

The Food Bank Report #1

By Whom and How is Surplus
Food Redistributed in Sweden?

svenska
matbanksnätverket
av ätbart



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Authors: Julia Berglund & Li Kristjansdottir

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Foreword

In the middle of 2023, a dear friend started working at the Swedish Enforcement Authority's debt restructuring department. He described a situation in Sweden that we would then see in the statistics at the end of the year. Debts are increasing throughout the country and groups of individuals who have never previously been in the debt register are increasingly being investigated. "We don't understand how people eat," he summarised and sighed.

"We don't understand how people eat"

According to recent data from the UN Environment Programme, a fifth (19%) of the food available to consumers is wasted. On top of that, 13% of the world's food is lost in the food supply chain before it reaches the consumer. However, data on food waste and food losses is still insufficient and may lack a significant number of unrecognised losses.¹ Food waste results in unnecessary climate and environmental impacts, which already have a direct impact on people's lives. In countries where the population already suffers from a lack of fresh water, the precious water is also used to irrigate crops – which then end up in our waste bins. An unsustainable food system with high levels of waste contributes to increased stress on our ecosystems, leading to droughts, soil depletion and biodiversity loss. At the same time, an estimated 783 million people worldwide go hungry. It is difficult not to feel resignation and frustration.

We wish this report, the first of its kind in Sweden, did not have to be written. From Boden in the north to Trelleborg in the south, food banks report that the number of people seeking food assistance has increased significantly, and that new groups are constantly emerging. Food assistance has gone from often being a temporary support for people going through hardships in life, to recently

becoming a more permanent need for a growing number of people who are 'just poor'. In its latest Poverty Report 2023, Stadsmissionen also reports that more and more of their operations involve food assistance.² Writing this report, we want to draw attention to what is happening in relation to food donations of surplus food and food waste in stores in Sweden. We also want to discuss the problems and risks we see with food donations as a temporary solution to food poverty. In addition, we want to tell a story that is unfolding right now, and which shows a reality that we believe many can agree is an unrecognisable picture of the welfare state Sweden.

At the same time, we want to highlight the incredible commitment and hard work happening all over the country, often on a voluntary basis, to save food from ending up in the bin and instead ending up on a plate. The strong will people show to help fellow humans out and reduce the waste of planetary resources is very encouraging. We hope that this report can provide testimonies, information and reflection on the role of food banks in our society – now and in the future.

Li Kristjansdottir & Julia Berglund

Project Manager & Operations Developer,
Swedish Food Bank Network





Acknowledgments

A big thank you to all of you who are making an effort to reduce food waste and alleviate food poverty!

We would like to thank all the food banks and organisations that have contributed with stories, information, statistics and time to make this report possible! We are very grateful and overwhelmed that so many of you are enthusiastic about the Swedish Food Bank Network and the platform for sharing experiences and knowledge on reducing food waste and food poverty that we have created together! Of course, we also want to thank you for all the invaluable work you do on a daily basis to support our society's most vulnerable people.

Special thanks to Matakuten in Gävle, Hela människan in Jönköping, Solikyl in Gothenburg and Kontakten in Kungälv for allowing us to include you in this report.

We would also like to thank Elinn Leo Sandberg, Marcus Herz, Niina Sundin, John Brauer and all the other researchers who have contributed very important knowledge to our work and to this report. We would also like to thank you for the incredibly important research you conduct.

Finally, we would also like to thank Jens Jonsson and Anne Lunde Dinesen at the Swedish City Missions for their invaluable input, IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute, Matmissionen, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, the Swedish National Food Agency, Axfood, Willys, Hemköp, Lidl, Reitan Convenience and Allwin for cooperating with us and sharing valuable information and data, as well as answering questions and concerns that have arisen during the writing of this report.

Ätbart and the Swedish Food Bank Network

Ätbart is a non-profit organisation founded in 2019 in Skövde. The intention was mainly to reduce food waste, but with the increased societal needs for food assistance, the ambition was expanded to include support for socially vulnerable groups of people. For this reason, Ätbart started the surplus food redistribution project 'Mathjälpen' in Skövde, Skara, Mariestad and Götene. It is no exaggeration that the founders of Mathjälpen collected, packed, sorted and redistributed food for fourteen hours a day for several months. Today, Mathjälpen in Skaraborg is running without Ätbart's active involvement. These food bank initiatives provide hundreds of people with good food and save several tonnes of food from being wasted every year.

During the work with Mathjälpen, Ätbart learnt an important lesson. There was a lack of national support and information for and about food banks. While several other countries have support networks that gather, map and act as a voice for food banks, there was no equivalent in Sweden. Ätbart wanted to change that! That is why Ätbart, with funding from the Postcode Foundation, Region Västra Götaland, Sparbanksstiftelsen Alfa and the Åhlén Foundation, started the Swedish Food Bank Network in March 2023.

At the launch of the Swedish Food Bank Network, Ätbart began a comprehensive mapping of food banks in Sweden. The experiences and preparatory work that has taken place over several years in Mathjälpen has been an absolutely necessary

basis for the rapid pace at which the Swedish Food Bank Network has been able to be built up and developed. As of March 2024, Ätbart has found over two hundred food banks, but there is good reason to believe that the number will continue to grow. The Swedish Food Bank Network includes large and small food banks that run food bag distributions, restaurants, social supermarkets or solidarity fridges.

The common denominator is that surplus food is redistributed to recipients.

The Swedish Food Bank Network offers monthly digital meetings to gather and share experiences and have discussions, sends out newsletters, collects national statistics and information, and sets

up new collaborations between food banks and grocery stores. The most important mission of the project may, however, be to listen to the stories of the food banks. Sweden's civil society bears much of the burden of climate change mitigation and takes social responsibility for those left behind. Food banks are the primary witnesses to the consequences that society is left with following the pandemic, austerity, inflation and war.

This report highlights what has emerged since the launch of the Swedish Food Bank Network. Ätbart, and thus the Swedish Food Bank Network, is an independent actor and aims in this report to highlight, problematise and analyse surplus food redistribution from different perspectives.

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Word List

Food bank Organisations that directly or indirectly redistribute surplus food from various food business operators to recipients. For example, through the distribution of food bags, social supermarkets or by meal service. Also organisations that indirectly redistribute surplus food by receiving it from food business and distributing it to organisations that redistribute it to the final recipients.

Redistribution organisation Used synonymously with 'food bank'. Åtbart uses a broad definition of food bank. Not all organisations identify with being a food bank, as they have other core activities, with surplus food redistribution or serving as a side task due to increased need.

Food assistance Food interventions that take place in civil society, mainly by charities and religious communities. People in need receive or are allowed to buy heavily discounted food. The food can either be redistributed surplus or just purchased.

Redistribution Refers to surplus or unsold food, which is donated to food banks, taken care of and then redistributed or cooked and served.

Surplus food Food or meals that have been left over either in grocery stores or in restaurants/catering establishments, and that normally will be thrown away or donated. This may be because it has been discontinued, is approaching its expiry date or for some other reason.

Food poverty A condition where a person is forced to exclude some nutritious, healthy or necessary foods in their diet because of their financial situation. The term was first used in Sweden by Stadsmissionen in their 2019 Poverty Report, but has been used in other countries before.

Avoidable food waste Food that could have been eaten but which for various reasons is not. In other words, avoidable food waste is food that is thrown away or poured out unnecessarily.

Unavoidable food waste All food that has become waste, both avoidable food waste and unavoidable food waste. For example, if you throw away a banana, the peel is unavoidable waste, while the fruit flesh is avoidable waste.

Prophetic diakonia A mission towards society and its power structures, to draw attention to situations and structures where people are at risk of injustice.

Dumpster diving Involves rescuing food from containers, often outside grocery stores. Dumpster diving is a protest movement against the waste of resources.

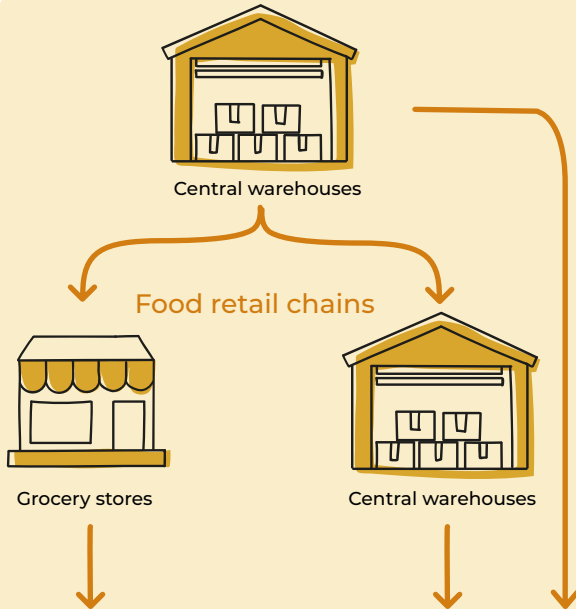
Different Types of Redistribution

Food is redistributed to recipients (end consumers) mainly in four different ways: through food bag distribution, through heavily discounted prices in social supermarkets, through different types of meal services and through solidarity fridges. The figure shows an overview of the flow of surplus food from donor organisations to the recipients through different types of recipient organisations, i.e. what we call food banks or redistribution organisations. Most of the recipient organisations are redistribution organisations that directly distribute the food to the recipients, so called frontline organisations. However, there are also a few recipient organisations (backline organisations) that function more as a logistics solution and thus pick up the food and transport it to another organisation.

The food that is redistributed comes mainly from grocery stores, but some food banks also receive food from wholesalers, producers and directly from the stores' central warehouses. Normally, only larger organisations have this type of cooperation. Recipients, or consumers, of redistributed food are a heterogeneous group who, for a variety of reasons, cannot make ends meet, want to save food to do something good for the environment, are going through hardships in life, or are in need of community meals.

