

Commentary

Closing the loop on Canada's national food policy: A food waste agenda

Tammara Soma

Department of Geography and Planning, University of Toronto

Introduction

In the near future, Canada will be implementing a national food policy; in doing so, it will be joining a growing number of countries with policies and strategies that address the growing problem of food waste. Food waste is a major economic drain estimated to cost Canada \$31 billion dollars annually or \$107 billion in true cost, when the costs of wasted water, energy, and resources are included (Gooch & Felfel, 2014). Despite the staggering cost, there is currently a limited number of scholars tackling the issue of food waste in Canada (Abdulla, Martin, Gooch, & Jovel, 2013; MacRae et al., 2016; Parizeau, von Massow, & Martin, 2015). Some of the leading think tanks and research institutions, such as the World Resources Institute (WRI), National Defence Research Council (NRDC), as well as inter-sectoral collaboratives such as Canada's National Zero Waste Council (NZWC) have identified several priorities to address food waste. Key priorities include, but are not limited to: 1) education and awareness; 2) harmonizing food waste quantification through waste audits and establishing reduction targets; 3) addressing confusion over "best before" labels; 4) incentivizing surplus food donation; and 5) landfill bans on food waste. While these priorities are currently being debated and consulted upon in Canada, several countries around the world have already reached the implementation stage. Canada is therefore in a position to learn from the impacts of policies in other countries with a view to developing a more sustainable, systematic, and just approach to food waste prevention and reduction in Canada.

*Corresponding author: tammara.soma@mail.utoronto.ca

The trend

Both France and the United Kingdom (UK) have led in the commitment to addressing the issue of food waste (Food Standards Agency, 2016; Mourad, 2015). For example, France enacted a law in 2016 banning supermarkets with an area of 400m² or more from throwing away or destroying unsold food. At first glance this law can be seen as a “win-win” solution to divert perfectly edible food from landfills, therefore reducing the greenhouse gas methane (known to be 20-25 times more potent than carbon dioxide) and assisting communities that are food insecure. The French government also urges supermarkets to sign contracts with food charities with respect to the donation of surplus food. Penalties for breaking the ban range from €3,750- € 75,000 or a sentence of two years in prison (Gore-Langton, 2017).

The law itself, however, does not set a specific minimum amount for donation. Accordingly, supermarkets can donate any percentage of their surplus food and be seen as complying with the law (Gore-Langton, 2017). Food waste bans and the incentivization of surplus food donations by supermarkets to charities (in the case of France, under threat of penalization) do not address the root causes of food waste. In fact, such policies may potentially shift the responsibility for food waste/ surplus food waste management to the charitable sector without recognizing the complexity and labour-intensive process of managing, re-distributing, sorting, storing, and processing of food donations. More importantly, from the lens of social justice, these types of laws can pass on the risks and burdens of consuming and managing “unwanted foods” (as deemed by the market) to the lower-income communities who are the primary recipients of food from charities. It is therefore important to caution against food waste reduction strategies that entail reliance upon low-income communities to be “infrastructures” for food waste management.

While donating surplus food or food that is about to be wasted may be well intentioned or helpful in the short term, if adequate consideration is not given to the appropriate local context, it can in fact pose some harm (OXFAM, 2005; Riches, 2016; Soma, 2017; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005). In an international context, Clapp (2012) has demonstrated that in some cases “food aid” is simply another term to guise the “disposal of surplus food.” These types of “aid” could have deleterious effects including the disruption of domestic production, the creation of dependencies, displacement of local food sales, as well as food loss at the agricultural stage (Clapp, 2012). As argued by Tarasuk and Eakin (2005), we need to be careful not to create a second-tier food system that will mitigate against more holistic efforts to develop long-term effective solutions to both hunger and food waste.

Food waste reduction through public education has also been a popular approach. In the UK, the Love Food Hate Waste campaign was launched in 2007 by The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) to raise awareness and educate consumers about the issue of food waste. WRAP’s campaign successfully raised the issue of food waste at a global level, assisted by developing tools such as apps and witty messaging. There has been a significant reduction in food waste during the duration of the campaign exemplified by the cutting of 219,000 tonnes of

waste at the retail and food manufacturing levels. The campaign has also inspired other countries and cities to follow suit. However, despite significant efforts placed on awareness and education, the UK government failed to meet its own target of reducing household food waste by 5% in 2015. Further data also found that food waste remains a major problem, with UK household food waste increasing by 4.4% between 2012 and 2015 due to economic factors such as population growth, price deflation, and increases in earnings (WRAP, 2017).

While public education and awareness campaigns are important components of a food waste reduction agenda, and will likely be part of the Canadian strategy, there is also a need to ensure that awareness leads to action and that backsliding does not occur after a campaign is over. Evans (2014) and Lee and Soma (2016) found that food wasting practices are influenced by numerous other factors (e.g., built environment, health-related anxieties, time scarcity) and hierarchies of prioritization that can compete with food waste reduction goals. A longer-term approach to food waste education requires complementary support for associated infrastructure and funding for research and innovation. Education should also include increasing food literacy through school curricula, improving the connection to food, and the understanding of food nutrient cycles to nourish the soil.

