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From Food Waste to Food Citizenship via Food Ethics - a Cross-Country Analysis

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Abstract

Food waste is frequently addressed as a technical inefficiency of food supply chains or a consequence of inadequate consumer awareness; however, its persistence across affluent societies suggests a broader contradiction between food availability, consumption patterns and environmental pressure. This study investigates food waste within the wider context of overconsumption and sustainability outcomes using cross-country indicators from the Our World in Data database. A comparative typology of countries is constructed based on metrics reflecting food system abundance and impact, including daily dietary energy supply per capita, prevalence of obesity, dietary composition approximated through animal-source food intensity, and environmental pressure proxies such as greenhouse gas emissions and agricultural land use. Where available, food loss and waste indicators are used to contextualise inefficiencies across the food chain while maintaining a clear distinction between supply-chain losses and consumer-level waste. The analysis identifies consistent macro-level patterns: countries characterised by high food availability and resource-intensive diets tend to exhibit higher environmental pressure and greater systemic inefficiency, revealing a structural gap between material abundance and responsible consumption, whereas countries combining sufficient availability with moderated consumption patterns display lower systemic pressure. These findings indicate that food waste cannot be interpreted solely as a logistical failure but as part of a broader behavioural and normative imbalance linked to excess consumption. Based on these results, the study proposes food ethics as an interpretative framework connecting material outcomes with behavioural responsibility, encompassing moderation, respect for resources, consideration of environmental limits and awareness of animal impacts. Within this perspective, food citizenship emerges as the observable behavioural expression of ethical internalisation reflected in consumption patterns consistent with lower systemic pressure. By integrating cross-country empirical patterns with a normative framework, the study contributes a conceptual-empirical approach to food waste prevention and supports the view that long-term reduction of waste depends not only on efficiency measures but also on value-oriented behavioural change embedded in food citizenship.

Keywords: Food waste, food ethics, food citizenship, overconsumption, sustainable diets

References

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