**Relationships between supermarkets and food charities in reducing food insecurity: Lessons learned**

Over the past decade there has been a growth of UK food charity and in turn the growth of supermarkets partnerships with food charities; this policy and practice paper explores these relationships, based on our findings from the 2021 project, “Supermarket Corporate Social Responsibility Schemes: Working Towards Ethical Schemes Promoting Food Security.” We review the project's findings, present practical recommendations, and identify lessons that can be applied to the current cost of living crisis.

*food insecurity; supermarkets; food banks; food redistribution; corporate social responsibility*

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**Funding:**

This work was supported by the Social Science Enterprise Scheme (SSES) University of York, Economic and Social Research Council National Productivity Investment Fund, Accelerating Business Collaboration under Grant number G0068001.  
  
**Conflict of Interest:**  
The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

**Acknowledgements:**This research benefitted from feedback from Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford of the University of Sheffield, whose comments and insights helped further the paper’s development.

1. **Addressing food insecurity via charitable and private sector responses**

Food insecurity[[1]](#footnote-1) and UK food charity has been rising since the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures (Jenkins et al., 2021; May et al., 2020; Lambie-Mumford and Green, 2017; Warshawsky, 2016; Loopstra et al., 2015; Booth and Whelan, 2014). Covid-19 added further complexity, placing new pressures on previously food secure households as a result of loss of employment/incomes, and further exacerbating food insecurity for others (Hagger et al. 2021). The pandemic also changed people’s relationship with food, both in terms of its procurement and consumption (Janssen et al., 202[1](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnut.2021.635859/full)). Most recently, the rising cost of living for households in the UK - termed the ‘cost of living crisis’ by commentators (e.g. [Institute for](https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/cost-living-crisis) Government, 2022) has seen significant price increases affecting the cost of transport, energy and food bills (ONS, 2022). These increases have largely been attributed to: the cost of crude oil and gas; weather; supply chain bottlenecks; the pandemic; poor growing conditions for food and labour shortages, and the war in Ukraine (House of Commons Library, 2022; ONS, 2022).

Policy interventions to support both pandemic costs and the cost of living crisis had/have both direct or indirect links with food affordability or access (e.g. £20 Universal Credit uplift, food school meal schemes, and the 2022-2024 cost of living payments) (Department for Work and Pensions, 2023; Department for Education, 2022; [Food Foundation, 20](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/FF_Impact-of-Covid_FINAL.pdf)21). During the pandemic, the UK Government created a collaborative three phase Covid-19 Emergency Surplus Food Grant, which aimed to support food redistributors in obtaining surplus food from food businesses such as supermarkets during Covid-19 (Wrap, n.d.); demonstrating the Government’s support and facilitation of food redistribution. There has also been a proliferation of non-state responses at local and national levels that specifically target food (see for example Leeds [Food Aid Network, 2022](https://leedsfoodaidnetwork.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/PDF-Leeds-Pandemic-Food-Insecurity-Response.pdf)). Food banks in particular are a common form of UK food aid, with The Independent Food Bank Network (IFAN) estimating there are at least 1,172 independent food banks, 550 belonging to their network; IFAN notes the Trussell Trust has 1,393 food banks in their network (IFAN, n.d.).

The private sector has also responded, in large part through corporate social responsibility (CSR) measures. As such, supermarkets’ involvement in food insecurity reduction programmes in partnership with the voluntary sector has flourished over the last decade in line, amplified in scale and duration by the pandemic. Many supermarkets had relationships with food charities prior to the pandemic. For example, Asda’s 2018 - 2021 ‘Fight Hunger Create Change’ programme donated £25 million between the Trussell Trust food bank network and FareShare, the food redistribution group (Asda, 2021); and £5 million for Covid-19 support (Asda, 2021). Tesco’s long relationship with the Trussell Trust, since 2012, features dedicated food drives and year-round food collection points (Trussell Trust, n.d.). For Covid-19, Tesco donated over £75 million worth of food between the Trussell Trust and FareShare over 2020 and 2021. Waitrose, Iceland, Sainsbury’s, and Co-op and othersall supported to food charity, demonstrating how common this was during the period. Arguably, there is expectation that supermarkets operate within this sphere (Quinn, 2023; Food Ethics Council, 2019). Under this guise, it is important to review these supermarket-food charity relationships and how they situate themselves within the food insecurity reduction landscape.

