



# Food systems and COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean: How to reduce food loss and waste

Bulletin 9

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## 1. Editorial



The ongoing pandemic has put the food and nutritional security of millions of Latin Americans and Caribbean people at risk. The countries of the region have taken some measures to try to stop the spread of the virus, such as the closure of ports (air and sea), restrictions on free movement, and physical distancing; such measures have affected the normal functioning of food systems.

These disruptions in the agrifood value chain have resulted in increased food loss and waste (FLW). We are not yet in a position to say when the rate of infection will decrease, let alone when we will return to normal. Such uncertainty makes it imperative to analyse how food loss and waste affect food systems. Only then can we, in a second step, design policies that will prevent food loss and waste, and reduce their impact. In that regard, for example, in cases where it is not possible to avoid surpluses that cannot be marketed, the necessary measures must be taken to facilitate their collection and distribution, ideally among the most vulnerable populations.

## 2. Key messages



- Food loss and waste is a global problem that precedes the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Qualitative analyses indicate that food loss and waste have worsened during the pandemic.
- For the same reason, a quantitative estimate must be made to know exactly how COVID-19 affects food loss and waste.
- Reducing food loss and waste can aim to improve economic performance, food security, nutrition and/or environmental sustainability.
- In a pandemic scenario, efforts should be focused on improving food security.
- Before the pandemic, measures to strengthen food security were expected to focus on the first links in the agrifood system. Besides, they were supposed to be more effective in lower-income countries.
- In a pandemic, it appears that food recovery and distribution measures can be implemented along the value chain, with different emphasis per country.
- Thus, developing countries with high levels of food insecurity should concentrate their efforts on preventing food loss (the first links in the value chain). To this end, it is essential to extend the post-harvest life of fresh produce and encourage more direct marketing (between farmer and consumer).
- In more developed countries, with populations that mostly show high levels of food security, measures should aim at reducing food waste, that is, its recovery and redistribution (final links in the chain), in order to improve the food security of the most vulnerable populations. In this sense, food banks and the role of the state in coordinating these sectors are important.



