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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Building back normal? An investigation of practice changes in the charitable and on-the-go food provision sectors through COVID-19

Steffen Hirth[a,b], Filippo Oncini[a], Frank Boons[a,c] and Bob Doherty[d]

[a]Sustainable Consumption Institute, Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK; [b]The Center of Interdisciplinary Sustainability Research, University of Münster, Münster, Germany; [c]Maastricht Sustainability Institute, Maastricht University, Maastricht, The Netherlands; [d]The York Management School, University of York, York, UK

ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about debates on rethinking food and other socio-technical systems. While swiftly re-establishing normality has understandable appeal in a crisis, the landscape-level changes during the pandemic also hold windows of opportunity to "build back better" and to achieve sustainability transitions. In this article, we ask whether a cycle of disruption and adaptation results either in the rise of more sustainable niche practices or the consolidation of the socio-techntheorical regimes in place. To approach this question, we consider the specific cases of charitable and on-the-go food provision and examine the extent to which COVID-induced adaptations have resulted in debates about, and implementations of, more just and sustainable practices. We draw on systems transitions and practice theoretical approaches to elucidate dynamics and elasticity and thus the effect of socio-technical practice changes. After describing the pre-COVID food regimes, we evaluate organizational practice adaptations during the lockdowns with regard to (1) changing cultural images of food security and provision, (2) socio-technical innovations, and (3) new forms of governance. We find that rather than justifying the public and policy frame of "building back better," the effect of recovery measures reinforces the socio-technical regimes and omits wider sectoral and societal sustainability challenges such as the systemic reduction of poverty and waste.

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Introduction

The impact of COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerabilities of our food systems (Clapp and Moseley 2020; Cummins et al. 2020; Lang 2020; Power et al. 2020). Soon after the first lockdowns in early 2020, food production, provision, and consumption practices in the UK were greatly affected. Supply-chain interruptions, food-waste issues, and food insecurity became immediately visible and governments quickly took a variety of measures, including financial aid for individuals or businesses, to contain the effects of the major disruption. A quick return to the established socio-technical regime of food provision and making social and economic life "bounce back" to normal (e.g., Ehgartner and Boons 2020) has understandable appeal in times of crisis. However, the pandemic also provoked speculation about the ways in which it offers a window of opportunity to rethink and reshape our food systems toward sustainability, including anecdotal evidence of positive change happening in several parts of the world (e.g., Graddy-Lovelace 2020; Moragues-Faus 2020; Power et al. 2020). With calls from politicians[1] and civil society[2] to "build back better" and "fairer," the crisis seemingly offers opportunities to address the root causes of social-ecological problems through system-level transitions, rather than just alleviating the symptoms of, and thereby reproducing, an unsustainable system. Some academic author collectives reacted to COVID-19 with calls for moving toward sustainable practices (Ehgartner and Boons 2020), controlled economic degrowth (Paulson et al. 2020), and more just human-animal relations and biodiversity conservation (Settele et al. 2020; Wrenn et al. 2020). These appeals were accompanied by broader public and policy debates on ensuring that financial aid supported the "green growth" deemed necessary in the face of the Paris Agreement. An assessment of the effectiveness of the COVID-19 stimulus efforts to induce green growth suggests, however, that the global economic recovery stimuli are even less "green" than after the financial crisis of 2008 (Harvey 2021; Vivideconomics 2021). It is therefore important to examine the discrepancies between fundamental

CONTACT Steffen Hirth steffen.hirth@manchester.ac.uk Sustainable Consumption Institute, Alliance Manchester Business School, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK
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transformations of practices in socio-technical systems and mere declarations of intent or slight practice adaptations, which rather than representing fundamental transformation instead appear to reinforce established practices backed by language and actions *suggestive* of transformation. The pandemic entailed an open display of food-system fragility and the feasibility of swift, mainly financial but also alimentary, support actions as well as logistic and other organizational adaptations. While arguably that situation of structural fragility and flexibility in the wake of the pandemic has opened an ephemeral window of opportunity for sustainability transitions, it is crucial to examine empirically whether and how various practices in the food sector were adapted to the new conditions, and whether these changes could indicate that an actual system-level transition is underway.

Drawing on the sustainable transitions literature and on practice theoretical approaches, we depart from other articles in this special issue to zoom in on the dynamics of social practices within food-provisioning sectors. Understanding how food-provisioning sectors that significantly shape daily urban life have responded during the COVID-19 disruption is highly relevant for studies of (un/sustainable) consumption and changing social practices in everyday life. Specifically, we focus on the cases of charitable food provision (CFP) and "on-the-go" food provision (OTG), two sectors that intersect with domestic food consumption in various ways. Both sectors are now established structural components of the UK food landscape, and over recent years they have gained increasing centrality. It is now well known that since 2010 the number of food banks has been steadily increasing everywhere in the UK (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2020). The Trussell Trust food-bank network reported a 31-fold increase in the number of emergency-food parcels distributed, from 61,000 in 2010–2011 to 1.9 million in 2019–2020 (Bramley et al. 2021, 14). Likewise, the OTG sector has consistently grown, particularly in the last decade, and its market share is now nearly 25% of the total eating-out market (Lumina Intelligence 2021, 5). The context of our research focuses on Greater Manchester and the wider UK context and we examine the extent to which the adaptations of the CFP and OTG sectors in response to the pandemic have resulted in more just and sustainable food-provisioning practices. Behind "building back better," we see a public debate expressing the general ambition and assumption by various societal and organizational stakeholders that certain unsustainable precarities and wasteful uses of resources can and must be reduced in systems of provision. More specifically, we question whether the disruption and adaptations in the case of CFP gives cause for hope that people's reliance on food charities can eventually be reduced. Similarly, we inquire whether the disruption and adaptation measures taken by stakeholders of the resource- and energy-intensive sector of food OTG involve significant practical changes toward sustainability.

The knowledge gap we try to address is whether the observable cycles of change, assessed within a timeframe of approximately one year after the first lockdown, beginning with landscape-level disruptions and resulting in practice realignments, can justifiably be framed as "building back better." Or, on the contrary, do the recovery measures taken consolidate the socio-technical regimes that were already in place? To do so, we use two sets of empirical data to outline the pre-COVID situation in both sectors based on stakeholder interviews and media sources. After outlining our conceptual framing, we first describe for each case (1) the wider pre-COVID landscape in which stakeholders were operating, (2) the socio-technical regimes that were already established, and (3) the pre-COVID perceptible trends and niche alternatives directed toward sustainability transitions. The second step is to then address the practical reorganization of the two sectors in response to the pandemic by discussing (1) the changing cultural images of food security and provision, (2) the socio-technical innovations, and (3) the new forms of governance. After analyzing each case separately, we draw on insights from both of them in the discussion to illustrate converging patterns of adaptation and that—during the temporal period analyzed in this article—the food system has shown a considerable form of resilience that has enabled both sectors to recover quickly, accelerating pre-existing trends within, and solidifying their continuity without embarking upon a path of fundamental sustainability transition. We conclude by calling for further research to explore the longer term impacts of the pandemic on food system-provisioning sectors and their influence on food regimes and consumption.

