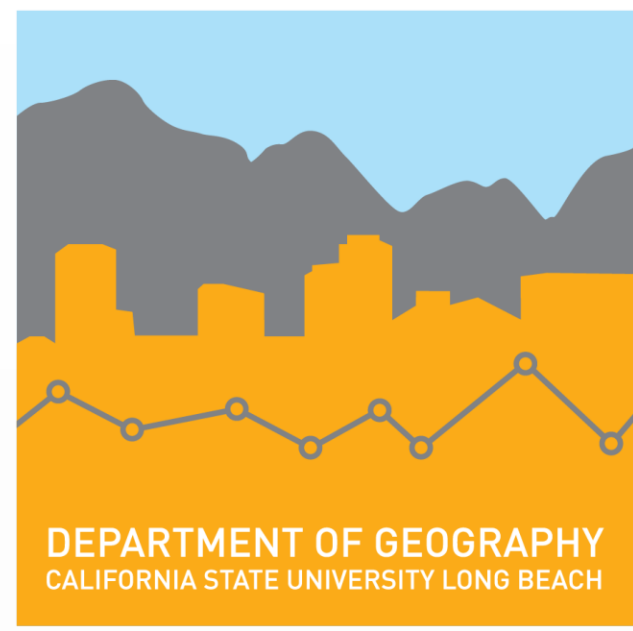


Evaluating Food Recovery Programs in Los Angeles

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Introduction & Background

The Los Angeles Food Policy Council (LAFPC) claimed, “Over one million tons of food goes into Los Angeles’ landfills every year and rotten food scraps that end up in landfills emit methane, a known powerful greenhouse gas” (LAFPC, 2020). The council is a collective body of over four hundred stakeholders in the city of Los Angeles. Their purpose is to help coordinate food related solutions that protect the environment and people. Being that Los Angeles (LA) city produces an incredible amount of food waste yet has one of the highest hunger rates, the need for action in food recovery is significant.

Evidence of food waste occurs throughout the food supply chain (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). This includes food production, cultivation, processing, distribution, sales, consumption, and leftovers or remains. The focus of this project is the redistribution of edible food waste, which comes at the end of the supply chain. Within the LAFPC there are five working groups and the Food Waste Reduction and Recovery Rescue (FWRR) working group promotes strategies for food waste prevention that includes food recovery, donation, and composting.

I investigate the current food waste themes in the LA area and evaluate the effectiveness of intervention programs that divert food from landfills. Specifically, I examine how the FWRR working group applies methods of food recovery outlined by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (US EPA) compared to the principles of just sustainability outlined by Professor Julian Agyeman (2013).

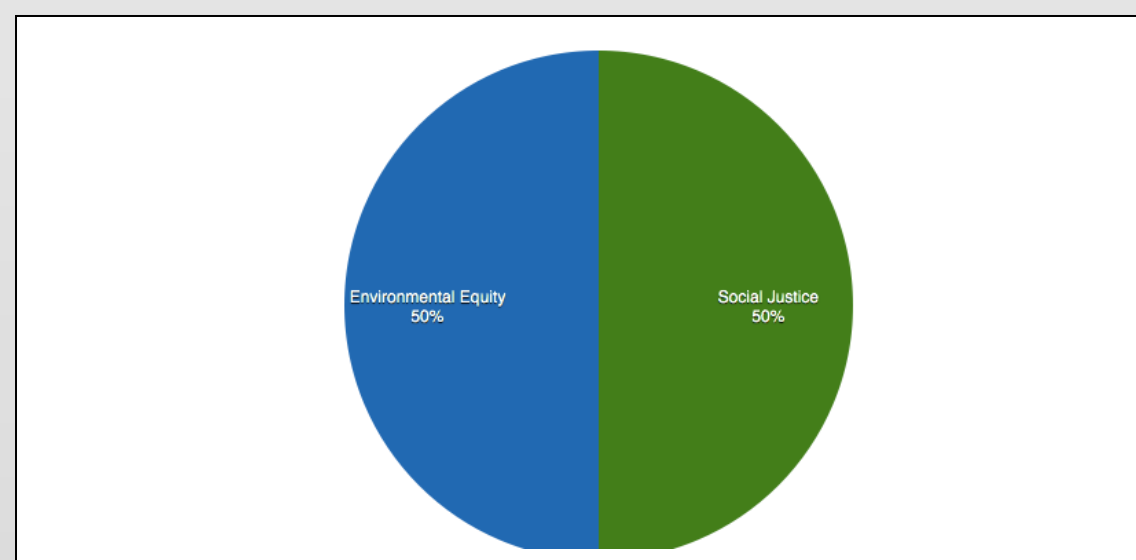


Figure 1. Visualizing conditions of Agyeman's just sustainability

The approach to achieving a just sustainability is a framework within the context of four conditions. They include improving our quality of life, meeting present and future needs, procedures rooted in justice and equity, and living within environmental limits (Agyeman, 2013). For this project and my research, I was most concerned with present efforts by the LAFPC and the FWRR workgroup being managed to promote equal access and fair representation of all people.

