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Chapter 3: Challenging corporate charity: Food commons as a response to food insecurity

Tara Kenny and Colin Sage

Abstract:

Recognising that food insecurity is a structural feature that requires profound food system and public policy transformation, this paper critically examines the increasing volumes of surplus food redistributed via food charities in many rich societies. The role of corporate charitable donations is widely celebrated as a 'win-win' that reduces food waste and feeds hungry people. Noting the inability of such interventions to address the structural causes of food insecurity, and its propensity to maintain and support problematic ideologies, practices, and power imbalances the chapter offers an alternative perspective that argues for the need to move beyond food as commodity and appreciate its other vital attributes. Reviewing two alternative models of food redistribution – labelled 'brokerage' and 'challenger' – the chapter highlights the corporate dominance of the former while the latter offers the prospects to rethink ways out of food poverty traps. Drawing upon the notion of food as a commons, it argues that reformed public welfare provision together with diverse community initiatives grounded in principles of conviviality could offer an alternative route to addressing food insecurity.

Keywords: Commons; foodbanks; charitable surplus; corporate donations; community initiatives; conviviality

Key learnings

- Reclaiming food as a commons is a principle that can guide food system transformation ideologically and structurally because it demands attention to the prevailing governance of food which has become dominated by powerful corporate interests.

- The commons can be viewed as antithetical to the principles of capitalism and can be regarded as a paradigm that is constituted by the indivisible and interdependent existence best expressed as: resource + community + set of social protocols.
- The narrative which frames food as a commodity is deeply embedded in socio-economic life and allows the harnessing and neutralising of potentially critical vocabulary.
- A greater focus on agency can unsettle existing inequalities in the distribution of power and recovering the notion of food as a commons may be a powerful tool in reshaping dominant narratives.

- The notion of food as a commons encourages us to consider non-market responses to issues of food insecurity; and convivialism – a mode of living together that values human and non-human relationships - may form a vital part of re-establishing food as a commons.

- Food system transformation requires close attention to language where the discourse of individualistic consumerism is replaced by a commitment to food citizenship and conviviality, and where 'food security for all' is underpinned by the right to food and a vision of commensality within a food commons rather than a landscape dominated by charitable donations.

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Short bios

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Introduction

To address the global challenge of food insecurity, public policy must support radical food system transformation, consider complexity and food system interactions with other sectors and systems, be based on broader understandings of hunger and malnutrition, and adopt diverse solutions to address context specific issues (HLPE, 2020). Prior to Covid-19 progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 2 was already off-course with one in three people experiencing some form of malnutrition (Nature Editorial, 2020). The fallout from Covid-19 resulted in a significant spike in food insecurity across the globe which is now being exacerbated further by the illegal invasion of Ukraine (Lang and McKee, 2022). However, widespread recognition of the multiple food and social system failures along with calls for radical food system transformation predates these unprecedented events (Swinburn et al., 2019, Willett et al, 2019).

Food system transformation is dependent on altering ideologies and social practices, developing new values, and reflecting on principles that can assist this transition (Duncan et al., 2022). Reclaiming food as a commons is a principle that can guide this transition ideologically and structurally because it demands attention to the prevailing governance of food which has become dominated by powerful corporate interests while resulting in the exclusion of the vast majority of stakeholders in the food system: eaters. Reclaiming food as a commons challenges the notion of food as a commodity, access to which is largely determined by an ability to pay (Vivero-Pol, 2017). Once we are reminded that food is an essential biological necessity - as vital as air and water to human existence – then a corresponding array of other assumptions - including nutritionism and neoliberalism - that have shaped and underpinned contemporary food systems fall sharply into focus (Nisbett et al., 2022).