Sustainability transitions in food practices

To analyze how COVID-19 has affected the CFP and the OTG sectors, in this article we broadly rely on the conceptual tools produced within the sustainable transition literature, and more specifically on Spaargaren et al.'s (2012) conceptual model for studying transitions in food consumption, retail, and production practices. Due to the increasing awareness of the many environmental problems caused by unsustainable consumption and production patterns, research on sustainability transitions has rapidly expanded over the last twenty years (Köhler et al. 2019). Transitions are conceived as processes of social change that transform the socio-technical system that constitutes the provision of human needs such as mobility, transport, energy, and food. Transitions can take decades, but they can also transpire in much shorter timeframes if "shifts in governance, financing, mobilisation and culture … coincide, overlap and drive one another" (Newell and Simms 2021, 919). In line with field theory (Di Maggio and Powell 1983; Fligstein and McAdam 2012), the unit of analysis of transition theory is generally situated at the meso-level of socio-technical systems (Geels 2004), and particularly at the level of the organizational fields that are made up of corporate actors (for example, firms, charities, industry associations, governments, consumer movements). This focus on organizational fields is particularly well suited to examine the CFP and the OTG sectors, as they both constitute "a recognised area of institutional life" (Di Maggio and Powell 1983, 148).

Among the founding frameworks for studying sustainability transitions, the multi-level perspective (MLP) distinguishes three analytical levels that can be usefully deployed to organize empirical research (Geels 2002; Köhler et al. 2019; Spaargaren et al. 2012). The first level, niches, are the incubation rooms where radical innovations appear. Second, the level of socio-technical regimes refers to the dominant set of actors, technologies, and rules forming the institutional structure of existing systems. Finally, the socio-technical landscape points to the exogenous, deeply sedimented, environment beyond the immediate influence of niches or regime actors (e.g., macroeconomics, cultural patterns, deep institutional arrangements). Moreover, many authors identify lock-in mechanisms, namely "positive feedbacks or increasing returns to the adoption of a selected technology" that prevent systems from changing rapidly and representing the constraining aspects that leave out of sight alternatives to radical, fast-paced system transformations (Klitkou et al. 2015, 22). The dynamic interaction between the three levels of niche, regime, and landscape helps make sense of how and why transitions happen (or not) and has proved useful in policy making and management as a tool to move current unsustainable systems in more sustainable directions (Hargreaves et al. 2013; Loorbach et al. 2008).

Elaborating on the MLP, transitions have been studied in terms of different pathways through which a socio-technical system moves from one state to another. For instance, Geels and Schot (2007) proposed a classification between five different pathways based on the variations of timing and nature of multi-level interactions:

1. *Reproduction*: The dynamics through which a system reproduces itself in the absence of external pressure.
2. *Transformation*: In the presence of outside/landscape pressure for change and insufficiently developed niches, regime actors will modify their practices and innovations to accommodate the pressure.
3. *Dealignment and realignment*: Under some forms of outside pressure, regime actors may lose faith, leading to erosion of the regime. If niches are insufficiently developed, they co-exist until one becomes dominant (i.e., becomes the new regime).
4. *Technological substitution:* When the system meets a source of outside pressure and a niche is sufficiently developed, the latter will replace the existing regime.
5. *Reconfiguration:* Outside pressure in combination with niches that can co-exist with the regime and enable it to absorb pressure. This process can trigger change in the architecture of the regime later on.

The concern of transitions scholars with systems and regimes has been fruitfully combined with theories of practice. The latter—given their focus on routinized, non-deliberative, non-voluntaristic action (Warde 2017)—is well-equipped to explain stability, "circuits of reproduction," and the unfolding of daily practices that reinforce or challenge existing socio-technical regimes (Shove 2012; Hargreaves et al. 2013). Moreover, as Laakso et al. (2021, 15) note, both theory strands are frequently used to address "whole-system reconfiguration and interlinked dynamics between practices of production and consumption," and they may fruitfully be combined "to engage with constellations and complexes of practices as one of the key components of transitions, either slowing down the transition due to sticky constellations or enabling transformative change" (Laakso et al. 2021, 24). The (managerial) practices of the "bureaucratic organisations" within the OTG and CFP sectors, their pursuit of goals or profits, can be seen as one such constellation (Welch and Yates 2018), and it is an aim of this article to discuss how sticky they have been in the face of the COVID-19 disruptions.

Building on both transitions and practice approaches, Spaargaren et al. (2012) propose a conceptual model to empirically investigate the dynamics and developments of food systems, illustrating how the concepts of niche, regime, and landscape "correspond with three levels of institutionalisation of practices under study" (2012, 11–12), namely, "novel" or "innovative" practices (original and new behavioral rules, generally unknown, that could challenge existing regimes), "regime practices" (widely established, known, and used by groups of actors), and "organizing principles" characterizing "all the major institutions in a society in a certain period of time." Second, they suggest to study practices "in transition" along three dimensions: (1) the cultural images of human-ecosystem interaction; (2) the socio-technological innovations, and (3) the new forms of governance that accompany them. The first roughly refers to the social representations, the system of values and beliefs, and the diffuse understanding of particular food practices. The second includes technological innovations and shifts in the organization of the knowledge-production infrastructure and the third calls attention to the role of governance and governing responsibilities.

The conceptual toolkit delineated above allows us to systematically outline the pre-COVID phase and the shifts that took place during the lockdown phases. For both the OTG and the CFP sectors, we will first briefly outline the "organizing principles" (landscape), the established practices (socio-technical regimes), and the innovative practices (niches) that characterized both organizational fields. Subsequently, we examine how the outbreak of COVID-19 and the interventions that followed affected the general understandings, the organization, and the governance of both systems. In the subsequent discussion of both cases, we argue that while COVID-19 could have provided a transition pathway (Geels and Schot 2007) for a sustainable and just transition in both sectors, the food system did not embark upon a path of fundamental sustainability transition.

Data and methods

The article builds on different sets of data gathered for two separate projects. Data on the impact of COVID-19 on food charities are based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data gathered by the second author between June and August 2020 (Oncini 2021, 2022b). Starting from the open-data map of food-support providers created by the Greater Manchester Poverty Action (GMPA) charity, the Mutual Aid Groups Map,[3] and the GMPA newsletter, 110 organizations active in the Greater Manchester area were reached, and 55 directors/spokespersons agreed to participate in a survey. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to a one-hour Zoom interview with the author to investigate further some aspects of the response to the crisis, discuss the history and characteristics of the organization before the epidemic, and explore the reasons why a certain food-charity model was chosen over other options. Eventually, 55 respondents (50% of the active population) participated in the survey, 30 of which agreed to the follow-up interview. One dozen additional stakeholders (in closely related sectors—see below) were recruited for an interview using personal contacts and snowball sampling. Both the survey participants and sample of interviewees include spokespersons working or volunteering in food banks (both independent and Trussell Trust,[4] the largest UK network), food pantries, warm meal providers, or mixed-type organizations. The 12 additional stakeholders included people operating more broadly in the third sector in close contact with food charities (e.g., directors of charities that distribute funding, experts in food-surplus redistribution, members of advocacy groups). Simultaneously, gray literature and UK online-newspaper articles were gathered to monitor governmental measures taken to keep pace with the rising requests for support and to follow the developments of the sector after the end of the interviews. Data analysis proceeded simultaneously and interactively with data collection and first aimed to describe the main outcomes of the response to the crisis (Oncini 2021) and more specifically the major shifts in the provisioning practices of the organizations.

