



Food Loss and Waste in the context of the COVID-19 crisis

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John 6:12 – And when they had eaten their fill, he told his disciples, “Gather up the leftover fragments, that nothing may be lost.”

1 – Background

The COVID-19 pandemic is driving rapid shifts in the way people buy and consume food. To cope with these sudden shifts in consumer buying habits, the food industry and regulators have an unprecedented opportunity to change food production and consumption-related policies and practices as they grapple with empty shelves, changes in consumer demand, and supply chain disruptions. [Closures of restaurants, hotels and schools](#) have led to cancelled orders and headlines on farms destroying food. But food loss and waste is not a new problem. Globally one-quarter of all food calories are lost or wasted at various stages between the farm and the fork, resulting in [nearly \\$1 trillion in economic losses](#). How can the world feed a growing population while advancing economic development, protecting natural ecosystems and meeting the challenge of climate change? This is one of the paramount questions of our time. [Reducing food loss and waste is a critical part of the answer](#), offering the potential for a rare “triple win.” Reductions in food loss and waste can save money for farmers, companies, and households. Wasting less food means we can feed more people with the same resource use. And it can alleviate pressure on climate, as well as on water and land. There is a risk that [the COVID-19 pandemic will exacerbate food waste and food insecurity](#) worldwide and hamper progress to reduce it. The distribution of food loss and waste across the food supply chain varies by region of the world. Food loss and waste at the point of consumption in homes and restaurants [is especially high in high-income regions, whereas losses during handling and storage are high in low-income regions](#). On-farm production losses (i.e., during and just after harvest) are an issue in all regions. The U.N. (SDG 12.3) as part of the United Nations’ [Agenda 2030](#), sets a target to halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses by 2030.

2 – Analysis

Food is lost and wasted [for a range of reasons, including](#): lack of awareness of the issue, the enormity of the problem, and the benefits of reducing food loss and waste, and knowledge about what to do about it. There is also a lack of capacity and motivation to tackle the issue; lack of skills (e.g. cooking skills by householders and farming/handling/processing skills in the supply chain) and lack of infrastructure (e.g. poor infrastructure in many developing countries, such as cold storage, local processing facilities, transport and distribution infrastructure). Food loss and waste matters for environmental, economy, food security, jobs and ethical reasons. It matters for *the environment*, as the food that is lost and wasted each year accounts for [an estimated 8 percent of annual GHG emissions](#), consumes a quarter of all water used by agriculture, and requires an agricultural area the size of China. According to FAO estimates, [if food loss and waste were its own country, it would be the third-largest greenhouse gas emitter](#). It impacts the *economy*: the annual market value of lost and wasted food is estimated at an astounding \$940 billion globally ([FAO 2015](#)). It relates to *food security*: more than 1 billion metric tons of food per year globally is never consumed in a world where one in nine people are undernourished. It pertains to *the job market*:

reducing food loss and waste could play a modest role in job creation across the supply chain, ranging from smallholder processing facilities close to the farm to technology start-up companies that help redistribute food that would otherwise be wasted. And it also interests *ethics*: reducing food loss and waste is considered by many people as simply “the right thing to do”. For instance, the benefits of reducing food loss and waste can be significant. [Recent WRI research](#) suggest that reducing the current rate of food loss and waste would have major positive results. It would close the ‘food gap’ by 12 percent, the difference between the amount of food produced today and the amount necessary to meet future demand increase; it would close the ‘land gap’ by 27 percent, the difference between today’s global agricultural land area and the expected agricultural expansion by 2050 assuming continuous growth in food yields; and it would close the ‘GHG mitigation gap’ by 15 percent, the difference between expected agricultural emissions in 2050 and the target level needed to hold global warming below 2oC (3.6°F), the level necessary for preventing the worst climate impacts.

