



Reduce food waste to feed the hunger: Worldwatch Institute

Updated July 4, 2011 14:01:43

The Worldwatch Institute has come up with an obvious solution to feeding the world's hungriest people - cutting down the huge amounts of food that is wasted, spoiled or just thrown away each year.

The research institute has spent two years studying how best to feed the world's poor as part of its Nourishing the Planet Project.

And one of its key recommendations is stop the waste.

Presenter: Cameron Wilson

Speaker: Danielle Nierenberg, the project director of Nourishing the Planet

- *Listen: [Windows Media](#)*

NIERENBERG: Our estimates at around 20 to 50 per cent of the global harvest before it ever reaches peoples stomachs, and so that's about 1.3 billion tonnes of food that's lost each year and this is an astounding estimate when you consider that nearly one billion people in the world are hungry right now.

WILSON: Now it seems there are different reasons for that waste, depending on if it's a developed country or a developing country. Can we start with the richer countries in the world? What do you see as the main reasons for waste there?

NIERENBERG: Well, the main reason in this country that food is wasted is you and me. We throw away food that's perfectly good before we ever choose to eat it. We're picky eaters in rich countries, so we buy something and we decide we don't like it and that food that are canned or fresh or frozen ends up in the world's landfills and contributes to not only a moral dilemma, because we're wasting food that is perfectly good, but it also contributes to climate change. Methane is one of the main gases that comes from landfills whether it's in the US or Australia or in Europe and methane is a very powerful greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming.

WILSON: I see you refer to this as institutionalised food waste. Does that mean it's behaviour that you see is fairly difficult to change?

NIERENBERG: I mean I think because food is so cheap in rich countries that we tend to not think of it as very important, but I think we see with the global food crisis and rising food prices, not just in poor countries but also in rich ones, that people are beginning to think that food is really a more precious commodity than it has ever been. And I think really the growth of the local food movement, the growth of the organic movement has really sort of raised awareness among consumers that again food is a very precious resource and it shouldn't be wasted.

WILSON: How are the reasons for food waste or food spoilage different when we look at some of the developing countries?

NIERENBERG: Well, when I spent about a year-and-a-half travelling through 25 countries through sub-

Saharan Africa, It was very clear to me how food is lost before it can feed people. One of the main reasons is a really poor transportation actually the roads in Africa are very bumpy and it takes hours and hours to sometimes travel just a few miles and so this makes it very difficult for farmers whether they're travelling by truck or by car or by wagon to get their food to the market in a timely manner, and because of the bumpiness, a lot of the food is crushed or spoiled by bruising before it can reach market.

Some of the other reasons food is wasted is just really improper storage, we're talking about farmers who are living on a couple of hours a day and they don't have the resources that are required to build proper storage, silos or buy proper storage containers that can really help protect their grains and their produce. They also don't have access to refrigeration. There are about 255 million people who go hungry in Africa every year. These are people who don't have access to the things you and I do, like refrigeration or cooling systems that can really help preserve foods, so it can be saved, eaten.

WILSON: So from what you're saying, is it just as important to put money and resources into improving these sorts of infrastructure, the roads and the fridges etc as it is putting the time and effort into improving farming techniques in developing countries?

NIERENBERG: I definitely think it is and this is not a new idea. A way back in 1974, at the first World Food Conference, there was a commitment made by world leaders for a 50 per cent reduction in post harvest losses. But now some almost 40 years later, we're still seeing the same sorts of problems in the food system. We don't have the political will to make sure that only producing food is a commitment, but also preserving food.

WILSON : In some ways, is there some good news in this and I'm thinking does it seem that the challenge of feeding the world in the years ahead, which we so often hear is going to what double the need for food production, does it become easier to realise that goal if we focus on less waste and don't face the challenges of the shortage of land and water etc?

NIERENBERG: Definitely, and given all the sort of investments that's gone into producing food, the same sort of investment needs to go again into really protecting that food. I was very sort of inspired by all the innovations that I saw travelling through those 25 countries as part of our Nourishing the Planet project and I'll just give you a few examples and these are not high-tech or innovations. Most of them don't require fossil fuel for refrigeration or other sorts of high tech things and I will just give you one example right now.

In Western Africa, around 100,000 tonnes of mangoes are wasted each year. Mangoes are a very nutritious food. They provide important Vitamin A. Vitamin A is one of the major deficiencies in the African diet, causes millions of cases of blindness in the developing world each year and the mango season tends to be very short. It's only a few months. So finally to make sure that important source of Vitamin A is available throughout the year is very, very important and in the Gambia, I saw and talked to lots of women farmers who were using very simple store-powered dehydrators and dryers to preserve these foods and they were able to sell the dried fruit to local schools, they were also able to sell it at market for tourists and they're also able to use this mango for home consumption. So it not only gave them extra nutrition, but it also gave them an extra source of income.