The data on food OTG are drawn from interviews, columns in online archives, and gray literature collected by the first author. Six corporate and three nongovernmental stakeholders with expertise in food-related plastic packaging in the OTG sector were recruited to conduct nine semi-structured telephone interviews (except for two face-to-face) in January 2020. The interviews were designed to begin with relatively open requests to define "food on-the-go," to draw a timeline, and to identify factors of how this mode of provisioning emerged. Later, in the more structured part of the interview, insights from archival data about the emergence of the sectors were tested against the perceptions of the stakeholders. The archival data consisted mainly of journalistic columns retrieved with the search term "food on-the-go" which generated 4,781 articles in Factiva on January 7, 2020. We considered all articles from the first one in 1987 through 2000, then due to the rise in reporting only the months of February and October until 2010, and only October for the most recent articles ($N = 119$ in total). The qualitative analysis of this pre-COVID data aimed to understand the social and economic factors for the emergence of the OTG sector through a longitudinal systems approach. The data used to summarize the pre-COVID situation here have been presented in greater detail elsewhere (Hirth et al. 2021). The post-COVID information is largely based on news articles and market-analysis reports (Lumina Intelligence 2020, 2021), but also draws on information from corporate OTG stakeholders who presented at the Food to Go Conference held in

March 2021 (Thompson 2021; Whiteside 2021; Young 2021).

Despite coming from two distinct projects on different subsystems of the UK economy, it is worthwhile to juxtapose the two sets of data for two main reasons. First, with semi-structured stakeholder interviews and reliance on gray literature, they both rely on similar methodologies that aim to shed light on the internal mechanisms and societal processes governing these two (sub)systems of food provision. Second, as briefly outlined above, they have been widely criticized by scholars for the problematic implications of their activities, while simultaneously representing essential parts of the provisioning and eating practices of the UK population. The heterogeneous sets of data on the past and current condition of both sectors enabled us to obtain information on the pre-COVID phase according to the MLP perspective (landscape level, regime, and niche practices), and to observe in vivo the novel "cultural images," the socio-technical innovations adopted during the pandemic, and the new forms of governance that accompanied the CFP and OTG sectors during the crisis. The data sets allowed us to explore how the forced disruption led to changed practices and the degree to which they addressed concerns over social and ecological sustainability.

Charitable food provision before COVID-19

Since the aftermath of the financial crisis, the charitable distribution of food to poor people has been rising in virtually every European country (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2020). In the UK, the expansion of food charities overlapped with the growth and professionalization of the third sector, with many charities becoming leading institutions in the fight against social exclusion (Fyfe 2005). Over the past decade, a rising number of food banks, holiday-hunger programs, community kitchens, soup vans, food pantries, and breakfast clubs opened their doors throughout the country in response to increasing levels of food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford 2019; Pool and Dooris 2021). Despite being in constant motion, before the outbreak of COVID-19 the CFP field in the UK was going through a relatively stable phase, characterized by the simultaneous presence of both regime and innovative practices.

Landscape level

At the landscape level, the organizational field was embedded in a set of "deep structural trends" (Geels 2002, 1260) that favored the emergence of food charities despite the diversity of the provisioning practices. In particular, three contextual forces facilitated the settlement and thriving of the regime practices—the food-bank model—and of the innovative ones later—the pantry model (see below). First, at the macroeconomic level, the effect of the financial crisis, coupled with a rise in food prices, an increase of zero-hours contracts, and an expansion of temporary work practices, created a new population of food-insecure people (Loopstra et al. 2015, 2016, 2018; Reeves et al. 2017).[5] Estimates from a 2019 study using representative data reported that 14.2% of the UK adult population experienced some degree of food insecurity in the previous twelve months, while 3.0% reported severe food insecurity (Pool and Dooris 2021). In fact, between 2008 and 2019, the number of people receiving a three-day supply of emergency food from the Trussell Trust moved from less than 26,000 to almost 2 million (Statista 2021).

Second, two distinct institutional arrangements facilitated the growth of organizations providing food support. The austerity measures taken to reduce public spending in 2010, and particularly those that made it harder for people to maintain requirements for benefit receipt (e.g., benefit sanctioning, universal credit rollout[6]) resulted in the hollowing out of the UK welfare state which in turn augmented the need for food support and possibly the number of food banks (Reeves and Loopstra 2021; Loopstra et al. 2018). Relatedly, welfare-diversification policies since the late 1990s have paved the way for the increasing role played by the voluntary sector in meeting needs in local communities, which can be seen as filling the void previously occupied by welfare policies (Fyfe 2005; Lambie-Mumford 2019).

Finally, there was rising awareness of the effect of food waste on climate change, paired with the appearance of several organizations and agencies dedicated to the recovery and distribution of food surplus to "feed the hungry." These activities generated several interconnected lock-in mechanisms that further consolidated the role of the CFP field in supporting people in financial difficulties.[7]

Socio-technical regime

Against this background, the food-bank model was clearly the most widely known and used type of charitable food provision, and soon became the socio-technical regime capable of accommodating and aligning the majority of food charities. While subtle differences exist in the actual organizational practices of different food banks, all of them are generally based on the distribution of food parcels that include a few days of nutritional intake that people can take home. Most commonly, the food comes from private persons or companies, either directly or through collection baskets placed in partner-food shops (e.g., supermarkets). A few food banks, however, also make use of food surplus coming directly from excess stocks of nearby food shops and supermarkets or from food-surplus distributors such as FareShare. Moreover, all food banks rely on the work of several volunteers that help with welcoming users and managing the daily operations. Food-bank practices became mainstream in the UK due to the role played by the Trussell Trust network over the past twenty years. This charitable organization was the first to scale up a coordinated model to provide parcels to those in need, and now counts more than 1,300 food-bank centers across the UK. Summed up with the nonaffiliated food banks surveyed by the Independent Food Aid Network[8]—a charity representing those food banks that did not join the Trussell Trust—in the UK there are currently roughly 2,200 centers operating in a similar fashion (Tyler 2021). The Trussell Trust especially gained visibility after 2010, when the increasing demand for parcels pushed many to open Trussell Trust branches in almost every city so as to counter food insecurity (Lambie-Mumford 2013).

Niche alternatives

After years of consolidation of food banks as the main type of food charity, the pantry model started to gain more and more visibility as a niche alternative that aimed to reconfigure mainstream responses to food insecurity while benefiting the environment by reducing food waste.[9] People operating a food pantry are often very critical of the food-bank model which they perceive as too stigmatizing, detached, and shameful for the users (e.g., Purdam et al. 2016; Garthwaite 2016). By contrast, pantry schemes are generally directed to people within a particular community and mainly rely on food surplus—often obtained through subscription with a food-surplus distributor or directly from local shops—and allow people to choose their groceries directly from the shelves of the shop in return for a (generally symbolic) weekly fee. Despite the relative scarcity of pantry schemes compared to food banks, over the past five years, a few more structured charities (e.g., Your Local Pantry[10] and Food on Our Doorstep[11]) scaled up the service and opened several other pantry shops across the country.[12]

Although the organizational field described above extended throughout the UK, the Greater Manchester region could be considered as a typical case, "capable to provide insight into a broader phenomenon" (Gerring 2007, 91). Before the virus outbreak, the region already exhibited high levels of food insecurity and counted more than 200 food-support providers comprising several types of food charities distributed across the ten councils and several regional and national food-surplus distributors (GMPA 2020, 2021).

