"Thinking outside the Box": Extending our Analysis of Surplus Food Movement

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ABSTRACT: The concept of movement in relation to food can be applied in diverse ways, literally, but also as metaphor. Food waste, similarly, is an open and contested signifier. To bring the two concepts together, then, is a potentially complicated analytical exercise. Nevertheless, to think of food waste in terms of "movement" may be productive. This paper examines, in terms of movement, the activities of Irish community and voluntary organisations (CVOs), partners with an Irish-based NGO, FoodCloud, in the distribution of surplus food. These are examined within the context of the COVID19 pandemic in Ireland during 2020 and 2021. The paper is based on research conducted by the authors in 2021–22. It outlines aspects of the concept of movement within food waste studies; describes the aims and methodology of the research; reports findings in relation to surplus food distribution in terms of movement; and suggests implications for our broader understanding of food waste. It asks scholars of food waste to "think outside" a number of boxes, to ask how the food chain is extended through surplus food distribution; how surplus food may be used in multiple ways; and in how surplus food distribution activities may have the potential to support, more broadly, sustainable food communities.

The concept of *movement* in relation to food can be applied in many ways: from the global migration of cuisines to the peristaltic movement of food through the body. It can be interpreted literally, but also as metaphor, as in the "movement" from one food regime to another. It is thus a complex phenomenon: as reflected in the theme and programme of this Symposium.

Food waste, similarly, is an open and contested signifier. For Spring et al (2020, 2), in the editorial introduction to the Routledge Handbook of Food Waste, "it is visual, categorical, statistical, visceral, multi-scalar, spiritual, relational, biological, technological, historical, and re-thinkable". To bring the two concepts together, then, is a potentially complicated analytical exercise. Nevertheless, to think of food waste in terms of "movement" may be productive.

This paper has a modest aim: to examine, in terms of movement, the activities of Irish community and voluntary organisations (CVOs), partnered with the Irish-based NGO, FoodCloud, in the distribution of surplus food. This is examined within the context of the COVID19 pandemic in Ireland during 2020 and 2021. It is based on research, conducted by the authors in 2021, commissioned by FoodCloud.

The paper outlines aspects of the concept of movement within food waste studies; describes the aims and methodology of the research; reports some key findings in relation to surplus food distribution (SFD) in terms of movement; and suggests implications for our broader understanding of food waste.

Food Waste and Movement

In 2012, Evans, a pioneer in the field, could remark that "there was little social scientific attention to issues of food waste" (2012, 1124). That is certainly not the case a decade later, as the comprehensive *Routledge Handbook* attests (Reynolds et al 2020). The scope of social scientific analysis extends across the macro, meso and micro levels, at the global, national, community and domestic scales. Perspectives range from the econometric, to the nutritional, to issues of media and marketing.



Figure 1. "Coffins of decay"? [Source: Photograph by P. Share]

Within this burgeoning field of analysis, the concept of "movement" has been significant. A key contributor has

been Evans himself, who has drawn on work by Gregson and colleagues (2007) on the movement of artefacts within society. In a 2012 article, Evans analyses the movement of food through individual households, drawing our attention to the "conduits" within which food moves from purchase through to its consumption, "handing on" or disposal through "binning'. Memorably, he refers to technologies of storage, such as Tupperware containers, tinfoil and fridges as "coffins of decay': liminal spaces where food can sit, while it is discursively transformed from "potentially edible" to "only good for throwing away" (see Figure 1).

At the macro-level, operation of the food chain can be visualised as a movement or "flow" of foodstuffs from one end to the other. The "domestic supply" of food (nationally produced food plus imports) moves through the "system" to diverse destinations, including use as animal feed or for "eating out'. Various strands, located in retail, domestic, manufacturing, hospitality/food service and so on, contribute to an overall quantum of "food waste" that moves on to a range of destinations: such as recycling, composting or anaerobic digestion. In the UK (for example, though similar patterns may obtain in other comparable societies) just 6000 tonnes of the 61 million tonnes of the food available annually for human consumption ends up being formally redistributed—a proportion of about one thousandth (Facchini et al 2018, 890).

This surplus food distribution (SFD) is our focus. While it comprises little more than a rounding error in the overall food chain, it can say much about the social movement of food within the food waste field. It can also point to potential initiatives in the development of local and sustainable food systems and the mitigation of the climate change impacts of the food chain. Food waste contributes an estimated 8–10% of global GHG emissions (EPA 2021) so this is an important challenge for all societies, including Ireland. We are particularly interested in what happens to surplus food at the point of transfer from retailer, wholesaler or food service to the CVO and where it goes afterwards: in other words, what happens *outside the box*.

