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Food Rescue Networks and the Food System

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Before the COVID-19 pandemic it was widely reported that, in the US, over 40% of food produced was wasted. During the pandemic, news reports have described unprecedented household food waste, up by 30% according to Republic Services, one of the largest waste management services in the US (Helmer 2020). But upstream, food waste was, and continues to be, equally problematic. When institutions such as schools and universities, large businesses, restaurants and other venues must shut down, so too must the food supply chain for those locations. Farmers who produce food for large scale public use have been unable to redirect their products for grocery markets, and so in many cases their harvests and dairy cannot be used. Elsewhere along the chain, farm and other food laborers (e.g. meat packing workers, delivery workers) without access to protection and health care cannot continue to pack and deliver food at “normal” levels, and so potential food was left in fields and warehouses (Evich 2020). Early on, panic buying and consumer hoarding was blamed for increased amounts of household food waste (ENN 2020), and rigid and segmented food supply chains were blamed for the fact that farmers and food suppliers across the country were not able to utilize their goods for profit or for donation (Hernandez 2020). In fact, as people were ordered to stay at home, the greater demand for that supply could not be met because goods could not be simply transferred from one part of the chain to another (Evich 2020). As well, the labor force employed to pick, pack, distribute and otherwise work for our food was vastly reduced due to lack of protection for their health (Hernandez 2020). In other words, there was more than enough food, but it could not be distributed to those who wanted or needed it.

As food rotted in fields and warehouses, the shutdown that resulted in soaring unemployment led to large increases in demands for food aid (Luhby 2020). Prior to the pandemic, in countries where food systems are highly industrialized, feeding hungry people through the use of otherwise wasted food (known as food rescue or recovery) seemed to provide a perfect solution to waste, according to some circular economists (Alexander 2018). Indeed, the recirculation of surplus food rescued and transported to food banks and shelters now accounts for the majority of food waste reduction (Messner et al. 2019). But the relationship between overabundance in the market and reliance on that surplus/food waste by food banks has been laid bare by COVID. Businesses and institutions that once donated food are no longer operating, and grocery stores are no longer dealing with too much food on the shelves, but rather too little (Bradshaw 2020). Food producers and distributors thus are no longer distributing or donating their oversupply, and food banks and shelters have largely resorted to buying the food that remains on store shelves (Bradshaw 2020). With record numbers out of work, more than 57,000 frontline food workers have contracted COVID as of this writing (Pollan 2020), and the restaurant/institutional supply chain has almost shut down. The precarity of our social fabric and its links to our food system has never been more visible. If food rescue has become the lynchpin to ameliorate food system inequities, it becomes important to ask about its current functioning and role into the future.

For this reason, my current research is concerned with how, if at all, the systemic linkage between food waste, food rescue and food insecurity has been altered by COVID-19 and with what impacts on local food access and waste. The networks that form around food rescue rely on continuous amounts of unwanted/surplus food (otherwise headed to the bin) in order to get that waste, newly defined as *food*, to those who are food insecure. As both food waste and food

insecurity grows during COVID, and as our food supply becomes more tenuous, food producers, food rescuers and policy makers are struggling with a food system that creates inequities from the labor of production to the mechanisms for accessible and nutritious consumption. This research project looks first at how the people involved with food rescue make meaning of the practice and their role in relation to others in the network and the community during COVID. I look to four food rescue networks in Ohio and Massachusetts for insight into the complexities of public, organizational, community and individual dynamics that form a response to food insecurity and food waste during COVID. Then, we discuss the challenges for networks and opportunities that might arise as social and food systems must adjust to the effects of the pandemic. More broadly, we talk about what the reconfiguration of social life after COVID might mean for future governmental, nonprofit and community responses to food insecurity and food waste. Three questions guide the research: 1) how, if at all, have food rescue networks altered or changed in response to changes in the food system? 2) what challenges and opportunities have arisen as a result of these alterations? 3) how, according to participants, have food waste and insecurity been impacted by changes to food rescue during COVID?