Charitable food provision through COVID-19

Cultural images of food poverty

Before COVID-19, public discourses on food insecurity in the UK were fragmented and contradictory. Despite some bold claims of commentators and Members of Parliament,[13] newspapers stories around food-bank use generally portrayed users in a compassionate manner, even though they rarely reflected on the root causes of their existence (Knight et al. 2018). At the same time, narratives about "generic" poverty reflected dominant discourses on individual responsibility, welfare dependency, and family dysfunction and contributed to the construction of the distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor (Purdam et al. 2016; Garthwaite 2016). The months that followed the virus outbreak rapidly generated novel collective representations and meaningful practices that allowed the crisis "to become thinkable" as Alexander and Smith (2020, 264) put it. For instance, warfare metaphors gained considerable traction among UK party leaders and the media, and social solidarity was recurrently expressed with frontline workers "fighting" with the virus (Morgan 2020; McCormick 2020).

As the food emergency became apparent, new considerations and concerns about the (food) poor emerged. Within a few weeks after the first lockdown, the desire to reach and sustain anyone in need of food became a prominent issue for national and local authorities, as well as for private companies and citizens (e.g., UK Government 2020c). The number of volunteers and mutual aid groups dedicated to food support grew consistently, as did the amount of food and monetary donations to charities (Oncini 2021). This wave of generosity countered the initial breakdown of the food-bank system, as in the very first days, donations had dried up as people were hoarding supplies (Power et al. 2020). Possibly, by illustrating the power of structural constraints to the whole population, the virus also made more people aware of how factors beyond personal control can contribute to poverty (e.g., Wiwad et al. 2021). In effect, in January 2021, the majority of UK adults (59%) were in favor of a *permanent* increase in the £20 uplift in the universal credit (Ipsos MORI 2020).

One exemplary case of this new framing is the success of Marcus Rashford's campaign. A famous Manchester United football player, Rashford had already been involved in campaigns against food poverty in the past, but during COVID-19 his efforts met with particular success. His involvement as an ambassador for FareShare[14]—the biggest UK food-surplus distributor—produced an upsurge in monetary donations (Adams 2021) and his parliamentary petition to end child-food poverty was signed by over one million people and brought the government to announce a funding package to alleviate the issue. Rashford's success was evidently tied to his capability to induce cooperation (Fligstein 2001) in a moment of increased awareness about food poverty and revealed, in a nutshell, how the pandemic was capable of fostering social solidarity and renewing people's perceptions of inequalities and welfare measures (e.g., Nettle et al. 2021).

Socio-technical innovations

Given the level of structuration of the field, it is not a provocation to say that an emergency response was in a sense afoot before COVID-19. Thousands of organizations were already providing food support to families all over the country. Nevertheless, the restriction measures taken from the first lockdown onward and the concurrent escalation of people requiring food aid (e.g., IFAN 2020) greatly affected the CFP field and the broader field environment. As shown elsewhere (Oncini 2021), the response was overall effective: despite several complications, food-support providers were capable of responding promptly to the increasing demands for their services while adapting their older practices of provision to the new circumstances. However, several complications emerged immediately after the first lockdown. Some organizations had to shut down due to a lack of volunteers or suitable spaces. Others experienced shortages and financial precarity. From a socio-technical point of view, the providers that remained open adapted to new regulations and innovated the way they operated. The data gathered in Greater Manchester highlight three main trends, namely, centralization, adaptation/transformation, and interconnection.

First, especially after the initial lockdown, the necessity to respond to the mounting requests of people in financial distress brought some food charities, food banks in particular, to coordinate and exploit locations where larger volumes of groceries could be stocked. Centralization always required some intervention from city councils, as they facilitated the creation of large warehouses and distribution points. In Oldham, for instance, the City Sport Centre became the borough's central food bank. Similar moves were evident elsewhere, especially in the immediate days after the crisis, when many organizations run by volunteers aged over 60 had to shut down due to the risks associated with COVID-19 contagion.

Second, many organizations that remained open, adapted to new COVID-19 regulations and transformed their organizational practices. Some soup kitchens became food-distribution points using their raw foodstuffs, while others just started giving out take-away meals; similarly, those food pantries that could not rearrange their shops to guarantee users' safety, had to temporarily move toward a different food-distribution model. The operations of food banks were probably the least affected, as they just needed to space entries and prevent users from lingering indoors. In this sense, the field temporarily leaned toward the most common form of food support because food-bank protocols were easier to adapt to the emergency. Crucially, since many people were sheltering due to personal health conditions or age, the distribution of meals or groceries took place also as home-delivery services, which was the safest way to reach many people who were confined to home but in need of foods. At the same time, it is crucial to underline that the efficient implementation of safe distribution practices implied that many social activities that used to take place around food support (e.g., financial advice, empathic listening) were interrupted, probably when they were needed more than ever (Oncini 2021).

Finally, increased connectivity was established between food charities operating throughout Greater Manchester and the Mutual Aid Groups played a fundamental role during the crisis. Most interviewees reported that the emergency created more awareness among the other food charities operating nearby, and more generally about those active in the county. Given the cooperative nature of the third sector, this situation implied that regime and niche practices existed side by side throughout the pandemic. This, in turn, facilitated the exchange of food and food surpluses between organizations, more coordination and information-sharing at the local level—particularly via video-conference tools, as well as a wider reach of food charities throughout the region. Complementary to the increased "networkisation" of the sector, was the growth of mutual aid groups. The proliferation of these groups was a salient trait of the crisis response all over the country, with over 4,000 informal groups engaged in various activities, from grocery shopping and collection of medication to emotional support and advice to community members (O'Dwyer et al. 2022). Given their flexibility and informality, many Mutual Aid Groups worked closely with food charities to collect food donations on their behalf, to flag vulnerable members in need, and to increase the reach and effectiveness of food aid.

New forms of governance

The political measures taken in the wake of COVID-19 demonstrated how far and rapidly governments can intervene in, reshape, and regulate the social and economic life of individuals and organizational practices. The power to decide the conditions of emergency for a state of exception to be established is at the same time the power to decide and reframe the conditions of normalcy itself (Dean 2010). That national and local authorities relied on food charities and surplus distributors to tackle the food-poverty emergency is telling of the taken-for-granted place that these organizations have acquired in the symbolic and material geography of the country. In fact, the capillary network of providers was prepared and qualified for responding to the crisis, at least for three reasons. First, they had the organizational expertise, experience, and knowledge to stock, manage, prepare, and distribute groceries or cooked meals. Second, they could count on a large base of professionals and volunteers with specific operational knowledge about safety and preservation measures. Finally, food-surplus distributors such as FareShare and The Bread and Butter Thing[15] were already giving foodstuffs to a well-established network of frontline charities, and therefore their intermediary role could be further exploited.

Consequently, at the country level, the UK Government immediately funded food-redistribution organizations to collect and allocate the surplus stock that emerged during the coronavirus outbreak to food charities; then it set up a £750 million package in support of frontline charities providing key services and supporting vulnerable people during the crisis (UK Government 2020a, 2020b). At the same time, local authorities further strengthened their interdependency with food charities, and actively backed their operations. For instance, the Manchester City Council opened a temporary food bank providing a door-to-door delivery service in Openshaw in partnership with several voluntary and private organizations. The distribution of emergency parcels during the first weeks of the lockdown, totaled around 30,000 requests from March to May (Manchester City Council 2020). Similarly, the Greater Manchester Combined Authority at the start of the pandemic developed a platform portal to match residents in need of food with local food charities.[16]

Although the government took additional, more direct measures to support people in need—for example, the temporary £20 a week uplift in the Universal Credit—the COVID-19 emergency eventually strengthened the leading role of food charities as effective welfare substitutes. This, in turn, possibly detracted attention from the need for a more decisive transition toward a more just and sustainable food system.