Methodology

Amongst the aims of the research commissioned by FoodCloud was to describe how the provision of surplus food operated during the COVID19 pandemic, to show how CVOs connected and interacted with recipients, and to describe service users' experience in accessing such food.

We used a mixed methods research strategy. An initial quantitative survey of FoodCloud's CVOs via the stackranking platform, OpinionX, surfaced relevant issues and understandings across the range of FoodCloud's partner organisations. This was followed by semi-structured interviews with a random stratified sample of CVOs. We interviewed 22 CVO representatives, based in large cities, regional centres and rural towns across the island of Ireland. Organisations ranged across family resource

centres, food banks, meals-on-wheels services, community centres and organisations working with migrants, those with disabilities, young people, older people, those with addictions and the homeless. We also interviewed twelve service-users, mainly drawn from these organisations. This paper is based solely on the evidence from the CVOs.

It was important for the research to capture the varied, wide-ranging, and complex situations of CVOs and their community members. We thus made use of photoelicitation that drew on participant-generated food-related images, generally photographs taken on smartphones. These were used during interviews to stimulate conversation and understanding about the roles and needs of CVOs and their members, as well as to provide visual evidence of the types of food being redistributed in multiple ways.

The interviews were recorded with participants' prior agreement; transcripts were generated and, after participant checking, entered into the Nvivo qualitative research platform. The researchers closely read each transcript on multiple occasions and generated key themes from the data, guided by analysis of pertinent literature and the research questions. The study was approved by the Trinity College Dublin School of Education Research Ethics Committee. While the methodology and interim findings were discussed with a stakeholder reference group and a research group within FoodCloud, the interpretation and conclusions are the researchers' own.

Theoretical Perspective

The field of food waste now has numerous stakeholders, at policy, producer, activist and consumer level. In Ireland, this includes state bodies such as the Environmental Protection Authority and the Health Service Executive; retail corporations such as Lidl and Tesco, activist organisations such as Friends of the Earth, waste companies such as Barna, and tech-based companies such as FoodCloud and Too Good to Go. Food waste is a complex, indeed "wicked" problem, but research (Welch et al 2018) indicates that many players are "responsibilised," from farmers to waste disposal companies.

At the state and corporate level, the response to food waste often takes the form of educational material and advice to consumers, focused on attitude change or "handy tips" that individual consumers or households can take on (see Figure 2). Researchers, including Evans (2012), have demonstrated that the link between attitudes, knowledge and engagement in practices that might lead to a minimisation of food waste are more complex. For example, composting is difficult for people living in small apartments or those without access to a garden.

The most compelling sociological approach to food waste lies in Social Practice Theory [SPT] (O'Neill et al 2021; Spring 2018) which focuses on the practices that actors engage in as they interact with the material world. SPT connects

people's values ("wasting food is a sin") with their skills and techniques ("I have no idea what to do with left-over bread") to their routines ("I feed my stale bread to ducks on the canal"). For SPT the following are all important: the values, ideas and belief systems that underpin behaviour; the materials with which people interact, such as technologies (kitchens, freezers, display areas, packaging, vehicles), food itself (type, perishability, adaptability, bulk, smell) and the broader techno-social system (the road network, warehouses, shops, waste collection systems, institutional arrangements). In this research we were unable to collect data on, or to analyse, all these elements, but the SPT approach did draw our close attention to the materiality of surplus food as a set of "things" that needed to be moved around within a social context.



Figure 2. Advice to individuals and households on how to manage food waste. Barna Recycling [Source: https://www.barnarecycling.com/how-to-manage-your-food-waste/].

How Surplus Food Moved During the Pandemic

We were privileged to obtain a very significant amount of qualitative data from our participant CVOs about how they engaged in SFD and how the COVID19 pandemic had impacted on their operations. A key theme was the challenge to match supply and demand: on the one hand many organisations received highly increased quantities of surplus food, a challenge to handle; on the other they had increased demands, as new "client groups" needed access to food, due to economic stress or social isolation. Another challenge was that of logistics and staffing: many volunteer-dependent CVOs experienced a loss of volunteers, especially amongst older people who had to "cocoon". There were significant challenges in the organisation of space, due to the need to social distance, and a very significant shift from food activity on-site to food delivery: in many ways mirroring the "pivot" experienced by others in the commercial food sector.

