



The Problem of Food Loss: Challenges from the Catholic Social Teaching and Responses from Caritas

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Distinguished Director General, Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

It is a privilege to speak today to such a distinguished audience. I am grateful to the FAO for allowing me to take part in this panel and to have the pleasure of meeting personally the Director-General, Prof. José Graziano da Silva. The FAO and Caritas Internationalis have institutional ties, a tangible sign of which is my presence here today.

My intervention has a two-fold aim: the first is to present a new way of framing the problem of food loss from the perspective of the Catholic Social Teaching and secondly to share possible solutions based on the experience of Caritas organizations.

The problem of food loss is one of the urgent concerns of the Catholic Church. When food is not made available to all people, it is full and integral human development that is undermined. The issue is more than just the loss of food, but rather the loss of human personhood and dignity. The experience of Caritas organizations shows that one of the challenges in the implementation of projects at all levels is the food loss that farmers and communities experience, year-in year-out. Food loss occurs in all stages of agricultural value chains development after harvest, during transport from fields to the homestead, during threshing or shelling, during storage, during transport to the market and during marketing. It is especially damaging for small-scale farmers, whose food security and capacity to earn from their work could be severely threatened.

Some Challenges from the Catholic Social Teaching

In his Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate (CiV)*, Pope Benedict XVI affirmed that a way to eliminate the structural causes of food insecurity is to promote agricultural development through investments in rural infrastructure, irrigation, transportation, market organization, training and sharing agricultural techniques among farmers (CiV, 27). All these interventions are proven to be effective in preventing food losses.

More recently, Pope Francis reminded us that realizing the fundamental human right to adequate food is not only an economic and “technical” matter, but also and principally an

ethical and anthropological one¹. States bear the obligation to create favorable conditions for food security, to respect the person and his/her way of using the necessary resources, to ensure the safety and quantity of food. If we want systems to ensure the right to adequate food for everyone, especially the most disadvantaged people, sound policies and effective measures to prevent food losses are required.

But why is the present system ineffective? Guided by the vision of the Catholic Social Teaching we realize that the systemic problem of food loss is the consequence of systems centered on the market rather than on the human person. In *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)*, Pope Francis said ‘no’ to an economy of exclusion and inequality that kills human beings and the environment. He rejected trickle-down theories that promise greater justice and inclusiveness through economic growth and free market. He asked all of us: “Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving?”² We are baffled by reports of so-called economic growth that continues to produce hungry people in many parts of the world.

In his Encyclical *Laudato Si’ (LS)*, Pope Francis reminds us that a correct reading of the Biblical texts reveals an invitation to “till and keep the garden of the world”, to be its stewards and guardians (cfr Gen 2, 15). While “tilling” refers to cultivating and working, “keeping” means caring, protecting, overseeing and preserving. Would the duty to “keep this garden” not apply also to its fruits? The Encyclical goes on: “Each community can take from the bounty of the earth whatever it needs for subsistence, but it also has the duty to protect the earth and to ensure its fruitfulness for coming generations.” What better way to protect and ensure fruitfulness than to prevent overproduction which depletes natural resources and to make sure that the fruits of the earth do not get lost or are thrown away? The Pope shows deep concern about the depletion of natural resources, recalling that the exploitation of the planet has reached its maximum level (LS 23, passim). The situation demands that we adopt new patterns of production and consumption. The system operating only on free market and profit simply does not work from the perspective of human development.

The fruits of the earth are meant to benefit everyone. To fulfill this vision we need a social perspective which takes into account the fundamental rights of the poor and the underprivileged. According to Catholic Social Teaching private property is subordinated to the universal destination of goods. Recalling the teaching of Saint John Paul II³, Pope Francis states that “a type of development which did not respect and promote human rights – personal and social, economic and political, including the rights of nations and of peoples – would not be really worthy of man” (LS, 93).

Some Initiatives of Caritas Organizations

The experience of Caritas organizations shows that often, small-scale farmers lack the capacity to manage post-harvest losses. Since the right to adequate food requires equal access to resources for food, thus apart from the ownership of property, rural people must have access to the means of technical education, credit, insurance, and markets” (LS, 94). Caritas accompanies farmers and rural communities by imparting improved methods of harvesting,

¹ Cfr. FRANCIS, *Message for the World Food Day 2013*, 2.

² FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53.

³ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (30 December 1987), 33: AAS 80 (1988), 557.

training in proper harvest timing and storage techniques, awareness-raising on the right to food, as well as advocacy before governments for the formulation of specific policy and strategies to guide the work of all those involved with post-harvest losses, like researchers, extension workers, private sector players, government, NGOs international aid organizations and farmers.

Allow me to mention some examples. In 2014 Caritas Malawi (CADECOM) studied food crops such as maize, millet, sorghum, soy bean, beans, pigeon peas and groundnuts. The result showed that food losses threatened the food security of individual farmers and of the country as a whole. It revealed serious unmet needs. First, we mention the constraints experienced by farmers, like the lack of financial resources to purchase storage equipment, the lack of appropriate storage facilities, the inaccessibility of storage methods due to limited awareness, the lack of access to technologies and prohibitive acquisition costs. Farmers need opportunities to get training and extension services, as well as to avail themselves of traditional and improved technologies. Let us not forget the importance of traditional methods⁴ for crop storage, particularly relevant to small-scale farmers. Secondly, there are no specific governmental strategies on post-harvest losses. The result of the research motivated Caritas Malawi to implement programs to enhance farmers' capabilities and to engage in policy advocacy.

Catholic Social Teaching encourages the promotion of an economy which favors productive diversity and values small-scale food production systems which feed the greater part of the world. In many cases, small-scale producers are forced to sell their land or abandon their traditional crops. Their attempts to shift to other forms of production are often frustrated because regional and global markets are not open to them or because the infrastructure for sales and transport is geared towards larger businesses. Civil authorities have the right and duty to adopt measures in support of small-scale producers and differentiated production. (LS, 129) It is also essential that food systems integrate the fundamental value of human work. To ensure that the fruits of human work do not get lost is a matter of justice! National and local policies and measures should encourage various forms of cooperation or community organizations that defend the interests of small-scale producers and ensure sustainable development.

Another example is a program of Catholic Charities (Caritas) USA called "Farm for Maine". It aims at providing nutrient-rich organic vegetables to needy people who resort to food pantries. Some of the produce is distributed right out of the field, while most of it is processed in partnership with small women-owned business for distribution over the winter months. This partnership fosters employment and cooperation. It also assures the availability of vegetables during the harsh Maine winter when the need is great.

⁴ Included here are the use of herbs from trees/shrubs, of ash from livestock waste and crop residues and of traditional granaries. Applying ash to some crops like beans is very effective: they are not attacked by weevils and take shorter time to cook. Ash applied to sweet potato and kept in a pit will ensure preservation for up to five months. Caritas Malawi, however, is working with all levels of farmers: smallholders, middle income farmers and commercial farmers, through different program approaches suitable to each of them. Therefore, some strategies for managing crop losses - such as use of agrochemicals - may not work for smallholder farmers who could use traditional methods. The use of agro-chemicals is suitable to middle income and commercial farmers.

We turn to an example of the food distribution system developed in the State of Washington to distribute fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income households. Catholic Charities of the city of Spokane created extensive connections with over 50 farming enterprises to feed a community in which 17% of residents rely on food stamps provided by the government. A robust “farm-to-food bank” system was set up, working with multiple partners including universities to provide nutrition education programs and to build supply-chain capacity. Farmers were connected by supply routes to distribution sites near them all the way to the city, allowing delivery of food without substantial transportation infrastructure. Equipment like a delivery vehicle, refrigerators and coolers for storage improved the capacity of distribution sites.

In sum, Caritas addresses food loss not only by providing technical solution. Rather the response comes from a vision of human development that is integral, societal and ecological. Caritas programs are oriented to the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized people. They promote sustainable development by caring for the environment, human health and well-being and by encouraging the creation of employment opportunities. They aim at achieving social justice by enhancing the involvement of the poor in their own development, by forging partnership based on solidarity, cooperation and social inclusion.

Conclusion: a renewed approach to food loss

The market alone cannot guarantee integral human development and social inclusion. Even when addressing an apparently technical problem like food loss, we must not overlook “the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth.” (LS, 109)

The present crisis invites us to look at things differently. But we must be ready to embrace policy choices, lifestyles and spirituality that would challenge the predominantly “technocratic paradigm”. At the heart of the issue of food security are human beings with dignity, families and dreams. Pope Francis says that forgetting them in favor of purely technical remedies separates “what is in reality interconnected and” masks “the true and deepest problems of the global system.” (LS, 111).

Thank you.