On-the-go food provision before COVID-19

Food OTG is both a consumier practice and a corporate practice of food provision for prompt and potentially mobile out-of-home consumption (Benoit et al. 2016; Hirth et al. 2021; Sands et al. 2019). Typically, it involves drinks, snacks, and lunch items, hot or cold, wrapped in plastic or cardboard packaging. In the following discussion, we elaborate on the wider landscape from which OTG emerged, how it became a socio-technical regime and dominant mode of food provision, and how it has nonetheless conveyed and maintained certain rhetorical features associated with niche alternatives that respond to environmental or health concerns. This overall picture of the emergence, growth, and discourses about the problems associated with the sector matters for an account of the disruption due to COVID-19 that follows this section.

Landscape level

OTG emerged toward the end of the 1990s and experienced a surge with establishment of the smartphone in the 2010s (Hirth et al. 2021). While both the enormous growth the sector has seen in the last decades and its focus on "quality" purport a sense of novelty and innovation, the sector's overall reliance on globalized logistics and industrialized food processing and packaging also conveys an embeddedness in a socio-technical regime in need of sustainability transitions.

The wider landscape in which OTG emerged as a dominant mode of food provision exhibits two long-term trends which characterize "modern" food and incremental changes in socio-technical practices. Since the 1950s, people increasingly eat out of home (Warde and Martens 2000), and this is accompanied by a trend toward time-saving and time-shifting convenience food (Shove and Southerton 2000; Jackson et al. 2018). The convenient ready-meals consumed within the household, find their gastronomic equivalent in the ready-to-eat snacks and fast, processed, and packaged meals consumed out of home and on-the-go. In this context, the OTG sector is often portrayed as an expedient lifestyle choice by consumers who have adopted an ostensible "convenience culture" within a "convenience society" (Hirth et al. 2021). However, there are good reasons to regard OTG not simply as a choice but as fostered by wider practices and trends toward dual-working households or away from in-house cafeterias or canteens in workplaces.

Socio-technical regime

We have argued that the depiction of OTG as demand-driven and backed by a culture which shapes consumer choices toward convenience should be met with reservation (see also Shove 2003). While not entirely unjustified, that narrative may obscure the ways in which processing and packaging food is also “convenient” for businesses (Hirth et al. 2021). What makes OTG an attractive provisioning practice is that its players capitalize on higher margins compared to the grocery sector, save on labor costs compared to restaurants, and do not pay the full environmental costs of waste. As already indicated, it can even be convenient for employers to externalize costs by not providing in-house cafeterias/canteens anymore (Liu and Chen 2020). Whether it be consumers or businesses who benefit the most from convenience, there is no doubt that the wider social, economic, and technological landscape that gave rise to OTG also allowed it to thrive over the last couple of decades. Within that landscape, OTG has grown to be an increasingly dominant mode of food provision in the UK and elsewhere.

Key OTG players range from OTG specialists (e.g., Greggs[17] and Pret a Manger[18]) to large supermarket and drugstore chains, coffee specialists (e.g., Starbucks), and traditional fast food chains also referred to as quick service restaurants (e.g., McDonalds). The sector saw particularly strong growth in the 2010s and analysts predicted that it would experience further growth during the current decade (IGD 2019). It is not a surprise that the sector experienced a surge with establishment of the smartphone as OTG co-evolved with the new technological socio-technical possibilities of digital delivery platforms (Dablanc et al. 2017; Hirth et al. 2021; Oncini et al. 2020). While home deliveries could be seen as competition to eating out and serving food to go, many key players of the sector have simply integrated both alternatives into their business models. For example, by offering deliveries specifically aimed at workplaces, OTG specialists such as Greggs have complemented their overall strategy to open branches near workplaces with an offer to deliver to them.

Niche alternatives

Dominated by large (often multinational) chains, the OTG sector does not appear to be a typical breeding ground for more sustainable niche practices. However, the ways in which it is promoted are often suggestive of OTG food being an alternative, or at least giving consumers the choice between “vice and virtue” options (Sands et al. 2019). The “virtue” of OTG products is expressed in three areas relevant to sustainability transitions.

First, stakeholders often distinguish OTG from “ordinary” fast food by emphasizing the combination of pace with quality and healthier options. In face of the obesity crisis, fast food has acquired a bad reputation. Snacks are also associated with high fat or sugar content. While the latter is an important part of the OTG market, the sector’s focus on lunch items rather evokes wholesome meals, including product ranges specifically promoted as “healthier,” alternatives low in sugar or rich in protein, as well as “hand-made” sandwiches. Second, increased public concerns over plastic polluting the environment, in particular the oceans, forced OTG players to address packaging waste. In response, some businesses tried to nudge customers into bringing their own reusable cups by offering discounts. Another example of how enthusiasm for sustainability transitions is demonstrated is cooperating with nonprofit organizations in the UK Plastics Pact (WRAP 2019). Finally, the portfolio of the OTG sector increasingly includes vegan options. Next to their classic meat-based sausage roll, Greggs now offers a vegan one, and LEON actively promotes plant-rich diets (while still offering meat options). With vegan products being a niche alternative in the process of becoming mainstream, OTG providers contextualize them with health, environmental or ethical benefits.

In sum, while the OTG sector is clearly characterized by big businesses maintaining their dominance within a socio-technical regime based on global logistics and processed and packaged foods, the sector also incorporates certain “niche” practices in response to concerns over public and planetary health, albeit in many cases by giving their customers a choice between “vice” and “virtue” rather than changing their portfolio fundamentally. The imperative of convenience is maintained, suggesting that OTG helps customers lead an easier life, while an allegedly improved offer evokes that known deficits of the globalized, industrialized food system are overcome, or at least addressed.

On-the-go provision through COVID-19

When the COVID-19 crisis hit, the lifestyle that was the basis for food OTG was temporarily suspended (Ehgartner and Boons 2020). Without a doubt, the pandemic meant a sudden and unforeseen disruption to the food system as a whole and the ongoing and predicted growth of the OTG sector. Looking at the first months of the pandemic until September 2020, food and beverage service activities—including restaurants, pubs and bars, and take-aways—reached their lowest point in April 2020. In June, they were still 83% below their February 2020 level, and then recovered in September but remained 23% below their pre-pandemic level (ONS 2020). The OTG sector suffered a loss of economic value and a disruption of its turnover growth rate from 2.4% in 2019 to −45.5% in 2020 (Lumina Intelligence 2021, 3).

Cultural images of shifts in food provision

The socio-ecology behind COVID-19, that is, its links to environmental degradation and a globalized economy (Settele et al. 2020), led to raised media coverage, public debate, and awareness of the deficits in previously normal human-ecosystem interactions. From an environmentalist perspective it was even tempting to draw optimism from the disruption of growth and nature's short-term opportunity to resurge, but what requires scrutiny is whether the disruption through restrictions, particularly in the first months of the pandemic, can have lasting effects on practices and the food system (Searle and Turnbull 2020). Stakeholders of the OTG sector mirror that optimism by suggesting that the pandemic has changed how people engage with space and has brought people closer to nature both spatially and in terms of their values. A clearly pandemic-induced trend in space use is increased outdoor socializing and picnics (e.g., in parks) which food OTG operators have identified as an opportunity to capitalize on—and are in a good position to do so (Lumina Intelligence 2021).