As a starting point, supermarkets engaging in food insecurity reduction initiatives appear to be obvious for food retailers. Due to the nature of their business, a ‘logical’ way to support the voluntary sector and their own initiatives is with food donations or food redistribution, as food is an existing resource they readily have. These voluntary partnerships in part appear to be natural for supermarkets’ addressment to multiple areas – CSR, food waste[[2]](#footnote-2) reduction (as often food donations are not counted as food waste or surplus), and transfer of food waste removal costs (Fisher, 2020; Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005). Indeed supermarkets are often rewarded for the food waste ‘reduction’ or redistribution (Booth and Whelan, 2014). For food charities, these relationships can often prove invaluable to their operations and, for many, operate successfully (Surman et al., 2021). Food donations are often stationed in both poverty policy and environmental policy spheres, adding further complexity.

In the project outlined below we aimed to ascertain how these relationships can be structured in ways that work towards the end of food insecurity rather than sustaining it or the current structures of relying on the voluntary sector. With government polices such as the Covid-19 Emergency Surplus food grant supporting and facilitating these relationships, it’s important for both policy actors and food charity groups to learn how these relationships work with supermarkets. To address this, over 2020-2021 we completed the project, “Supermarket Corporate Social Responsibility Schemes: Working Towards Ethical Schemes Promoting Food Security.” The project identified multiple challenges and potential solutions during the different research stages. This paper is structured as a review of the empirical findings alongside relevant literature. Below we will outline the research project’s findings and offer lessons to be learned and applied. The voluntary sector can expect to gain insights into the supermarket-food charity dynamic while policy makers particularly may note the fundamental underlying issues beneath food surplus redistribution.

1. Evidence from our empirical study

2.1 Method

The empirical work was based on three key elements. Firstly, knowledge exchange with a large supermarket partner (and associated CSR team/related projects). Secondly, a workshop with over 20 food charity practitioners from all devolved nations accessed by contacting an initial list of 213 food charity organisations identified via the Trussell Trust website, the IFAN website, and Google searches by region. Thirdly, a final knowledge exchange webinar was held with academics, practitioners, and industry representatives.

2.2 Understanding and improving the supermarket – food bank relationship

Based on our empirical work and a review of existing literature, we identified three themes that help to explain and understand the complex relationships between supermarkets and food charities and that may help to improve them.

*2.3.1 Theme 1: Mismatching goals and values*

From the food charity practitioner workshop, we found there is a mismatch of the values and goals of supermarkets and of the charities involved in food insecurity work. Nearly every food charity group represented had a defined goal of food insecurity relief, but participants expressed this did not always overlap with the supermarkets they had relationships or partnerships. Instead, practitioners reported the supermarkets often had a primary goal of food redistribution rather than relieving food insecurity - ridding their systems and locations of unwanted or surplus food and goods. While the outcome may have been the same - food donations - the places the two actors were operating from potentially differed, e.g. supermarkets working towards zero waste stores, maximising food redistribution while the charity may value quality over quantity.

In extreme cases this mismatch of values undermined the charity's ability to complete their goals. Specific examples offered by workshop participants included the donation of overly large and unhelpful amounts of one product being donated, and large quantities of fresh foods near expiration which could not be distributed in time, such as stale bread. At its most extreme, an example was given of a supermarket ‘donation’ of flowers, bread, and cakes in a container that also contained broken glass.

