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## Food waste

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Have you ever gone to a buffet? Rows among rows of tables are filled with all sorts of delicacies and mouth-watering dishes waiting to be tasted. With flowing drinks and a never-ending variety of food from appetizers to main courses to desserts, the choices are endless and without doubt, there is something to satisfy everyone's palate. People fill plate after plate to the brim, hoping to stuff their stomachs as much as possible and to get a bite of everything, if possible. By the end, everyone is joyfully satisfied, awaiting the oncoming food coma to bestow them. But I'd wager that nearly no one notices the plates taken away with food still on them nor the amount of food that gets thrown away by the end of the buffet.

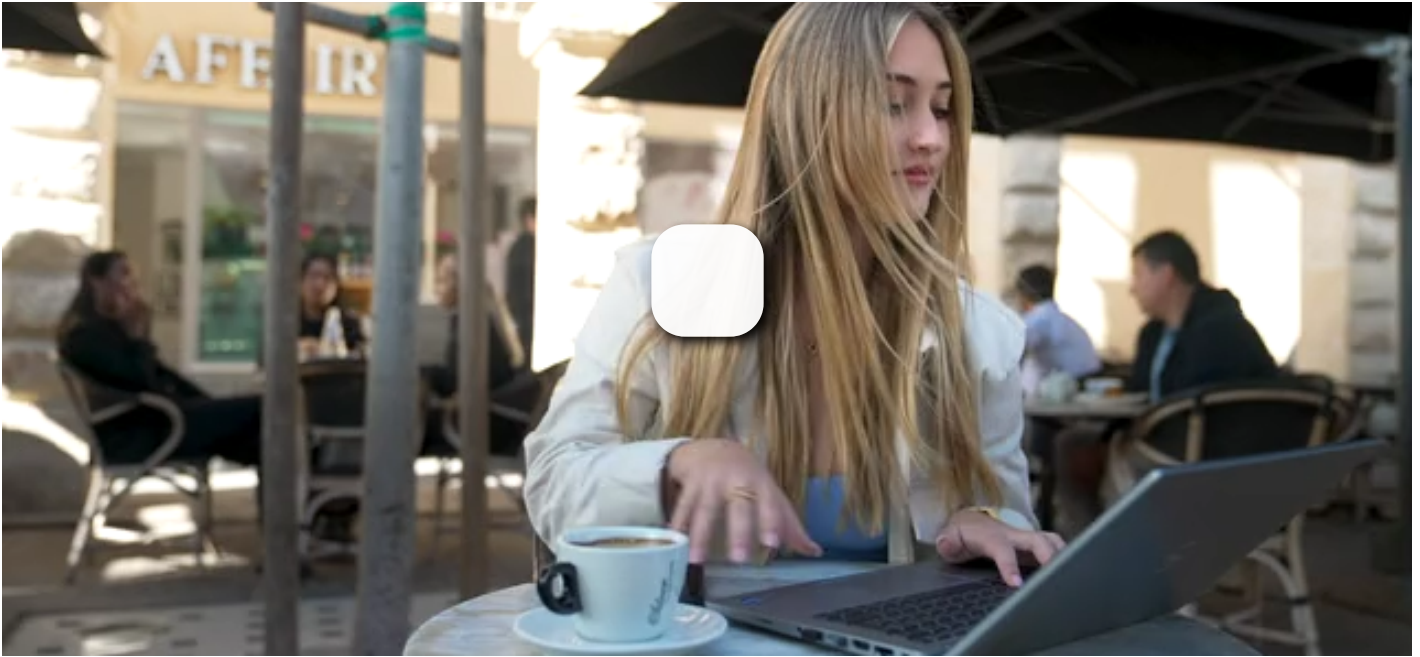
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Food waste can occur throughout any phase of the food supply chain from manufacturers to retailers to consumers. It can be broadly divided into two categories:

1. *Food loss* occurs before the food reaches the consumer. It is a consequence of issues in the production, storage, processing and distribution phases.
2. *Food waste* - refers to food that is good for consumption but is consciously discarded at the retail or consumption phases.