Another way in which the pandemic affected consumption patterns was a shift in focus from city centers to residential areas. Increased unemployment, reduced use of public transport, and people working from home negatively affected outlets in workplace areas, transport hubs, and business districts (Lumina Intelligence 2021; Thompson 2021). Yet, reduced footfall in those areas came to the benefit of supermarkets, neighborhood centers, and local shopping areas near residential areas. Damage to the big players of the OTG sector remained limited as "McDonald's, Greggs and Subway are more physically present in towns and suburbs, with less exposure to the impacts of minimal city centre footfall" (Lumina Intelligence 2020, 1).

Interestingly, stakeholders interpret that shift not simply as one in governance necessary to tackle the pandemic but also as one in consumer values. Analysts perceive the increased importance of residential areas as a "rise in localism"; along with cycling, which increased by 10%, they depict this development as a trend that is "here to stay," an expression of ethical environmentalism, and "a new consumer reality" businesses are advised to "leverage" (Thompson 2021; see also PwC 2021). On one hand, ethical consumption has been a trend for a couple of decades, and non-motorized local mobility for food procurement may turn out as a long-term improvement. As soon as public transport is considered safe again, the combined strengths of non-motorized and public transport might be able to challenge the dominance of the car. On the other hand, avoidance of direct contact during the pandemic has also been in favor of cars. Particularly fast food restaurants are increasing drive-through and curbside-delivery services (Cummins et al. 2020), and Greggs CEO Roger Whiteside describes this as a trend that has been accelerated and will remain (Whiteside 2021).

Socio-technical innovations

Contact avoidance has also increased trends toward digitalization and "platformization" (Felix 2020) of food provisioning. While the "overall demand for physical supermarket and hypermarket retail" (Cummins et al. 2020, 2) declined during the lockdowns, it is local convenience and online retail that are now flourishing. The (temporary) closure of locations to eat in has accelerated ongoing trends toward technology use.

Online services encompass food deliveries to homes—and generally, if not so much currently, to workplaces—accessible with desktop computers or smartphone apps, but also click-and-collect services and subscription formats. While the latter two formats require the customer to come in, their advantage lies in the ability—both of customers and businesses—to plan ahead and produce or receive just-in-time. As Pret a Manger and LEON, as well as independent brands, have discovered during the pandemic, the "subscription economy can enhance loyalty" (Lumina Intelligence 2021, 19). Deliveries enable businesses to avoid high rents for shiny shops in high-footfall areas. So-called dark kitchens—caterers which, unlike restaurants and take-aways, do not have a physical space for customers to eat in or pick up—allow entirely virtual brands to exist or established brands to make their space use more efficient.

Faced with losses of turnover, the sector responded to changed circumstances by recovering regime practices rather than by nurturing niche alternatives. Both the disruption of classical hospitality and the instance that people eat more outside and on-the-go exacerbates the waste problem. Globally, the pandemic has increased the use of single-use products including food serviceware, often destined for landfills or released into the environment (Dennings 2021; Sarkodie and Owusu 2021). Thwarting recent debates and efforts toward reducing plastic pollution, this can be seen as a reinforcement of the unsustainable modern long-term trend and structure of linear production and disposal, one which an increased emphasis on biodegradable materials does not automatically compensate for.

New forms of governance

By establishing new forms of (self)governance, the OTG sector drew on a rhetoric of "recovery" from unforeseen disruptions. Backing the overall desire to return to gastronomic normality, the government's "Eat out to help out" scheme subsidized meals eaten out-of-home and inside gastronomic premises.[19] While, as such, the scheme did not help the core business of OTG players (which, though out-of-home, is about picking up food and eating "on the run," in cars or at workplace desks and not at tables inside), they had anyway been largely classified as "essential" and hence less affected by closure than typical stay-in gastronomy. Partly, OTG stakeholders' recovery debates resonated with sustainability transitions and the call for building back better. This includes the aforementioned focus on residential areas and catering for outdoor socializing which allowed positive connotations with ethical consumption, more sustainable mobility, and care for nature. However, first and foremost, measures aimed at re-establishing the sector's highly profitable socio-technical regime as evidenced by the adaptations toward deliveries and the acceptance of collateral damage by increased single-use packaging. It is also questionable to what degree these adaptations were really induced by the pandemic and in that sense "novel" or "innovative."

For example, on first sight, a net change (openings and closures) of −9,877 stores in the UK's retail sector in 2020 seems to hint at a strong disruptive effect of the COVID-19 crisis (Butler 2021), with analysts speaking of an outright "city exodus" (PwC 2021).[20] However, the general termination of outlets in city centers has been a longer-term trend that had gradually begun to occur even in the years before the pandemic (see Figure 1). Rather than a singular disruption, the process of retrenchment can therefore be seen as a continuation of sectoral changes and might have happened anyway.

Similarly, the popularity of drive-throughs may have been increased by the desire for contactless consumption, but the pandemic has at best increased a trend that had already been ongoing for decades. The same principle applies to the use of digital platforms for deliveries and other innovative sales formats. The disruption might rather be seen as an opportunity to employ those upcoming formats more flexibly than the primary reason for their emergence.

In sum, compared to other parts of the wider eating-out market, analysts and practitioners saw the OTG sector as relatively well "insulated" against the downturn and other impacts of the pandemic

