

PERCEPTIONS OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN THE FIGHT AGAINST FOOD WASTE

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Religious leaders (RLs) are respected and play a key role in influencing community decisions in different situations or crises. The influence of religiosity on environmental concern and intentions to reduce food waste in major religions such as Islam and Christianity have been widely examined. However, our understanding of why religious people wastes food remains limited.

Methods: This opportune qualitative inquiry is the first to determine the perception of RLs in the fight against food waste in in the Thulamela Municipality under Vhembe District. It aims to uncover how religious leaders in the Vhembe District of South Africa perceive their role in the fight against food waste within their community. A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data from 22 religious leaders. Using ATLAS.TI, thematic analysis of the transcribed data was executed.

Results: Results showed that religious leaders perceive their role in the fight against food waste as community influencers with a caring obligation to help household members in rural areas because of the possible food insecurity and hunger associated with the wastage. It also revealed that RLs face barriers to promoting food waste reduction. The issue of the relationship between Religious Leaders and FWR is a crucial topic, not least because the influence of the former may be crucial in achieving the latter. This study highlights the important role that religion can play in reducing food waste to achieve the SDG 12 as well as some of the pitfalls.

Conclusion: This study, therefore, brings a fresh approach for academics, policymakers, and practitioners interested in the relationships between religion and sustainable development. It combines social science, agriculture and theological approaches with ‘spotlights’ on particular topics from practitioners in the field to underscore the fact that religion matters for sustainable development and needs to be taken seriously.

Key words: Food security, Food waste, Perception, Religion, Religious leaders, Rural sustainable development.

INTRODUCTION

The 2021 FW index report reveals that HFW accounts for up to 65% of food waste (UNEP, 2021), confirming that the amount of HFW is colossal (Ghaziani et al., 2022). In the same perspective, Obuobi et al. (2024) stipulates that FW has societal repercussions that affect food security. Empirical and social scientific research has recently documented that food waste has significant environmental, economic, and social costs (Geislar, 2018). Up to now, FW has remained a complex issue with a socio-cultural and religious artifact. Thus, recent studies have been conducted empirically to understand how religious dynamics and the role of faith communities and actors are crucial for sustainable development (Tomalin et al., 2019). Baig et al. (2022) stressed that in Saudi Arabia FW is one of the prime issues threatening food security. Moufakkir & Auzun (2024) revealed that FW is a major sin in Islam. The UNEP reported that in 2019, 61% of the FW generated came from households (UNEP, 2021). Yet, the food that is wasted could be used to combat hunger or malnutrition (Parfitt et al., 2010). As an essential human need, food is very important for our survival and performance as individuals (Jarjusey & Chamhuri, 2017). Approximately (222 million tons) has been wasted by individuals in developed countries. These individuals are wasting more than the entire food production in sub-Saharan Africa (230 million tons) (Gustavsson et al., 2011; FAO, 2019a; Ishangulyev et al., 2019). This amount is estimated to rise to 2.1 billion tons by 2030 (Hegnsholt et al., 2018). Conversely, in 2022, between 691 and 783 million individuals globally faced starvation or malnutrition because of inadequate or constrained food resources (WHO, 2023).

Few studies have examined the influence of religiosity on environmental concern and intentions to reduce food waste in Islam and Christianity. However, our understanding of why religious people wastes food remains limited (Moufakkir & Auzun, 2024). Against this background, this study seeks to determine the perceptions of RLs in the fight against food waste in Vhembe District, South Africa. The researcher through this study aims to address this gap by bringing positive ideas and experience to RLs through interfaith collaboration and partnerships. And also, by drawing particularly on perspectives that reflect the world’s most vulnerable communities affected by hunger and food insecurity. This is because food security is imperative for human survival with dignity.