Globally, about 2.5 billion tons of food, which is over a third of all the food produced, is lost or wasted each year. This is equivalent to \$230bn worth of food. Furthermore, in 2020 in the EU, it was estimated that each inhabitant wasted around 127kg of food. If we take a deeper look into those 127kg of food waste generated, 55% of it is accounted for by households while the remaining 45% of food waste is generated by the food supply chain, as follows:

- Manufacturers of food products and beverages produced 23kg of food waste
- Primary production of food generated 14kg of food waste
- Restaurants and food services are responsible for 12kg of food waste
- Retail and other food distributors produced 9kg of food waste

Similarly, it has been estimated that each Maltese individual generates approximately 62kg of food waste each year. This is particularly worrying since it not only increases greenhouse gas emissions but furthers the burden on landfills which are continuously being used to dump all sorts of waste including food. Meanwhile, as all this food goes to waste, 828 million people go to bed hungry, despite there being enough food to feed everyone.

Food waste can occur during two main phases, the upstream and downstream phases of the food supply chain. The upstream phase considers the production, yield handling and storage stages. During this phase, over 50% of food is wasted. The downstream phase deals with the processing, distribution and consumption stages of the food. Additionally, a correlation between income level, a country's development and food waste is present. For instance, middle and higher-income regions had greater food loss and waste during the downstream phase or at the consumption level while in developing countries, food loss or waste was more likely to occur during the upstream phase due to a lack of proper harvest techniques and infrastructure. In conjunction with the above, several other factors are in play that further contribute to food waste.

To start off with, insufficient shopping and meal-planning together with in-store promotions like the infamous "buy 1, get 1 free" can lead to increased food waste. This is because consumers may buy more food than they actually need, leading to more waste if the food goes uneaten before it goes bad. Furthermore, the misconception of "best-before" and "use-by" dates may lead to edible food going to waste. The use-by date refers to food that should not be consumed following that date and such food cannot be legally sold since it may pose a health or safety risk. On the other hand, the best-before date is when one can still consume the food for a while following that date as it should be safe but may have reduced quality. Moreover, inadequate food storage and transport, together with inappropriate food-management skills, can lead to food waste too. Overproducing a particular product, which is not met with high demand, can also lead to good food being thrown away. Other factors like the aesthetics of the food (example the colour of the fruit or vegetable), portion sizes in restaurants and production errors contribute to this matter too. The list can go on and on but what is important is that one is aware of them and knowledgeable about what can be done to prevent such waste.

It is crucial to prevent and reduce food waste since it has detrimental effects on our community and environment. A great percentage of food waste is dumped in landfills. This means that the food wasted by humans is more often than not accessible to wildlife and pests leading to a shift in ecological communities and behaviours. As where there is an abundance of food at a focal location, animals may congregate and focus their daily activities around this food source and have larger group sizes. Furthermore, as the food waste in landfills starts to degrade, large amounts of methane gas are liberated. Methane is a greenhouse gas that is 25 times more harmful than carbon dioxide, trapping exorbitant amounts of infrared radiation within the Earth's atmosphere. Thus, food waste is a contributing factor to global warming and climate change.

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Additionally, about a third of the world's total agricultural land is used to grow food. So, by throwing away food, that precious land in which wildlands were converted for agricultural use, went to waste too. Without considering the negative impacts on biodiversity, like monocropping to produce food, one can appreciate how food waste is impacting both us and the environment.

By now, you are probably wondering what we can all do to reduce food waste. First, there has to be a collaborative effort from all the actors in the food supply chain, from farmers and food manufacturers to retailers and consumers. It all starts with a sustainable food system which entails reducing the waste and losses in the food chain. It is a food system "that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for (current and) future generations are not compromised".

Furthermore, any food that is going to waste due to overproduction or having an "ugly" appearance (example bruising of fruit) can be donated to food banks as long as it is still good. Restaurants can opt to offer smaller portions and donate the uneaten prepared food to charities. Governments should push for policies that aim to reduce food waste that have to be adhered to by the actors in the food supply chain. Education campaigns should also be encouraged to raise awareness of the issue and what incentives one can take to reduce such waste. Moreover, the overall goal is to reduce food waste by improving product development, storage, marketing, labelling and cooking methods while also promoting the donation of excess food. In addition, recycled food waste can be used to feed animals or to create compost, bioenergy and natural fertilizers too. And finally, we as consumers can educate ourselves when food is no longer safe for consumption, how to cook and store food properly, how to repurpose and compost food and most importantly how to plan our meals to avoid buying excess food that will go uneaten.

In conclusion, the next time you go to a buffet, before filling that empty white plate with food, ask yourself if you can down all that food and if you actually like it. And whenever you are upset because you were not served your favourite dish, remember how fortunate you are to have food on your plate while a person out there is going to bed hungry tonight.

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