As Zsuzsa Gille argued in her work on “food waste regime”, food waste is a multiscalar global problem and therefore “solutions to the ‘food waste problem’ limited to technological innovation and a few sites or even countries will prove insufficient and will likely exacerbate existing inequalities” (Gille, 2013, p. 27). Accordingly, food waste solutions should not be applied in isolation. While approaches such as taxation, campaigns, and incentives are tangible, and may be easier to implement, from a systems perspective they are considered the least effective because they fail to address root causes such as paradigm/worldviews and global food regimes. They can, however, function as stopgap solutions in the short term.

A systems approach based on social justice and reconciliation: All my relations

A comprehensive approach to a national food policy on food waste is critical when considering Gille’s (2013) caution that solutions based on a few sites have the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities. In the case of food waste, language and worldviews are influential in shaping the narrative around food waste solutions.

I had the opportunity to learn firsthand about the importance of language and worldview, especially the principles of “All My Relations” from Indigenous community members Patrick Nadjiwon, Melanie Goodchild, Maria Montejo, and Johl Ringuette, each of whom were expert contributors to a social innovation project I co-founded called the Food Systems Lab. The Food Systems Lab started as a one-year pilot project utilizing social innovation methodology to address the issue of food waste in the City of Toronto. This collaborative process was developed with the aim to collectively contribute toward a more systemic approach to food waste and to build relationships with different stakeholders across the food systems.

Stakeholders who participated included farmers (both rural and urban), a migrant farm worker, food businesses, Indigenous community members, retailers, food processors, consumers, a school association, an industry association, civil society groups, faith leaders, charitable foundations, and local government (both municipal and provincial). From September 2016 to June 2017 the Lab conducted expert interviews with 47 informants, as well as engaged in a collaborative social innovation process with a total of 92 stakeholders across the food system. What emerged from the Lab demonstrated the complexity of the issue of food waste. An issue that is premised on injustice, which in the context of Canada is rooted in colonization, residential schools, spatial and mental distancing¹ connected to urbanization, and the globalization of the food supply chain.

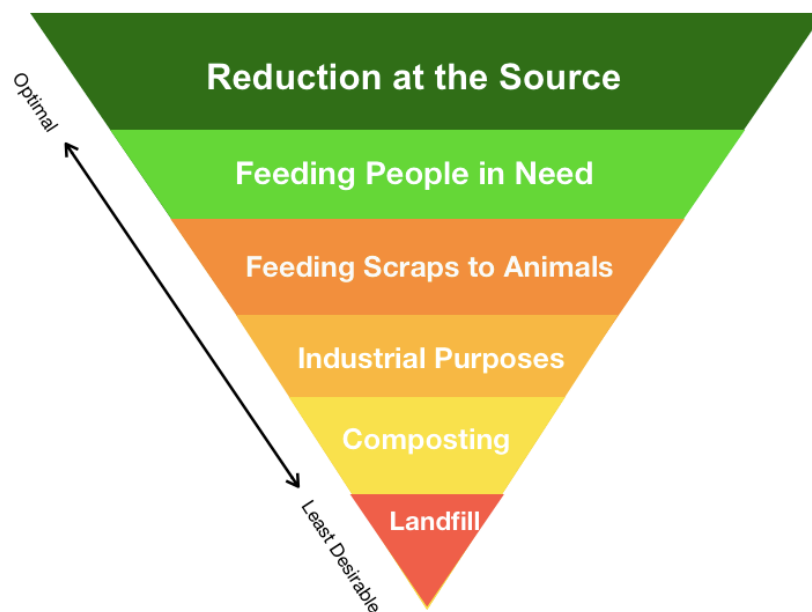


Figure 1: EPA Food Recovery Hierarchy, adapted from EPA (2017)

Currently, the dominant paradigm for managing food waste is based on a “food recovery hierarchy” developed by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. While the hierarchy has helped raise awareness and advance efforts in reducing food waste, it is still based on a paradigm that sees food as a commodity or material resource viewed through an industrial food system lens (Li and Soma, 2017). Further, it does not necessarily consider the cultural and spiritual expressions around food as premised in the Indigenous teachings of “All My Relations.”

A National Food Policy can directly support initiatives to reduce food waste by recognizing alternative worldviews through a commitment to Indigenous food sovereignty, reconciliation, and a food system based on circularity. By doing so, it is possible to re-introduce

¹ Gap in knowledge between food production and consumption (Clapp, 2012)

alternative worldviews that do not commodify food and land. The province of Ontario has recently implemented a 2016 *Resource Recovery and Circular Economy Act*. More than simply a “resource,” the teachings of “All My Relations” promote a circular philosophy based on consideration of both human and non-human relations in the food system. Shifting the governing paradigm on food waste reduction from a food recovery hierarchy to a regenerative closed loop food system is critical for Canada’s food waste agenda and is the foundation for a more sustainable and just food system.

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