
HLPE e-consultation
to set the track of the study on:

Food losses and waste in the context of sustainable food systems

From 03 to 30 April 2013

http://www.fao.org/fsnforum/cfs-hlpe/food_losses_waste_scope

– Scope proposed by the HLPE Steering Committee –

Topic

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in its thirty-ninth Session (October 2012) requested the High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), to undertake a study on 'Food losses and waste in the context of sustainable food systems' to be presented to the Plenary in 2014. *This report has to be policy oriented, practical and operational.*

As part of its report elaboration process, the HLPE is launching an e-consultation to seek views, public feedback and comments, on the pertinence and interconnections of some key questions that the report proposes to address, in line with the request from the CFS, and that could form the building blocks of the report. References of global and national studies and data on the subject, especially on food waste, are also welcome.

The feedback received will be used by the HLPE Steering Committee to finalize the terms of reference of the study and the HLPE Project Team that will be appointed to prepare the study and policy recommendations.

In parallel, the HLPE is calling experts interested in participating or in leading the Project Team for this report. Information on this call is available on the [HLPE website](#). The HLPE Steering Committee will appoint the Project Team after review of candidatures.

The issue of food losses and waste has recently been given high visibility. According to FAO (2011), **almost one-third of food produced for human consumption—approximately 1.3 billion tonnes per year** is either lost or wasted. Their global reduction is now presented as essential to improve food security (HLPE 2011, FAO 2012ab) and to reduce the environmental footprint of food systems (HLPE 2012, FAO 2012ab, UNEP 2012ab). It was prominent on the agenda towards the preparation of the Rio+20 Conference, which linked the reduction of food losses and waste to the issue of more sustainable food systems.

The Zero Hunger Challenge launched by the Secretary General of the United Nations in Rio during the conference integrates a **zero-food-loss-and-waste** challenge and a 100%-sustainable-food-systems challenge.

The formulation of the request by the CFS seeks to understand food losses and waste, and the means to reduce them, from a sustainability perspective, including the three dimensions of sustainability: environmental, social and economic. It requires defining what "food losses and waste" means, to consider their extent and the means to reduce them, keeping in mind the three dimensions of sustainability. It also implies adopting an integrated view of food production, commercialization and consumption.

By requesting the HLPE to examine the issue of food losses and waste in the context of sustainable food systems, the CFS invites the HLPE to investigate how the reduction of food losses and waste could improve the sustainability of food systems, as well as how unsustainable food systems

contribute to food losses and waste¹. This in turn requires considering the very notion of sustainable food systems, which includes their contribution to the four dimensions of food security, now, and in the future.

It is generally agreed to distinguish food losses and food waste:

- Food losses happen at the earlier stage of food chains; major issues are the post-harvest losses mainly in developing countries, the development of infrastructure and the most suitable technologies to address them.
- Food waste happens at retailing and consumption stages mainly in developed countries but also as an increasing concern in developing countries. The key issue is food distribution and consumer behaviour.

Food losses and waste can be first seen as a reduction of food availability for the poor and hungry. By reducing the amount of food available, they also have an impact on prices and thus on access to food. Losses occurring during storage make it more difficult to ensure stability.

Loss of nutritional quality (and particularly important losses found on certain categories of food such as fruits, vegetables and fish) has an impact on nutrition. This calls for an extension of the mere notion of “quantity” of loss towards integrating quality aspects in the measure and in the problem of reduction of food losses and waste.

Moreover the production of food, which is finally not eaten, whether it is lost during the production and transformation processes, or wasted at the consumption stage, entails **the use of resources in vain**. Therefore, reducing food losses and waste would also reduce the pressure on natural resources. Reducing food losses and waste appears thus as emblematic of **better resource efficiency**, a key dimension of more sustainable food systems.

This explains also why some enlarge the perspective from “food waste” (which by definition is edible food wasted, i.e. which could have been eaten, non edible part not accounting as waste) to food-related waste (which includes the wastage of *non edible* biomass/material). In the latter perspective, the focus is more on reducing the ultimate amount of waste, accounting also for not wasting non-edible parts, by re-use or recycling, either as feed for livestock, feedstock for energy production or, ultimately, as compost to return nutrients to the soil.

Food waste at the consumer level in developed and in some developing countries is also emblematic of non-sustainable consumption patterns. As such, reducing food waste appears as a way to raise awareness more generally on sustainable consumption as a driver of sustainable food systems.

1 Food systems encompass the ecosystem and all activities that relate to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food. A food system also includes the inputs needed and outputs generated by each of these activities as well as their outcomes, insofar as they contribute to food and nutrition security.

Whatever the approach, there is no doubt that reducing food losses and waste is a key dimension of improving the sustainability of food systems.

But actions to reduce food losses and waste are not necessarily immune from impacts on one dimension or another of sustainability.

Causes of food losses and of food waste are very different and call for very different solutions. **Most of food losses can be traced back to biophysical, including biosafety aspects, or technical causes. Food waste is often linked to behavioural causes.**

The economic costs of technological improvements have to be taken into account and compared to the economic costs of losses, both of which are very context dependent.

Actions to reduce food losses shall also take into account sanitary issues, for instance as regards the development of cold chains. Reducing losses for fresh products could also have environmental impacts as they often require either refrigeration or quicker means of transport, or both.

There is the need to deepen the understanding of the relations between the price of food and the amount of food lost and wasted. Policies to reduce food losses and waste might, everything else being equal, lead to a reduction of the overall effective demand, and thus to less pressure on the price system, with different consequences for producers and consumers. Other advantages could also be offered in terms of food price and the use of agro-resources for non-food uses, among others.

Such considerations show how food losses and waste and the ways to reduce them have to be considered in their specific context.

The main question underlying all the above mentioned aspects is *what can be the contributions of a reduction in food losses and waste to improve food and nutrition security in the context of sustainable food systems.*

To address this question, the HLPE proposes to look at several issues:

1. **Concept/definitions (state of art and debates):** existing definitions; taking into account for quantities and quality of food lost and wasted; other uses of food (livestock, energy); “overuse” of food (natural resources and over-nutrition/obesity); actual uses of food losses and waste as feed for livestock and feedstock for energy production; food losses and waste circulating through informal circuits, food banks or food charity.
2. **Measuring and data availability (indicators, extension and trends):** adequate indicators to be used; extent of food losses and waste; expected trends; lack of data and monitoring systems.
3. **Impacts:** impacts of food losses and of food waste on the four dimensions of food and nutrition security.
4. **Sustainable food systems:** causes of food losses and of food waste; economic, social and environmental dimensions; economic constraints and social and environmental consequences of reducing losses and waste or of better valorisation; connections with poverty and social inequalities; food production and consumption patterns.
5. **Public policies:** present state of public policies; policies leading to or ignoring related food losses and waste; programmes aimed at reducing food losses and/or food waste.

6. **Recommendations:** The HLPE proposes to look at the following axes for possible recommendations:
- potential for reduction for food losses, and by what means (technical and policy tools, information etc), taking into account regional and product specificities, as well as actions at different levels,
 - potential for reduction for food waste, and by what means (technical and policy tools, information etc), taking into account regional and product specificities, as well as actions at different levels,
 - potential for better valorisation of food waste and food related waste, including modifications of systems in place,
 - appropriate programmes and instruments for reducing food losses and food waste,
 - on the above, what role for governments, consumers, social actors, private sector and social responsibilities?

References

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