

Episode 1: Don't Waste This | Cassava in Brazil

English transcription

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

So my favorite Brazilian dish, and we know that Brazilian food is very good, but for me this dish is quite significant, which is the smoked meat with cassava puree. And my father comes from this region of Brazil, so for me it's a connection to my ancestry.

Even the way I say cassava is quite representative here in Brazil. We have different names for this food, so it could be macaxeira or cassava, depending on the region you're in. And by reducing food waste, for example, right? Combined with combating food insecurity, we ensure that these natural resources are not wasted, reinforcing the national commitment to global goals, such as the sustainable development goals in SDGs, such as combating hunger, climate, conscious consumption, also cities, in short, all of them that are related.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Welcome to Don't Waste This. I'm Carolina Fernandez, International Partnership Manager at WRAP, and today I'm here to speak with Luiza Soares, a conservation analyst at WWF. Regarding the food system crisis in Brazil and what's at stake if we don't solve it, Luiza, thank you so much for joining us for this podcast. Let's start by getting to know us a little better. Could you introduce yourself?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

First of all, thank you very much for the invitation. It's an honor to be here with you. Yes, I'm Luiza Soares, a conservation analyst at WWF Brazil, and I also lead Brazil Without Waste, our voluntary agreement to prevent and reduce food waste.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Thank you so much, Luíza. So, let's talk about food. I'd love to hear if you had to choose a dish or ingredient that truly represents Brazil, something you and many others enjoy, but which is also at risk due to climate change, water use, or food waste. Which would it be?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

I choose cassava, it's cassava. Even the way I say cassava is quite representative here in Brazil. We have different names for this food, so it could be macaxeira or cassava, depending on the region you're in. And it's a very traditional food. So we have different influences that this also refers to.

The name we call it here in Brazil is for me. I have another connection with this food, so my favorite Brazilian dish, and we know that Brazilian food is very good, but for me this dish is quite significant, which is the smoked meat with cassava puree, the fumeiro. It's smoked pork. Let's put it that way, it has a very strong flavor, which goes well with the creaminess of the puree.

And my father comes from this region of Brazil, so for me it's a connection to my ancestry. So, besides feeding and nourishing my body, it's also a food that nourishes my soul and warms my heart, so that's why it's today's chosen food.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

How beautiful, Luiza, thank you so much for sharing, it's really cool. How can we create such sentimental bonds like food, right? I also love cassava. I'd like you to talk a little more about it. Why is cassava so important to Brazil?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

Besides being a deeply cultural food, cassava plays a crucial role in food security, promoting family farming, and preserving cultural traditions. So, it's also a staple in indigenous communities, for example.

It's rich in nutrients. It's incredibly versatile in cooking, so we can use it in a variety of ways—fried, cooked, and in other dishes. Besides food, it's also used in the production of bioplastics, such as cosmetics and hygiene products. It's also used in animal feed and medicine.

And it's adaptable throughout Brazil as well. So it thrives in different climates. We have a continental country with different biomes, different soils, different temperatures, for example, and it adapts to all of them. So this is very important, for example, for promoting agroecology, because it requires less chemical inputs.

And especially in regions like the Amazon, we can also contribute to the bioeconomy because of all this, right? Cassava is very important not only for our economic development, but it's also quite strategic for socio-environmental development.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Incredible, isn't it? Wealth is the meaning of food, which we often take for granted and don't stop to think about. But there's another very important question I'd like you to address: what's the fact? The important study that illustrates the challenge of food waste in Brazil.

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

Brazil has made significant progress in reducing food waste, but in a continental territory, where we have a very different, extensive, and complex production chain.

Yeah, is it a challenge? It's a really big challenge. It's estimated that Brazil wastes 55 million tons of food per year, but we know that this number is an underestimate. So, considering our production figures, for example, we know that this number is probably higher. And we live in a paradox here, right? So, at the same time that we have this huge waste, we have a huge amount of food production.

We still face the problem of food insecurity, so we recently left the UN hunger map, so we managed to reduce our malnutrition rate to less than 2.5%. But we still have almost 7 million people facing hunger, and millions more facing other levels of food insecurity.

So this shows how unstable access to food is in the country. So reducing this waste is a strategic way for us to achieve this. It's about ensuring that this food reaches those who really need it, right? So it's not just important for environmental conservation or economic impact, right? But also so that we can guarantee the right to adequate food throughout the country.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

It certainly reduces the food waste problem to a gigantic realm, but one full of social, environmental, and economic opportunities. But let's get back to the cassava we love so much. How do you think the food waste problem relates to cassava?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

It's cassava. As I said before, it plays a role in food security in Brazil because it's quite adaptable for production, right? So it's a food that's produced, for example, by family farms, and it has great nutritional value. So, for example, when purchasing food directly from family farms, cassava usually appears. We have some data here from the IBGE, which is our data institute in Brazil.

