

Elimination of Food Waste Could Lift 1 billion Out of Hunger, Say Campaigners

Excessive consumption in rich countries 'takes food out of mouths of poor' by inflating food prices on global market

by Adam Vaughan
September 9, 2009

Eliminating the millions of tonnes of food thrown away annually in the US and UK could lift more than a billion people out of hunger worldwide, experts claim.

Government officials, food experts and representatives of the retail trade brought together by the Food Ethics Council argue that excessive consumption of food in rich countries inflates food prices in the developing world. Buying food, which is then often wasted, reduces overall supply and pushes up the price of food, making grain less affordable for poor and undernourished people in other parts of the world. Food waste also costs UK consumers £10.2bn a year and when production, transportation and storage are factored in, it is responsible for 5% of the UK's greenhouse gas emissions.

Tristram Stuart, author of a new book on food waste and a contributor to a special food waste issue of the Food Ethics Council's magazine, said: "There are nearly a billion malnourished people in the world, but all of them could be lifted out of hunger with less than a quarter of the food wasted in Europe and North America. In a globalised food system, where we are all buying food in the same international market place, that means we're taking food out of the mouths of the poor."

Stuart calculated that the hunger of 1.5bn people could be alleviated by eradicating the food wasted by British consumers and American retailers, food services and householders, including the arable crops such as wheat, maize and soy to produce the wasted meat and dairy products. He added that the production of wasted food also squanders resources, and said that the irrigation water used by farmers to grow wasted food would be enough for the equivalent domestic water needs of 9bn people.

Food waste costs every household in the UK between £250 and £400 a year, figures that are likely to be updated this autumn when the government's waste agency WRAP publishes new statistics. Producing and distributing the 6.7m tonnes of edible food that goes uneaten and into waste in the UK also accounts for 18m tonnes of CO₂.

But Tom MacMillan, executive director of the Food Ethics Council, warned that reducing food waste alone would not be enough to alleviate hunger, because efficiency gains in natural resources are routinely cancelled out by growth in consumption. "Food waste is harmful and unfair, and it is essential to stop food going into landfill. But the irony is that

consumption growth and persistent inequalities look set to undo the good that cutting food waste does in reducing our overall use of natural resources and improving food security," he said.

MacMillan explained that the land and resources freed up by cutting food waste would likely be put to producing and consuming other things, such as growing more resource-intensive and expensive foods, bio-energy or textile crops. "Now is the moment all parties should be searching out ways to define prosperity that get away from runaway consumption. Until they succeed, chucking out less food won't make our lifestyles more sustainable," he said.

In addition to cutting down on waste, experts suggested food waste that does end up in bins could be dealt with in more environmentally friendly ways.

Paul Bettison, chair of the Local Government Association environment board, wrote: "Many councils are now giving residents a separate bin for their food waste. Leftovers are being turned into fertiliser, or gas to generate electricity. In some areas, in-vessel composting and anaerobic digestion are playing a key role in cutting council spending on landfill tax and reducing methane emissions."

But there are obstacles to generating energy and producing compost from food waste, he warned. "Lack of infrastructure is holding back the drive to make getting rid of food waste cheaper and greener. Councils do not want to collect leftovers without somewhere to send them, but nobody wants to build the places to send food waste until it is being collected."

Writing in the magazine, the retail industry defended sell-by and use-by dates, which were criticised as confusing by environment secretary Hilary Benn in June. Andrew Opie, director of food and consumer policy at the British Retail Consortium, wrote: "Certainly, some customers aren't clear about what the different dates mean but getting rid of them won't reduce food waste. Customer education will."

Last month, the government also criticised supermarket "bogof" offers (buy one get one free) that encourage shoppers to buy food they don't need and which ends up unused in bins, adding to the UK's food waste mountain.

The renewed push for action on food waste comes as a National Zero Waste Week by online campaigners and bloggers gets under way, encouraging individuals to go one day without putting anything in their bins.

' Guardian News and Media Limited 2009



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