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Down with food waste

UK parliament should debate the Food Waste (Reduction) Bill

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Future food security depends on creating a sustainable food system that can provide healthy affordable diets for a growing population while minimising environmental damage. Multiple actions are needed to achieve this, including reducing the vast amount of food wasted every year. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that a third of the food produced globally is lost or wasted.¹

The environmental impact of producing food is enormous, so waste contributes needlessly to climate change, loss of biodiversity, nitrogen and phosphorus loading, and use of scarce agricultural land and limited freshwater resources.² Global food waste accounts for 7% of global greenhouse gas emissions. In high income countries, such as the United Kingdom, most food waste occurs downstream in manufacturing, retail, hospitality, and households. The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP) estimates that in 2012 UK households threw away 4.2 million egatonnes (Mt) of food that could have been eaten, about 12% of food brought into the home.³ In addition, a further 3.9 Mt of food waste occurred in manufacturing and 0.4 Mt in retail and wholesale.⁴ Successful campaigns, such as WRAP's "love food hate waste," helped raise awareness and, with households reducing food waste by 21% between 2007 and 2012 and saving about £13bn.³

In September 2015 the Food Waste (Reduction) Bill was put before the UK parliament as a private member's bill by shadow environment secretary Kerry McCarthy, supported by Conservative, SNP, Liberal Democrat, and Green MPs.⁵ It comprises two broad objectives: to

reduce food waste by individuals, business, and public bodies, and for businesses to enter into formal agreements with food redistribution organisations. It was due to have its second reading on 4 March but was placed too far down the agenda to be debated, reflecting lack of support by the government, which advocates voluntary agreements rather than legislation.

The Bbill sets out proposals for large supermarkets, manufacturers, and distributors to reduce food waste across their supply chain by at least 30% by 2025 and to make proposals for a 50% cut by 2030, the target set in the recent sustainable development goals.⁶ While the environmental and economic benefits of reducing food waste are indisputable, the challenge is to provide an infrastructure and incentives across the food system to achieve these reductions. New policies to reduce food waste should bring together the health, environmental, social, and economic agendas to maximise gains and avoid unintended consequences. As an example, reducing food portions could reduce food waste since a third of the food waste in the hospitality and food sector comes from uneaten food left on consumers' plates,⁷ and smaller portions could go some way to help tackle overconsumption and obesity.

The Food Waste (Reduction) Bill's proposal for agreements between business and food redistribution organisations echoes the legislation passed in France in February 2016 that prevents supermarkets from throwing away or destroying unsold food and compels them to donate it to charities or for animal feed. The value of redistributing food to those who need it is clear, but it should not be viewed as the solution for food poverty or as institutionalising use of poor people to "recycle" food.^{8,9} In the short term it can help to address acute problems of hunger, but the root cause of food poverty is typically other underlying societal problems, such as income inequalities, which need to be tackled in their own right. Furthermore, the redistribution of food should not distract from the need to prevent food waste in the first place. Greater visibility of food redistribution risks creating complacency; individuals may see it as the responsibility of others to act, thereby absolving them from reducing their own food waste.¹⁰

Reducing food waste is likely to be widely supported. UK consumers report reducing food waste to be the most desirable pro-environmental behaviour change when compared with changing their diet, reducing car use, or flying less.¹⁰¹ Cutting food waste is an essential part of creating a more sustainable food system for future food security, but alone it will not be sufficient. Additional complementary action is needed to tackle the challenge of changing dietary habits to improve health and reduce the environmental impact.¹¹²

The government's failure to respond positively to the proposed Bbill should not detract from the need to pursue legislation to reduce food waste as part of an integrated approach to improving health, increasing food security, and reducing environmental damage.

Competing interests: We have read and understood BMJ policy on declaration of interests and declare JM is a member of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council global food security public panel steering group committee [Q to A correct?] JM and TL are both members of and the international scientific committee of the Daniel and Nicole Carasso Foundation. TL is a charitable Trustee of Borough Market, London.

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