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THE GREENISTS



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UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF CHEMICAL
TECHNOLOGY

FOOD WASTAGE

Is this a problem you are aware of at your school?

A lot of schools and colleges in India face the issues of food insecurity. Sometimes it might be because of extra working hours or examinations or financial issues. But at some or the other point it has led to food wastage. Food prepared is either getting wasted or is not reaching the right place.

How does food insecurity interact with identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status? What does this reveal about the intersecion between food and justice?

Food insecurity has particularly devastated women's lives. Women farmers are at risk of hunger, especially when crisis strike. Rural women account for nearly half the agricultural workforce in developing countries.

Despite their crucial roles in household food security, they face discrimination and limited bargaining power.

Patriarchial norms create disadvantages for women farmers, specifically in land rights (small plots, difficulties attaining ownership, discriminatory inheritance rights), productive resources (no access to credit, extension services or inputs), unpaid work, insecure employment and exclusion from decision making and political representation.

Research an organization in your state, country, or even campus that is working to address food insecurity. Tell us about this organization and how it supports students. What can you do as an individual to support that work?



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"What happens to all the leftover food at weddings?"

Padmanabhan Gopalan founded the No Food Waste initiative in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. Supported by Sudhakar Mohan, N Balaji and a team of 20 full-time volunteers, the No Food Waste initiative redistributes surplus food from large-scale events like weddings to nursing homes, orphanages and slums. Operating across cities such as Coimbatore, Chennai, Salem, Erode, Tadepalligudem and Delhi, the team has re-distributed food to over 2 lakh people since its inception. Their ultimate goal, according to Balaji, is not just to minimise food wastage, but also to make people aware of the larger implications of waste management.

When it comes to making big changes, small steps are everything. "It started off very simply," Balaji said, recounting the early days of No Food Waste. "Padmanaban just set up a Facebook page and a helpline number to spread the word."

At first, volunteers collected enough food for 20 to 30 people, making multiple bus trips

from the venues of various events. As their work gained recognition, they began receiving calls for larger quantities. Soon, more volunteers joined. The Rotary Club of Coimbatore provided them with a van, which helped increase the capacity of food transported. Today, the initiative has five vehicles ferrying food across nine cities.

What does a typical day for the volunteers of No Food Waste look like?

First, the dedicated helpline for No Food Waste receives information from wedding parties and other functions about the location and quantity of surplus food. Then, volunteers collect the food (which should be sufficient to feed 50 people or more). Pick-ups and distributions for the day are mapped according to the number of venues volunteers must visit - all food is distributed within an hour of collection.

Typically, No Food Waste re-distributes food three times a day. During wedding season, days can get much more hectic. If food is collected very late in the day, it can also be stored at No Food Waste's office, to be re-distributed the next day during their morning route. At every stage, volunteers keep an eye on the quality of food and when it was prepared. After each collection, vessels must be duly cleaned.

To ensure contributions do not go to waste, No Food Waste gives donors the choice to either drop off small quantities of food or directly donate them at designated hunger spots. The locations of these hunger spots are mapped on The No Food Waste app - these are usually places where food for 10 or more people is required.

In addition to this, Goapalan has also set up food and beverage dispensing refrigerators in Coimbatore and Salem. "These are refrigerators manned by personnel, where people can drop off food," Balaji said. "The quality is checked to ensure the food is fit for consumption. These Food and Beverage ATMs, as we call them, are capable of storing food for about 40 people."

Empower and educate

"Nearly 40% of all our food is wasted," Balaji said. "Even if we salvage half of this and redirect it to where it is needed, it can create a huge impact on the issue of food waste and food shortage."

Food surplus and shortage usually exist within a few miles of each other. While the NGO is working on reaching out to more cities, the team feels that in order for any significant changes to occur, people need to realise the magnitude of food loss.

"We work on increasing awareness through various measures," Balaji explained. "One is by encouraging *anna daan*, or food charity, of surplus, untouched food. We also audit food waste at schools and colleges. By involving students in monitoring food waste, we hope to make them more conscious from an early age."

In the future, No Food Waste plans to put some of the wasted food to use by establishing biogas and compost facilities. They are working towards getting the funds for these initiatives. With increasing regional, national and international recognition (No Food Waste was listed as one among the top 10 initiatives in the world which are tackling food waste through mobile apps) the organisation is still plagued with logistical issues - not being able to get to a food source on time because of traffic, for instance.

With more volunteer support and Food & Beverage ATM installations, they hope to mitigate some of these obstacles. As Gopalan puts it, "Feed people, not landfills."