We have an estimated production of approximately 1,800,000 tons of cassava in an area of 1,000,000 hectares. So, it has high productivity. And also because of this adaptability, it's a

food that is considered resilient to climate change. So, it also plays this role of guaranteeing long-term food security. Because it's part of our biodiversity, it has a low production cost.

So, it's also ideal for more vulnerable regions with limited agricultural infrastructure, such as the Cerrado and the Amazon, which are currently our two biomes. These are the regions that have faced the most problems, such as deforestation.

Regarding food waste, we don't have specific data on cassava, but it's a highly valued food culturally and also a source of sentiment. So we need to apply this same value to all food that's being wasted to make it a non-option.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Could you tell us a little more about the consequences of this food insecurity challenge in Brazil?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

Yes, if we can reduce food insecurity in Brazil, we would generate impacts. Positive, more profound ones, right? So, for example, there are several studies that confirm that when we ensure food security, we see improvements in public health, for example, we also see an increase in school performance among children and adolescents, and this also affects both economic and agricultural productivity.

And not just agriculture in general, but strengthening family farming in particular, which then promotes greater social equity. Furthermore, when we reduce food insecurity, we don't need to develop new forms of food production, right? So, it also ensures environmental preservation.

And by reducing food waste, for example, right? Combined with combating food insecurity, we ensure that these natural resources are not wasted, reinforcing the national commitment to global goals, such as the sustainable development goals in SDGs, such as combating hunger, climate, conscious consumption, also cities, in short, all of them that are related.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Definitely, Luiza, but there's a lot of hope, because this issue is a priority for the current government. And fortunately, Brazil was removed from the hunger map this year. Could you talk about the hunger map? Brazil was working to contribute to this challenge.

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

WWF Brazil is a Brazilian NGO. We work primarily in environmental conservation, and we're very active in this area. We're strongly involved in promoting responsible agriculture, valuing its subdiversity, and implementing consistent strategies to conserve these ecosystems and strengthen traditional communities. This is the kind of support we focus on. We focus primarily on sustaining and promoting them.

Good ways for sustainable production chains, right? So, through agroecological practices, respect for the rights of indigenous peoples, and also the promotion of the conscious use of these natural resources, we have also invested in strengthening local organizations that are out there, in the territories.

And also in productive inclusion, valuing this traditional knowledge and also contributing to the reduction of deforestation, the fight against climate change and food security in these territories, which are more vulnerable.

Yes, we also recently launched Brazil Without Waste. So we had the honor of serving as the secretariat for this initiative, which has a strong focus on both food security and biodiversity preservation. So, we believe that through this multisectoral pact, we will be able to strengthen this agenda by working with different sectors and stakeholders to reduce and prevent food waste.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Congratulations, congratulations Luiza on all the incredible work that the WWF has been doing. Could you share a success story or impact?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

Brazil, as I said before, has made progress in combating the loss of food experience.

And recently we had the sanction of the national policy to combat food waste and also the publication of the new intersectoral strategy for the same topic, this is important as it shows Brazil's commitment to promoting educational actions and partnerships.

Across sectors, we work toward this common goal and also reinforce this agenda's commitment to food security. So, as we said before, Brazil is off the hunger map. Yes, we've made progress on policies because of this. So, in two years, by strengthening existing policies, such as the Brazil Without Hunger plan, strengthening family farming, and also school meals.

And all of this is driven by the Ministry of Social Development, which is responsible for this policy. And we are honored to have you as one of Brazil's supporters, without waste, so in addition to adding to this.

Movement as a national impact, we have also sought alignment with these goals, alignment with these objectives so that we can increasingly add to this national strategy and continue to ensure that Brazil brings even more fruits for food security and in the fight against food waste.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Your work is incredible. What we're doing with Brazil, without waste, is at this launch, on Thursday, October 2, which was really cool, and we were able to see this collaboration, not only with all the actors from the government, companies, and academia, working together for a Brazil without waste.

Yes, could you talk now, it's the global network of pacts, it's the Food Pact network, yes, we're very, very happy, right? Brazil has been joining for years, could you talk a little about how being part of the network of food pacts is helping Brazil.

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

First, it's an honour for us to now officially join. This large network of pacts around the world. So we're very pleased to include Brazil in this scenario. It's for us to implement this national pact. It's very important, especially because of our favorable political context. So, this year, Brazil is hosting COP30, so the eyes of the world are on us, and it's a very strategic way to demonstrate results.

Besides being, of course, one of the largest food producers, we also harbor the greatest biodiversity on the planet. So making an impact on this scenario is, is very important. So we can demonstrate a new connection between sectors. Everyone who works with food, right? So government, academia, companies, civil society through this approach. Multistakeholder is an example of an agenda that can be applied to others, right? So it's a great example that we can show.

WWF Brazil already has this characteristic, especially with the support of WRAP and the Food Pact Network. It's very important to demonstrate how consolidated this approach is, right? So, with over 20 years of experience, it's great to have this expertise and show our stakeholders that we're not.