Donor organisations

Wholesale & producers



Receiver organisations



Recipients

People without residence permit

People with livelihood support

People with addiction problems

Ukrainian refugees

People with mental illnesses

Socio-economically vulnerable people

Pensioneers

Environmental activists

Unemployed

Students

Homeless

Families



Social Supermarket

Helen Lindman, Head of Operations
at the Hela Människan
DeLa store in Jönköping

Hela Människan is an ecumenical organisation that works to empower people who have a vulnerable life situation. They work to reduce exclusion and give people an opportunity to change. DeLa stands for 'Diakonalt Effektivt Livsmedels Ansvar', and has several branches across the country. DeLa in Jönköping receives 22 tonnes of food per month and has 500 members.

Hi Helen Lindman,
tell us a bit about the DeLa store!

The DeLa store opened in 2017. We had been distributing surplus food bags since the beginning of 2000 but felt that we wanted to work more long-term and sustainably. We believe that being able to buy food with your own money induces a sense of dignity, and we want our customers to get that feeling. Our groceries cost 20% of the price in the regular store. We are open three afternoons a week. One morning we are open for customers with special needs. Twice a week we also have a complementary food bag distribution. The recipients of these reach us via the social services or the church deacons. During the store's opening hours, we also have a café where people can sit down and chat for a while. It is clear that the need for our services has increased after both the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine.

How are your partnerships with food companies working?

Very well. Sometimes we receive food that is not fit for consumption, but then I call them and point out the problem. We certainly do not want to be anybody's waste dump. This is a collaboration, even if we sometimes forget that in our gratitude for what we receive. We are strategically located in Jönköping, where there are many wholesalers from whom we collect food, in addition to grocery stores. Since the new waste legislation came into force in January, we have noticed a significant increase in the inflow of goods. This is fantastic, but it has also led to some challenges.



Hela människan Jönköping, DeLa store

” Food that we do not manage to sell in the store, we currently sell to private preschools and nursing homes here in Jönköping. ”

What might those challenges be?

For example, we have had to increase our waste management. Right now, the challenges are related to the increased amount of food we receive. Our manpower is not quite enough, even though we have about 60 volunteers, eight job trainees and temporary staff from companies such as IKEA.* We also receive some food that does not really appeal to our regular customers. Then it can be difficult to sell it. A while ago, for example, we received a huge delivery of French cheeses. We had to give them away as gifts. Another time we received a large batch of 'Böllnäsfil'. Then we had to have a tasting station to get customers to discover the product. The DeLa store has grown rapidly in the past year and we want to grow wisely and carefully with respect for volunteers and members. We try to move at a steady pace so we do not lose sight of the people we want to help. A big challenge is the funding and staffing issue. The food we receive would be enough to keep open every day of the week. Food that we do not manage to sell in the store, we currently sell to private preschools and nursing homes here in Jönköping. In this way, the children and the elderly can get excellent food while we get a small financial contribution to our charitable organisation. It would also be terrible, not least from a climate perspective, to throw away the food donated to us.

What reactions does your organisation get?

We are keen to invite the authorities, especially newly employed social services officers. We meet the same groups, so it's important that we cooperate. They can come here for a study visit when the store is closed, so we can show them around and answer questions. You easily get blinded by what we have created, but they are always pleasantly surprised and overwhelmed by how organised and nice everything is. As for the members, they are almost always very grateful. The first time they come they may be slightly uncomfortable and hesitant, but anyone who is a regular customer is very, very grateful. Since people can buy cheap food from us, they can buy other things that they also need. It can be anything from clothes in our second-hand shop to a small gift for their grandchildren that they could not otherwise afford.

What do you see as the way forward?

We want to get more young people and young adults on board. We already get some help from the folk high schools, but now I am thinking of making an appeal to the university here in Jönköping to see if there are students who want to volunteer.

*There are several examples of companies lending their staff to spend part of their working week in social enterprises/non-profit organisations. In Jönköping, IKEA has sponsored Hela människan with two people coming to help during the store's opening hours.



Food Bags

Janne Kraft, Director of the Non-profit Organisation Matakuten in Gävle

Matakuten's vision is that no one should go hungry. They pick up food from grocery stores, wholesalers and restaurants, which is then redistributed to people in need. In 2023, Matakuten distributed over 29,000 food bags from over 220 tonnes of collected food.

Hi Janne Kraft! How and why was Matakuten founded?

Matakuten ('The food emergency') was founded in 2013 by Lars Wennman, a true enthusiast. It all started when he recognised the need for food, as many people were struggling financially. At the same time, he saw a potential 'resource' in the form of surplus food in the grocery stores. This led to the motto that Matakuten still follows today: "We get to give". He got in touch with a local store and started saving surplus bread. He invited a local newspaper to write a story, and interest grew among stores and sponsors. Matakuten became a non-profit organisation in 2016 and is now run by a board of 9 people, all volunteers.

How does your redistribution work?

We have a space adapted to our activities of around 450 m². Gävle municipality supports us with all the costs of the premises through a three-year IOP agreement (Non-profit Public Partnership). We are open from Tuesday to Friday for the distribution of free food bags and bread bags. Everyone can pick-up food bags with the same interval, one food bag every fortnight. Matakuten currently employs five people and is supported by thirty volunteers. We work with a large number of actors in the food retail industry, 26 donators of which we collect surplus food according to a schedule. Two small trucks run between 07:00 and 12:00 Monday to Friday each week.

It is unusual for the municipality to sponsor food banks through IOP agreements. Would you like to tell us more about it?

Our surplus food redistribution is part of a social centre. We share the building with the social services' emergency accommodation, refugee accommodation, 'Housing First' initiative and housing officers. The IOP from the municipality includes rent, electricity and cleaning. We work closely with the public sector and target the same social groups. At the same time, it is important to emphasise that we do this in very different ways. The food bank helps everyone and does not refuse anyone. We do not require 'proof' of people's living situation. The fact that we are in the same building as municipal support organisations means that the distance is shortened for people who live here. It creates closeness in assistance.

Who can get food from you?

The homeless, unemployed, retired, long-term sick, war refugees, single people, families with young children and many more from all corners of society where the conditions for a good private economy are lacking, inadequate or changed by the increased costs of living. Those who come, have reason to come. Of course, it happens that people try to come more often than our routines allow and sometimes you can feel tricked. However, we try not to focus our energy on the small group who "cheat".

What do you hear from those who come to you?

Many people in need testify that our support is a direct necessity for them to make ends meet at the end of the month. Most of those who come are grateful for the help they receive. Visitors from the industry and private companies, politicians and volunteers often emphasise how surprised they are by the amount of food being rescued, the number of food bags being distributed and the process behind each food bag.

”The food bank helps everyone and does not refuse anyone. We do not require ‘proof’ of people’s living situation.”

What challenges do you face in redistributing surplus food?

The working environment for the staff and volunteers can be tough. The desperation among the recipients in the queue is apparent. We meet people who have nowhere else to go for compassionate support. This also causes stress for people who work here. It is heartbreaking to refuse people who need more food than we can provide. We distribute about 150 bags a day, yet there is not enough food on three out of four days. At the same time, I feel confident that we are supporting people as much as we are capable of, and that what we are doing is helping people who have nowhere else to turn.

What is the way forward?

In the best of worlds, food banks would not need to exist, but unfortunately that vision is currently pure fiction. The need for food banks is growing. Therefore, authorities and politicians also need to understand how to facilitate the fulfilment of our socially important mission, so that we can help more people and save more food. Spreading knowledge is incredibly important to start a process of change around food waste and hunger. I also believe that society as a whole can do more for those who are struggling. We need to establish more straightforward cooperation between social support functions to achieve the necessary synergies and solutions.



Meal Service and Food Bags

Lennart Åkerlund, Operations Manager at 'Kontakten in Kungälv', Non-profit Organisation

Kontakten is run by Hela människan in Kungälv, as a non-profit organisation with the churches in Kungälv (Church of Sweden, Eque-mnia Church and Pentecostal Church), Kungälv Municipality and Kungälvsbostäder as principals. Kontakten is a meeting place that offers food, warmth and fellowship. The organisation takes care of food that would otherwise be thrown away by distributing surplus food bags and cooking food for its visitors.

Hi Lennart Åkerlund!

Tell us a bit about your organisation.

We collect surplus food from seven stores and three bakeries, three times a week. From that we prepare lunch and breakfast three days a week. On Saturdays we offer 'fika'. A couple of times a week we also distribute food bags. We usually supplement these with what we call 'shopping-for-others'. In this way, you can get a more nutritious food bag. When we started around the year 2000, we mostly received bread and coffee from Ica Maxi. Since then, it has grown. The key words for us are food, warmth and fellowship. Our visitors are mostly people with addiction issues or mental illness.

Are your guests the ones who receive the food bags you distribute?

Yes, it is partly our guests we distribute the surplus food bags to. But also to people who come in contact with us through the diaconate in the parishes. Families also come via social services and other municipal services, such as housing support workers or family counsellors. We are very content about the good collaboration with the municipality.

How many people do you meet each year?

The organisation is based on voluntary work and we employ just over 50 volunteers. We serve about 220 unique individuals in a year who visit us regularly and we distribute about 50-60 food bags per month. Of course, we may be taken advantage of



Jeanette Åkerlund



New collaboration with Tempo Livs in Kareby

” We have increased our composting, but do not carry the cost, it is covered by the municipality. We are situated in a rented flat provided by the municipal housing company. ”

by some who do not really have the need, but we try to minimise that risk. On the whole, there are people with great needs in vulnerable life situations that we meet and we offer them a welcoming meeting place.

What support do you provide to your guests?

The guests are happy and positive, it is definitely appreciated that we operate here. We wish that this type of support would not be needed, but now that we are needed, it is good to be able to help. Of course there is a lot of frustration, but it is not directed at us, but at the social services. There is a lot of disappointment about not getting any adequate support. I often offer to be involved in conversations with the public sector, but unfortunately few people take advantage of that. Many are too resigned. We try to give the support we can. One nice thing is that we have a hairdresser who comes here for a whole working day to cut visitors' hair for free. Above all, it is a community and fellowship that we have to offer.

