

Perishing possessions

Why eating up your food really does make a difference



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In the seventeenth century, the philosopher John Locke argued that if someone took more food than they needed and let it go to waste, “he took more than his share, and robbed others.” If, on the other hand, he consumed, traded, or even gave away his surplus food “he did no injury; he wasted not the common stock; destroyed no part of the portion of goods that belonged to others, so long as nothing perished uselessly in his hands.” How do modern wealthy nations stand up to Locke’s judgements, and do his moral paradigms hold any lessons for us today?

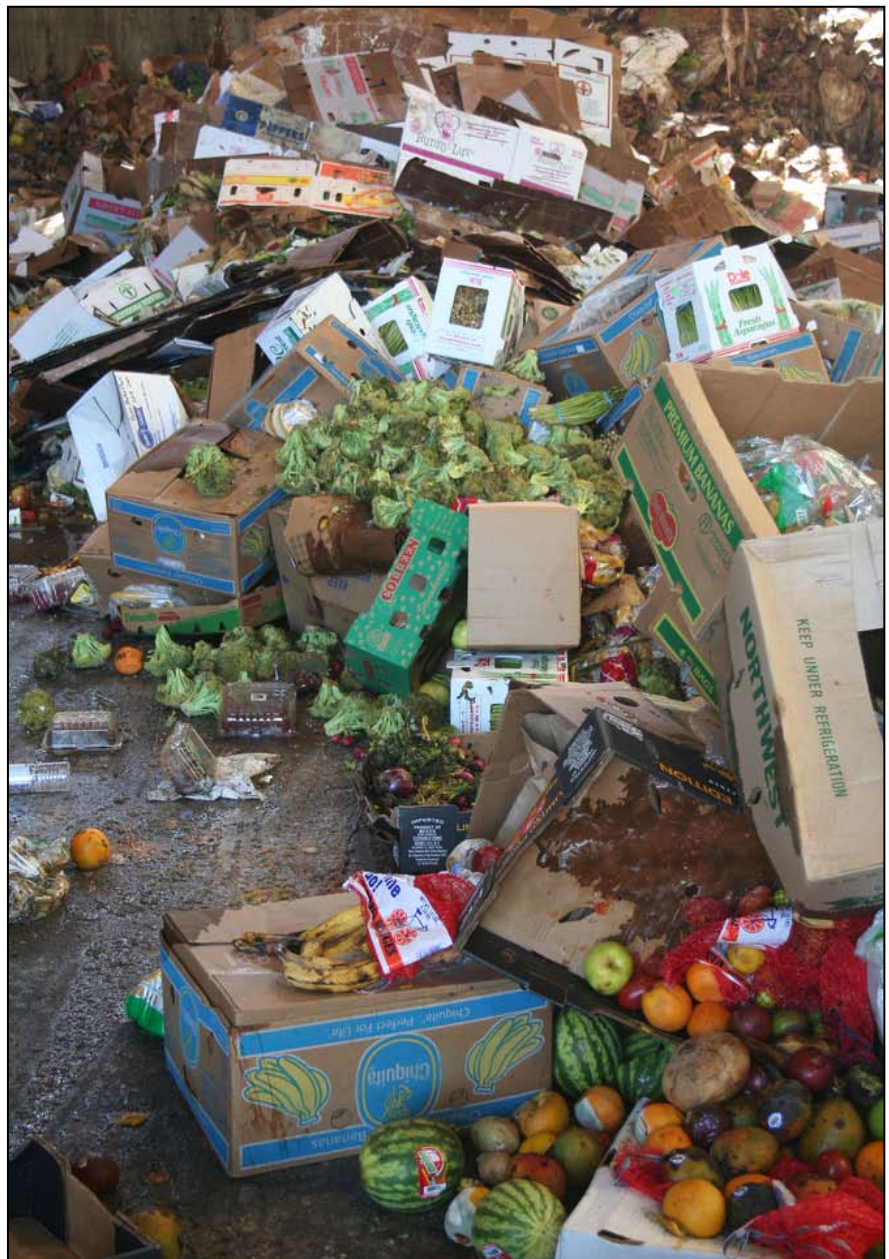
In a globalised food supply chain, the people who depend on the same ‘common stock’ of resources are no longer necessarily our neighbours, nor even our compatriots. They may live thousands of miles away, but many people in Asia and Africa still depend on the global marketplace for their food. How do we answer for the fact that most countries in Europe and North America waste up to half of their total food supplies between the plough and the plate?

Whether it is fresh fruit and vegetables rejected by supermarkets for failing to meet arbitrary cosmetic standards, or manufacturers forced to discard millions of slices of good fresh bread because supermarkets don’t like their sandwiches to be made from the outer slices of a loaf, or whether it is the waste we all daily witness in our own homes – all of this represents land, water and other resources that could be put to better use than filling rubbish tips with food.

The connection between food profligacy in rich countries and food poverty elsewhere in the world is neither simple nor direct, but it is nevertheless real. Obviously, the solution is not for rich countries to send old tomatoes or stale bread over to poor countries after saving them from the rubbish bin. This spurious connection assumes that the food in rich people’s homes or overstocked supermarkets had no other potential destiny than ending up in rich countries in the first place.

Cynics will argue that there is no connection between food being wasted in rich countries and the lack of food on the other side of the world. Their argument may have been stronger in the past, when famines were sometimes more to do with local conditions – such as war or natural disasters – than global shortages. But there has long been a connection, and the food crisis of 2007–8, largely caused by global shortages of cereals, has made this even more evident.