### 3. Impact of COVID-19 on food loss and waste



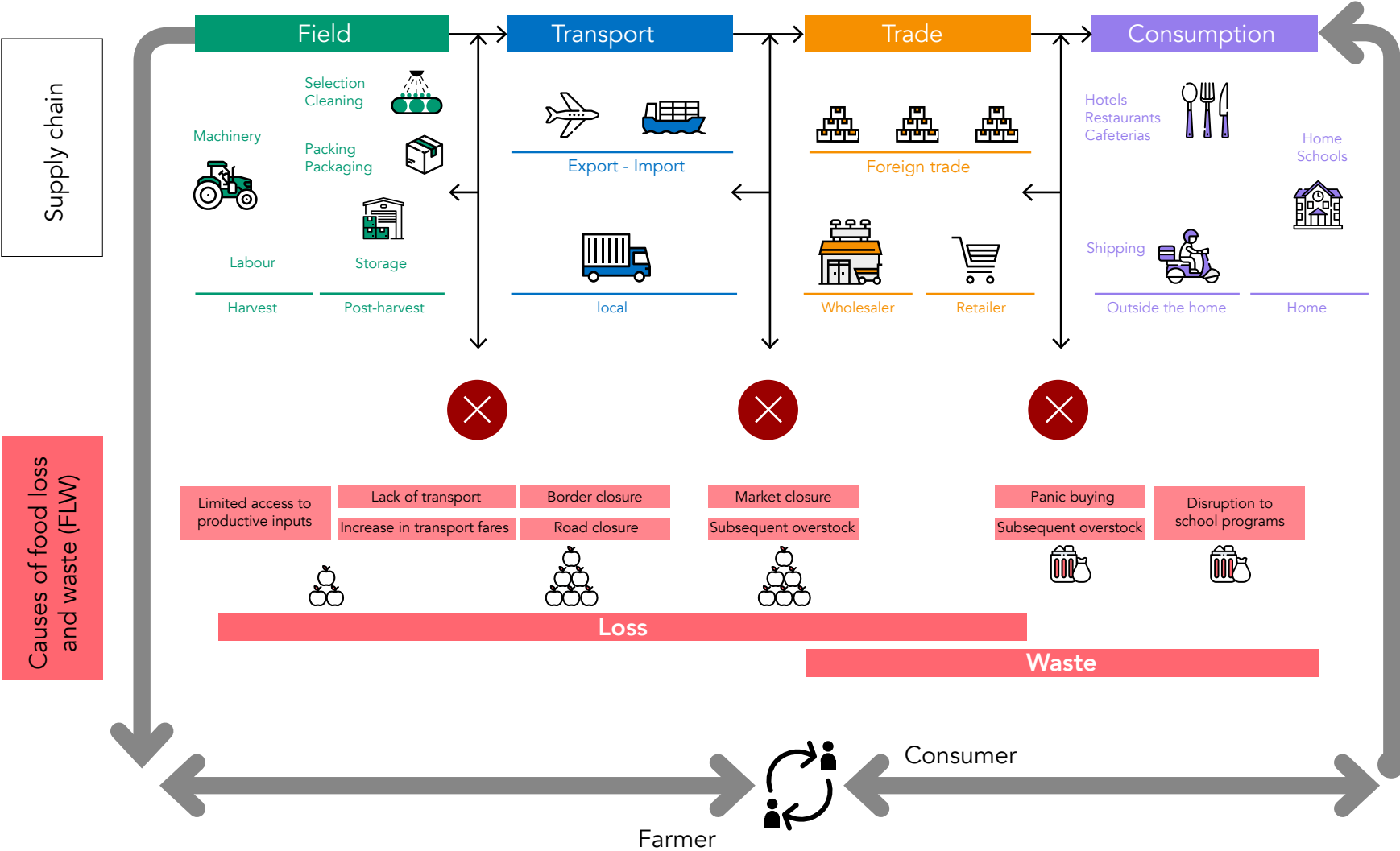
The idea that food is lost or wasted may seem simple, but in practice, there is no single definition. Generally, by food loss and waste, we mean the reduction in the quantity or quality of food along the food supply chain. Food loss and waste can be differentiated by the stage of production at which they occur. **Loss** occurs at the production, post-harvest and processing stages of the food supply chain, involving the whole chain except the interaction between the marketer and the final consumer. **Waste**, on the other hand, occurs at the end of the food chain and is not closely related to production, but rather to the behaviour of retailers and consumers (FAO, 2011 and 2019).

Before the pandemic, it was estimated that about 30 percent of the world's food was lost or wasted each year. This estimate, although preliminary, has raised awareness of the issue (FAO, 2011). More recent analyses estimate that 14 percent of the food produced is lost (FAO, 2019).

Today, to measure the impact of the pandemic on the agrifood system, we need analyses that shed light on the causes of the greatest food loss and waste during the pandemic. National governments have a great challenge: first, finding the best way to measure food loss and waste and, then, incorporating these issues into the design of public policies.

Precisely because of the absence of reliable regional data on the subject that would allow us to measure the impact, we carried out a qualitative analysis based on news and notifications from national offices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. The result is that the situation seems to have worsened. Thanks to the data collection carried out by our office in recent months (February to June 2020), we can summarize in the following diagram the possible impact of COVID-19 on food loss and waste.