In part, the values varied between whether the initiatives and relationships were built as food insecurity measures or environmental measures. By starting with mismatched goals, these relationships risked, at best, insufficiently supporting both goals or damaging or counteracting one of the goals. The academic literature has identified risks with framing these relationships as ‘win-win’ for both environmentalism and food insecurity (Papargyropoulou et al., 2022; Arcuri, 2019; Caplan, 2017); however support for delineating the goals is not universal (Vlaholias et al., 2015).

It is clear that there are distinct boundary issues here and that separating food insecurity from environmental goals is a key to ethical and sustainable relationships. While not all actors will have the exact same position, it is evident there must be a common goal and common values between partners, and partnerships need to be both strategically developed and appropriately selected for the goals and policies of all actors. Not all existing partnerships may be fit for purpose so an honest evaluation of how the actors fit together will be required, this includes incorporating the views of the end user of the food charity who is often the unspoken actor in these partnerships.

*2.3.2 Theme 2: Improving working relationships with the charitable food sector*

It was resoundingly clear from the food charity practitioners that communication was key towards partnership success. We found positive examples of supermarket managers being exemplary, creating engaging, productive relationships between their store(s) and the food charities through considered communication. For the practitioners, successful partnerships featured open communication channels, transparency, and reliability. Again, where it worked well, communication was bi-directional and based on a dialogue which placed groups on an even status.

Where these relationships worked less well, there was a sense of a power imbalance between food charities and supermarkets (underpinned once more by a lack of shared values). Practitioners reported being required to collect donations at short notice and at the time and location preferred by the supermarkets. Often, these arrangements were required of the charity rather than mutually agreed upon, but the charities reported an obligation to collect donations in this way (even where the donations were unhelpful) to maintain the relationship and future donations. For some charities, issues were as basic as not having a phone number to contact regarding donations. For others, the communication struggled to be a dialogue rather than a mechanism for supermarkets to ‘inform’ them on what they may donate, how it will be given or delivered, and what the received and distribution procedure may look like.

Many sought more systematic and structured communication solutions with the supermarket managers or supermarket community liaisons who are charged with these relationships. Some supermarkets have these roles, such as Tesco Community Champions, Co-op Member Pioneers, but not all. Additionally, not all community liaisons had the support or capacity to handle the needs of the charities so appointing a role was not sufficient to sustain the relationships. These critical point-of-contact roles were often the make or break for the success of many relationships.

For some, communication issues came from a lack of shared understanding both on the ground (i.e. individual supermarkets and food banks) and cross-level (supermarket corporate offices and food bank networks). If supermarket head offices or retail workers were not aware of the typical contents of a food bank parcel or the daily operational activities of a food charity, they might not suggest or arrange appropriate resources or support. As a way of resolving this, workshop participants suggested that supermarket workers and corporate staff should visit their charity to gain a clearer understanding of its processes and needs. Moreover, feedback channels for what’s working, what is not, and what needs monitoring should be built in so there is shared understanding and expectations.

One commonly praised example of shared understanding was the Morrisons ‘Pick Up Packs’ (see Morrisons, 2021). The scheme allows customers to donate to food charities via the supermarkets while the supermarkets select which products are donated based on the needs of their location donation recipient charity. This scheme fulfils the local charity’s needs while the supermarket engages in a format suitable to themselves. While there still may be a mismatch in goals and values, the structure of the scheme allows for a more productive working relationship between the two actors.

*2.3.3 Theme 3: Wider actions supermarkets can take*

While not as applicable to the voluntary sector, we found that supermarkets’ own policies, processes, and procedures can undermine the goals of their food charity partnerships. Food insecurity exists within the food sector, as The Food Foundation reported in the first six months of the pandemic, 14 per cent of food sector workers faced food insecurity, 5 per cent higher than the general population (Goudie and McIntrye, 2021). More recently, 24.8 per cent of households where a food sector worker(s) resides, including supermarket workers, experienced food insecurity in January 2023 (Food Foundation, 2023). Other sources also confirm the situation – and irony – of food workers turning to food banks that their retailers donate to (Food Ethics Foundation, 2019). If a goal is food insecurity reduction, there must be an emphasis on turning inward and ensuring the full business and supply chain is supported towards food security.