3 – Messaging: potential “Build Back Better” messages to address both today’s and tomorrow’s crisis include:

- *‘Practice Integral Ecology’*: increasing the sustainability of our global food system is of paramount importance to the care of our common home. [The food sector contributes around a quarter of global GHGs](#) (including land use), uses 70% of global freshwater, is the major driver of deforestation and biodiversity loss, and supports the livelihoods of some of the poorest people on the planet. The Pope could help raise awareness of Food sector’s impact and the opportunities and benefits of reducing its huge footprint, including the issue of food loss and waste. We need to restore the historical social norm that it is not acceptable to waste food (“waste not, want not”). Instead, it needs to be ‘normal’ to care about food, to treat it as a precious resource and not to waste it. Building on the *Laudato Si’* pledge to live more simply, the Pope could develop a moral philosophy in the Catholic Church in regard to existentialism, consumption and responsibility, using food waste as a positive example.
- *‘Food Loss and Waste will help address the climate emergency’*: the Pope could encourage governments and leaders of the world to recognise the role that tackling food loss and waste has in addressing the climate emergency as well as ensuring we have a sustainable food system that can feed a growing population. Specific actions could be: to include tackling food loss and waste in national food security strategies and social safety nets; to include tackling food loss and waste in Nationally Determined Contributions as part of the Paris Agreement; to set country specific targets which are consistent with SDG 12.3 and to measure food loss and waste within their countries (and to require businesses to do so as well).
- *‘Link actions to reduce Food Loss and Waste to the COVID-19 emergency response’*: as we emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, many countries are initiating large stimulus packages to help their economies recover. The Pope could seek to influence the focus of these packages so that they include a focus on initiatives that reduce food loss and waste. For example, encouraging developed countries to tackle food loss and waste within their country at the household level (by developing food loss and waste reduction programmes that include consumer facing campaigns, provision of tools and tips to reduce food loss and waste as well as working with retailers and the supply chains to get them to help consumers reduce waste). Encouraging developed countries to assist developing countries e.g. in investments in storage, cooling infrastructure etc. Or encouraging developing countries to introduce schemes that are suitable and appropriate for the needs of their farmers and small businesses and which will help reduce food loss and waste. Examples of similar, virtuous measures already exists. For example, [Argentina’s 2019 National](#)

[Plan for the Reduction of Food Losses and Waste](#) encourages food business to donate surplus to food banks, while India's Food Safety and Standards Authority recently passed a series of regulations and started the program '[Save Food, Share Food](#)' to prevent food being lost or wasted throughout its supply chain.

4 – A Food Loss and Waste campaign for the Catholic Church

With roughly 1.313 billion Catholics around the World, the Catholic Church has a huge network that could play a significant role in helping to address food loss and waste. It also oversees about 220,000 parishes, 150,000 schools, 1,200 universities, 1,000 healthcare systems, and more. The Church also manages a large amount of land: 177 million acres, larger than the size of France. Giving the diversity between developing (food loss as main issue) and developed countries (food waste as main issue), the approach could be tailored to individual locations. For example, while in western locations the parishes could host cooking classes focusing on fighting food waste, have food programs for the homeless, etc., in developing country the focus could be educational programmes for small holder farmers. To make real change happen on the ground requires 1:1 interventions and for people to feel that those around them are doing the same thing – so it becomes normal to treat food as precious and not to waste it. There are examples of successful campaigns which could be developed, adapted and built on to create a campaign tailored for the Catholic church, such as '[Love Food Hate Waste](#)', '[FoodWasteFree](#)' in the Netherlands and the '[Stop Wasting Food Movement](#)' in Denmark. An overall approach would consider the following aspects:

- The campaign should be a combination of messages (raising awareness and the call to action); messengers (who delivers the messages); modes (how the messages are communicated – probably a mix of methods); and means (how one makes it easy for people to take action, tips etc.).
- The campaign should be at more than one level – some led by His Holiness Pope Francis but also implemented locally by individual Churches (so personalized to local situations alongside some high-level messaging by the His Holiness Pope Francis and Cardinals).
- The campaign needs to be aimed at both members of the Catholic Church reducing their food waste but also them acting as role models in their local communities to help drive community wide reductions.
- There should be some key stages – development of the approach, piloting and evaluation and then wider roll out/implementation.