

Food waste: raising awareness is important, but not decisive



A considerable body of work has been published over the last few years regarding food waste, its quantification and its environmental impacts. [Statistics from the FAO](#) show estimates as high as 30% of global food being wasted. There is no doubt, then, that acting on food waste is key to transitioning to more sustainable food systems.

In developed countries, food wasted by household represents a significant share of total food waste. Therefore, better understanding why households behave the way they do is paramount.

An article from the *Journal of Cleaner Production* in 2017 by Marie Hebrok and Casper Boks (as part of [the CYCLE Project](#)) reviews the main factors that lead people to discard food that could have been eaten. Its two main take-away for policy are that, first, awareness raising is not enough as food waste is the result of an interwoven set of factors, and, second, there is a need for more user-centered innovation to tackle the issue.

People know they should not waste food

No one is happy to waste food. Literature shows that people feel guilty about it. Some even develop strategies to deal with this guilt, for example by letting leftovers go wrong in the fridge until they are considered unsafe to eat and therefore ok to throw away. So, even in an area of abundance and cheap food in developed countries, food waste still remains seen as negative, something one should really not be doing.

This result from the literature is really interesting because it has far-reaching consequences on policy. Indeed, if households know they should not waste food, then telling them not to do so will therefore not really have an impact.

Pleasure, freedom, safety... so many reasons to waste food

So how can we explain that people still waste food even if they are not really proud about it? The article shows that **the secret lies in understanding, and acting upon, the interwoven set of factors that make people waste food even if they know they should not.** As Marie Hebrok puts it, *"how we organise our days of work and leisure matters profoundly"*.

The general picture is that, in a context of abundance, a lot of things (social life, pleasure...) takes precedence over controlling food waste. **People do not throw food on purpose, it just happens as the consequences of them dealing with conflicting priorities in their lives.**



For example, it has been shown that young people tend to favour pleasure and improvisation over planning their food purchases. In other words, they bought food thinking they would eat it in the week, and then went out on some days, and left it go bad. Arguing that you need to finish your vegetable is not a socially accepted reason to decline an invitation to go out with friends...

Another example is the "good provider" identity. Within a family, this can happen when the spouse in charge of the meals wants to provide diversity and food children will like. They will stock food in quantity to deal with some uncertainty, and some of this food can go wrong. The same happens when households have guests: they do not want to be seen as not providing enough for them, so they prepare more than what they know will be eaten, and can throw away the leftovers.

What these examples point out is that depending on your way of life, your age, your values... the reasons why you waste food are different. **Understanding these different logics will help better tailor policies.**

The need for user-centered innovation

In order for policies (and, more generally, products and services innovations) to be effective, they need to be designed with the final user in mind, otherwise they might just miss their point. For instance, as Marie Hebrok highlights, *"apps that help you keep track of the food you have at home may reduce food waste if used in the intended way, but how do we make people use it, when the reason they do not keep track is time constraint and affluence?"* Another example? Any advice that entails better planning, for instance, that regarding cooking leftovers, will fit more in the way of life of families with children, who are more used to planning for meals and shop accordingly.

The innovation process should therefore come from the bottom up. The question should not be: *"how can we convey the message to young people that wasting food is bad?"* It should rather be: *"what kind of incentives or services can we develop for young people that waste food because they do not really plan their shopping, and will probably not be willing to plan anyway?"* And this opens up a boulevard for innovation...

According to the researcher, a key insight to design effective interventions is to be where (and when) food is handled. This points for a wide array of contextual measures around packaging, the grocery store, the fridge... It is not to say that awareness raising campaigns should be halted. They keep sending the signal that food waste is not socially accepted, and therefore they do play their part in the overall food waste policies. What this article points out, though, is that they are not enough and more should be done. And that only by carefully studying which households are doing what, and why, can we find pathways for innovations.

The CYCLE Project

CYCLE is an interdisciplinary project with a bio-economic perspective, focusing on several value chains from both agriculture and marine sectors. The main objective of CYCLE is to improve resource utilization in the food chain in Norway by developing sustainable eco-friendly bio-processes and novel technology, with research and innovation at its core.

CYCLE is based on a holistic approach, focusing on value chains and integrate several disciplines such as food safety, sustainability, sensor & automation technology, logistics, bioprocessing technology, and socio-economics into one balanced entity

More information: <http://cycleweb.no/about-the-project/>

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[Marie Hebrok, Casper Boks, \(2017\) "Household food waste: Drivers and potential intervention points for design – An extensive review", Journal of Cleaner Production, Vol 151, pp. 380-392](#)

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