What challenges do you see in redistributing surplus food?

In general, it works very well. The new waste regulations has given us a bit of a boost, we are getting more food, but also more unserviceable foods.

Cucumbers are a good example. We get more good ones, but also many more bad ones that we have to throw away. We may need to communicate that they need to make a different assessment but it is difficult, we do not want them to stop donating either. It is also a bit tricky for the grocery stores. They have not been prepared to separate the food from the packaging. But of course, as long as we take care of everything without saying anything, they do not have to do anything. We have increased our composting, but do not carry the cost, it is covered by the municipality. We are situated in a rented flat provided by the municipal housing company.

What do you see as the way forward?

The need for food and social assistance will increase. The same goes for the availability of food. There will always be waste. We have focused on running our particular activities as well as we can, but there is still so much that the community around us needs to do. We meet some of our guests' basic needs by providing proper food, human kindness and fellowship, in order to provide a community to our guests, but at the same time so much more is needed for people who have become marginalised in order to find long-term stability in life. Both mental illness and drug abuse are unfortunately on the rise, and many efforts are needed to get these people back on their feet.



Solidarity Fridge

Bruno Chies, One of the Initiators of Solikyl

Solikyl is a collaborative initiative to reduce food waste in supermarkets and households. They work towards creating a gift economy around food that is fit for consumption, but would have been thrown away anyway. Solikyl is mainly active in several locations in Gothenburg, but has the ambition to spread the concept of food sharing throughout Sweden. The initiative redistributes around 3 tonnes of food a week and has 164 volunteers.

Hello Bruno Chies!
Can you tell us about how the organisation was founded?

It started during the summer of 2016. I had been at a conference on Solidarity Economy in Germany the year before. It was there I learned about the food sharing concept. The participants of the conference went on a pick-up round with an organisation in Berlin. We picked up food from shops by bike and left it in outdoor fridges placed around the city. They also distributed food directly to homeless people. That experience made a strong impression on me. For me, who was a dumpster diver for ideological reasons, a different solution to food waste from grocery stores emerged, one that also became an act of solidarity. I came home, talked to another dumpster diver, and we were given the opportunity to deliver food to a fridge at 'Omställningsverkstan' in Gothenburg. The hardest part was to be perceived as credible enough for the stores to donate. We had no project funding, no one who could get paid for the work. The idea itself went against the neoliberal notion of a "serious" actor...

What does your redistribution look like?

We often distribute food directly outdoors, but we also put it in solidarity fridges located in free shops, for example. Sometimes we advertise on social media that we are distributing. It is never a

”We see a trend where the ‘old’ civil society of grassroots movements has become bureaucratic organisations underpinned by a neoliberal ideology.”

problem to get rid of the food. We collect food from grocery stores, bakeries, and large quantities from the Rescue Mission’s ‘Maträtt’ social supermarkets.

Who is your target group?

We do not have a target group, we want to be inclusive and not create stigma. Anyone can pick up the food. Even people who are not in need of it need to see the waste of resources that food companies are contributing to. We say thank you for saving the food to those who collect it and we do not want them to say thank you to us.

You have chosen to build your organisation on a completely voluntary basis. Who are the volunteers?

They are all kinds of people. Not really young people, but 20 years old and up. People from all social classes, Swedish as well as other cultural backgrounds. The issue of food affects everyone. At the organisational level, it is often people who are really passionate about the problem of food waste, such as dumpster divers, climate activists and students. As a dumpster diver, you think about sustainability and system change from a different angle than many others. The very act of taking back food that food companies throw away, and eating it too, goes against the idea that consumers ‘demand a certain standard’. The new waste regulations will eventually mean that the containers that dumpsters turn to will disappear. This means that more people will need to rescue food at an earlier stage, as Solikyl already does with food sharing. Rescuing food and then distributing it for free, without making a profit one way or another, is a system-critical act. It is a kind of antithesis to the tendency of food companies to exploit inflation, for example, by raising food prices and capitalising on people’s vulnerability.

What advantages do you see in being an entirely non-profit organisation?

I think you have to be very careful about bringing financial interests into issues that are about engaging people in systemic change around over-production of food and human vulnerability. As soon as someone is paid, both responsibility and power fall on that person. This means that others let go of responsibility and involvement. The other advantage is that we avoid the extra administrative tasks that arise when applying for financial resources. We see a trend where the ‘old’ civil society of grassroots movements has become bureaucratic organisations underpinned by a neoliberal ideology. We are getting more done, saving more resources and creating value through our actions to save food.

What challenges do you face as an entirely non-profit organisation?

Actually, you can summarise it in three points:

- 1.** Collaboration with the grocery stores. They are not interested in our concept and prefer traditional charity.
- 2.** Premises for distribution. Alternative sites that we could have used in the past are being demolished in favour of new buildings and so on. It is difficult to find free places, especially in the city centre.
- 3.** Registration and other fees. The requirement for us to be registered as a food business in the municipality entails a processing fee that for us is high and also arbitrary.

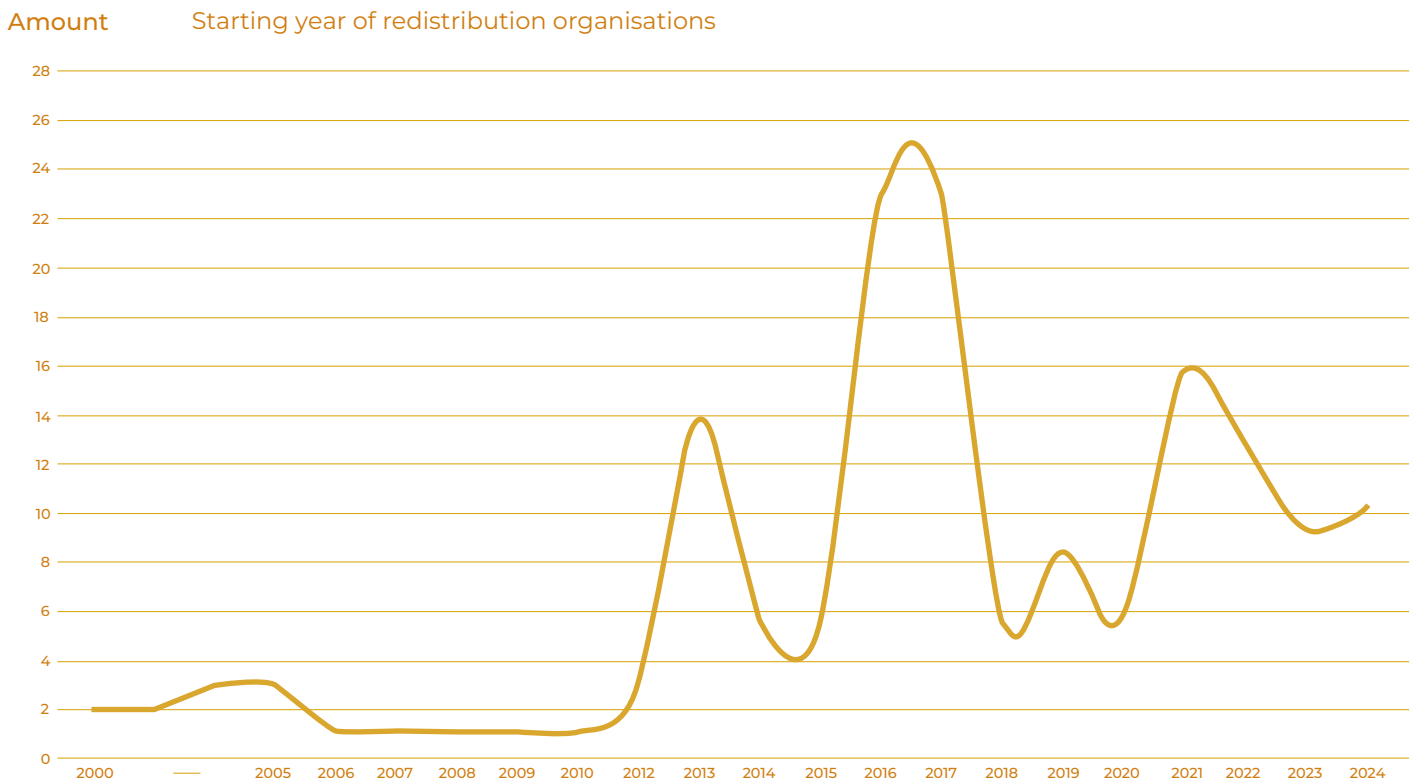
What do you see as the way forward?

We are in the process of setting up a kind of umbrella organisation that will help us with knowledge, experience, guidance and a digital platform. We want to spread the food sharing concept throughout Sweden and remove obstacles to jointly drive opinion on issues related to food waste. Anyone who has time and interest to organise themselves should be able to easily start a similar activity in their town or area.

Reducing Food Waste Through Donations: A Relatively New Phenomenon in Sweden

This section reviews the development of surplus food redistribution and different events that have influenced it.

According to the data Ätbart has collected through interviews, a survey, information from redistribution organisations' websites, scientific reports and articles from local newspapers, donations of surplus food were unusual in Sweden before 2013. The graph below shows a summary of when 164 organisations started their redistribution of surplus food. Many started with food assistance in other ways much earlier, so this only shows when they started handling donated surplus food. There are about 50 additional organisations that Ätbart knows are redistributing surplus food, but has no information about when they started. Despite the lack of complete information, the graph gives an indication of the trend.