In this chapter we critically evaluate the contribution that rethinking food as a commons might make to our understanding of food insecurity. We do so, following a brief conceptual elaboration of the commons idea, with reference to the growing sector of charitable food distribution in rich countries. With rising numbers of people presenting themselves at food banks to avail of emergency rations while business donors and social entrepreneurs celebrate

the increasing volumes of food 'saved' from waste streams and feeding the hungry, it would appear that this 'win-win' solution was here to stay. However, there is growing evidence that a different approach, based upon principles around the Right to Food and involving practices that speak to the notion of food as a commons, are beginning to gain traction. We argue that such initiatives, including harnessing concepts such as conviviality, are vital if we are to reimagine a food system ensuring food security by delivering healthy and sustainable diets for all.

Food as a commons

The idea of the commons has been with us since antiquity (Vivero-Pol et al., 2019). The term applies to a resource – whether grazing or foraging land, forest, inshore fisheries, heritage seeds etc – that is held and managed collectively in favour of the common good. Invariably this has meant not only ensuring equitable arrangements now, but also in the interests of future generations. Traditionally, this duty of care was extended not only to 'productive' resources that benefitted human users but, as we see in the cultural practices of surviving indigenous communities, included recognition that other forms of life also enjoyed use rights to these resources through co-existence. However, as Bollier reminds us, while a commons includes physical elements, it is better regarded as a paradigm that is constituted by the indivisible and interdependent existence best expressed as: resource + community + set of social protocols (Bollier, 2014). Elsewhere he has suggested that commons might be better understood as a verb than as a noun: where 'commoning' is an active social process (Helfrich & Bollier, 2015).

To understand the commons, however, one must first acknowledge the history of its first and brutal expropriation from the hands of those who nurtured it. Between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries in the UK, a large number of parliamentary acts were passed that established legal property rights to land much of which had been effectively held in common by rural communities. These Acts of Enclosure were part of the conditions that enabled the development of capitalism in England as besides turning land into a commodity that could be bought and sold, it had secondly to be owned by a class willing to develop its productive assets for profit and the market. A third factor, arguably the most critical of all, was to 'free' a great mass of the rural population from its means of subsistence and to effectively force them to

the towns and cities where the emerging industries – coal mining, iron making, textile manufacturing – could use their labour. This process was facilitated by the Poor Law of 1834 which accelerated this rural to urban migration (Hobsbawm 1975). The enclosure of common land has continued in other countries ever since and over the last fifteen years the process of expropriation and privatisation by sovereign funds and other wealthy investors has come to be known as 'land-grabbing'.

The commons, then, can be viewed as antithetical to the principles of capitalism where all is held in private ownership, where productive activity is designed to enhance personal wealth and where asset-less individuals must work how and where they can to be remunerated with wages that are exchanged for the goods – food, shelter, clothing – that keep them alive. Such essential principles have come to form the bedrock of economics from which occasional forays have cautioned against any 'foolish' suggestion that common or collective ownership arrangements might offer a just and equitable alternative (Hardin 1968, Bollier 2014). However, dissatisfaction with capitalism has been growing amongst an increasingly diverse range of social movements and while it is hazardous to attribute a singular label - anti-globalization – to the extremely heterogeneous movements that have emerged since the events in Seattle in 1999 and Occupy Wall Street, this does provide a basis from which to trace some of the creative responses to capitalism's failings. Recovering the idea of the commons has been part of this process and now constitutes one of the important conceptual tools in a repertoire of alternative thinking that has moved from simply opposing the status quo to proposing anti-utilitarian - if occasionally utopian - measures that might be collectively labelled as 'degrowth' (D'Alisa et al., 2015). Rethinking the food system is high on this agenda for change and where food security itself becomes an important topic for reappraisal.

Following Vivero-Pol (2019) we agree that food holds multiple meanings that can be constructed and reconstructed according to those powerful interests which dominate the narrative, policy space and technologies. Today, at least within most of the wealthier countries, the prevailing obsession is one of cheap and convenient food given that a small number of powerful corporate actors effectively dominate the manufacture, supply and retail of food and frequently remind us of these features. While most customers probably welcome the fact that their weekly shop now takes a smaller proportion of household earnings than

ever before (notwithstanding the current rise in prices), fewer are likely to ask why, given its indispensable role in human survival, access to food is determined by the ability to pay. This characteristic of exchange has served to rather overwhelm and render inconsequential in public discourse other long-standing, unmonetized, attributes of food. So, in addition to considering food as a tradeable good and as an essential requirement for human survival, Vivero-Pol (2019) identifies the following additional attributes:

