



The toll of food waste globally

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By Danielle Nierenberg and Matt Styslinger

When was the last time you took a look way in the back of your refrigerator — where the 3-week-old Chinese takeout leftovers are hiding? It's not pleasant, is it? Not to sound like your mother, but don't you know there are starving children in Africa?

Whether it's Atlanta Community Food Bank's efforts to feed the poor or the large-scale composting of Greenco Environmental, Atlanta residents actually have a lot they can do to curb food waste. And yet, most of us still are wasting precious and relatively easy opportunities to do even more, here and in parts of the world that need it most.

In the United States, an estimated 40 percent of edible food is thrown away by retailers and households. Food waste accounts for 12 percent of total waste produced nationwide in a year. Across industrialized countries, some 222 million tons of edible food is wasted annually — nearly equivalent to the 230 million tons that sub-Saharan Africa produces.

Uneaten food not only means wasted opportunities to feed approximately 925 million hungry people worldwide and wasted resources used to produce that food, but it also contributes to global warming. Rotting food produces methane, a greenhouse gas more than 20 times as potent as carbon dioxide. Food in landfills accounts for 34 percent of the total methane produced in the U.S.

As America's per capita food waste has increased 50 percent since 1974, in much of Africa more than 40 percent of crops go bad before they can be eaten. Lack of proper storage, transportation, infrastructure, and disease and pest control all work against impoverished farmers. As mountains of food are thrown out every day in rich countries, farmers in Africa — the epicenter of world hunger — are losing tons of food before it hits the table.

The good news is that there are a lot of ways we can reduce waste — none of which involves you eating that unidentified, fuzzy green stuff you had forgotten about in the fridge.

The Atlanta Community Food Bank distributes donated food from the food service industry, retailers, manufacturers, growers and food drives to more than 700 hunger programs in Atlanta and North Georgia, allowing 20 million pounds of food to go to the poor each year. Greenco creates organic compost for local agriculture and landscaping, using food and other organic waste collected from participating restaurants and other businesses on its 32-acre facility.

And although our individual actions in Atlanta are less directly felt by farmers struggling to reduce post-harvest waste in Africa, we are not powerless. Over the past two years, Worldwatch Institute's

Nourishing the Planet team traveled to 25 countries across sub-Saharan Africa in search of stories of success in sustainable farming.

In Pakistan, for example, the United Nations helped farmers cut their storage losses up to 70 percent by simply replacing jute bags and mud constructions with metal grain silos.

Purdue University is helping communities in rural Niger maintain year-round cowpea supplies by making low-cost, hermetically sealed plastic bags available through the Purdue Improved Cowpea Storage program. Another West African project uses solar energy to dry mangoes after harvest, many of which would go bad before they could reach market.

It's good to reduce your waste at home. But we also can put pressure on governments and nonprofit organizations not to let food aid funding go to waste by overlooking simple ways to protect harvests.

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