

A pathway to sustainable policy: Unraveling the interplay of socio-cultural factors, local contexts, and institutional dynamics in food waste reduction

¹Yannis E. Doukas and ²Ioannis Vardopoulos

¹*Department of Agricultural Development, Agri-Food and Natural Resources Management, School of Agricultural Development, Nutrition and Sustainability, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (UoA), 34400 Psachna, Evia, Greece*

²*Department of Regional and Economic Development, School of Applied Economics and Social Sciences, Agricultural University of Athens (AUA), 33100 Amfissa, Central Greece, Greece*

Abstract

In the pursuit of understanding and addressing the pressing issue of food waste (FW), it is essential to recognize that its generation is not merely a consequence of inaction but is significantly influenced by behavioral and cultural factors (Yetkin Özbük & Coşkun, 2020). Policymakers have been striving to combat this phenomenon through legislative measures and targets (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2023). However, they have encountered challenges rooted in behavioral marginalization and cultural exclusion (Phasha et al., 2020). To navigate these complexities and foster effective change, a framework guided by historical institutionalism is proposed, which sheds light on how policies are created and altered. This approach acknowledges that public policy plays a pivotal role in the continuous advancement of society, functioning not just as a set of rules but as a means of learning and education. Examining the sociocultural aspects of FW generation, we find that agro-dietary habits, behavioral marginalization, and cultural exclusion, in addition to conceptual and terminological diversity, contribute to the problem (Vardopoulos et al., 2022). Cultures around the world exhibit unique practices that can either mitigate or exacerbate FW. In Brazil, the "comida por quilo" culture in restaurants allows customers to choose and serve themselves as much as they desire, leading to potential overordering and waste (de Oliveira Pontes et al., 2022). In China, over-ordering is perceived as a gesture of hospitality or a demonstration of one's ability to provide for their family (Wang et al., 2022). The African culture of 'Ubuntu', embraces extravagance in food as an expression of love and acceptance (Phasha et al., 2020). Religious beliefs also influence FW generation; for instance, Judaism promotes the concept of 'Bal Tashchit,' prohibiting wasteful destruction, and the Muslim Quran urges against wasteful excess (Minton et al., 2020). Additionally, state-funded school meals in countries like Sweden, Finland, and Estonia have institutionalized a social culture around food. Known as 'pedagogic meals,' these

programs promote balanced, nutrient-rich diets, home economics, and resource management, thereby attempting to reduce FW (Silvennoinen et al., 2015). However, such welfare state models are distinct from liberal welfare regimes found in countries like the USA and Australia, where convenience and pre-cooked food are widely endorsed. Beyond cultural practices, the intricacies of food preparation techniques also contribute to FW. High-end culinary traditions, often involve complex and refined cooking methods, resulting in a higher percentage of FW, particularly with exotic fruits that have substantial inedible components. Likewise, the desire to take restaurant leftovers home is influenced by cultural and social norms, as well as environmental awareness. These diverse examples underscore the complexity of reducing FW through policy measures that desperately need to account for the context-specific nature of FW (Abeliotis & Lasaridi, 2022). Historical institutionalism and rational choice institutionalism provide a logical framework for comprehending policy change. The evolution of institutionalism in social science led to a shift from focusing on formal structures to considering how people and behaviors shape policies (Doukas et al., 2023). This emphasizes the importance of historical and local context in policy decision-making, laying the foundation for historical institutionalism (Doukas & Petides, 2021). Key to this understanding is the concept of path dependency, where established institutions tend to persist, making policy changes difficult and costly (Andreou, 2018). Critical junctures are pivotal moments with significant impact on institutional trajectories, shaped by the institutional environment and political behavior. Recognizing their transformative potential is essential for crafting effective FW reduction policies (Capoccia, 2015). Thereafter, to achieve sustainable FW reduction, the policy architecture should be flexible and rational. Encouraging collaboration with compatible policies and allowing adaptability to diverse circumstances and objectives is also essential. Embracing institutional resilience can enhance the policy's effectiveness in the face of unexpected challenges. This research serves as a call to action, urging policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders to come together in a collaborative effort to combat FW and pave the way for a more food-secure and environmentally sustainable future.

Keywords: policy-making, stakeholder engagement, waste prevention, food waste, circular economy, sustainability, SDG 12.3

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