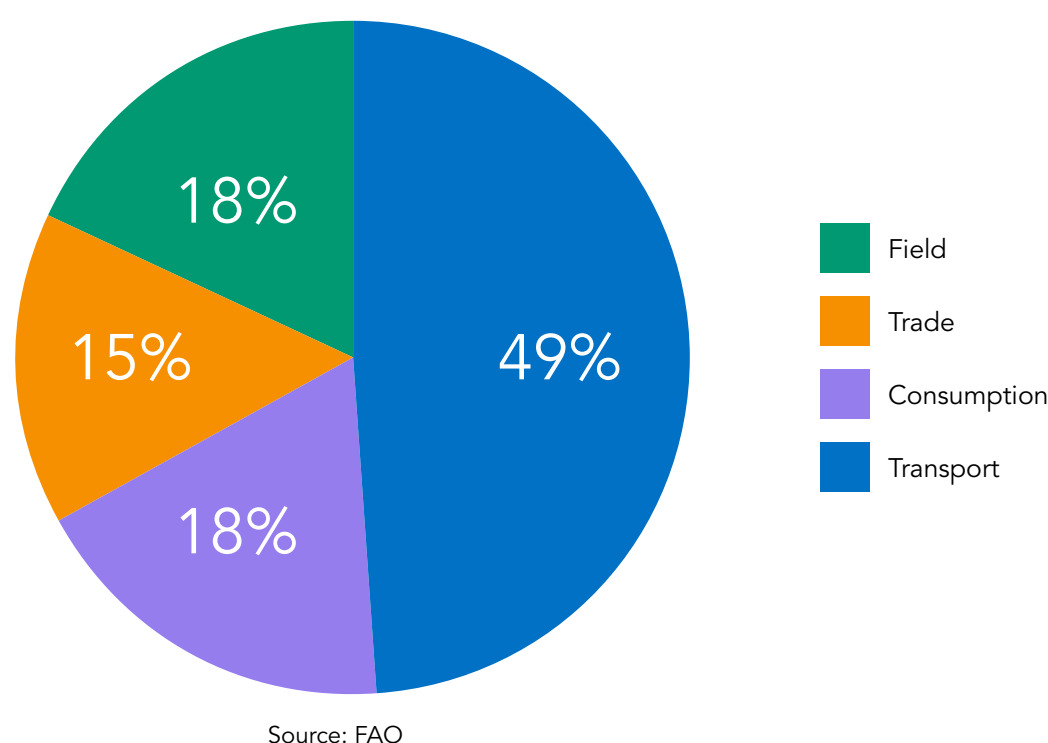
Figure 1/ Potential impacts of COVID-19 on food loss and waste



Source: FAO

Our research also allows us to assume that, while there is disruption along the value chain, it is not particularly high. In other words, access to inputs has been affected by COVID-19, but not in a radical way. The largest proportion of news items are transport (49 percent) and field (18 percent), intermediate segments of the value chain, where certain measures – such as road closures, shutdowns or limited access to distribution centres – could be generating significant food losses. In contrast, in the final stages, only 18 percent and 15 percent correspond to consumption and trade, respectively.

**Figure 2/** Qualitative analysis of press releases related to food loss and waste due to COVID-19 in Latin America and the Caribbean



### 3.1. Field

One of the impacts of the pandemic on the agrifood chain is the limited access to certain agricultural inputs, whether due to a disruption in import or logistics process or to a price increase (dealing with high prices is particularly difficult for small producers). Regardless of the cause, shortages of productive inputs can result in food loss during harvest, post-harvest or processing.

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*The health and economic crisis caused by the coronavirus has increased the price of inputs, which has affected rural Mexico, where food production must be guaranteed.*

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Revista Contralínea

Due to the health restriction measures, a significant part of the workforce has not had to report to their workplaces. In most countries, this measure does not apply to workers in the agrifood sector, a basic service that cannot be interrupted in its production and distribution.

However, there are known cases in which workers in the agrifood sector were prevented or had difficulty accessing their workplaces, mainly because of the quarantine measures in place, reduced access to transport for local workers, and the closure of borders for temporary immigrant workers. A reduction in the workforce is known to be detrimental to harvesting, post-harvesting and food processing, including loss associated with the deterioration of perishable foods not harvested in time. This is a particularly acute problem in low-income countries where the seasonal harvest has begun, as it could further exacerbate existing high levels of loss (FAO, 2020).

