



GOOD FOOD

MAKES EVERYTHING BETTER

WASTE

THROWING AWAY EDIBLE FOOD is something many of us believe is wrong.

Today nearly a billion people are malnourished or starving. But this is not because the world doesn't produce enough food: we currently produce around 4 billion metric tonnes of food every year.

Another way to understand this figure is in terms of calories. It is generally accepted that between 2300 and 2700 kcal is the optimum daily requirement for an adult. According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization our farmers produce food equal to around 13 quadrillion calories each year – or around 5359 kcal per person per day.

That's enough food to feed 14 billion people – twice the current global population. But up to half of this food (between 1.2 and 2 billion tonnes) never reaches a human mouth.

Waste is so ingrained in our global food system that many countries – even those

where poverty and hunger are real problems – don't even keep accurate figures of how much edible food they throw away each day.

WASTE AND LOSS

Waste is a broad concept that includes more than just the food we throw away. It also includes food loss which occurs most often in developing countries due to poor handling, storage and spoilage in distribution, due to inadequate infrastructure.

It is estimated that 45% of rice in China, and 80% in Vietnam, never makes it to market for these reasons. In India around 18% of fruit and vegetables is lost each year due to lack of cold storage and transport facilities.

But in the affluent West – where some of the worst examples of waste occur – food is wasted at every step along the food chain.

Big commercial growers will grow more than they know they can sell to ensure they

WASTE

can meet demand. Fields of vegetables or fruit can be left to rot because the cost of harvest is greater than their market value.

Supermarkets routinely over-order, for fear of running out and losing customers; and what isn't sold is thrown away. Edible produce is routinely rejected by retailers for being the wrong size or shape. In the UK 30% of 'ugly' vegetables are left in the field for this reason.

Restaurants serve too-large portions and throw the leftovers away.

Consumers, are regularly enticed to buy more than they need through special offers and misled by unrealistic 'best before' and 'sell-by dates' which encourage them to throw edible food away.

FINITE RESOURCES

Throwing away edible food can mean that those who need it most don't get enough to eat. It also wastes finite and diminishing resources such as soil, energy and water.

It is estimated, for instance, that 550 billion m3 of water – equivalent to 220 million Olympic sized swimming pools – is wasted on crops that never reach the consumer.

Likewise, food waste and inefficient management results in a 60% waste of the nitrogen fertiliser applied to crops worldwide and about half of the phosphorus – global supplies of which are running out.

CONSUMER EDUCATION

There is no doubt that consumers have a role to play in reducing food waste.

A recent study by the EU's Joint Research Centre found that the average EU consumer wastes 16% of all food that reaches them – most in the household and the balance through the catering sector (i.e. restaurants, schools and takeaways). Around 80% of this – the equivalent of 47 million tonnes of food annually – is edible food.

Buying the right quantities, putting perishables like bread in the freezer, buying only what you need rather than what the supermarket wants to sell you and preparing meals with products that are close to their expiry dates are all ways for consumers to avoid food waste.

But consumer education, while important, is only one part of the problem. There are even those who believe that focusing on 'behaviour change' at the consumer end of the problem keeps the deeper systemic

changes needed from being addressed.

What is needed, from farm to fork, is a sense of shared responsibility and the desire to make the most of the abundant food we already produce.

BEYOND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

We are continually told that we must produce more food if we want to feed the world. But producing more food – especially through an inefficient and damaging industrial food system – without addressing the underlying causes of food waste, will only result in more waste.

Reducing food loss and waste needs, first of all, to be prioritised by politicians and policymakers. Sustainable food policies that focus on how we farm, how we market food and how we eat are a better way to address waste than the often piecemeal strategies of most governments.

What we eat is also part of the problem. Diets high in meat and dairy now dominate

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global food priorities. But these foods are deeply wasteful. For example, taking into account the water, fertiliser, greenhouse gases and land used in its production, it can take up to 24 kilograms of wheat to produce just 1 kg of industrially produced beef.

Likewise, an extra 4 billion people could be fed with the grains currently fed to livestock.

High meat and dairy consumption is also linked to the global rise of non-communicable diseases such as heart and respiratory disease, diabetes, and cancer. Premature death from these avoidable diseases is also a form of waste.

The focus on food as a commodity, rather than a source of essential nutrition, helps us turn a blind eye to high levels of food waste.

Seeing food as a source of nourishment and health, a symbol of culture, and a social, even moral, responsibility would help us think more broadly about solutions.

We have the determination to reduce food waste. We know it can help us feed ourselves well and bring benefits for human health and well-being, as well as the environment, if we do. What is needed now is a clear framework and a coordinated effort for progress.



This leaflet is part of a series on sustainable food issues, produced by Beyond GM. References available online:

beyond-gm.org/good-food