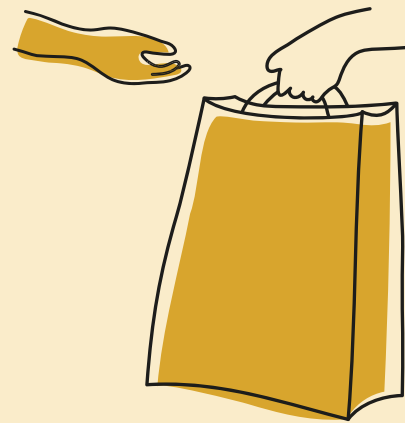
It is also worth mentioning that there is some uncertainty as to exactly when some organisations started redistributing surplus food, as many organisations have also been receiving 'pure' charitable donations from food companies, unrelated to taking care of surplus food and reducing food waste.

The Start of Surplus Food Donations and Reduction of Food Waste

Apart from a few pioneers who started redistributing surplus food in the early 2000s, Allwin was one of the first actors in the field in Sweden. As early as 2004, the foundation 'Gemensamt engagemang', which later became Allwin in 2010, began picking up food at a 7-Eleven store and donating it to charities. Allwin is a limited company and is financed by charging the grocery stores for the service of picking up their surplus, and they are the only actor with this financing model in Sweden.³ Although redistribution of surplus food was taking place to some extent, it was not until 2013 that it clearly started to increase. There is no distinct answer to why this happened at that time; according to the Swedish National Food Agency⁴, for example, there were no changes in regulations during this period that could have affected the willingness to donate.

The reasons for starting to redistribute surplus food are often; either that there has been a local surge in food assistance needs; or that a grocery store has reached out to an organisation to donate, in order to reduce its food waste. Although food is often rescued to provide food assistance (especially amongst religiously grounded charities), almost all redistribution organisations state that they also do it because they care about reducing food and resource waste and doing a good deed for the environment - and sometimes this is the primary driver. A mix of these reasons has been cited by food banks no matter when they started their redistribution. A movement based primarily on environmental concerns, which has emerged alongside more formalised food redistribution, is dumpster diving. 'Dumpster divers' draw attention to the problem of grocery store waste, by rescuing food from containers. Diving for discarded but perfectly good food in containers is described as a protest movement against the waste of resources, and the movement is present in many parts of the world.⁵

The unnecessary burden of food waste on the environment and climate began to be recognised in Sweden in the early 2000s, and gained



momentum in both research and the media around 2007-2008^{6,7}, including in a report by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and in articles in the newspapers 'Sydsvenskan' and 'Svenska Dagbladet'⁸. Since then, the amount of information, research, statistics and reports has increased significantly. The increased availability of information on food waste may have influenced the interest of organisations and individuals to start redistributing surplus food.

Interest in Reducing Food Waste Is Growing Rapidly

The significant increase in the number of organisations starting to redistribute surplus food in 2015-2017, as shown in the graph above, can be linked to several factors. Most food banks have stated that the increased need for food assistance following the so-called 'refugee crisis' that began in autumn 2015 was a contributing factor to starting to redistribute surplus food. Politicians from both the left and the right called on the Swedes to show understanding and empathy. Sweden's liberal-conservative Prime Minister at the time, Fredrik Reinfeldt, asked the people to "open up their hearts" and the civil society listened.

Axfood (one of the largest actors in food retail in Sweden) began to show interest in donations of surplus food in 2014-2015, and founded the social supermarket 'Matmissionen' together with the Stockholm City Mission with support from Axfoundation.⁹ The first 'Matmissionen' opened in December 2015 in Rågsved (a suburb in Stockholm), with the Stockholm City Mission in charge. In 2016, 'Matmissionen' participated in a development project to establish a franchise concept and spread it to different parts of the country¹⁰, a process that is still ongoing.¹¹ In 2015, Lidl also initiated a partnership with Allwin, which came into effect in 2016, which also contributed to more organisations being asked to receive surplus food donations.¹²

Common reasons to start redistributing food:

- A greater need for food assistance
- Stores want to donate
- The will to reduce waste of planetary resources

The increase in 2016-2017 is mainly linked to the fact that Willys (grocery store chain owned by Axfood) started an initiative in 2016 to reduce its food waste, now called 'charity instead of waste'. They started new partnerships for surplus food donation in over 30 of their stores in 2016¹³, and in another 40 stores in 2017.¹⁴ Many of these partnerships are still active, but some have ended for various reasons. For example, many Willys stores in Stockholm began donating to 'Matmissionen', but as they have grown, they now only accept donations from central warehouses, wholesalers and producers. As a result, most of the store partnerships started in 2016-2017 in Stockholm have been terminated, and have not been replaced by new partnerships.

However, Matmissionen's partnerships with wholesalers, central warehouses and producers have significantly increased the total volume of surplus food donations.¹⁵ In 2016-2017, Stockholm City Mission developed a concept for a central food bank warehouse, to distribute food to 'Matmissionen' as well as some social charitable organisations (both its internal activities and other organisations) via their food bank truck.¹⁶ This concept still exists, and is also running in Gothenburg and Malmö. In some cases, external organisations that receive surplus food from the City Mission's food centres are required to pay an operating fee of varying amounts. In Gothenburg, for example, the fee is from SEK 50,000 (approx. 5000€) per year.¹⁷

Donation Guidelines and Food Waste Reduction Targets

One of the reasons why the interest in reducing food waste through donations increased dramatically in 2015-2017 can be partly linked to the fact that the UN launched the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, of which target 12.3 is to halve global food waste by 2030.^{18, 19} As a UN member state, Sweden has adopted the SDGs. In 2018 the Swedish National Food Agency, together with the Swedish Board of Agriculture and the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, launched a national action plan to reduce food waste.²⁰ The Swedish National Food Agency has been commissioned by the government to implement various measures as part of the national food strategy, with reduced food waste being one part.²¹ In 2020, the voluntary industry agreement "Samar-

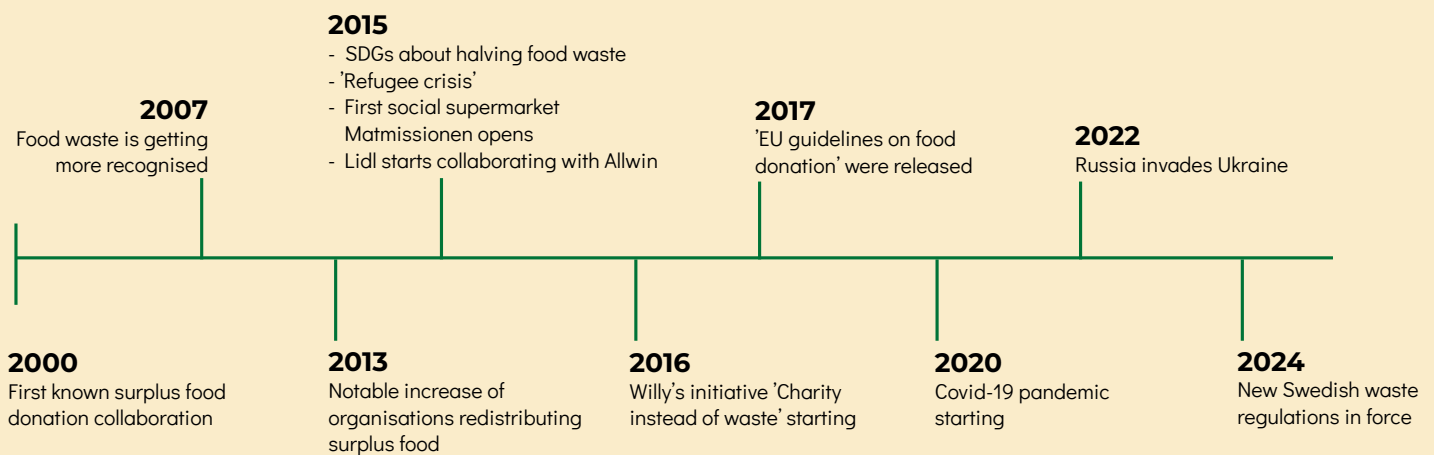
bete för minskat matsvinn" (SAMS)* was launched as part of the government's mission to reduce food waste.²²

The interest in reducing food waste has increased significantly among food retailers since the target to halve food waste was launched, but there has been some confusion about the regulations that apply to donation. Until 2017, there were no national guidelines for surplus food donations. Then the 'EU guidelines on food donation' were released, and thereby became the applicable guidelines in Sweden. The aim of the guidelines was to clarify EU legislation and remove barriers to food redistribution, in order to reduce food waste and move towards a circular economy and more sustainable food systems.²³ The EU guidelines have contributed to increased clarity, although there are shortcomings in communicating them and adapting them to the Swedish context. Many food banks still report that many retailers refrain from donating due to reluctance and uncertainty about the interpretation of food safety, liability, traceability and tax regulations.

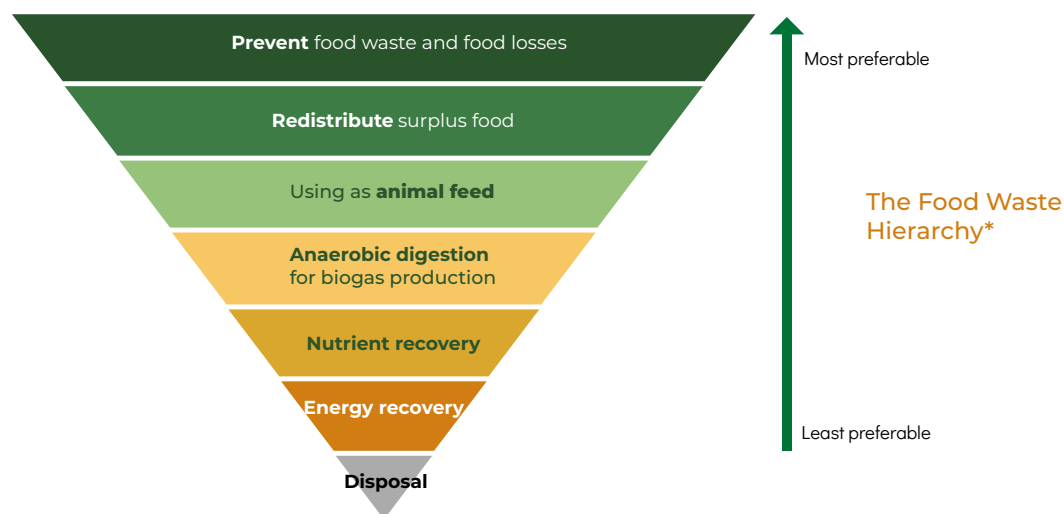


SDG 12.3

By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses.



