Household food waste in Nordic countries: Estimations and ethical implications

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Abstract

This study focuses on food waste generated by households in four Nordic countries: Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Based on existing literature we present (A) comparable data on amounts and monetary value of food waste; (B) explanations for food waste at household level; (C) a number of public and private initiatives at national levels aiming to reduce food waste; and (D) a discussion of ethical issues related to food waste with a focus on possible contributions from ecocentric ethics. We argue that reduction of food waste at household level, which has an impact on issues such as climate change and unjust distribution of food resources, needs to be based on an appreciative and relational understanding of nature and food and not only on economic and moralizing arguments. This is done by drawing on an ecocentric perspective where food is seen as one of the areas where new narratives need to be developed to establish cultural habits replacing a focus on affluence and individual choice with a focus on participatory embeddedness in a more-than-human lifeworld.

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Food waste is food that is thrown away, lost or uneaten. The reasons for food waste are numerous, and occur at the various stages in the food supply chain from production, processing, retailing to consumption. In low-income countries, most loss occurs during production, while in developed countries much food – about 100 kilograms per person per year – is wasted at the consumption stage. Food waste is not referring to rotten food but to good food that could still be used. The Paradox The world is faced with an interesting paradox. Food waste in Norwegian households - An average person throws away 42.1 kg of food per year (2015). - An average household discards food worth NOK 5 800 annually. - Food waste from households makes up 13 % of consumption; this means that every eighth bag of groceries ends up in the dustbin. Key figures from the ForMat Project show a reduction in the amount of edible food waste in Norway over the last five years. After a steady increase in amounts of wet organic waste in 1995-2010 (waste statistics from Statistics Norway), amounts of edible food waste have been reduced in the past five years. Food waste or food loss is food that is not eaten. The causes of food waste or loss are numerous and occur throughout the food system, during production, processing, distribution, retail and consumption. Global food loss and waste amount to between one-third and one-half of all food produced. In low-income countries, most loss occurs during production, while in developed countries much food – about 100 kilograms (220 lb) per person per year – is wasted at the consumption stage.