It is now abundantly clear that fluctuations in consumption in rich countries affect the availability of food globally and this impacts directly on poor people’s ability to buy enough food to survive.



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The case for this is most easily demonstrated by cereals – principally wheat, rice and maize – which have global prices determining the cost of food in the markets of Africa and Asia just as they do on the shopping aisles of the United States and Europe. The amount of cereals that rich countries import and export depends on how much is used within those countries – and how much is thrown away. If Western countries divert millions of tonnes of cereals into their rubbish bins, there will be less available on the world market. If they stopped doing so, there would be more and it would be more likely to be affordable.

Since food supply has become a global phenomenon, and particularly when demand outstrips supply, putting food in the bin really is equivalent to taking it off the world market and out of the mouths of the starving.

Wasting food also uses up the world's limited available agricultural land. If rich countries wasted less this could liberate agricultural land for other uses – and this applies even for fresh produce grown and purchased within individual nations. If that food wasn't being bought and wasted, the land and other resources could be used to grow something else, including food such as cereals that could contribute to much-needed global supplies.

There are legitimate objections to this argument – for example, that rich countries' demand for food can stimulate production and contribute to the economies of poor nations, and therefore throwing food away merely increases demand which raises some farmers' revenues. It is also true that in some circumstances growing surplus can be a necessary and desirable measure to prevent food shortages.

But creating surplus food involves a trade-off in terms of land use, resource depletion and stretching supplies, so therefore when ecological or production limits are reached, the costs of waste outweigh the potential benefits. It is true, too, that if rich countries stopped wasting so much, the food that would be liberated might merely be bought by other relatively affluent people, for example to fatten more livestock, rather than being eaten by the poorest families. But overall, pressure on world food supplies would decrease, helping to stabilise prices and improving the condition of the vast majority of poor people who depend on these markets for their food.

Hunger and malnutrition are not exclusively foreign concerns either; millions in the developed world also do not have enough to eat. In Britain alone, four million people are unable to access a decent diet. In the United States around 35 million live in households that do not have secure access to food and, in the European Union, an estimated 43 million are at risk of food poverty. This situation persists even while supermarkets throw away millions of tonnes of quality food. Here one

potential solution is for surplus food to be given to organisations such as FareShare in the UK or Feeding America in the US, and redistributed to people who need it while it is still fresh and good to eat.

So in terms of taking food from the mouths of the hungry, how significant is the food wasted in rich countries? One way of looking at this is to calculate the nutritional value of the food being wasted. It is difficult to imagine a million tonnes of food, but converting that measurement into the number of people that could have been fed on it makes it more comprehensible and the value of that food more vivid. It can even help to provide a clearer idea of how many people the world would really be able to feed if people cut down on waste.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the average calorific deficit for malnourished people in the developing is 250 kcal per person per day – a level of undernourishment that is called the 'depth of hunger.' Supplying an average undernourished person with an extra 250 kcal a day above what they are getting already would allow them to attain a minimum acceptable body weight, and perform light activity. Malnourishment causes children to be stunted and it retards brain development; it damages the immune system and sometimes leads to death by starvation: 250 kcal extra a day on average would be enough to prevent all this.

The detailed studies on food waste conducted in Britain and America allow us to calculate the nutritional content of wasted food with some precision. British consumers and American retailers, food services and householders throw away enough grain-based foods, mainly in the form of bread, to alleviate the hunger of more than 224 million people – that is, it could have supplied them with that extra 250 kcal a day they need to avoid malnourishment (and that still does not include the industrial waste of food in as-yet unmeasured links in the supply chain). If you include arable crops such as wheat, maize and soy used to produce the meat and dairy products that are thrown away, this comes to enough food to have alleviated the hunger of 1.5 billion people – more than all the malnourished people in the world. That grain – if we had not outbid the poor for it – could have stayed on the world market; people could have bought it, and eaten it.

Using a completely different set of production and consumption data from the FAO, it is possible to calculate approximately how much food could be saved if all nations in the world reduced waste and unnecessary surplus to the extent that no country supplied its population with more than 130 per cent of the population's nutritional needs (as opposed to 200 per cent in the case of the US today and

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slightly less for most European countries). The details of this calculation are laid out more fully in my book, 'Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal', but the overall total shows that 33 per cent of global food supplies could be saved, or enough food to provide the entire nutritional requirements of an extra 3 billion people.

Even these staggering totals do not include the savings that could be made if Westerners ate a smaller proportion of cereal-fed livestock products in their diet which would liberate grains that are inefficiently fed to animals rather than people, and it does not include the potential savings from agricultural products currently wasted in rich nations before they enter the human food supply chain, such as potatoes rejected on cosmetic grounds, nor the diversion of food crops into other non-food uses, nor the millions of tonnes of fish discarded by fishing fleets each year, nor the massive savings that could be made if Europe used its gargantuan piles of food waste to fatten pigs and chickens, rather than, as at present, outlawing this ancient recycling process under misguided animal by-products legislation.

It seems that the affluent world is doing on a global scale what Locke warned against in seventeenth-century England. We sequester the land and other common resources of the

world to grow food that we end up wasting. According to Locke, this annuls our right to possess both the land and the food grown on it.

It is understandable that we have not yet learnt to appreciate how our everyday actions affect people on the other side of the planet. This kind of global consciousness is relatively new, and societies always take time to absorb big ideas, particularly when they are uncomfortable ones. It is too easy to resort to condemnation and outrage. Rather than feeling guilty, we should feel empowered by the sense of responsibility. It is a relief, in many ways, that we can enhance the lives of the world's hungry by doing something as easy as buying only the food we are going to eat, and eating whatever we buy. ■