Professor Julian Agyeman's (2013) evaluation of Food Policy Councils (FPC) also notes that the dominant voice for food and decreasing waste has been in favor of environmental sustainability. FCP's have often fallen short in addressing inequities of representation of all communities (including people of color, immigrants, and low socio-economic status) in policy implementation.

The California Civil Code § 1714.25 mandates recycling. This is part of the state's commitment to divert 75 percent of food waste by 2025 and provide twenty percent of edible food waste to those in need (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2021). The mandatory industrial recycling policy requires businesses, restaurants, large housing complexes, and organizations that generate four or more cubic yards of organic waste per week to recycle the following:

- Organic Materials,
 - o Food scraps
 - o Green waste & yard trimmings
 - o Non-hazardous, non- treated wood waste
 - o Food-soiled paper and cardboard

Methods

Just sustainability serves as a foundation for my investigation. First, I evaluated the FWRR working group's programs through their online webpage, specifically looking for indicators of fairness and equal access. Next, I reviewed resources including the LAFPC's 2019 Annual Report and the Los Angeles Food Recovery Guide for impact. Additionally, I studied the working groups involvement in the state mandate requiring industrial recycling of organic waste (RecyclA, 2021). My discussion is grounded in LAFPC's ability to create solutions that fall under Agyeman's condition for just sustainability.

Results

Investigating food waste found that there are three major “pain points” or factors impacting access to good food in Los Angeles. They include the high cost of housing, rising transportation costs, and low wages (Los Angeles Food Policy Council, 2020). Furthermore, many urban neighborhoods are situated in food and resource deserts. Quality food that is healthy and culturally appropriate is not only expensive, but difficult to acquire.

In the LAFPC's Annual Impact Report for 2019, the FWRR is recognized for supporting RecyclA, which was created as a solution to the mandatory industrial recycling policy. The FWRR is referenced as a major advocate for implementing food recovery into the RecyclA's service plan. Meaning that, in the process of collecting and sorting industrial waste, edible food is recovered. By implementing food recovery into the service plan, the LAFPC has recorded saving over one million pounds per year, roughly 3.3 million meals since 2018.

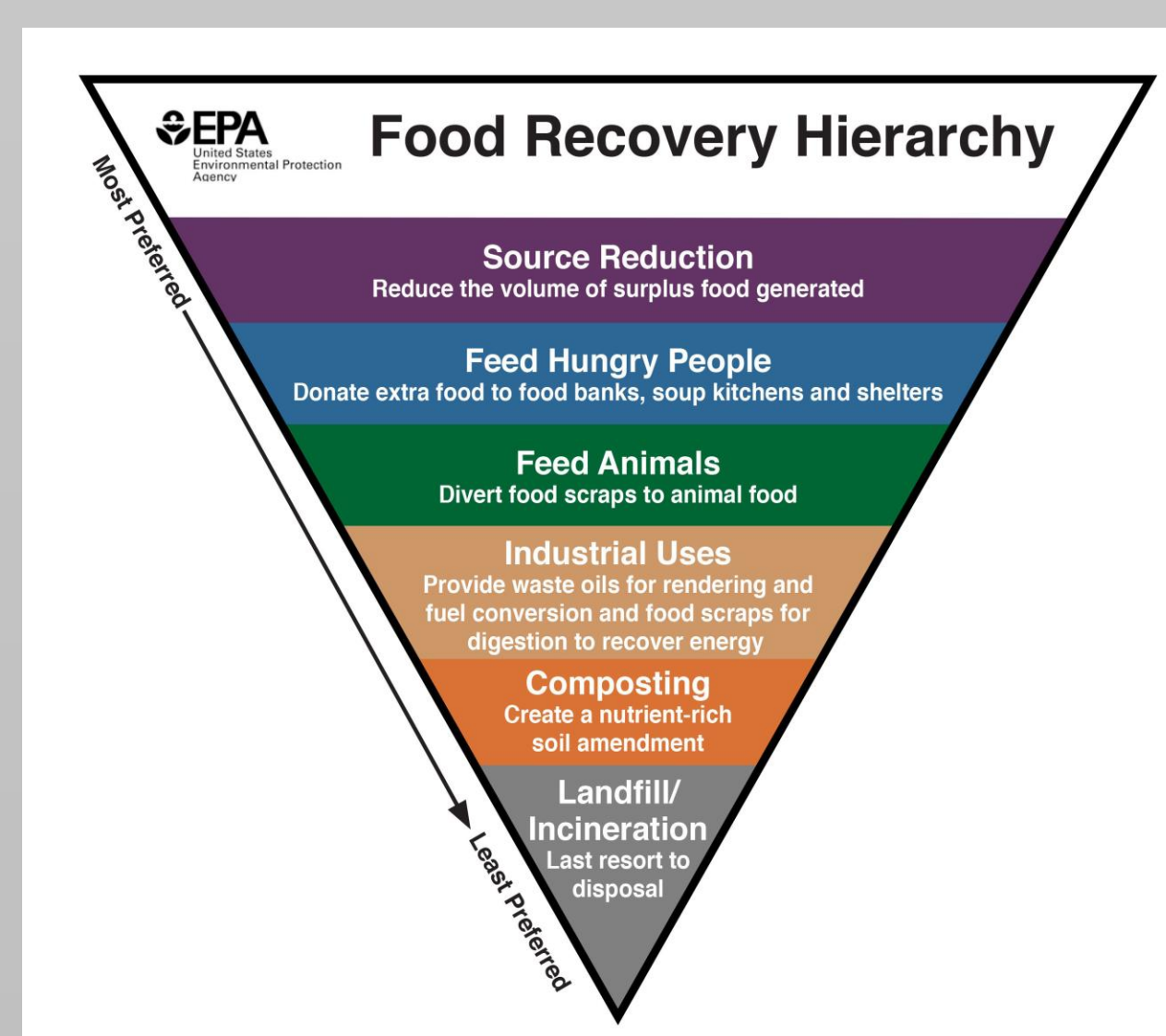
Also shared in the annual report is the FWRR's workshop with community stakeholders. The workshop is about how to start food relief programs that prevent edible food from being discarded and developing food waste partnerships that serve people, particularly families with children and college students in need. Lastly, the Annual report states that the working group launched an online resource hub for the public and published a new version of, “Reducing Food Waste Guide: Recovering Untapped Resources In Our Food Systems,” to be accessed on the working groups web page.