We're not inventing anything new. We're bringing experience and a wealth of knowledge to our reality. It's certainly very important for us to bring this global impact to Brazil as well. So

it's great to contribute to this globally. But I'm sure it's also an exchange from the outside in, which is very important.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

That's it, right? That's all. The experience the network has already brought to Brazil is that it can be adapted to the context, the reality of the country, or also, but also the power of collaboration—national collaboration, international collaboration—which is essential to tackle a problem, a challenge as big as food waste. Yes, but let's continue just a little further. What will be lost if urgent measures to combat food waste aren't taken?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

For us Brazilians, our biodiversity is very important. So we're very proud of our nature, right? Something that makes us proud to be Brazilian. And food waste intensifies the pressure on these natural ecosystems. So, to produce food, we end up using water, soil, energy, and our own biodiversity. So, when we waste food, we waste it.

This entire value chain as well, right? So, we often end up generating more deforestation and more environmental degradation to produce more food. So this waste production cycle directly contributes to the loss of natural habitats, especially in the biomes that are most under pressure, such as the Amazon and the Cerrado, where this agricultural expansion without sustainable planning threatens our species, threatens our nature and also imbalances ecosystems.

So for us here in Brazil, combating food waste is also an urgent action to conserve biodiversity? Yes, we know that food systems have high greenhouse gas emissions. So we also want to contribute to reducing these avoidable emissions and also promote greater environmental sustainability and ensure that the right to adequate food reaches everyone.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

We have a lot to lose, right? So, to give a little more context, I'd like to go back to cassava. Our cassava is what I'm asking you: What do you think future generations might lose if cassava disappears?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

If cassava disappears, it will, despite cassava being very versatile because of its many varieties.

Yes, it is possibly a food that will adapt to climate change, but having a reduced presence of cassava will have a huge impact on Brazil, because it is a symbolic and very cultural and versatile food in our cuisine.

So, it is present in several typical dishes that are well-known from the north to the south of the country, such as tapioca, cassava flour, beijou, pirão, tucupi and, without it, these indigenous, Afro-Brazilian and very regional food traditions would lose their foundation, then?

This is very sad, especially for future generations, right? We've also seen a growing shift in food culture due to globalization. So losing that would be very sad. And on top of all that, cassava is essential for food security, especially in rural and vulnerable communities, because it's resilient, nutritious, and easy to grow. If we lose it, it could be a risk to us. It's also food security.

Economically, the decline or absence of cassava would primarily affect smallholder farmers, who rely on it as a source of income and environmental impact. We would lose a crop that is highly adaptable to our climate, has a low environmental impact, and is essential for achieving more agroecological food systems and strengthening our sociobiodiversity.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

We clearly need to act quickly to solve this problem, which has so many negative consequences for the environment and people. Now, I'd like to know what motivates you personally to do this work?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

This is a touching question. I didn't mention it at the beginning of my presentation, but I'm an agricultural engineer by training, and yesterday was the day of agricultural professionals. So congratulations to my colleagues. And when I decided to become an agronomist, I had... The intention was to work with an agriculture that was environmentally friendly and that also helped fight hunger.

Throughout my professional career, I've worked in different ways to maintain this commitment, right? And I believe that working with and combating food waste is a continuation of this. So it's a great opportunity to show other agendas, right? Not just the agricultural sector, but also the environmental and social sectors, that it's possible for us to engage with different stakeholders from different sectors. Throughout this entire chain, so we can have a concrete impact. And together, right? So, when we can open this dialogue, we can make a greater impact in the long term.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

What do you think? If we solve the problem tomorrow, what difference would tomorrow make?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

It's a morning I've always dreamed of, so it would be an incredible morning. In my opinion, it would be a morning where food is valued from production to consumption, so wasting it would no longer be a natural option.

For this to happen, we need a united agrifood system to combat food loss. So, companies must take innovative, impactful actions, and governments must implement sound, integrated public policies.

And the entire ecosystem of civil society organizations, educational and research institutions, is well-structured, with investment to provide a solid foundation of data, technical, and socio-environmental knowledge.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Let's believe, believe, and continue working for this beautiful world you describe with the harmonized food system. If you can, in 10 seconds, tell us why we need to fix the global food system?

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

In 10 seconds, which could be a book, but for me, it's because the way we produce and consume food will define our future. So, beyond emissions figures, it's important to say that no one can fight for other ways to help the planet. So, fixing the food system means feeding people, the planet, and also our future.

Carolina Fernández, WRAP:

Thank you, Luíza. And all I have left to do is say, thank you, Luísa, for sharing your ideas and for the incredible work you're doing to combat food waste and loss in Brazil. And good luck to Brazil Without Waste. This is an important initiative that joins the global Food Pact Network.



We started this group by talking about cassava, a food with a very special meaning in Brazil. Listening to their story and sharing their knowledge and perspective, we made it clear that we need to act now so that cassava and everything it represents can be protected and appreciated by future relationships.

Luiza Soares, WWF Brazil:

I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk a little about cassava and Brazil. Thank you so much for being here with you once again and for all your support. It's a Brazil Without Waste.