- Food as cultural determinant, shaping societal and individual identity, and key to social relationships;
- Food as human right; designated under international law as an entitlement to all citizens and where, under no circumstances, should it be denied to a person;
- Food as natural resource: although paradoxically food is rivalrous – eating an apple means it is not available for another to eat – apples are replenished by nature (or artificially by technologies). Providing conditions are maintained the supply of food is not a constraint, although access may be as a consequence of physical or economic exclusion;
- Food as a public good, that is an outcome of a deliberate policy choice to address an evident public need and conceivably underpinned by legislation and funding.

Arguably these six attributes are not necessarily an exhaustive list and a case might be made to regard food as an instrument of health and wellbeing. Moreover, food is associated with an enormous store of knowledge, some of which has been generated in recent decades by western science, but the greater part established through experimentation, observation, selection and communication over many thousand years by and through our ancestors. However, collectively they demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of food that extends beyond its primary valuation through the market, and in the context of food security the fourth bullet point above – food as a public good – should be regarded as particularly relevant.

Food as corporate charity

It is important to recognise that the narrative which frames food as a commodity is not only deeply embedded in socio-economic life in most wealthy countries, it is also quite accommodating in harnessing and neutralising potentially critical vocabulary. For example, although a food culture around culinary traditions and convivial eating practices (family

meals) may appear to be in robust health in countries such as Italy and France, corporate interests still dominate across their food systems and happily sustain a sense of timeless continuity in national diets despite the rising proportion of processed foods. We can also witness the ways in which food system interests – especially those associated with agricultural inputs and large-scale farming – have sought to appropriate terms such as sustainability and regeneration (Bord Bia, 2021). Moreover, such reassuring tropes deflect attention from the widening social inequalities whereby increasing numbers of households are struggling to put food on their tables. Increasingly, in circumstances where the 'consumer' does not have the resources to buy, charitable responses are evoked and excess food, a necessary and "intended consequence" (Messner et al., 2020: 809) of the corporate food regime, is deployed to fill the gap.

Feeding people, by ensuring access to resources, ought to be regarded as a responsibility for public policy (HLPE, 2020) yet across the globe, this responsibility is progressively becoming a corporate matter (Riches, 2018). Although the pandemic led to increasing numbers seeking charitable support, the rise in demand must be recognised in the context of conditions that preceded Covid-19 (Spring et al., 2022). The food banking model has spread rapidly across the globe and now plays an essential role in both the "roll back and roll-out of Neoliberal welfare policy", and ultimately has distracted attention from the troubling relationship between food waste, poverty and the policies that strengthen the production of both (Lohnes, 2021: 352). While food surplus and food insecurity tend to be presented as a paradox (Moon, 2021), in truth a more accurate framing would be that of mutualism.

Of the four pillars customarily used to describe food security, *availability* is regarded as necessary, but not sufficient for *access*; access as necessary but not sufficient for effective *utilization*; and *stability* as a cross-cutting factor that is necessary for the others to hold (Clapp et al., 2022). Arguably this hierarchy has served to privilege availability and has placed emphasis on producing more food as key to feeding the hungry. This drive to continuously increasing output – the massification of food – explains the growing structural surpluses that have come to characterise industrial food systems in rich countries. Yet as incomes fray as a consequence of market perturbations and people's purchasing capacity declines, they demonstrably lack access to that food. It is under these circumstances where charitable

initiatives have emerged, although clearly under circumstances where key stakeholders in this arrangement exercise no voice or agency beyond presenting themselves as deserving poor worthy of philanthropic support. Agency – recently proposed, together with sustainability, as an additional pillar to make a more robust definition of food security (Clapp et al., 2022) - can be regarded as the ability to express, exercise, and execute personal views and decisions in the interests of oneself and wider community well-being. However, it extends beyond the idea that people ought to have a voice in matters of food security but, rather, become effective stakeholders within food systems, a change that will clearly unsettle existing inequalities in the distribution of power.