The main reasons for farmworkers not showing up at their workplaces were quarantine measures and reduced access to transport for local workers, as well as border closures for temporary migrant workers.

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*In the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina, an agricultural company producing potatoes, onions and garlic confirmed that, due to health restrictions, the number of available workers dropped by half.*

*In **Colombia**, although there is no official consolidation of the crop being lost, according to a FAO study, 87 percent of the producers consulted say they have had difficulties. The survey was carried out in twenty departments of the country.*

*In **Costa Rica**, the efforts to stop the entry of illegal immigrants from Nicaragua have redoubled, to prevent further spread of COVID-19 from that country. However, the Costa Rican agricultural sector is dependent on immigrant labour.*

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Sources: Radio France International, Sociedad de Agricultores de Colombia and Diario Extra

In general, **seasonal workers in the agrifood system have a low level of formalization and, therefore, of health protection**. It is imperative to protect these workers, providing them with the necessary health implements and including them in social security schemes. The objective is to prevent them from being infected and becoming vectors for the spread of the disease, to allow them to continue to carry out their work, and to ensure a smooth supply chain (FAO and ECLAC, 2019a).

## 3.2. Transport

### a. Local

Another critical node is the limited access of producers to local markets. When logistical problems prevent farmers from accessing markets and delivering their products, two things happen: **shortage** and **food loss**.

Family farming has been most affected by the lack of transport. **Less frequent transport** – and in some cases increased costs – is a critical obstacle for small producers to get their crops and products to market. Within this group of producers, those who have felt the effects of the pandemic most strongly have been rural and indigenous women – who are usually responsible for selling in local markets – making an already vulnerable group more vulnerable (FAO and ECLAC, 2020b).

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*To avoid large crowds of people, **Cuba** restricted mass agricultural fairs where farmers go directly to offer their fresh produce.*

*The Ministry of Industry, Trade, Agriculture and Fisheries of **Jamaica** reports a reduction in the share of agricultural activities and food sales, which has a negative impact on the income of family farmers. They call on family farming to make the greatest effort to reach markets and encourage people to choose local products.*

*In the **Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela**, food delivery has been disrupted by national isolation. In the area of La Grita, it was normal for about 5 000 tonnes of vegetables to be shipped weekly. Today, these products remain in the fields due to lack of transport.*

*In the **Plurinational State of Bolivia**, fewer and fewer trucks are arriving at the points of sale: from 30 trucks with loads of up to 4 tonnes that were selling all their cargo, it went down to a range of five to eight trucks that did not even manage to finish off the entire harvest.*

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Sources: Cuba Debate, Ministry of Industry, Trade, Agriculture and Fisheries of Jamaica; France 24 and El País.

Something similar is happening with the national supply. The closure of localities, the lack of entry and exit permits for food transporters and the interruptions on the roads make it difficult for food to travel from the countryside to the urban wholesale and retail markets, causing a substantial loss in one of the first links in the chain: transport.

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*In **Peru**, producers in the Yungay area lost 6 000 tonnes of strawberries due to interruptions in transport to market.*

*In **Argentina**, during March, a ban was decreed on the movement of trucks, which, in the middle of the harvest period, could affect up to 100 million tonnes of food and cause serious logistical problems in reaching ports, storage sites or factories.*

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Sources: Revista Agronoticias, Letra P

## **b. Import and export**

Local and international markets have been affected by closures or access restrictions. Countries importing food from the region, such as China and the European Union, have ordered cordon sanitaire, preventing the landing of products or cancelling already agreed orders due to the closure of ports or fewer workers in them. As a result of these measures, a significant amount of fresh and perishable food – fish, seafood, fruit and vegetables, among others – will be lost, and very few can be recovered and reinserted into the supply chain.

