law, the National Pact against Food Waste and, more recently, the law regulating relationships between food manufacturers, distributors and farmers (Egalim Law). These measures have had tangible results, insofar as the quantities of food thrown away seem to have decreased. However, changes to combat food waste must go further and be integrated into a comprehensive food system reform to avoid food overproduction.

Conclusion

Combating surplus production is a twofold challenge. First, it involves avoiding the unnecessary exploitation of natural resources and reducing the pollution associated with overproduction. Second, it requires a reduction of overconsumption, which leads to health problems and obesity. While better control of one’s consumption allows eaters, on an individual level, to take their share of responsibility for reducing waste and to rethink the social and environmental value of food, this in no way means that individuals should be

responsible for bringing about major change alone. In this sense, framing the problem in terms of overproduction – of which food waste is a consequence – would allow for a more balanced distribution of responsibilities between the actors (Chapter 18).

This chapter draws heavily on Nicolas Bricas's opinion piece 'Pourquoi faudrait-il lutter contre le gaspillage alimentaire?' (2018), published on the website of the UNESCO Chair in World Food Systems, and Marie Mourad's PhD research, published as 'De la poubelle à l'assiette: contre le gaspillage alimentaire. Dix ans de lutte en France et aux États-Unis' (2022).

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