It has been suggested that there are two broad types of surplus food redistribution: the type that challenges and the type that brokers. The 'challenger' model is characterised by "more radical politics, accompanied by less conditional and more plural and collective means of accessing and sharing food" (Midgely, 2020: 354). The 'brokerage' model, in contrast, appears to operate as an effective partnership between the food industry and the charitable and voluntary sector, best represented by food banks channelling surplus products to the food insecure (Midgely, 2020), and which today have become the dominant model of addressing hunger in many rich countries. This model is, of course, deeply embedded in the neoliberal narrative where food is only ever a commodity – but where philanthropic activities of well-meaning companies can enable the hungry to eat. Framing the issue of food redistribution as a 'win-win' solution to the problems of food waste and poverty – thereby claiming collateral ownership of the sustainability agenda too while buffing up the image of corporate social responsibility – it is unsurprising to find powerful corporate interests well beyond the food system jostling for entry. Recent advocates for 'ending hunger' include Enterprise Rent-A-Car Foundation and the construction plant machinery company, Caterpillar: an interesting array of donors can be seen on the Global FoodBanking Network website (GFN, 2022). The corporatisation of food banks has been well addressed by Fisher (2017) and Riches (2018).

A good example of the brokerage model, or arguably a 'brokerage plus' model that emerged during the pandemic, can be found in developments in the charitable food sector in Ireland and mirrored in many other countries. In Ireland, FoodCloud, a social enterprise and founder of Ireland's first food banking network, redistributed 77% more food in 2020 in comparison

to 2019 and their goal is to increase volumes distributed by 15% per year over the next three years (FoodCloud, 2021). Recently announced partnerships include McDonalds, the world's largest fast-food chain (Irish Times, 2021), and a notable feature of new donors and products has seen an expanding array of ultra-processed foods. This has partly been disguised by a narrative celebrating a 'community' call to action and use of associated tropes of selfless generosity. In May 2020, Nestle Ireland were celebrated for 'feeding kindness' owing to their donation of "…80,000 bowls of cereal, 23,000 easter eggs and 19,000 bars of confectionary" (Foodcloud, 2020). Two months earlier, Danone partnered with FoodCloud in a 'Give our communities your best shot' campaign based on the goal of donating one million Actimel cultured yogurt shots across Ireland and the UK. To participate, consumers simply needed to purchase one pack, log into the Actimel website and opt to donate a second pack to a community of their choosing. This campaign continues today and is called 'Drink it for your community' (Actimel, 2022). In September 2020, Ireland witnessed its first ever official national food appeal led by FoodCloud and Ireland's leading retailers, encouraging further instore purchases and donations (Sunderland, 2020). In April 2021, Mars Ireland's launched its 'food for change campaign' based on donations of '60,000 meals' comprising Dolmio and Uncle Ben's branded products (FoodCloud, 2021). As UN Special Rapporteur, Michael Fakhri, is reported to have said, "we see the same corporate players who have caused irreparable damage to our health, climate and environment trying to create a new game, gain more influence and carve out new economic opportunities" (Lakhani, 2021).

It is clear that the brokerage model rests upon food waste management not prevention, ignores the structural nature of food surplus production and overconsumption (Messner, 2020) and is increasingly moving seamlessly into non-surplus, ultra-processed food promotion and distribution. Yet demands for greater agency in how people seek to feed themselves – not simply the right to be fed – are growing and an emerging diversity of practices at local level – bundled together under the 'Challenger' rubric – demonstrate that recovering the notion of food as a commons may be a powerful tool in reshaping narratives.

