



# Profit, reputation and ‘doing the right thing’: Convention theory and the problem of food waste in the UK retail sector

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## ABSTRACT

In 2014, Tesco – one of the world’s largest food retailers – revealed that it had generated almost 57,000 tonnes of food waste in its UK operations over the previous twelve-month period. This shocking statistic added to existing evidence of a significant environmental and social problem in the UK and across the world. This paper utilises convention theory to examine the role of major retailers in the context of this global problem and assesses their motivations for acting on food waste. Drawing on interviews with key stakeholders (including major retailers), the analysis investigates their main justifications for action on food waste. It finds that retailers mostly appealed to three conventions or ‘orders of worth’ (civic, market and opinion) and used these as a basis for their commitment to food waste reduction. We argue that the combination of these different justifications is feasible and necessary in the context of the retail sector but that they may also lead to some unintended consequences (in the retail sector and beyond). Crucially, we demonstrate how the dilution of civic justifications (by their financial and reputational counterparts) might produce negative outcomes and inaction as retailers attempt to adhere to the so-called ‘food waste hierarchy’. The paper highlights the continuing significance of convention theory as a framework for analysing possible responses to the social and environmental challenges confronting global agro-food systems.

## 1. Introduction

In October 2013, Tesco – one of the world’s largest food retailers – made headlines when it announced that it would audit the amount of food that is wasted across its supply chain and publish the findings. The subsequent revelation that the retailer had generated almost 57,000 tonnes of food waste within its UK operations in 2013/2014,<sup>1</sup> added to existing evidence of a significant problem in the UK and across the world (IME, 2013; House of Lords, 2014). The announcement was followed by a commitment to tackle food waste – from Tesco and a range of other supermarkets.<sup>2</sup> This paper examines the role of major retailers in the context of this global problem and assesses their motivations for acting on food waste. Specifically, it uses convention theory (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991; Ponte, 2016) to explore the three main justifications for action – civic concerns, financial implications and reputation – and how the combination of these justifications has enabled short-term action (in the retail sector), while posing a potential impediment to a long term-solution to the problem (in the retail sector and the global

food system more broadly). The paper makes an original contribution by extending convention theory to a new thematic area (food waste) and engaging directly with retailers to build on previous studies that critically apply convention theory to the analysis of corporate responses to sustainability challenges (e.g. Renard, 2003; Reynolds et al., 2007). Crucially, it demonstrates how the dilution of civic justifications (by their financial and reputational counterparts) might produce negative outcomes and inaction as retailers (and other actors in the global food system) attempt to adhere to the so-called ‘food waste hierarchy’.

The standard ‘waste management hierarchy’ was introduced by the EU Waste Framework Directive in 2008 and incorporated into UK law. The hierarchy provides guidance on the disposal of any waste material and ‘ranks waste management options according to what is best for the environment’, with prevention as the first step, followed by reuse, recycling, other recovery and disposal (Defra, 2011). The basic waste management hierarchy has been widely applied to the problem of food waste in the UK and beyond (Zero Waste Europe, 2016; EPA, 2017; Feeding the 5000, 2017; WRAP, 2017). In the first instance, surplus

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<sup>1</sup> The actual figure was 56,580 tonnes (Tesco and Society Report, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Details to follow in Section 2.

food should be reduced but where this is not possible, it should be redistributed (to those in need), used for animal feed or anaerobic digestion (AD) and then, as a last resort, incinerated or sent to land fill. The food waste hierarchy provides retailers with a framework for the management of surplus and acts as a guide in establishing the most appropriate options for dealing with the mounting food waste challenge' (Papargyropoulou et al., 2014, p. 107). Adherence to this framework – particularly in the context of redistribution – has played a key role in supermarket communications about food waste. Our paper provides a detailed analysis of the basis on which retailers adhere to the food waste hierarchy. It demonstrates how a commitment to its principles can be both facilitated and complicated by the differing demands of civic, financial and reputational concerns.

In previous work, we have suggested that current responses to food waste reduction in the UK are notable insofar as major retailers appear to be voluntarily and actively – in concert with a dense network of stakeholders – contributing to an emergent sense of distributed responsibility (Evans et al., 2017; Welch et al., forthcoming). The current paper provides a more detailed account of *why* this is the case. In the absence of strict legal regulations, why are retailers signing up to voluntary commitments? As something that will presumably lead to a decrease in profits, why are retailers eliminating promotional strategies and encouraging more efficient shopping habits amongst their customers? There are costs to be saved by reducing waste in-store, but this does not explain why retailers are encouraging their customers to buy less (or their suppliers – who typically bear the burden of surplus and rejected produce – to produce less). As we have argued elsewhere, these claims of efficiency gains reflect a limited and slightly 'lazy' interpretation of the situation (Evans et al., 2018). The application of convention theory – which explores the normative basis of economic action – yields insights into the dynamics of retailer involvement in food waste reduction activities as well as their implications for a long-term solution to the problem. This critical application of convention theory might be usefully applied to other sustainability challenges in the retail sector and beyond.

