GLOBAL FOOD LOSSES AND WASTE

With limited natural resources (land, water, energy) it is more effective to reduce food losses than to increase production.

The Swedish Institute for Food and Biotechnology (SIK) on assignment from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations from August 2010 to January 2011 conducted two studies to identify the causes of food losses and possible preventions.

One study focused on high/medium income countries and one on low-income countries. The studies were done along the entire food supply chain.

The three medium and high-income regions were: Europe including Russia, North America & Oceania, and Industrialized Asia (Japan, South Korea and China).

The four low-income regions covered were: Sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, Western and Central Asia, South and Southeastern Asia and Latin America.

The results of the studies showed that globally an average of one-third of food for human consumption is lost or wasted, which is about 1.3 billion tons per year.

Every year, consumers in rich countries waste almost as much food (222 million tons) as the entire net food production of sub-Saharan Africa (230 million tons).

This inevitably means that also one-third of the resources used in food production are used in vain, as well as one-third of the greenhouse gas emissions caused by food production.

Food is wasted throughout the food supply chain, from initial agricultural production to final
household consumption. In medium and high-income countries food is thrown away even if it is still suitable for human consumption.

In low-income countries food is lost during the early and middle stages of the food supply chain, much less food is wasted at the consumer level.

The causes of food losses and waste in low-income countries are mainly connected to financial and technical limitations in harvest technique, storage, cooling facilities, infrastructure, packaging and marketing systems. These limitations in combination with the prevalent climatic conditions cause large amounts of food to spoil.

The food supply chain in developing countries need to be strengthened by organizing small farmers, diversifying and up scaling their production and marketing, as well as by investments in infrastructure, transportation, and food packaging industries. Both the public and private sectors have a role to play.

The causes of food losses and waste in medium/high-income countries mainly connect to consumer behavior as well as lack of communication between different actors in the supply chain. Farmers often feel pressured to deliver according to agreements with suppliers to contractor supermarkets, causing discrepancies between offer and demand. In case of surplus production, both contractor agreements and agricultural subsidies may contribute to large amounts of crops ending up wasted and ploughed back in the soil.

Food can be wasted due to quality standards that reject food items not perfect in shape or appearance. At the consumption level, insufficient purchase planning and an exaggerated concern towards ‘best-before-dates’ also cause large amounts of waste in combination with a careless attitude of consumers who can afford to waste food.

Consumers in rich countries are generally encouraged to buy more food than they need. “Buy three, pay two” promotions are an example, while the oversized ready-to-eat meals produced by the food industry are another.

Food waste in industrialized countries can be reduced by an increased awareness among food industries, retailers and consumers. The ‘disposing is cheaper than using or re-using’ attitude should be changed.

1.3 billion tons of food per year are wasted

The public needs to be made aware that food commodities are traded on the international market and waste in one part of the world affects prices in other parts of the world. When
a large proportion of food is thrown away in rich countries this affects the availability of food in poor countries. It is frequently proposed that food production much increase by 70% until 2050 to meet the future demands of an increasing and more affluent world population.

The results of SIK study do however illustrate the potential in shifting focus from production to consumption issues and to food loss reduction in order to increase the amount of food available for human consumption. With limited natural resources (land, water, energy) it is more effective to reduce food losses than to increase production.

World Food Day, 16 October 2012

Agricultural cooperatives are key to feeding the world. Agricultural cooperatives are the focus of World Food Day 2012.

“Agricultural cooperatives – key to feeding the world” is the formal wording of the 2012 theme. It has been chosen to highlight the role of cooperatives in improving food security and contributing to the eradication of hunger.

Interest in cooperatives and rural organizations is also reflected in the decision of the UN General Assembly to designate 2012 “International Year of Cooperatives.”

www.fao.org/getinvolved/worldfoodday