Challenging charitable food: Commons, community, conviviality

A first step in reframing food insecurity must be to situate it as a social problem as well as an economic one: ultimately, low and precarious wages and inadequate social safety nets are what trap many in long-term poverty. Charitable donations of food can undermine people's

personal dignity, deepen stigma, and exacerbate a felt sense of social exclusion (Van der Horst et al., 2014). It also reflects the individualisation of solutions where donor recipients become 'deserving' consumers in a parallel charitable food system equally under the control of powerful companies. Fortunately, in moving from using 'leftover food for left behind people' (Riches, 2018:2) to enabling people to better nourish themselves, a range of initiatives have begun to emerge that challenge the existing top-down model and inject a strong dose of agency into the system.

The emergence of buyer cooperatives, social supermarkets and food clubs are amongst recent initiatives that bring people together. A common feature is that they generally require participants to make a small weekly contribution (upwards from €1) reflecting a differentiated ability to pay but critically engaging them as *members*. While such initiatives may still work with donated surplus there is generally a more discriminating selection of the products accepted, while members are able to exercise choice in what their box contains. Growing numbers of pantries, larders and fridges within communities draw in a widening roster of actors – from conventional retailers to local restaurants and farmers - able to contribute to their stocking. Many individuals now cook extra food which can be packed in foil and placed in a fridge, while neighbourhood kitchens batch cooking healthy meals by and for community members is a way of bringing people together to collectively respond to a shared predicament. Such spaces do more than provide food, however, as they can also teach important cooking skills to those without exposure to this experience. While there are instances within the brokerage model where similar processes occur, this is dependent on the motivations, ideas, and access to resources of the receiving organisations (Kenny and Sage, 2019; Kenny and Sage, 2021). Nonetheless, many of these initiatives – slowly spreading within and between cities in a rather rhizomatic manner – are revealing the inherently *social* nature of food and its capacity to restore a sense of mutual responsibility and conviviality. Yet, the questions remain as to whether these arrangements, while undoubtedly positive, can, or are designed to, tackle the structures excluding people from food systems in the first place. Do these arrangements challenge governments to assume responsibility for ensuring the right to food?

The notion of food as a commons encourages us to consider non-market responses to issues of food insecurity, as is already the case with regard to healthcare and education where access is not dependent on income but provision undertaken by the state. In practice, this requires a shift in thinking around the governance of food, but there is evidence of progress here. In March 2020 an independent report by the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors (GCSA) to the European Commission recommend that to achieve a sustainable food system, "food must be considered a common good rather than a consumer good…" (GCSA, 2020: 7). While the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy, for which this report was a contribution, did not address the power asymmetries that have locked in the economic framing of food as a tradeable good (Jackson et al., 2021) it nonetheless signifies a progressive shift in thinking that aligns with similar clarion calls such as those for a 'Common Food Policy' (IPES, 2019).

This call for a common food policy is underpinned by the principle that public money should be used for public goods and this presents one tangible and actionable goal when working through how, if food was reclaimed as a common good, would this translate on the ground in response to food insecurity. This would require addressing poverty in a more fundamental way than it is currently through a patchwork of social welfare benefits for which claimants must demonstrate eligibility and 'deservingness'. One alternative model is that of Basic Income whereby each citizen would receive from the state a payment sufficient to live at a minimal but dignified standard of economic security and which would be universal and unconditional on the performance of labour. Advocates argue that this Basic Income model could also include non-monetary benefits such as food and in this way begin to decouple human sustenance from the commodity economy.

However, state provision is not in itself sufficient and needs to be accompanied by efforts to reconnect conviviality and food as part of a wider ecological transition. Convivialism – a mode of living together that values human and non-human relationships (Convivialist Manifesto, 2014) – may be an essential part of re-establishing food as a commons. Community-based initiatives provide evidence here, for example when local growing projects recover an appreciation of the environmental basis of food. They also help to disrupt the atomistic ways in which the economic system manages consumers, bringing to life a messier but more collective response to issues of common concern such as food insecurity.

Conclusion

Ultimately, food system transformation requires a shared sense of mutual care, where the language of individualistic consumerism is replaced by a commitment to food citizenship and conviviality, and where food security for all is underpinned by the right to food and a vision of commensality - the practice of eating together – within a food commons rather than a landscape dominated by charitable donations.

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