In 2018, the UK organisation WRAP published a food waste hierarchy, which has become widely recognised in both the EU and Sweden.²⁴ As seen in the figure below, it shows that redistribution of surplus food is the second most desirable way to reduce food waste, after prevention. In Sweden there are, however, still very few scientific studies on surplus food donations. In one of the few case studies that have been conducted, a life cycle analysis of donations has shown both environmental and climate benefits, but also positive social effects.²⁵



Despite the current consensus on the resource efficiency of redistribution, a relatively small amount of food is redistributed compared to how much is thrown away*. It can also be noted that throughout the development of redistribution of surplus food, it has seemed unquestionable that the food should be redistributed as part of a charitable project. The food companies often have a strong desire to donate the food to charity, and organisations that rescue the food for other purposes often find it difficult to get partnerships for donations. International researchers as well as Swedish professor Marcus Herz describe that the relationship between food waste and food poverty seems reasonable because both "are about food", but that this is a problematic simplification. We will address this criticism later in the chapter "Food assistance or food hindrance?".

* Source: Livsmedelsverket, Naturvårdsverket and Jordbruksverket, baserad on image from WRAP 2018.

** 89 000 tonnes of food was wasted in grocery stores in 2022 in Sweden, whereas the estimation for surplus food donated in 2023 is 9500 tonnes (of which a large part comes from wholesale)

Crises and Effects of Dismantling the Welfare System

It is also possible to distinguish a further increase in redistribution organisations from 2021 to present. Food banks that have started or expanded their operations during this time show a direct link to the ongoing economic crisis that large parts of our society are currently experiencing. The economic effects in the wake of the pandemic were quickly replaced by price rises, inflation, interest rate hikes and migration as a result of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. There are also factors in the Swedish societal development that can be described as a dismantling of the welfare system that have contributed to a reduced resilience to crises for a large part of the population. Some examples are:

- Widening income gaps, the proportion of people living in households with low economic standards is increasing²⁶
- The national standard for livelihood support has fallen behind the general income trend¹⁹
- Increased household debts at the Swedish Enforcement Authority²⁷
- Law on temporary residence permits from 2016^{*28}

The list of contributing factors also includes a dismantled psychiatric system, reduced support for people with addiction disorders and the possibility of falling into debt with rapidly growing and weakly regulated credit companies.²⁹ Civil society is witnessing a rapid development where

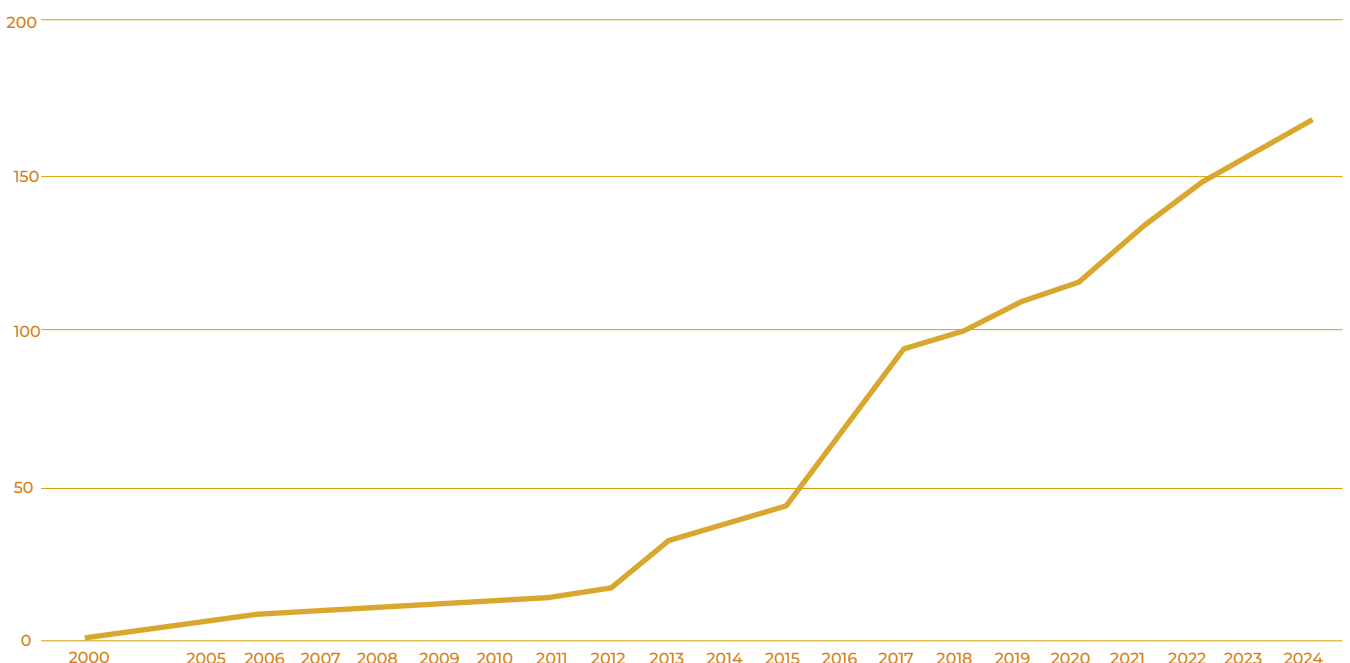
Alongside various trends in society that have led to an increased need for food assistance, there is a growing interest in reducing food waste, which together have contributed to a sharp increase in donations and the number of organisations redistributing food over the past 10 years.

more and more people are slipping off the edge, unable to make ends meet, and suddenly needing both emergency and long-term food assistance. Alongside various trends in society that have led to an increased need for food assistance, there is a growing interest in reducing food waste, which together have contributed to a sharp increase in donations and the number of organisations redistributing food over the past 10 years. It is also worth mentioning that most non-profit organisations have limited financial resources. The possibility of receiving food, which they would have needed to provide anyway, makes the match between civil society, people in need and food surplus perceived as particularly accurate.

The number of redistribution organisations in Sweden has increased by at least 50% since 2019, as shown in the graph below. Many organisations state that they started expanding or started their surplus food redistribution activities to help Ukrainian refugees, but also because the need for food assistance has generally increased and that new groups that have not previously sought food assistance from civil society are now showing up.

Amount

Number of redistribution organisations in Sweden



* According to the report and many others, the uncertain conditions for refugees have made it more difficult for them to establish themselves in Sweden and have led to increased mental illness.

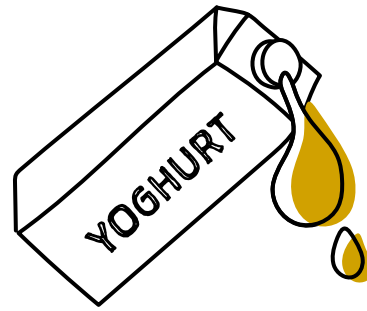
New Waste Regulations Turns the Tables

On 1 January 2024, a new waste regulations entered into force in Sweden. The regulations requires packaging to be separated from biological waste.³⁰ In grocery stores and at wholesalers, this means that all food products need to be separated from their packaging before disposal. This has led to a significant increase in interest and incentives to donate instead of discarding. Previously, many stores perceived donations as taking extra labour time and being more complicated than throwing it away. Now, it is perceived as much more complicated and time-consuming to comply with the new waste regulations than to sort out food for donation.

This has also caused many grocery store managers to change their attitude. Most food banks report that there used to be a lot of "take it or leave it attitudes", i.e. that they have to collect all the food that the store sorts out, even though there is a lot that is unfit for consumption or that they cannot handle. If they have not agreed to pick up everything, they have often been told that the collaboration will be terminated. Fearful of losing the donated surplus food altogether, many food banks have thus felt "forced" to accept these conditions.

"He had this kind of attitude towards our collaboration. Take it or leave it. Once we got a whole crate of beer. We just had to stand there and pour it out. After all, our recipients are here because they suffer from addiction problems." says a food bank in northern Sweden.

With the new waste regulations, the balance of power has suddenly shifted. Instead of it being perceived as the stores are doing the food banks a favour, it is now clearer than ever that it is the food banks that are doing the stores a favour. Food banks have always helped to reduce waste and helped food retailers meet their sustainability targets for reducing food waste and waste management costs. Now they are also helping to save many hours of labour for store employees, who can avoid having to manually separate food from packaging.



Risks Resulting From the New Waste Regulations

However, there are negative consequences of the strong interest in 'getting rid' of the task of separating food from packaging in grocery stores. Already a few weeks after the waste regulations came into force, food banks testified that they started to receive an increased amount of unserviceable food.

"We can only come two days a week, but the store now wants us to collect every day. Some stores are therefore freezing food so that we can rescue more before it goes bad. That's good, of course. But sometimes it's a bit like they throw anything in a mixed box and send it away. The other week we got a bunch of frozen cucumbers. What are we supposed to do with them?" asks a food bank in Dalarna.

In some cases, this may be due to a lack of communication in the store and unclear procedures for sorting, but in some cases the economic interest is clear. Many store managers are open about the fact that they work in a profit-driven organisation and see an opportunity to cut costs while donating something that benefits people.

"This week, I'm going to do a drive among our partnerships and tell the stores that our composting has increased significantly since the beginning of the year. It's not okay, we're not supposed to take their rubbish. Most people are ashamed when you point it out, but you wish you didn't have to," says a well-established food bank in a small town that feeds 850 people a week.