Approximately fifty participants, members of food rescue networks in Northern and Southeastern Ohio and in Western Massachusetts, have participated in this research project. Each of the four food rescue agencies identified food suppliers and recipients, and these network members were then contacted by the author or research assistant for interviews. The participants offered their views based on their role in the network and in response to research questions. The author is now in the process of transcribing and coding interviews. Responses have been grouped according to themes, with attention paid to details of economic, cultural and geographical context. Analysis of the data will also map the extended network of donors, recipients and patrons, examining the ways participants identify their or their group's role in relations to others in the network, as well as in food rescue, the food system and food justice in the community. This map will help draw a more in depth picture in response to the research questions.

Previous research (Author 2019) has looked at how, when or whether food waste is valued within food rescue networks (food waste suppliers, rescue agencies, and food shelters) in rural and urban locations across the U.S. That research indicates that rescue networks communicate about food in terms of quantities (over quality) recovered to aid hunger. Donations are recorded and rewarded through tax incentives designed to entice large corporations to donate their excess food while increasing their social and economic profit. Members of the food rescue networks studied expressed dedication to perfecting the system in place, with the goal of giving, delivering and receiving more potential "food" for food insecure people from inventories that would otherwise be wasted (Author, 2019). Nonetheless, food justice scholars and activists have registered concerns that the recovery and donation of food waste creates dependency on an already burdened system that requires ever-larger quantities of surplus food for shelters while longer-term problems of hunger and environmental resource expenditure remain (Author 2019; Messner et al. 2020).

Constance Gordon and Kathleen Hunt (2019) call on food researchers concerned with the social and cultural relationships among food, people and the environment to study the "communicative co-constitution of the food system and our relations with in it" (8). Despite the popularity of food rescue, few studies have examined it at all, much less as a phenomenon of

food communication. This research builds from the premise that food rescue networks have not disappeared, but communicate differently about food donation and recovery under crisis. The research examines how local food rescue networks are responding to social distancing, fewer sources of donations and increasing need, as well as their plans for the future. The study also discusses the ways changes in food rescue impact related issues of food waste and food access, as well as larger issues of food system sustainability. While critical food and food justice research paints food rescue as a temporary bandage for an ailing system, it is also true that food rescue, before and during COVID-19, has helped to bring together networks of community members who are planning to implement change on local and regional levels.

For that reason, research on the networks that form around food/waste donation during and beyond this pandemic also offers an opportunity to better understand how local food rescue networks may help in the development of more sustainable community food systems. Amidst the reports of hoarding, food sharing and community transport systems are being developed and used throughout the country, and some farmers and grocery chains are selling their produce directly to food banks at reduced rates (e.g., Food Runners 2020; ReFED 2020). In light of the current pandemic, these networks have not disappeared but have adjusted to increased need for food and decreased donations of “waste.” Food rescue policymakers and prognosticators see future opportunities through incentives, shift work, and other ideas for rescuing greater quantities of food for use by food banks facing consistently growing need (Kaufman 2020). Still, and at a moment when food insecurity has risen to precarious heights around the world, simultaneously food access is often limited or blocked by a global system that still relies on multinational corporations and large-scale monocropping for the majority of its food. Although in the U.S. some relief has been provided by government aid programs such as Farm to Food Bank, the aid is unevenly distributed and larger issues of transport and distribution remain (ReFED 2020). This breakdown of the food supply chain is not likely a temporary or shorter term result of this pandemic, but will require reconfiguration in light of the future of large scale face-to-face and group interaction. The current research is a step in that direction.

Food rescue is made meaningful through the communicative actions taken to connect food to people who need it. The networks of people, business, agencies and other groups involved in doing this work offer a view of how food systems function socially, politically, culturally and ecologically. Research on food systems communication is sorely needed if we are to better understand how discourses of sustainability are taken up and/or resisted, as well as possibilities for thinking and acting otherwise. The data gathered through prior and current research can paint a picture of how communities might plan for more communal food sources and less segmentation and stratification of the food system. The catastrophe of this pandemic provides an opportunity for exploring how, where and why food waste and food donation have become the lynchpin of community food programs both for political and economic reasons. If we can better understand the how networks of people form and maintain systems of food rescue in normal times and in crisis, we may better understand the problems with our food system as well as the problems food rescue was designed to address. Such work has the potential to point the focus in food policy and food justice away from an approach that closely links food waste to food insecurity and toward one that prioritizes food system sustainability for all.

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