In the following section we focus on those aspects of the SFD experience during COVID19 that highlighted the complex *movement of food* into, within and out of communities, that came to involve a broad range of actors and practices, drawing on multiple organisations, transport logistics, relationships and technologies. Issues included more food moving *into* organisations, food being *moved around* in new ways, and *new actors* in the movement process.

Food Moving In

Organisations spoke about how, at the onset of the pandemic, they received large volumes of food from restaurants and other organisations that were closing due to lockdown. Food was "moving in" at a greater rate. These extra food supplies presented several challenges. Some CVOs, particularly those with relevant *technology* in terms of cooking facilities and freezer storage, could process food quickly, whereas others were unable to deal with it. Sara, catering manager in a CVO that provided housing, found herself in the fortunate position of being able to provide high value food to residents:

We were very lucky, much to the awful end of the hotels closing on the 12th of March last year, you know, we got so many donations. We were given fillet steaks. We were given, you know, we were given the best of food, so I allotted to do fillet steaks for dinner for Saint Patrick's Day dinner last year. And I came in and I worked it and it was a stunning dinner. (Sara², HO1³)

Alison, reported receiving "unusual donations" into a residential service with full kitchen and catering staff, with the capacity to respond:

There are a couple of businesses local that would be in catering and hotels or whatever. And when they closed down, they donated some of the contents of their cold room and freezers to us. I think a lot of the donations that came would have come kind of at the beginning of lockdowns [...] Like we would have got unusual donations like fresh cream and stuff. Stuff that you wouldn't normally get you know.

We can turn it over because we deal with it on site whereas other groups yes, you'd be waiting for maybe to organize it to get it out to families. Plus, it wouldn't be like if you get stuff from hotels and catering facilities. By and large it's catering size and like you wouldn't be walking into somebody's house maybe with a container with 6 pints of cream in it. (Alison, AS1).

Moving Food Around

A feature of CVOs' pandemic experience was that there was a lot more *moving food around*, after it had been supplied to them. This added new elements to the SFD food journey. Some CVOs had to close their operations, with consequent pressure to deal with the supplies of food

that were already in-house. One solution was to "move the food on" elsewhere:

we didn't have the normal numbers that we would have. So, I would have had a lot of excess. So, what I did was I contacted [...] and [...] they were working with, at the height of it they were working with over 300 families. So, I passed anything that I could on to them and then also I did I think three/four drops to different projects within the inner city in Dublin. (Marie, YS2)

Unable to provide onsite meal services, or a pick-up alternative, some CVOs delivered food parcels to those they felt were in need:

In the past we had an open-door policy here where parents could come in and we'd, you know whatever ever food we had, we'd have it, you know, displayed. You know the next day that they could pick what they wanted. But because of Covid that has all changed. So, what we do here is we do our parcels for who we know would need it. (Margaret, CC1)

Food-related *routines* established in CVOs had to be significantly modified due to COVID19, changing the location for the transfer of food, but also reducing elements of choice and control for those receiving redistributed food.

Meals on wheels providers were already in the business of moving food around but experienced significantly greater demand for their services. They expanded to those who had previously received onsite services and to those who may previously have received support from family/friends:

[there were] double the amount of people looking for help. [...] our service went up by about 30% because you know daughters who cook for their mum couldn't go to the house, right? (Phelim, MoW 1)

In some cases, this required a significant reorganisation of the food-preparation process and the application of specialised food-handling technologies:

we went [...] up to over 300 meal deliveries every single day, because family members were calling in, they weren't able to get home to their families. The older people were cocooning and there's just that mad panic of what are we going to do? So [...] we blast-chilled our meals. [...] We had a rota up, two teams going for fear that one would go down [...] We were able to continue on. Because a lot of our volunteers would have been elderly themselves. I mean, some of them were delivering to people younger than them. So, they then had to cocoon. (Dearbhla, OP1)

Some meals on wheels services added extra dimensions to food provision, resituating food within a caring and social context (Parsons et al 2021):

We also started doing pensions collections for people, shopping, even the newspaper. You know that some people weren't able to get out for their morning paper. So, all those things we were able to do for the person and actually it brought in a huge amount of new volunteers. (Dearbhla, OP1)

One CVO's experience of moving from a day centre meal service to a meals on wheels service was initially motivated by the need to provide food to their day service users, but soon became an important mechanism for social interaction for those confined to their homes:

I just actually had a text from the son of a woman that lives on her own [...] she was getting meals from us three days a week. He said she needs a bit more social contact now—an I get the meals five days a week? [...] It's as much about the social aspect as the meal. [...] And these people like I get a phone call our delivery driver goes out and if you know maybe an hour later, I get a phone call from someone saying, well, my dinner isn't here yet. They look forward to it [...] if the delivery is late, they panic because it's such a, reliable, is the word. They know the bus driver will be there at such a time on such a day and if he's not there they're on the phone to me going - what's gone wrong you know. So, they do depend on it. (Aisling, OP4)

Notwithstanding the flexibility and creativity demonstrated by CVOs, the constraints of logistics and transport challenged their capacity to move food around. One CVO initiated a foodbank service that relied on volunteer support to collect food from the FoodCloud hub and on sponsorship for transportation costs. There were significant challenges in dealing with ultimately unusable surplus that costed money and time to transport:

They got crisps and Doritos here and they're saying thanks so much to [name of organisation] who sponsored a delivery of food pallets from FoodCloud in Dublin and they arrived yesterday. [...] some of the food that arrived is short-dated and we can't use it in the food bank. So, it goes to [name] in "Feed our Homeless" so nothing goes to waste. But what had happened was as the pandemic lifted and volunteers went back to work, they couldn't accept that food because they didn't have the time to get it delivered to "Feed our Homeless'. So, it was duplication because it was getting sent from Dublin to [place name] and they were sending it back down to Dublin to feed the homeless. (Fred, FB2)

Moving Food to New People

CVOs that operated foodbanks noted *increased demand* from people in diverse circumstances: those on low-wage casual employment who had lost their jobs at the start of the pandemic; those with children and young people living at home who had previously been in receipt of meals outside of the home; and older people who were not "online'. These service-users would not previously have sought food aid:

All of a sudden, their income drastically reduced. They still had the same bills. They still had their mortgage payments and stuff and so [...] they had no disposable income. And yeah, people were saying, oh well, they're getting €350. But if you're on an income, you know when you were barely managing [...] you have no resources available to you when you hit that crisis. (Julie, FB3)

There was a lot of say people in the town or immigrants or refugees, they might have been coming through a refugee program and they might have been, some of them might have been washing cars and doing stuff like that because we have people - you see them in every town. (Feargal, FB1)

CVOs, like Sonia's, that engaged with young people, observed greater demands from families who experienced pandemic-related job losses and now had children at home all the time:

a lot of people were out of work or there might be a one parent family that could have lost a job or whatever [...] anyone that I did deliver food to over the pandemic like they said they used to have this certain amount of income a week. Now they're down to whatever and they're struggling to buy food. And then you know there's costs of having the kids at home as well. It's costing more to have the kids at home because they're eating more. Whereas if they're in school they're not eating as much. But they're at home and they're in the fridge all day. (Sonia, YS1)

The operation of the SFD programmes in this environment entailed an understanding of broader socio-economic patterns, as well as the capacity to respond to them.

Moving Food Safely

The movement of food in contemporary society is strictly regulated: especially when supply to third parties is involved. COVID19 restrictions required CVOs to comply with additional requirements. How they managed their food provision service was circumscribed by social distancing requirements and hygiene measures. This had significant impacts on how services handled food and moved it around within premises:

we were operating out of [place] which it was a very small room. And when we had to consider like you know, social distancing and staff working together. We were like "we cannot operate safely from there'. So, we moved to in [place name] which had two different doors. So, somebody could come in one and then out the other. But that had I suppose we got very negative feedback from that because it's very visible [...] There was no privacy. (Julie, FB3)

Have to sanitize like everything you know and all the touch surfaces and make sure that there's plenty of you know wipes and stuff for them to use. Like in case you know, not touching stuff and what else like our toilets [...] Even though we did have our routines there. But like sanitizing that happens twice a day, every day, no matter what. All our light switches and frequently touched surfaces [...] so there's a lot of changes. (Marie, YS2)

For foodbanks and those CVOs that operated a delivery service, packing and bagging were new issues to contend with during COVID19. To move the food around required specific packaging technologies, sometimes improvised in the form of plastic bin-bags (see Figure 3). Pre-COVID19, community foodbank members usually brought their own bags, but the pandemic demanded a new way of operating:

we had to change because we didn't want to take in anybody's bag. So, we started pre-pack. So, we had to buy plastic bags, etc., etc., and we had to get plastic. The paper bags were no good, they weren't strong enough. (Feargal, FB1)

In the old days they used to bring a bag. But because of Covid and what have you that's when we started to get the heavy-duty bin liners which we were also granted money for. (Noelle, CoMC1)