The paper is divided into seven sections. Following on from the introduction, we present a context for the research (Section 2) and locate the study in existing literature on convention theory (henceforth CT) and agro-food (Section 3). We then outline the methodology (Section 4) and present the main analysis (Section 5). Drawing on the framework of CT, we identify the three main justifications for action: a) civic concerns, b) financial considerations and c) reputation as well as the potential conflicts between these individual justifications and the crosscutting adherence to the food waste hierarchy. Section 6 discusses the necessity of combining conventions in the retail sector and the implications of this approach for long-term action on the problem of food waste. To conclude, we highlight the pivotal position of the supermarket in the global food system and the importance of an approach (CT) that can analyse the complexity of motivations in this context, as well as the unintended consequences they may engender (Section 7).

## 2. Research context

According to recent reports, '30–50%...of all food produced on the planet is lost before reaching a human stomach' (IME, 2013, p. 7), while consumers in industrialised countries waste almost as much food as the entire net food production of sub-Saharan Africa (House of Lords, 2014, p. 7). The environmental implications of this problem are vast. Global food production necessitates large areas of land, substantial volumes of water and a great deal of energy (most of which is generated from fossil fuels). Food must be grown, stored, transported and distributed, and greenhouse gas emissions are generated at every stage of the process. In fact, the environmental impacts are such that 'the carbon saving of preventing all avoidable food waste in 2012 is equivalent to taking one in four cars off the road' (WRAP, 2012, p. 10). Moreover, in a world where one in nine people are suffering from chronic undernourishment

(FAO, 2016), food waste has become a significant moral issue. Indeed, in the same year that Tesco released its findings, almost a million people in the UK required the provision of 'emergency food' (The Trussell Trust, 2014) and over 20 million meals were distributed to people living in 'food poverty' (Cooper et al., 2014, p.4).

All of the UK's<sup>3</sup> 'big four' supermarkets (Asda, Morrisons, Sainsbury's and Tesco) – along with a range of others (e.g., the Co-operative, Marks and Spencer, Waitrose) – have made some commitment to tackling the problem of food waste. This has included in-store initiatives such as changes to labelling (e.g., advice on storage) and packaging innovations (e.g., bags that can be resealed). Retailers have withdrawn promotional strategies that could lead to food waste in the home (e.g., Buy One Get One Free) and they have made efforts to educate their customers (e.g. websites that provide information on meal planning, freezing and portion control as well as recipes for using up left over food). In addition, retailers have tried to ensure that surplus, edible food is redistributed to people living in food poverty. These efforts have been directly informed by a commitment to the food waste hierarchy. More broadly, all of the major food retailers are signatories to the third phase of the Courtauld Commitment<sup>4</sup> and, in 2015, the seven biggest supermarkets (87% of the UK grocery market) agreed to publish figures for food waste across their entire supply chains (British Retail Consortium, 2015).

The retailer is an 'essential focus for UK sustainability policy' (Dowler, 2008, p. 768) but, thus far, critical food scholars have eschewed systematic empirical engagement with major retailers and refused to treat them as a legitimate object of social scientific enquiry (cf. Evans, 2015, p. 36). Most of the previous research into food waste has focused on the household and family (Watson and Meah, 2013; Evans, 2014) and the everyday practices that lead to the generation of surplus (Metcalf et al., 2013; Tucker and Farrelly, 2015). Elsewhere attention has been paid to the classification (Darlington et al., 2009) and causes (Hyde et al., 2001) of food waste and the savings that can be achieved through its minimisation (Hyde et al., 2003; Henningson et al., 2004) but these studies tend to focus on manufacturers or the food industry writ large (rather than retailers specifically). The exception is *Mena et al. (2011)* who interviewed retailers alongside other key actors (e.g., wholesalers, suppliers) in order to provide descriptive accounts of the 'root causes of food waste' (p. 649). In addition, the issue of food waste has played an important role in studies of food banks and redistribution (Hawkes and Webster, 2000; Tarasuk and Eakin, 2003, 2005; Midgley, 2013) but, with the exception of *Alexander and Smaje (2008)*, this research has focused principally on the third sector. The neglect of retailer and supermarket engagement with the politics and practice of food waste reduction is a serious lacuna that this paper addresses by engaging directly with retailers and building on our previous work in this area.

## 3. Convention theory and agro-food

Originating in the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991, 1999), CT is a framework for exploring the normative basis of (economic) activity with an emerging focus on the multiple justifications that exist for action. It has been widely applied in the agro-food literature (Ponte, 2016). Based on the premise that objects, processes and actions can be evaluated in a number of different ways, it has mainly been used to research the qualities of products and labour, and how these provide the basis for co-ordination and exchange. The theory sets out six different 'orders of worth' and attendant principles of evaluation and

<sup>3</sup> We note that retailers elsewhere in the world are taking similar measures. However, the UK has arguably been at the vanguard of responses to the challenges of food waste reduction, thus offering a useful case study of more general tendencies

<sup>4</sup> This is a voluntary agreement administered through The Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), aimed at improving the resource efficiency and environmental impact of the UK grocery sector.

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