For some less established food banks, it can be more difficult to express their limitations. Åtbart is collecting testimonies through The Swedish Food Bank Network about changes in behaviour from grocery stores in order to raise the issue with the food retail chains, and disperse information about routines that can prevent food from becoming unfit for consumption between pick-ups. In addition to being unethical behaviour if done deliberately, treating food banks as waste dumps is against the laws and regulations applied to grocery stores.³¹ The consequences for food banks, which are already lacking resources, will be an increased workload and lead to higher waste management costs.

Sweden's First National Register of Food Banks

Before the Swedish Food Bank Network was launched in March 2023, there was no comprehensive national information or statistics on how, where, by whom or to what extent surplus food is redistributed. This section presents our mapping of food banks and summarises some of the information that has emerged during interviews, discussions and network meetings.

Mapping of Food Banks

Several different approaches have been used to map where in the country surplus food is redistributed. Mapping Sweden's food banks has been, and is, an ongoing detective work. Food assistance organisations are often driven by values other than visibility and marketing, and not all food assistance involves only redistribution of surplus food, but may also involve purchasing of food or distribution of gift cards.

Register of All Registered Food Businesses

One of the methods used was to request registers of food businesses from all 290 municipalities in Sweden, as food banks should also be registered as food businesses. Almost all municipalities have responded, which means that the mapping has been systematic and covered most parts of the country. Different types of keywords were used as filters to find relevant actors, such as different charitable organisations and churches. Contact details for the organisations were then searched for online. Åtbart then emailed and called the organisations to ask them whether they redistribute or purchase food for their operations.

Hearsay, Local Newspapers and Targeted Searches

As contacts with more and more local organisations have been made, tips on nearby organisations have also been an important part of the mapping process. In some cases, targeted searches have also been carried out, focussing on specific areas. Most importantly, food banks that are not registered food businesses (often because they are not aware that they should be) have also been found in this way.

Lists from Food Retail Chains

Åtbart has also accessed some of the food retail chains' lists of their current donation partnerships. In this way, additional food banks have been discovered, where it has also been certain that redistribution is taking place, without the need for further investigation.

Qualitative Interviews

To ensure that the organisations found are actually redistributing food, and are not just purchasing the food they distribute, over 100 qualitative interviews were conducted. The ambition has been to contact all identified food banks, but due to the large number, this has not yet been possible. We have been able to confirm that the identified food banks that have not been interviewed are redistributing food, for example through information on websites, social media or via email.

The qualitative interviews have included a series of questions and conversations around food bank activities. In this way, large amounts of information and data have been collected. The conversations often included discussions on the challenges and ethical and moral dilemmas related to surplus food redistribution by civil society. In addition, many testimonies have been collected on the very worrying social developments that these organisations witness on a daily basis, with poignant stories of families and single households in need.

Interview material collected during the mapping and ongoing activities is used throughout the report through quotes and references. However, it is common for food banks to worry about losing support, sponsors and food donations in cases where they 'speak out' or 'criticise', so most quotes are anonymised.

140 municipalities

The identified food banks are located in 140 different municipalities (i.e. 48% of Sweden's municipalities have at least one food bank)

50,000 households

Ätbart has estimated that at least 50,000 households regularly consume redistributed surplus food in various ways.

9,500 tonnes/year

Together with the Swedish City Missions, Ätbart has calculated a new estimate of how much surplus food that is donated annually in Sweden - the new figures show that it is about 9,500 tonnes/year - which is more than twice as much as the previous estimate! This corresponds to approx. 15,000 tonnes of Co₂.

The Map

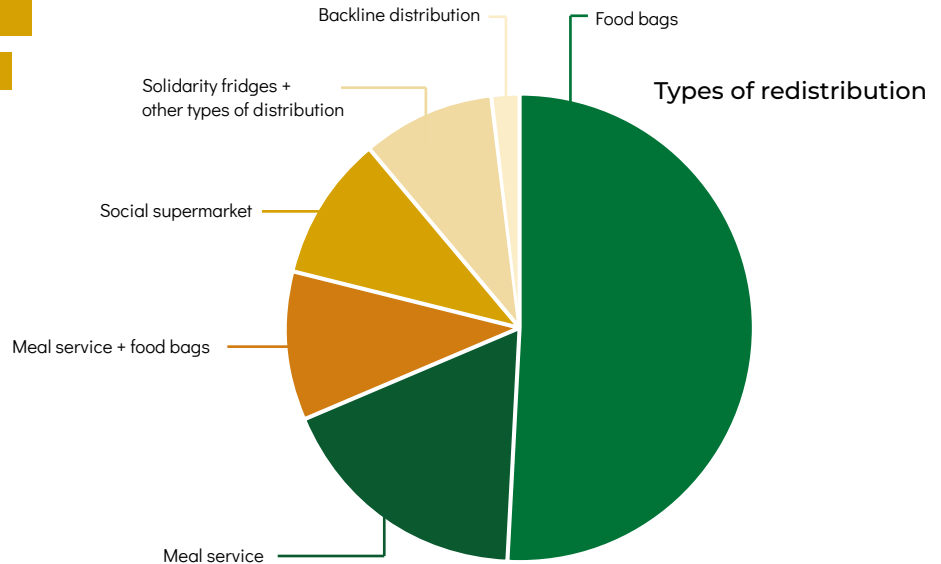
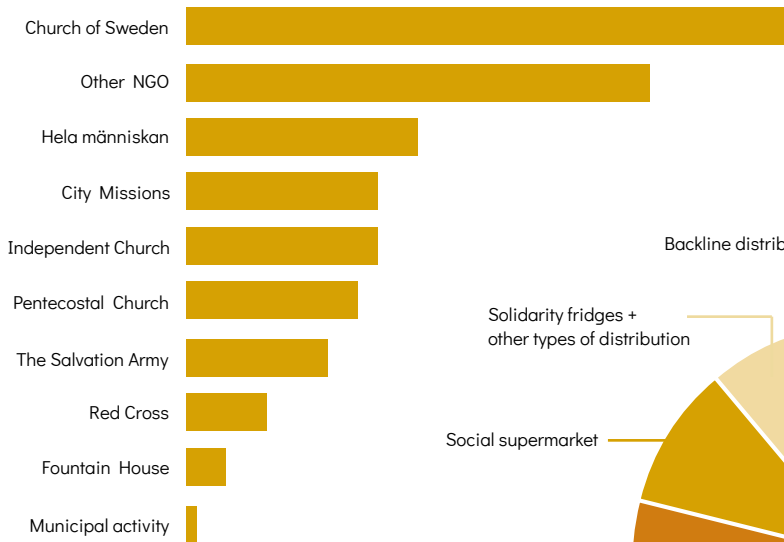
Ätbart has identified over 220 confirmed redistribution organisations in Sweden. The locations of these organisations have been published in an interactive map on the Ätbart website. However, in total, around 320 local organisations that are, or are likely to be, involved in surplus food redistribution have been identified. Some of these are not included in the map because it is not confirmed whether they are redistributing or providing food assistance with purchased food. Some are not included because they are part of a collaboration between different organisations, which together operate a food bank with one physical location.

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Food Banks



Which organisations are running the food banks?



Volunteers



Christina "Kicki"
Kicki, retired preschool teacher
Volunteer at Mathjälpen in Lund



What drives me to volunteer can be summarised in three points:

Food: Being involved in making nice baskets of food is fantastic. We get a lot of food and it gives joy to redistribute it to those in need.

Environment: The food we receive from the store, which we clean and pass on to the recipients, contributes to a better environment.

People: The best part is meeting our recipients. That hour gives me joy and energy. I often get to talk to someone for a while, and maybe give them a hug. ”



Elisabeth
Volunteer at Ockelbo Matkasse



I'm a volunteer at Ockelbo Matkasse which brings me such joy and fulfilment! We also have a lot of fun and good times, we are a great bunch of people who knows how to collaborate! It's fantastic being able to give something in return to those in need. ”

The Swedish Food Bank Network Matches Grocery Stores with Food Banks

Since the launch of the Swedish Food Bank Network, there has been an ongoing dialogue with grocery chains and various food companies about how we can work together to reduce food waste through increased, but also fair and legal, donations. One type of collaboration that has been explored is that Ätbart can assist retailers in matching stores that want to donate with food banks or other non-profit organisations such as cooperative preschools or community colleges that can accept donations. The mapping of food banks has been a cornerstone in the work to reduce retail waste through donations at a national level. The nationwide register that Ätbart now provides is an essential prerequisite for quickly matching stores that want to donate with suitable food banks.

The mapping of food banks has been a cornerstone in the work to reduce retail waste through donations at a national level.

Collaboration with Axfood

At the end of November 2023, Ätbart and Axfood signed a collaboration agreement. The agreement means that Ätbart, through the Swedish Food Bank Network, receives requests from Willys and Hemköp stores that want to donate their surplus food. Ätbart then matches the store with a nearby food bank. Ätbart holds start-up meetings to go through Axfood's guidelines for donations, as well as other things that are necessary to know. Both Axfood and Ätbart are interested in reducing food waste by increasing the proportion of surplus food that is donated, and ensuring that donations are made in a food-safe and fair manner.

"I am so glad that we have you as a third party actor in the meeting. It is easier to express our needs and constraints. I don't think I would have had the courage to say that we can only pick up food twice a week otherwise. It was clear that he [the store manager] wanted at least four times a week. But that's not possible, it takes too much time away from our other diaconal work," says a newly started food bank in southern Sweden.

The Swedish Food Bank Network has thus moved from mainly supporting the food banks, to also working more closely with the donating stores. The interest from grocery stores wanting to start donating their surplus has been striking. In three months, 70 enquiries from stores have been received, and 52 of these stores have been matched with a food bank. Almost without exception, stores that want to start donating have cited the new

waste regulations as the main reason. Some may have thought about it for a long time, while others clearly state that it is because they want to avoid the task of separating packaging from food.