The findings from the annual report and the LAFPC's web page feel incomplete. Specifically, there is not enough information on how these outcomes were achieved and who specifically has been involved in program implementation and execution. Although the LAFPC is a body of multiple stakeholders, accountability is lacking.



Figure 3. From the LAFPC 2019 Annual Report: Stakeholder workshop

Figure 2. Food Recovery Hierarchy (US EPA, 2021)



Discussion

One strength of the LAFPC is the opportunity for collaboration with various food stakeholders. Their connection to a vast network of restaurants, businesses, and local leaders amplifies the diverse quality of content and perspectives that can be shared externally. However, the resources provided by the LAFPC are not accessible to all people.

Their website does not include information in languages other than English. Additionally, I was unable to find alternative content that accommodated those who could not read or had difficulty with hearing and seeing content. If someone does not have access to internet or a device, they are limited on how they obtain new information that may be put out by the LAFPC and their partners. Individuals limited by this, are often also those who struggle with food security.

Perhaps the most frustrating process was obtaining the 2019 Annual Report and the “Reducing Food Waste” guide. This guide is published on the FWRR web page with a link for viewing. This link takes you to a third-party website that requires registration for viewing and a fee for long term access. With over thirty percent of LA living in poverty, is it reasonable to expect someone to pay for these resources? Those who are already excluded by high costs of living and unequal resource distribution are further segregated in their inability to learn and participate in the solutions LAFPC advocates for.

Although the 2019 Annual Impact report states the working group helped to redirect millions of organic food materials from landfills to plates, there is little evidence on how this was done. The educational workshops' number of participants, schedule, outcomes and impact are not addressed. This raises concerns for the working group's capacity and overall accountability for the LAFPC.

Given the information presented, LAFPC claims to support fair food for all, however, there has been no dialogue documented between stakeholders and the public; both those looking for information and those who are food insecure. Although not the main focus of the FWRR, it should also be noted that small scale food recovery and composting opportunities are limited in drop off times and locations. Furthermore, the link on the FWRR web page, that is meant to direct viewers to a list of food scrap drop off sites, is no longer valid.

Conclusions/Policy Recommendations

The LAFPC strives to bring leaders of LA together to provide solutions to current food and waste problems. To increase their credibility, the LAFPC needs to have more complete content on how they achieve outcomes. They should revisit how data is shared and make all aspects of their website accessible to the public. Hyperlinks must be regularly audited to ensure they work. Content provided by partners also needs to be checked for accuracy.

Secondly, I would recommend revisiting co-production when it comes to the working groups. The FWRR working group currently has three members and should actively work to increase participation. Active recruitment of diverse members could bring new ideas and creative solutions for these gaps of knowledge and access.

Though there has been success in supporting the policy that requires industrial recycling, LAFPC could make a larger impact by addressing the top tier of food waste as expressed by the US EPA. The third recommendation includes addressing source reduction (US EPA, 2021). This would include lobbying to address conventional food standards, particularly within the context of oversized meal portions in food services, and the idea around food aesthetics. One would be astonished to know that farmers are continually met with impossible consumer standards that prevent perfectly good produce from being used due only to their physical appearance.

This food could be feeding the millions that go hungry in LA and ensure that precious greenhouse gases and resources are not being wasted. This balance of human and environmental wellbeing is the just sustainability that Agyeman calls for.

For more information

Please contact Alex.Almeida01@student.csulb.edu for more information on the poster topic and related resources about the project.