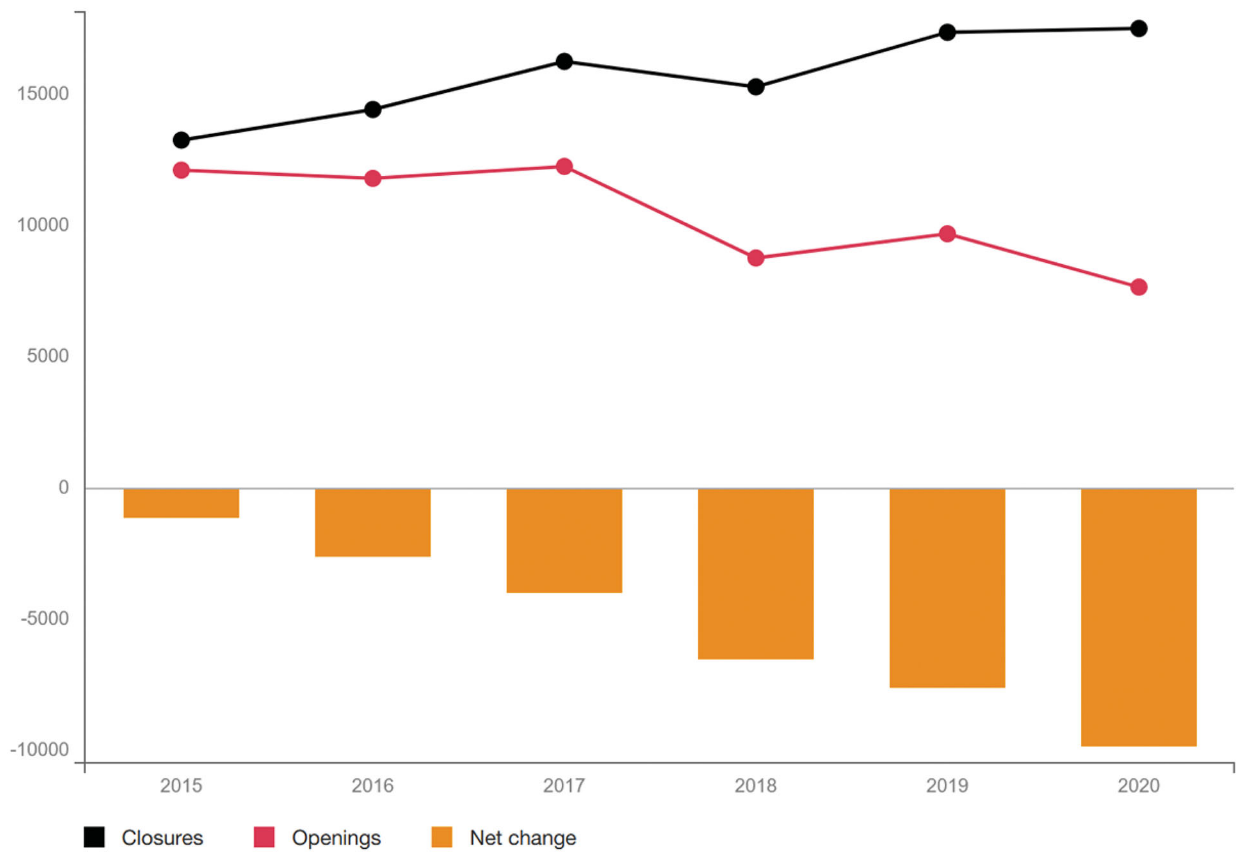

Figure 1. Total retailer-store openings and closures by year in the UK (Graphic design: PwC 2021; Data source: The Local Data Company).

Figure 2. Customers queuing for OTG retailer around lunch time, Oxford Road, Manchester, 25 May 2021 (photo copyright: main author).

(Lumina Intelligence 2020, 1). Following the fall of the OTG sector's turnover growth by 45.5% in 2020, analysts forecasted a rise of 31.6% in 2021 and 41.6% in 2022, with market turnover fully recovered by that year (Lumina Intelligence 2021, 22). Analysts expected the market value of the branded coffee-shop market, which was slightly more strongly affected than other parts of the OTG sector, to recover by 2024 (Young 2021). In other words, the growth disruption of the OTG sector lasted only as long as pandemic-induced restrictions were imposed. The comparably greater disruption of traditional hospitality has even allowed the OTG sector to increase its share of the eating-out market by 1.4% from 2019 to 2020 and now comprises nearly 25% of the national total (Lumina Intelligence 2021, 5). This is also illustrated by the customers queuing at Pret a Manger while other previously popular lunch establishments around Manchester's universities were still temporarily closed in 2021 or are permanently closed (Figure 2). Stakeholders' capacity to adapt, their optimism to "recover," and ingenuity to capitalize on changing conditions, suggests that the effect of the crisis means no let-up in terms of avoiding waste, let alone changes on a systemic level.

Discussion: building charitable and on-the-go food back to "normal"

The literature on sustainability transitions emphasizes the role of disruptions in triggering systemic-level changes. In a recent review on the issue, disruption has been defined as

> a high-intensity effect in the structure of the sociotechnical system(s), demonstrated as long-term change in more than one dimension or element, unlocking the stability and operation of incumbent technology and infrastructure, markets and business models, regulations and policy, actors, networks and ownership structures, and/or practices, behavior and cultural models. (Kivimaa et al. 2021, 119)

In light of this definition, we conclude that, apart from short-term effects, the COVID-19 pandemic did not disrupt the regime practices of charitable and the on-the-go food provisioning. Following Geels and Schot's (2007) typology, both socio technical regimes showed convergent patterns of resilience, and therefore reproduction processes, despite the landscape-level pressure that the virus outbreak seemed to exert in the wake of the crisis. In both cases, the complications arising from COVID-19 have been met with a variety of modes of adaptation, but we find that neither case justifies speaking of a (sustainable) transition of practices. However, with regard to our second theoretical approach, it is worth elaborating on how the routinized and non-deliberative character of practices impeded fast and more fundamental change.

The CFP field demonstrated great endurance and adaptability despite the increasing requests for food parcels and pressure to adapt provisioning practices overnight. Organizational practice changes required larger locations for storage, protection of elderly volunteers, deliveries to homes, and increased connectivity via video conferences and across groups and organizations, as well as decreased devotion to interpersonal care and advice which could no longer happen face-to-face. Most importantly, the changes reconfirmed the capacity of the third sector to function as a cornerstone of the welfare state—albeit in a guise that favors transfers in food rather than cash (Williams et al. 2016). That adaptability is no guarantee that people did not experience hunger or were not forced to cut back on other essentials in order to eat, as food-bank use is a poor predictor of food insecurity (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015). Nonetheless, from an organizational point of view, it is undeniable that the emergency response, coupled with the £20 uplift in the universal credit, was overall effective and arguably "essential" for staving off even greater misery. Yet passing the COVID-19 stress test did not help to steer governmental action toward more redistributive and anti-poverty policies. First, discussion of a possible wealth tax—judged as the most efficient way to raise up to £260 billion (Advani et al. 2021)—was soon dismissed. Second, the very same supermarkets that lavished monetary and grocery donations on charities, often pay their employees below the real living wage and use zero-hours contracts which are known to exert pressure on household budgets and possibly create food insecurity (Lansley and Mack 2015; LWF 2021).[21] Finally, the end of the £20 week uplift in the universal credit, first introduced by the UK Government to strengthen the safety net during the pandemic, will plunge again many families below the poverty line, and likely force some of them to rely on food aid. In addition, the scaling up and the greater collaboration among emergency-food infrastructures could result in the further institutionalization of the CFP field, especially if the political capital acquired during the crisis is not used to exert pressure for developing more sustainable and equitable food policies. Although the pandemic was an opportunity to end the need for food banks (regime practices) and to rethink how food surplus could be put to different uses other than to feed the poor (niche practices), the embeddedness of both types of practices in social policy ultimately favors the consolidation of the charitable food-provision sector rather than enabling a real transformation toward social sustainability that would fully dispense with poverty and make food charities obsolete.

Similarly, the OTG sector experienced a sudden and strong disruptive impact during the first lockdown, then drew on a range of measures to regain turnover and get back on the path of continuous growth that it had seen over the course of two decades. Catering trends such as drive-throughs and deliveries have boomed in response to the restrictions and safety requirements during the lockdowns. Likewise, there was a "city exodus" that, due to advice to work from home, became very visible through reduced footfall and appeared to explain the high net rate of outlet closures in centers. However, all these trends of organizational practice changes were already initiated and advanced before the pandemic. Despite the landscape-level impact that COVID-19 has arguably had, these trends were already part of the wider landscape in which OTG players were operating, and the pandemic at best accelerated their further establishment (see also Greene et al. 2022). Drawing on these trends in a time of crisis is a reliance on routinized, well-paved, but not necessarily sustainability-oriented, pathways of practice change for the short-term stability of the regime. Furthermore, not depending on customers eating in, the OTG sector was in a privileged position to comply with hygiene and safety measures and was, unlike pubs and restaurants, largely classified as "essential." In consequence, the OTG sector achieved relative gains within the eating-out market over traditional hospitality, with important players such as supermarkets, coffee shops, take-aways, and patisseries continuing to open outlets (Butler 2021).

Increasing its share of the eating-out market (Lumina Intelligence 2021, 5), food OTG has thus achieved a regime consolidation rather than suffered a disruption resulting in a significant transition of practices. Undoubtedly, the crisis has also raised public awareness over ecological deficits of the economic system and food provision as a subsystem, and OTG stakeholders associated an increase in outdoor socializing with changed customer preferences toward localism, cycling, and ethical consumption. While the crisis was taken as an opportunity for rhetorical references to sustainability transitions or niche practices, the sector remains locked in a socio-technical regime around globalized logistics and processed foods as well as considerable amounts of "back-of-store" waste (Hirth et al. 2021), disposable packaging, and food waste.