Figure 1: Food wasted on the plates and other discarded food

METHODOLOGY

In-depth one-on-one interviews with key informants were used for the collection of data with 22 religious leaders from South Africa. The objective related to this study was to determine perceptions of RLs in the fight against food waste in Thulamela Municipality under Vhembe District. Purposive sampling technique was used to select locations within the municipality and the 22 RLs who participated in the study. This sampling technique was appropriate because it helped to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest to answer the following stipulated research questions: ‘What is the role of religious leaders in reducing food waste?’ ‘What are RLs perceptions on the fight against food waste?’ Analysis of the of the transcribed data was executed using ATLAS.TI and thematic analysis.

STUDY AREA

This study was conducted at three selected areas (Thohoyandou, Muledane, and Shayandima) under Thulamela Municipality in Vhembe District Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa.



Figure 2: Map of Thulamela Municipality showing the study area

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The results of this study yielded two themes, and nine sub-themes related to the second objective of the study. Albeit there is also a small proportion of RLs who, despite the main barriers challenging them, commit themselves optimistically to be involved in the future in the fight for FWR. The main themes include **perceived barriers to the promotion of FW reduction**, and **perceived strategic views to fight FW**.

Lack of capacity and lack of community engagement are the barriers; while *perceived views to fighting FW*, *Provision of FW Reduction Education*, *Spirituality and Sustainable Development*, *Showing direction to the people and leading on FW issues*, *Hope induction*, *Use of available networks*, as well as *Advocacy* are the views to fight FW

Illustrative quotations by participants

“Religious leaders lack enough knowledge and experience with regard to food waste reduction” (Male participant).
“If we are fully empowered and start using multifaith collaborations, this will make huge impact around Venda. We can create food depots where people will come to donate food to share with orphans and the poor” (Female participant).
“From our Thulamela Pastors Forum we never advocated for FW reduction, but we can still do it if we are trained” (Female participant).
“Around Thohoyandou, there are no religious leaders that are actually working on food waste reduction” (Female participant).

Perceived strategic views to fight FW

FW can be reduced within the communities under their leadership
FW is truly a serious issue ignored by them and many other community leaders
RLs can develop strong interfaith collaborations and partnerships to address the FW issue through networks
RLs influence remain vital regarding the shaping of decisions among community members while preaching

Discussion of Results

The results on the perception of RLs in the fight against FW in Vhembe District indicate that RLs perceive their potential role towards FWR despite some barriers. The findings of the present study, similar to those of many previous studies (Kanagy and Nelsen, 1995; Forghani et al., 2019; Baran et al., 2024), confirm that an increase in the level of religiosity among consumers leads to a higher level of environmental kindness. Most participants agreed that as RLs they are significantly trusted countrywide in the community. Other participants mentioned that RLs were of the view that engaging the community through multi-faith conversations or dialogues and interfaith collaborations could also be effective strategies as they will be linking the value of food with faith and giving with the intention to decrease FW.

CONCLUSION

RLs possess significant potential to contribute to FW reduction by virtue of the assets they manage. However, in many African countries including South Africa, FW initiatives and programmes led by RLs are non-existent. This is due to their limited integration and participation in the national food system sustainability priorities, which may hinder their proactive engagement in FW initiatives. It is crucial to foster a concerted, participatory approach involving RLs, FBOs, government, the private sector, and other stakeholders.

This study provided empirical-theoretical insights on the perceptions of RLs in the fight against FW in Vhembe District. It was revealed that RLs in the study area are not doing anything so far in the fight against FW. Lack of capacity and lack of community engagement were revealed as barriers limiting RLs to be able to fight FW. This study finds also that religious beliefs affect FW in rural households in Vhembe District as they are rooted in their culture.

It was indicated also that advocacy, hope induction, provision of FWR education, use of available networks, spirituality, and showing direction to the people and leading on FW issues were among the perceived strategic views to fight FW highlighted from RLs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a need for policymakers to develop policies on the role of RLs in FWR strategies for sustainable food security.
RLs in partnership with the government could initiate a media initiative aimed at educating the public about the importance of indigenous food conservation and other innovative methods.
The FWR Training Curriculum should be developed for capacity building of RLs and community members.

This study highlights the important role of RLs in influencing household FW prevention behaviour. Hence, there is a need for the government to formulate policies governing FW in order to address and strengthen the FW management and prevention in South Africa in partnership with RLs.

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