As supermarkets seek profit, often these profit-driven activities and strategies undermine their food insecurity initiatives directly or indirectly (Mendly-Zambo et al., 2021). When taking a wide lens, every aspect of the business presents the opportunity to act against food insecurity (e.g. creating work schedules that give retail workers enough hours at an appropriate wage) or contribute to it (e.g. underpaying workers and farmers) (Ataseven et al., 2020). One direct action we identified was paying the Living Wage Foundation wage (at the time of writing £10.90, with London weighting £11.95) (Living Wage Foundation, n.d.). A business forum report by the Food Ethics Council reported some hesitancy, citing it as a risk to, “hand over control to a third party” (2019, p. 3). Businesses reported initiatives like a Living Wage Foundation wage could mean benefits already given to employees could be taken away (Food Ethics Council, 2019). For policymakers, acknowledging these potential unintended consequences can be crucial to ensure workers are left in a net positive position with food security.

Furthermore, a consistent underlying challenge throughout our research was that food redistribution - particularly unsold or unsellable food - cannot solve the root and structural causes of food insecurity (Barker and Russell, 2020; Caraher and Furey, 2017). Moreover, this underlying challenge creates clear incentives for poverty policy to not be overlapped with food waste policies. While one government respondent when presented this research thought not using food waste for food redistribution was a “waste of a valuable resource”, food redistribution perpetuates the cycles of overproduction, just-in-time food systems, and furthermore wraps the voluntary sector further into the fold (Power et al., 2020). Policymakers, food charities, and supermarkets alike need to consider what food insecurity reduction partnerships with each other can mean outside the transfer of surplus food.

Our findings identified positive non-food programmes; this includes Sainsbury’s offering £2 coupon against Healthy Start vouchers, Iceland giving free frozen vegetables to Healthy Start participants, and supermarkets taking pandemic-specific action by arranging delivery for those vulnerable or shielding giving access to food (Sainsbury’s, 2021; Iceland, 2021). As a point for future research, supermarkets should review their food insecurity schemes and assess whether non-food schemes are helpful or indeed more stable than traditional food donations, such as expanding benefits top-ups past Healthy Start to Universal Credit. As seen internationally during Covid-19, there were deep shortages in food donations, demonstrating the fragility of food donations as a primary or sole source of support for charities (Capodistrias et al., 2022). Researchers in the Netherlands cited examples of how food banks pivoted to supermarket vouchers - sometimes donated by the supermarkets - when food shortages were occurring (Dekkinga et al., 2022). Further study is recommended to see how supermarkets can pivot more permanently to non-food support.

To ensure the practical application of this work, Table 1 outlines ways to address the key issues discussed above alongside practical steps that can be taken to achieve this. These are of relevance to any actor(s) engaging with these issues/in this terrain.

Table 1: Recommendations

Table 1 Here

Revised table from Kennedy and Snell (2021).

1. Conclusion

The challenging contexts of Covid-19 and the cost of living crisis have only made it more critical to review food charity-supermarket relationships and evaluate whether they are best meeting the goal of ending food insecurity. These relationships must be carefully constructed and negotiated to ensure that goals are pursued in which all actors are supported and the voluntary sector is not at risk of being further tasked or further entrenched as the primary way to reduce food insecurity. The findings and recommendations discussed above can be used as a basis for revising and developing these relationships, with particular attention for policymakers and the third sector.

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1. Here we use the FAO definition, “A person is food insecure when they lack regular access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. This may be due to unavailability of food and/or lack of resources to obtain food.” (FAO, n.d.) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. in the sense any food that goes beyond the needs of the supermarket and their sector. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)