By example of a hosepipe ban disarranging normal gardening practices in the face of droughts, Chappells et al. (2011) illustrate not only that unsustainable regime practices can quickly become visible in face of an acute crisis, but also that the virtuous cycle of raised problem awareness followed by practice change is destined to fail if the changes do not aim at the infrastructural and institutional level. Likewise, for some months the consequences of COVID-19 made problems about food poverty, food waste, and other sustainability areas more salient and debatable, and possibly even changed people's orientations on both issues. Without a doubt, the sudden emergence of COVID-19 has shaken regime practices by creating a landscape-level configuration in which emotions such as anxiety and grievances over the pandemic occurred and interlinked with expectations of what had been "normal" practices in the past and the experienced new reality of restrictions. That a sustainable transition in some form is necessary was reinforced as a widely accepted general understanding, exemplified by the demand and promise to "build back better." However, the practice adaptations of the collectives in the two sectors first and foremost aimed at the normal short-term functioning of food provision in order to address the existential fears of a society deprived of normality. The COVID-19 outbreak only required organizations to accommodate practical "know how" ("knowing how" to go on with an activity) and "rules" (explicit directions, instructions, admonishments) to keep going with their old practices. Changes in the routines were circumstantial and did not need to question the organizational practices themselves. In turn, shifts in cultural images, socio-technical innovations, and new forms of governance (Spaargaren et al. 2012) were only temporary and did not undermine the overall operating principles of the extant regime. What came second was the pursuit of that positive vision of safe and sustainable practices on the long run. Evidently, the crisis did not suffice to steer policies and collective practices to move toward zero-poverty and zero-waste objectives, as both types of food provision discussed here are still anchored in pre-COVID-19 infrastructures and institutions. Comparable to the case of the hosepipe ban, this institutional continuity eventually "reinforces, rather than redefines, normal practice" (Chappells et al. 2011, 711).

Conclusion

By taking previously existing pathways rather than entirely new ones, CFP and OTG food provision exhibit considerable parallels in their journey from disruption and adaptation to recovery. If in both cases, the pandemic-induced disruption resulted in regime consolidation, the societal and policy objectives to "build back better" and achieve long-term food security and sustainability cannot be met. Conceptually, we came to this conclusion by combining two theory approaches. On one hand, we have deployed transitions theory (and the MLP specifically) which provides a framework for examining whether and how socio-technical innovations lead to regime changes and sustainability transitions. On the other hand, we have drawn here on social practice theories which understand change as being the result of alternations in routinized patterns of behavior. In short, while the former tends to turn one's gaze to sectoral dynamics and innovations, the latter is more apt to explain relative stasis and elasticity (Hargreaves et al. 2013). Relying on transitions theory alone might have resulted in inflating the disruption to a diagnosis of lasting regime change and, arguably, a way out of the crisis by focusing on the socio-technical adaptation measures combined with the—to some extent—existing debates on just or sustainable transitions in both sectors. Practice theory approaches provide a means with which to explain a lack of change despite disruption by focusing on the everyday and organizational contexts of provisioning practices. By illustrating the constellations and complexes of pre- and post-COVID practices of organizations, our research allowed to better understand the interplay of often exaggerated, conspicuous dynamics and often downplayed, inconspicuous continuities. Both the CFP and OTG sectors were able to swiftly return to their routine practices, albeit under arduous conditions while restrictions lasted in the UK. The sectors did so, first, in pursuit of their goals of profits, and second, with societal approval in the form of governmental and private help. Overall, recovering established circuits of reproduction, which was arguably "essential" to avoid immediate hardship, gained priority over the other, more long-term debate reinforced by the pandemic: avoiding hardship by building systems of provision back better and transitioning to sustainable practices.

Our results derive from observing two food-provision sectors in motion, and the volatility of political measures in response to the pandemic, means that future research will have to show mid-term and long-term effects of the crisis. For both CFP and OTG it might be useful to zoom in on specific practices and "dispersed collective activity" (Welch and Yates 2018) and to provide more detailed, longitudinal, case studies not only of how organizations and their provisioning have changed during the pandemic, but also how this affected everyday life practices and the imperative of transitioning to sustainable practices. To date, we can say that "building back better" would, in both sectors, require greater systemic-level changes than the sectors are able, or willing, to enact. While we were able to identify rudiments of niche practices discussed and evolving *within* both sectors, our results leave open in which ways the crisis has given or may still give rise to niche practices in food provisioning beyond these players. At this stage, the established players seem in excellent positions to maintain their regimes. Whether that is based on deliberate action or not, it is, unfortunately, at the expense of sustainability transitions.

Notes

1. See https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/biden-boris-johnson-build-back-better-b1613419.html.
2. See https://www.buildbackbetteruk.org.
3. See https://covidmutualaid.org/local-groups/.
4. See https://www.trusselltrust.org.
5. Food insecurity refers to the "the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or having to acquire foods in socially unacceptable ways" (Anderson 1990).
6. The universal credit is the UK social security payment directed to people with low household income.
7. Among the nine typical lock-in mechanisms identified by Klitkou et al. (2015), the establishment of economies of scale and collective action are worth

mentioning to understand how the symbiosis between food poverty and food surplus emerged. The first factor allowed organizations such as FareShare to decrease the costs of food-surplus recovery while making its price affordable to food charities based all over the UK; the second refers to the emergence of new societal norms concerning the production and potential reuse of food excess.
8. See https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/.
9. In addition to food banks and pantries, warm meal providers (e.g., soup kitchens) respond to a similar need for food. However, their practices do not actively challenge the other models and therefore may not be considered as niche alternatives (Carstairs 2017; Oncini 2022a).
10. See https://www.yourlocalpantry.co.uk.
11. See https://www.family-action.org.uk/what-we-do/children-families/food-club/.
12. From a field perspective, this implies that they are positioned as "challengers" to the Trussell Trust (the incumbent) and more generally to the food-bank model (Oncini 2022a).
13. See, for instance, this list of statements about food-bank users released over the past years by public commentators and politicians reported by Purdam et al. (2016, 1075) and Garthwaite (2016b, 278): "[T]hey never learn to cook … the moment they've got a bit of spare cash they're off getting another tattoo"; "Food bank users are like terminal cancer patients. There may not be a tomorrow so spend like hell today"; food-bank users are "unable to manage their personal finances, [they are] freeloaders abusing the service the foodbank offers or they are opportunistically taking advantage of the burgeoning network of foodbanks offering free food."
14. See https://fareshare.org.uk.
15. See https://www.breadandbutterthing.org.
16. The platform is available at the following link: https://surveys.tfgm.com/snapwebhost/siam/surveylanding/interviewer.asp
17. See https://www.greggs.co.uk.
18. See https://www.pret.co.uk/en-GB.
19. See https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8978.
20. The net closure is derived from summing up the number of store closures and store openings in a year.
21. The real living wage is a UK wage rate based on the living cost that companies can voluntarily pay to their employees. The real living wage is sensibly higher than the minimum and the national living wage. See https://www.livingwage.org.uk/.

Ethical statement

The research reported here obtained ethical clearance from the University of Manchester Ethics Committee (2020-9377-15273).

Disclosure statement

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ORCID

Steffen Hirth http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6719-1214
Filippo Oncini http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6123-4917
Frank Boons http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8743-7800
Bob Doherty http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6724-7065

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