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Hokuma Karimova

DP #1: Food Waste

Food Waste: Overview



Just as flowers need the sun for survival and cars need petroleum for movement, humans need a constant caloric intake to function properly. However, according to the 2008 Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) statistics, there are 1 billion people currently hungry, which is the highest number we had in human history. (Beachy 2011). This number sheds a faint light on the disparity between food production and food consumption. If we have the technology to produce more food, and do so on a daily basis to feed the entire population, then the problem is with food transportation and its waste.

In fact, a recent collaborative paper by the the Stockholm Environmental Institute, the Stockholm International Water Institute, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, and the **International Water Management Institute** highlighted that the global food crises is not truly caused by lack of food production, but rather its distribution and waste. “Inefficient harvesting, transport, storage and packaging make a considerable dent in the potential availability of food. Additional losses occur in food processing, wholesale, retail, in households and other parts of society where food is consumed.” (Saving Water 2008)

Some argue that developing countries should not be given aid through rice or other food supplies, due to its potential of hampering the capability of local farmers to compete with the subsidized commodities provided from abroad. A good example of this are developing countries such as Haiti and Mexico, where free trade agreements have led to the rapid influx of cheaper international corn and rice, which devastated local farm production. With the local farmers out of business, the population begins to rely on international imports, and becomes unable to pay for rising international prices, as is happening on a global scale.

Short-term Aid

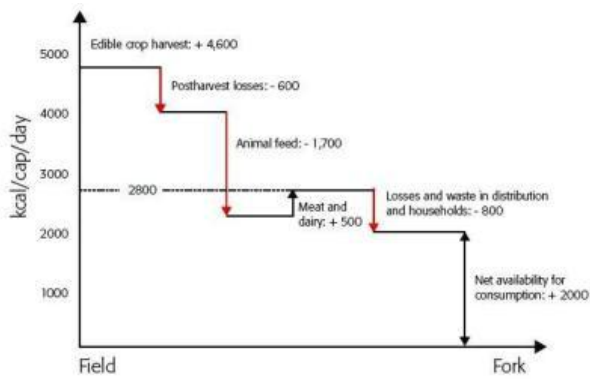


Figure 1. A schematic summary of the amount of food produced, globally, at field level and estimates of the losses, conversions and wastage in the food chain. Source: Smil (2000). Illustration: Britt-Louise Andersson, SWU.

It is these soaring food prices, out of work farmers and food insecurity that causes civil riots and protests against governments. The problem of free trade is that the big players of international food donation artificially control food prices and demand. “The EU pays farmers to destroy their crop when there is a surplus. The U.S. dumps it in Haiti.” This charity rice and corn, although donated with good intentions, produces long-term negative effects. They provide short-term reduction of hunger, but debilitate local farmers from developing a stable business. (Beachy 2011)

Environmental Concerns

In addition to food being a human right that must be met, food wastage also causes grave environmental damages. “A 2009 article published in the journal PLoS calculated that food that ends up getting tossed accounts for almost one-quarter of all freshwater use in the country. Additionally, rotting food in open landfills releases significant quantities of methane, a greenhouse gas with a warming potential that is 20 times greater than that of carbon dioxide.” (Walsh 2011)

The food waste statistics are staggering. “In the U.S. alone, as much as 30% of food is thrown away – at a cost of \$48.3 billion dollars and 40 trillion liters of water. In developing countries, 15 to 35% of food may be lost in the field and an additional 10 to 15% discarded during processing, transport and storage, all happening before it gets to the point of consumption.” (Saving Water 2008) The important difference to note between food wastage in developed and developing countries, is that the efficiency with which food gets produced is much higher in the developed world. Additionally, almost half of one’s salary is spent on food in the developing countries, illustrating just how difficult it is for low and poor class individuals to buy and provide for their family during rising food crises.

The Sustainable Future?

For someone who is a big food lover, the topic of food waste comes close to my heart. It’s not just about eating, its also about wasting the things that take so much water, energy and physical labor to grow. It is about throwing away the labor of others, of the world, and then pretending to care about those less fortune, hungry and starving. A good example of this is the “1997 study by the economic research arm of the Department of Agriculture, [which stated] that about 10 million people a year could be fed through the recovery of just one-fifth of food waste.” If that was 14 years ago, imagine this number today, with an increased population, higher food demand and a stagnating economy worldwide. (Walsh 2011)

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) of the United States of America published statistics that demonstrated how more than 30 million tons of food was dumped in landfills in 2009, making food the most abundant material wasted by weight.



In order to make a real difference in the future of our planet and make large strides in the world of development, governments, organizations and individuals on a grassroots level need to start addressing this gap between food production and its consumption. Finding more efficient ways to package, transport and utilize these precious commodities are a more important question to address, than aiming at solving the hunger problem through distribution of international food aid.

I have been hearing since childhood that, I “should finish the food on my plate because there are starving children in Africa,” now I see this statement has more truth in it than I previously thought. If we are all more efficient in how much food we waste, sustainability of our planet is possible... it just all depends on us.

References:

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• **Hokuma Karimova**