Figure 3. Black bin-bags sused to move surplus food around [Source: Photograph by research participant Julie, FB3]

The real and symbolic effects of packaging food in this manner did not go unremarked:

So even little things like the black plastic bags that we pack the food into, that is costing us approximately €8000 per year on black plastic bags. So, it's not environmentally friendly. And we're conscious that there's no dignity you know in somebody receiving a black plastic bag down a laneway. (Julie, FB3)

New People Moving Food

The pandemic brought new people into the operation of the SFD food chain. Established meals on wheels providers and foodbank operators, heavily dependent on volunteers, experienced a decline in volunteering as older people were advised to "cocoon", as well as being mindful of protecting the health and welfare of their own staff and service users:

when the pandemic was at its worst several of the volunteers, obviously we made the decision earlier on, only four people in. Because prior to that it could be, six, seven or eight whatever it's too many, right? So, we learned that lesson quickly that four was enough, but we also found out that a few of our volunteers had underlying conditions etc., so they had to step back. (Feargal, FB1)

We banned all volunteering. We didn't allow anybody into the building for the first year because our clients are so vulnerable healthwise. We just couldn't take the chance. (Sara, HO1)

Many CE (community employment) workers were also advised to stay at home, and this impacted on the operation of services. Although most meals on wheels providers were depleted of volunteers, one found people in the wider community eager to provide support:

we were very lucky, the GAA locally were just phenomenal. They were so, so good. I actually think it brought a whole new community spirit back [...] I actually had too many volunteers in the end offering their services. (Dearbhla, OP1)

All but two CVOs in the study had been engaged in food provision prior to the pandemic. The only organisation that engaged in new activities with surplus food distribution did so as they were aware that other agencies involved in SFD were not reaching everyone in need:

When the initial pandemic struck and everything was shut down, you couldn't do the other stuff that you wanted to do anyway. So, you may as well do food because you know it's of help to the people, and it's a use of your time [...] we were working to find other ways of connecting with our clients via online methods. You know, zoom methods, outdoors as things would have lifted a little so we were doing things differently. [...] it sent us down a different route in how we engage with clients. So, like I said, this area of food support that we were looking at, we started to do "grow it yourself" training with people. (Fred, FB2)

Discussion

This paper has provided a glance into the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on SFD amongst the CVOs that partner with FoodCloud. It has focused on aspects of the movement of food that require the application of technologies, skills, routines, relationships and creativity. It reveals that the *work* of SFD does not stop when surplus

food is transferred from retailer, wholesaler or food service to an organisation that must "handle it" as best it can.

The pandemic exerted additional pressures on CVOs: from increased and changed demands for food; the necessity (mirroring the commercial food sector) to "pivot" from on-site service to delivery and packaging; application of new tools and technologies, from freeze-drying to black bin-bags; to the need to engage in new ways in the intense relational work that is part of service delivery in the alternative food sector (Parsons et al 2021).

We would argue that the practices of SFD help to create an additional and supplementary food chain that does go *outside the box*. This has implications for how we think about food waste.

- 1. As a set of practices, the *effective operation of SFD* requires *effort and creativity*, the application of significant resources and important commitments. It requires the development and maintenance of relationships, not least between staff of players in the "conventional" food chain and those, who may be volunteers, in the operation of SFD.
- 2. Alternative food networks (AFN) have the potential to localise food and shorten food chains. This is typically thought of as between producers and consumers, for example through farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture or community-based food distribution (Walters et al 2021). We could conceptualise SFD as a form of AFN, given its local base and the importance of interpersonal contact and the building of relationships around food. But SFD differs from other AFNs in their use of highly processed food products; the involvement of global and national food producers, distributors and retailer; the use of hightech apps; and the work of many non-producer or consumer intermediaries. There is potential for an interesting debate here.

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Notes

- FoodCloud is an Irish non-governmental organisation, founded in 2012, that uses technological solutions to link food enterprises (such as supermarkets, logistics companies and food service companies) with community and voluntary organisations [CVOs] in order to distribute surplus food. It is also the Irish operational partner for the EU FEAD [Fund of European Aid to the Most Deprived] programme, that distributes staple food to those deemed to be in need. More information is at https://food.cloud/about
- 2. All names are pseudonyms

 Participant Codes: AS: addiction service; CC: community childcare; FB: food bank; HO: housing/ homelessness; MoW: meals on wheels; OP: older persons; YS: youth service

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