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*For **Saint Vincent and the Grenadines**, an exporter of live lobsters, there are now connectivity restrictions between its transfer point, the United States of America, and destinations such as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.*

*In **Guatemala**, mango exports to California, United States of America, have suffered shipment cancellations. Also, there has been a decrease in the number of containers available for shipping, as these have been accumulated because they cannot enter Chinese ports. There has been a fall in the prices of goods such as coffee (7 percent), sugar (21 percent), oil (24 percent) and bananas (3 percent).*

*In **Chile**, the daily restriction of food containers to China fell to a range between 40 and 50, compared to the 200 to 300 containers that were commonly received. The products most affected have been cherries, blueberries, wine and seafood.*

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Sources: St. Lucia News Online, Food News Latam and El Mercurio

## **3.3. Trade**

It is acknowledged that in situations of crisis or disaster, there is a phenomenon called "panic buying" or hoarding. This means shopping triggered by the beginning of quarantine and the fear of shortages. In other words, people buy more than they can consume in the short and medium-term.

The goods that make up the basic food basket are often the subject of panic buying. Hoarding leads to shortages and price increases for certain products. During this pandemic, this has happened to flour, eggs, vegetables and fruit.

A further consequence is that retail markets, as a response to panic buying, tend to be over-supplied with the most in-demand products. When buying patterns return to normal, there will be a stockpile of certain products in retail, wholesale and even rural markets. In the case of perishable products, significant loss will occur if storage or processing measures are not taken to extend their shelf life, which is particularly challenging for vegetables, fish and milk.

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*In **Mexico**, for the past few weeks, there was an atypical demand for eggs as a result of panic buying.*

*In **Guatemala**, corn was hoarded in March, which led to increases in its price. The reported areas were Catarina and Malacatán in San Marcos, Tactic and Alta Verapaz in the municipality of Sololá and Huehuetenango.*

***Chile** was forced to import more than 240 tonnes of legumes to cope with high demand and a stock shortage.*

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Sources: Infobae, elPeriódico de Guatemala and Radio Cooperativa.

Restrictive measures may also affect tenants and/or customers. The temporary or partial closure of markets has led many tenants to discard products that would soon expire. On the other hand, many consumers, especially those in risk groups, have been limited in their movement to markets by existing health measures.

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*In **Mexico**, some fruit shop owners discarded kilos and kilos of food due to lack of customers. In Mazatlán, Sinaloa, the tenants of a local market said that considering the fall in the number of products consumed – up to 80 percent –, it turns out that a large number of fruits, vegetables, dairy products and packaged foods, end up as waste.*

*The Great Wholesale Market of Lima, **Peru**, had to close partially due to the coronavirus. Of the 200 tests performed, 132 vendors in this supply centre tested positive for COVID-19.*

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Sources: Radio San Joaquin and PeruRetail

Also, with the closure of restaurants, dining rooms and schools, the demand for certain products has fallen, generating losses in initial links of the value chain.

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*In **Colombia**, compulsory isolation caused household consumption to fall substantially.*

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Source: El Tiempo

### 3.4. Consumption

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed food purchasing patterns. Consumers in many low-income countries are buying more basic, non-perishable carbohydrates at the expense of fruits and vegetables, resulting in perishable foods being wasted in markets (FAO, 2020).

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*According to a survey conducted in Brazil, vegetable consumption has decreased during the pandemic.*

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Source: Embrapa

Another problem that can impact on food waste is the disruption of school feeding programmes, which generally benefit children and young people from the most vulnerable populations. In some cases, there have been huge problems in getting food to households, wasting prepared rations and leaving millions of families without this aid.