Increased number of donating grocery stores

through collaboration with The Swedish Food Bank Network
Dec 2023 - March 2024

↑ 52

Matched Axfood owned stores

It has been clear that good communication is a prerequisite for a successful donation collaboration. Store managers often have limited understanding of what kind of workload it means for food banks to handle surplus food. With a better understanding of how the food should be used and the type of activities it will be used in, procedures for sorting or freezing goods, for example, can be optimised. Many food banks also invite store managers and employees to visit or volunteer at some point to better understand their operations and see for themselves how the food is used.

Exchange of Experiences and Dialogue

In addition to what has emerged from the interviews, valuable information has also come from the digital network meetings to which all food banks that are members of the Swedish Food Bank Network are invited to, once a month. At the time of writing (April 2024), the Swedish Food Bank Network has 91 member organisations, with more joining every month. Part of the purpose of the network is to create a platform for food banks to exchange experiences with each other. At these meetings, anything is discussed, from ethical dilemmas, choice of different working methods, how to motivate a reluctant store to start donating, to how regulations are interpreted in different places. Below are some extracts of recurring challenges.

Interpretation of Regulations

There are major differences in how municipal food inspectors interpret regulations, which can have major consequences for the food banks' ability to operate. For example, some food banks need to make handwritten lists of all the goods they receive, before they donate the food to the final recipient. This is due to a very strict interpretation of the traceability requirements for food businesses, which food banks are also registered as. However, if the donating store had sent delivery notes to the food bank with the food, the time-consuming work for these food banks could have been avoided. Retailers usually find it too time-consuming to print delivery notes and often refuse to do so - even though they are legally obliged to be responsible for traceability. Since few food banks stock food to any greater extent, often collecting on the same day as they distribute or serve it, the traceability requirement fills a dubious function. Axfood has taken a clear position to relax the traceability requirements for food banks, to get rid of administrative barriers for donations.³² Many food banks highlight that this is very helpful for them.

Recurring Challenges with Sufficient Funding

Matbankerna ställs inför en rad utmaningar, varav Food banks face a number of challenges, and the most common is funding. Neither municipalities* nor retail chains** provide funding to facilitate the work of food banks accepting store donations.

There are sometimes debates about whether municipalities should support food banks financially, and the issue is often sensitive. As a result, there are countless unofficial partnerships where the municipality, for example, bears logistical costs.

"We get to use this space for free. The municipality has earmarked it for a special type of letting. In the unlikely event of such a situation arising, we will have to move," says a deacon at a food distribution centre in a town of 4,000 inhabitants.

Opinions may differ, but the fact is that municipalities, and to some extent grocery stores, are often in obvious need of the unpaid work of the organisations, which means that the issue of funding needs to be discussed.

"It's always a question of resources. We drive our own cars, pay the registration fee to the municipality [processing fee to register food businesses] and pay for electricity. Electricity and fuel are not exactly free. If we could have been paid for picking up the food, it would have been a different story", describes one organisation.

The economic situation of food banks can also differ significantly. Non-profit associations and organisations in smaller towns often face even greater challenges with funding than, for example, the various local units of the City Missions.^{***}

United Against Waste and Social Injustice

Although the type of organisations, methods of redistribution, beliefs, etc. differ significantly between the redistribution organisations, they are all rooted in the fight against social injustice and waste of resources. Throughout the interviews and network meetings, it has become clear that there are a myriad of ethical, moral and logistical decisions and dilemmas that affect most people involved in food redistribution. Many food banks have tested and evaluated different approaches and re-evaluated previous decisions, in order to try out what works best to help, support or contribute to the utilisation of surplus food in the most dignified way possible. The next chapter dives deeper into these issues.

* With a few exceptions in smaller scale

** Except from Lidl in some cases

*** For example, some of the City Mission's local units run internal companies, a model that generates internal profit while also being subject to donations, corporate sponsorships and gifts from the public.



Food Assistance or Food Hindrance?

This section makes an effort to summarise the ethical dilemmas raised in the interviews conducted. The discussion does not claim to provide truths or to speak for "all" food banks, but aims to highlight the type of problems that arise at the intersection of civil society and public responsibility for vulnerable people, as well as at the intersection of food companies' and civil society's interest in the issue of avoidable food waste.

A Long Story

Civil society has a long history of providing support and food to people affected by societal challenges. Bread distribution in churches, the Salvation Army's cooking pot and shelters with meal services are just a few examples of the assistance that civil society has continued to practise in parallel with the social welfare construction of what is commonly referred to as "folkhemmet". During the 20th century, the government wanted to modernise Sweden through political reforms. In 1956, the Social Assistance Act was introduced, which was replaced in 1979 by the Social Services Act.³³ The reforms, which were based on criticism of organised assistance to poor families, ran the risk of cementing subordination rather than offering a social alternative. However, the development of the welfare model came to halt during the economic crisis of the 1990s.³⁴

Over the last twenty years, several so-called crises have followed one another. A growing number of sources testify that groups previously covered by a social safety net are now being left out.^{2,26} Others have emphasised that the social safety net never had the ambition to include everyone.³⁵ The logic of supply and demand has given civil society a stronger position in the surplus food redistribution market. Some people lack resources, and food companies have a surplus of resources. Several researchers describe that "this trend towards the diffusion of responsibility for the most vulnerable, generates and encourages a welfare pluralism where social work is carried out in different sectors, and where civil society activities are supported politically, both directly and indirectly."³⁶

The Responsibility of Civil Society?

Today, 86% of the Church of Sweden parishes are involved in some form of food assistance.³⁷ A large proportion of these have redistribution activities, but many also distribute gift vouchers or help by purchasing food bags on behalf of the church. An overall majority of the interviewees describe a concern about the societal development that underlies the need, not least from an organisational perspective. One issue that researcher Elinn Leo Sandberg also highlights is that of the role and meaning of diakonia. Should the diaconate respond to the need for support through occasional handouts, or should it devote itself to fighting the root causes of injustice? A deacon in central Sweden sums up the feeling as follows:

"I don't think the church should do food assistance. Politicians must do something about the growing poverty. It's not the role of the church anymore. But at the same time, I could never deny someone food if I can help."

Elsewhere in Sweden, a deacon whose workplace is in the start-up phase of redistributing surplus food expresses:

"We want to focus on helping people get back on their feet, not on putting out fires through emergency food assistance. I think we need to do two things at the same time. Helping people in the here and now, but also perform prophetic diakonia together with you."

Several food banks reiterate the importance of conducting prophetic diakonia* in parallel with the emergency support efforts. Many describe that they do not really want to do food assistance, but they have to, because people they meet have nowhere else to turn. At a larger food bank in central Sweden, churches have established a diaconal centre that provides food assistance to 850 people a week.

"Half of our recipients are Ukrainians. It's the state's fault. The daily allowance of SEK 71 is not enough for anything."

Similar to the recent Poverty Report, many food banks and researchers describe that the bureaucratic process of applying for social assistance (financial support) has now become so challenging that potential beneficiaries are in practice being excluded from their rights.² Moreover, the granting of some type of assistance or temporary residence permit entails a number of time-consuming and to some extent impossible quid pro quos, which in turn entrench the recipient's situation rather than enabling a pathway to a different life.³⁸

As a result, more and more families and single households are turning to surplus food distributions by the civil society for support. The recipients of food are a diverse group, such as people on daily financial allowance support from the The Swedish Migration Agency, people who are denied sickness benefits, people suffering from addiction problems, pensioners and low-paid full-time workers. The latter group is described in research as 'working poor'.³⁹

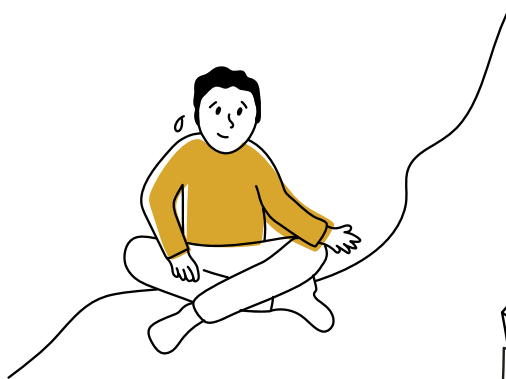


* See word list

Emergency and Active Assistance Work

Concerns about justifying an unequal social structure and the permanent need for food assistance motivate the majority of food banks to help guide people in the social support system. They can meet with the municipality's debt counsellor, get help looking for a job or help with formulating applications for livelihood support and similar bureaucracy. In addition to these kinds of targeted interventions, food banks sometimes offer homework help, youth groups, language cafés and cooking groups. Marie Lundeborg, a deacon at the Church of Sweden in Handen, explains:

"Over the last ten years, food has become an increasingly important issue. The increasing prices of electricity and food in recent years has not been fully compensated for, which means that livelihood support has, in practice, been reduced. In addition, the concept of a sufficient standard of living is interpreted differently today than when the law was first enacted. There is also a group of people who live on very low compensation from the Migration Agency, which is the same level of compensation as in the 1990s. The social services' regulations when applying for financial assistance make it difficult for many people with cognitive difficulties to fulfil all the requirements. We, who work with parish social work, meet some people who have given up along the way, or who feel so questioned that they would rather live below a sufficient subsistence level than seek the assistance to which they would probably be entitled."



Several of them describe that they have good cooperation, which can mean that the municipality provides logistics solutions, rent for premises and to some extent free labour.

Like many others, Kryckan, the organisation where Marie works, finds that the municipality informs people in need about the church's food assistance. A majority of food banks have some kind of collaboration with social services and other parts of the municipality. Several of them describe that they have good cooperation, which can mean that the municipality provides logistics solutions, rent for premises and to some extent free labour. However, this cooperation can give rise to conflicting feelings.

"Of course it's positive that we have a good partnership with the municipality, but at the same time it shouldn't be too good," says a manager at one of Sweden's oldest food assistance organisations.

Like many others, she believes that food poverty is proof that municipalities lack the resources to meet the needs of their residents, and that this problem is made invisible by the many unpaid efforts of civil society.

"The government is injecting billions in support for civil society. And sure, that's good for us. But you wish they could have invested in equipping the parts of society that are actually responsible for changing people's lives for real," says a senior official at another of Sweden's nationwide organisations.

