

**Title: The implications of the charitable food system in the quest for sustainable diets**

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In line with international trends, Ireland has witnessed a dramatic increase in charitable food provisioning in recent years. These developments have been aided by the rise of smart-app tech entrepreneurs and social enterprises creating new partnerships between corporate actors and charitable organisations (Kenny & Sage, 2019). Elsewhere, the increase in charitable food provisioning has been described as a ‘...an unfolding public health crisis’ (Garratt, 2017), signifying the corporatization of food charity (Riches, 2018) that solves neither food poverty nor food waste (Caplan, 2017). Given the increasing prominence of charitable responses, academics have called for expanding the definition of local food environment and systems to include the charitable food sector given their increasing role in determining diets for growing numbers of precariously employed low-income households (Thomson et al, 2019).

Many of today’s key challenges - climate change, noncommunicable diet related diseases and indeed food poverty - are concomitant with unsustainable food systems and contain the necessary features to be referred to as ‘wicked problems’. These characteristics include complexity, interconnectedness with other problems and difficulty in identifying effective solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Rutter et al (2017) urges ‘... consideration of the ways in which processes and outcomes ...within a system drive change’. They argue that instead of questioning the success of a given intervention, such as food surplus as an answer to food poverty, the focus ought to be on whether the intervention contributes to reshaping a system ‘in favourable ways’ (Rutter et al, 2602, 2017). Thus, in the context of the Irish charitable food system, and using Cork city as a case study, the primary research question is how does charitable food redistribution contribute to reshaping the food system?

This research assumes a multi-level systems approach to explore the responses to food poverty in Ireland. This was achieved by examining the various elements and influences, such as the structure and processes within the charitable food system, the food flowing through the system, the perception and ideas shaping it, and the understanding of the problem at the level of policy makers. A multi-method data collection approach, consisting of surveys, in-depth interviews, food inventory classification, and documentary analysis is used to examine the various elements of the charitable landscape at both the national level and the local Cork city level. To

guide the analysis, elements of Mason and Lang's (2018) multi-criteria framework is used to assess the implications of using surplus.

The introduction of indirect service providers has facilitated and encouraged a rapidly evolving surplus based charitable food system in Cork and an expanding list of recipients. In the case of most charities operating within this sphere, their users are long term spanning months, years and generations in some cases. Charitable food provisioning here is neither an in the meantime response nor is it capable, at least in its current form, of challenging neoliberal politics as suggested by Cloke et al, (2018).

The results indicate high levels of food insecurity and poor health experienced by charitable food recipients. A mere 2.6% of the sample (n=76) fell within the food secure category and six in every ten participants reported one or multiple health problems with depression and anxiety being the most common. Analysis of food inventory data from one surplus redistribution hub supplying charities across Ireland, over a three-month period using a method that classifies food according to the degree of processing (NOVA), suggests that ultra-processed food formed the majority of the food flow during this period.

The cost saving ability of using surplus is a key factor in its increased use. Within some organisations surplus food has replaced supporting local businesses and this aspect of food redistribution is an area that warrants further exploration. However, many interviewees pointed to the increase in the variety of food provided, such as vegetables, that traditionally would not have formed a key element of the charitable food system and this change was attributed directly to food surplus redistribution efforts facilitated by indirect service providers. Similarly, these services have also created new charitable food flows by enabling more charities to engage in charitable food provisioning and other charities to increase their quantity and frequency of distribution. While most charities are content using surplus, issues were noted with regards to too much of certain types of food, unsuitable food, poor-quality food and pressure to accept all food donations. In some cases, this leads to surplus food being distributed regardless of the request for aid and instead of food vouchers.

Perceptions and beliefs facilitating this response include that if people are hungry enough they will eat the food supplied and that any food is better than no food. The idea that both recipients and the charities themselves should not complain, along with growing public pressure to reduce food waste is also working to keep the current system in place in the absence of any critical questioning regarding the implications of a diet based on surplus. Catering to specific requests,

health concerns, cultural requirements, or dietary needs are outside most charities' capabilities as is the provision of choice. So while all definitions of food poverty entail a reference to health/nutrition/quality/culturally appropriate food, these concerns are not evident in the current responses and arguably, never will be if the responses are based on surplus.

Government agencies have facilitated the development of food redistribution streams, and corporate actors in addition to overproduction are key to its functioning. This situation is not unique to Ireland with Riches (2018) noting the degree to which the charitable food system has become a corporate powerhouse, supported by government across Europe (Riches, 2018). This makes advocating for food waste prevention at the level of government and business a difficult if not impossible task for those relying on government and corporate funding.

The charitable food system is determining diets. This research indicates numerous implications stemming from the rise of surplus food use within the Irish charitable sector, high levels of 'severe' food insecurity and ill-health within one group of recipients, and significant amounts of ultra-processed foods flowing through the charitable food sector. Current responses risks furthering Ireland's burden of poor health and does not challenge the problems associated with the conventional food system. Moreover, the perceptions of those working within this sector act as a catalyst to maintain the status quo. Despite some noteworthy impacts concerning a wider range of food items on offer to charities, this research suggests that overall, the increasing use of surplus has significant implications for the move towards sustainable, healthy and socially just food system within Ireland.

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