



# In a world of abundance, food waste is a crime

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What does the U.S. have in common with countries in sub-Saharan Africa?

Both waste large, obscene amounts of food. Better knowledge and technology would reduce food waste, deter environmental damage and, especially in that region of the African continent, reduce the number of people who go hungry each day.

In sub-Saharan Africa, at least 265 million people are hungry, heightening the travesty of the food waste problem. More than a quarter of the food produced in Africa spoils before it is eaten. Farmers battle post-harvest losses caused by severe weather, disease and pests, or poor harvesting and storage techniques. Annual post-harvest losses for cereal grains, roots and tuber crops, fruits, vegetables, meat, milk and fish amount to some 100 million tons, or \$48 million worth of food.

## Preventive measures

To prevent these losses in Africa and elsewhere, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) is trying to provide the information and technology to begin turning this tide:

- In [Kenya](#), the FAO partnered with the Kenya Ministry of Agriculture to train farmers to take steps to reduce corn crop loss to mycotoxin, a devastating result of fungi growth.
- In [Afghanistan](#), the FAO recently provided metallic silos to roughly 18,000 households to improve storage of cereal grains and legumes, protecting them from the weather and pests. Losses have dropped from 15%-20% [to less than 1%-2%](#).

Americans, of course, are blessed by an abundance of food. But that fact makes our waste all the more inexcusable.

Every day, the average American throws away about one-and-a-half pounds of food. Slightly wilted lettuce, half-eaten cheeseburgers, bruised apples end up in the trash instead of our stomachs. Better to buy and cook less food, and compost the rest. Although it doesn't sound like much, those nearly one-and-a-half pounds add up — [31 million tons](#) end in landfills or incinerators each year. That's roughly equivalent to the weight of 74 Golden Gate bridges. These dumps are not only unsightly, they produce 34% of the methane in the U.S. — a greenhouse gas more than 20 times as potent as carbon dioxide.

## **U.S. household waste**

The waste goes well beyond households. Four percent to 10% of food purchases become waste in restaurants before ever reaching the customer.

Although, unlike sub-Saharan Africa, the United States has the technology to preserve harvested crops, too much of a harvest is left by farm equipment on the field to rot. To feed the hungry in the U.S., organizations such as the Society of St. Andrews recruit volunteers to visit farms after a harvest to glean, or pick up, the perfectly good produce left behind. In 2009, they were able to save and distribute 15.7 million pounds of produce.

Groups such as Food Runners, a non-profit in San Francisco run entirely by volunteers, deliver an estimated 10 tons of food each week to hungry people; otherwise, it would have been wasted. Taken from coffee shops, restaurants and supermarkets, this salvaged sustenance is used in shelters, soup kitchens, senior centers and other locations.

The U.S. and sub-Saharan Africa, now that they are catching up with other countries in this regard, can serve as models for the rest of the world when it comes to food waste. We can show the world how to feed its people while protecting the earth, too.

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