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*Ten million students in **Latin America and the Caribbean**, whose main and almost only source of food was school meals, were put at risk as a result of school suspensions and quarantines in most countries in the region.*

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Source: El Mercurio

## 4. Recommendations to prevent food loss and waste



Evidence indicates – despite the limited data available – that reducing food loss and waste can generate both economic benefits and costs. As reduction options are exhausted, the cost increases. In other words, there is a level of food loss and waste that will always be unavoidable.

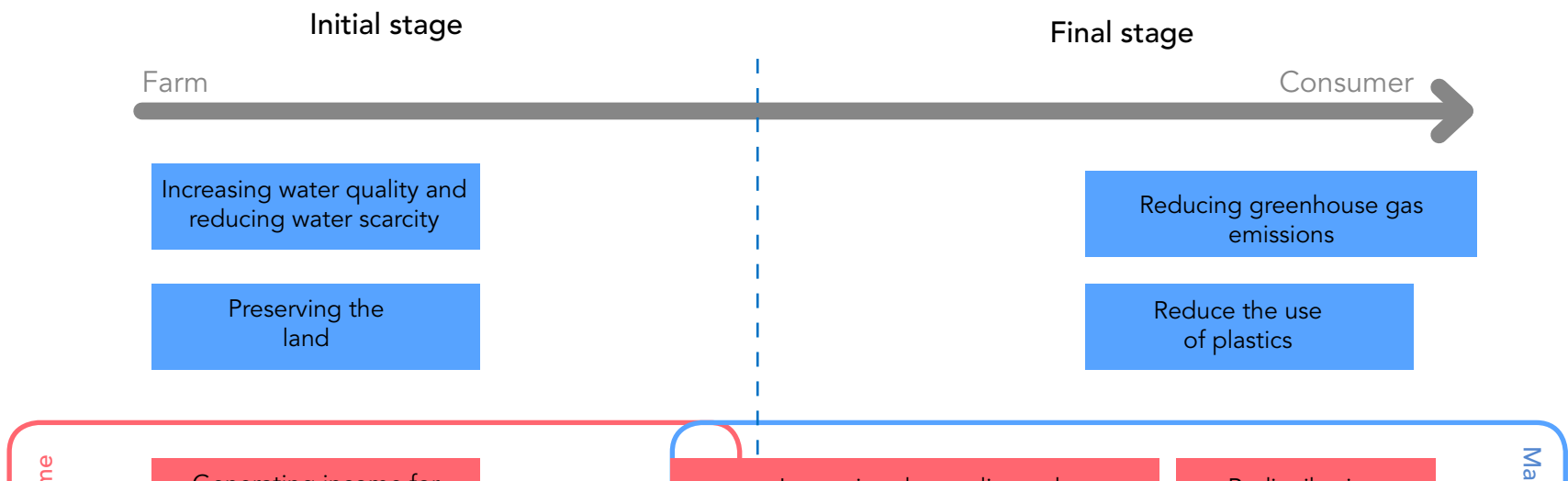
In any case, FAO does not recommend focusing exclusively on trade considerations when planning a comprehensive response to the problem. In addition to economic justifications, other considerations may motivate public sector intervention in food loss and waste, such as improving food security, nutrition and environmental sustainability (FAO, 2019).

Therefore, it is necessary to know where and why to design a policy or measure to mitigate food loss and waste. In the midst of such a pandemic, **the main concern of governments should be food insecurity.**

Reducing food loss or food waste can improve food security and nutrition, depending on where these groups are located and where the reductions are made. However, positive impacts on food security are not guaranteed and, in some cases, they may even be negative for some groups – farmers, for example (FAO, 2019).

Before the pandemic, better food security outcomes were achieved when food loss was reduced in the early stages of the supply chain, especially on farms in countries with high levels of food insecurity. On the other hand, reducing food waste at later stages of the supply chain can improve consumers' access to food, but farmers could be left worse off in terms of income and, therefore, food security (see Figure 2).

**Figure 3/** Objectives of measures related to the reduction of food loss and waste, and their points of entry into the supply chain before the COVID-19 pandemic



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