The Last Resort

In an attempt to establish a legitimate order of priority to who is eligible for food assistance, the person in charge of the food distribution often requests some kind of documentation of the applicant's financial situation. The documentation is submitted in combination with an interview where the person is given the opportunity to describe their life situation to a deacon, pastor or operations manager. To become a member of the City Mission's social supermarket 'Matmissionen' or the Hela människan DeLa store, documentation is required in the form of proof of livelihood assistance or equivalent. The requirement for documentation is made partly to ensure that the applicant is really in need, but also with the aim of being able to offer the person targeted support to encourage them to change their life situation. However, feelings about requesting documentation can vary greatly. With the fear of being turned into a gatekeeper, some food banks choose to completely refrain from reporting requirements.

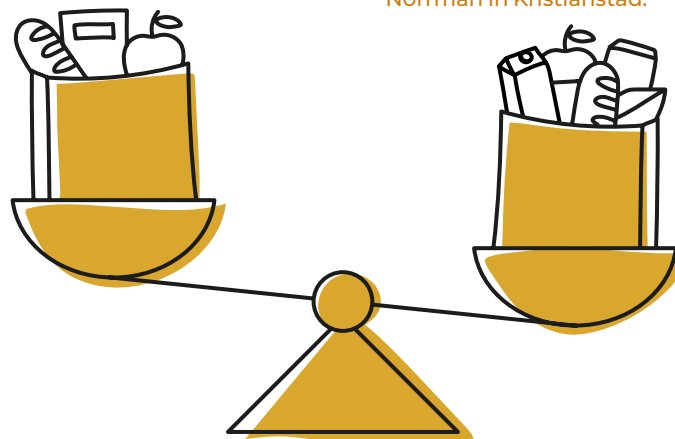
In 'Three Decades of the Social Services Act', Åke Bergmark, professor in social work, describes how the conditions for livelihood assistance have changed over a period of thirty years. When the law was passed in 1979, it was based on a view of the individual as capable of changing his or her situation with the help of financial support and a personal relationship with the caseworker.⁴⁰ As Marcus Herz has shown, today's view of the applicant is characterised by a perception that he or she needs to be activated and/or monitored through various methods. The relationship with the caseworker, who is often not the same person throughout the course of the case, is formal. The Swedish City Missions have also highlighted how social workers have been restricted in their role, from offering support to acting as gatekeepers.⁴¹ The work that food bank managers do when they

request documentation, grant support in the form of food or gift vouchers and maintain continuous contact for follow-up is thus somewhat reminiscent of the vision of the task social workers were intended to fulfil when the Social Services Act was first passed.

The fact that people are more or less explicitly encouraged to turn to civil society for support when public support functions do not work properly, places civil society as a societal last resort. The perception of the responsibility that this puts on the organisations is evident in the interviews. During network meetings, questions like "How do you distribute food fairly?" and "How do you deal with queuing systems when distributing food?" often arises. A majority describe how they are forced to make trade-offs when trying to decide whose needs are greatest, what documentation should be required from the recipient and what conditions the recipients have to handle the food they get. There is also the question of whether the food distributed should be free, or whether a low price creates a sense of dignity for the recipient, who then becomes a customer. The health aspect of the donated food is also a recurring theme.

Shortages of food, staff and logistics mean that volunteers increasingly need to make decisions about whose needs should be prioritised over others. Sometimes these decisions can lead to conflicts and frustration.

"Some Swedes get angry that they always get pork. Conflicts can arise around that. We at Matraddarna have to respect religious freedom and give beef to Muslim families with children, for example. It was easier before the economic crisis, when we got more chicken and game meat. We didn't have to take that position then. Now we prioritise ensuring that children get meat they can eat," says Marcus Norrman in Kristianstad.



Conflicts have also arisen at Matakuten in Gävle during food distribution. Like Matraddarna in Kristianstad, they have started a partnership with a municipal security company.

"They sponsor us with assault alarms that we always keep close. A security guard comes by at every distribution. We took the decision after one of the employees was beaten by a person who was denied a bag of bread. Desperation can be very high and three out of four days a week there is not enough food for the whole queue. Of course it's hard. In the vast majority of cases, people are incredibly grateful and surprised that they are not expected to give anything back - that we simply want to support them", describes Janne Kraft.

The examples above can be described as symptomatic of what the food bank as a last resort evokes. When being denied a bag of bread causes strong feelings of despair, you have probably been denied many other things before.⁴²



The Last Resort in Multiple Ways

Being a last resort affects the food banks' willingness to constantly do more for their visitors.

"It breaks my heart when single mothers with four children break down with joy over some ice cream and sweets for their children's birthday parties. It makes you want to do more and more...", says Marcus Norrman.

But it is not only for people in need that food banks have become a last resort. The food bank is also a last resort for the surplus food that would otherwise have been wasted*. As described earlier in the report, the new waste regulations has motivated more stores to donate surplus food, which has increased the pressure on food banks to collect food more often.

"The idea that we cater to people by helping them is completely wrong. We support people," said an informant who wished to remain anonymous. "On the other hand, we do cater to the stores and food companies. I think that you, who have the power to spread the word, should emphasise this more. I can't express myself freely about my collaborations with the stores, or the food donations for my recipients might be cancelled. This is despite the fact that we cater to the stores by contributing to direct cost reduction and positive development of their finances without receiving a penny for it."

This description summarises a recurring experience at many food banks. Food businesses and store managers generally lack an understanding of the workload involved in redistributing surplus food. This is reflected, for example, in the overall unwillingness to assist organisations financially. While decent food from food companies can be considered a gift, for many organisations the gift is double-edged. While it allows the organisation to help more people and avoids the cost of food they would otherwise have had to buy, it also leads to extra work and additional moral dilemmas to consider.

* This refers to the last resort for the food before it reaches the final consumer. In other words, the last operator to collect the retail surplus.

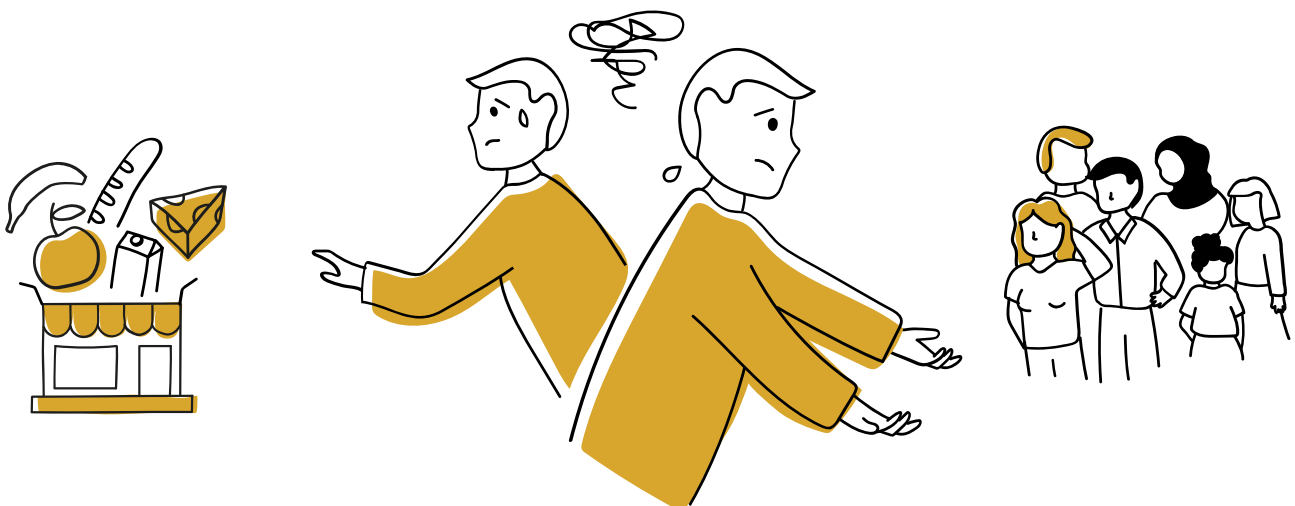
Food Waste - a Win-Win?

Being a last resort for both people and surplus food thus give food banks a deep sense of responsibility for both problems. Because the need is so great among the recipients, they want to save the food from perishing. The desire to do the 'right thing' from both a socially and an ecologically sustainable point of view can sometimes lead to conflicting thoughts. For example, not cooperating with a store in a neighbouring town avoids carbon emissions from driving the car there. However, discarding the food in that same store leads to uneaten food, resulting in food and resource waste. Consequently, food banks often ask questions like:

- Which has more of a negative climate impact, driving to the store, or throwing away food?
- What is more important, meeting people's need for food, or reducing the carbon footprint?
- Should we redistribute unhealthy food?

These questions highlight an important aspect. Responsibility for both surplus food and people in need has been internalised by the redistribution organisations. When organisations are percei-

ved to be failing in this responsibility, it leads to a sense of guilt. This projection of guilt onto themselves for societal problems is remarkable, especially if one looks at where the surplus food comes from or, for that matter, at the instigators of the current societal structures.⁴³ As described earlier, food companies benefit financially from donating surplus food. Moreover, when the food is donated to charities, the result of overproduction is suddenly described as something ethical. This, Herz argues, is a problematic construct that influences food companies to: "increasingly donate food that would otherwise be thrown away. It makes them look good, i.e. gives them a market advantage [...] by showing how they are contributing something good to society".⁴² Like international researchers, Herz argues that the link between surplus food and food poverty is deceptive. It is not a lack of food that leaves people in Sweden without food. People lack basic materials (food, clothing, housing) because of a flawed and unequal welfare system. During an international food bank conference organised by the Kavli Trust in September 2023, this logic prompted a representative from the Norwegian Food Bank to loudly exclaim: "We are not going to be the politicians' pillowcase!"



Philanthropic Fallacy

As written earlier, it is not the lack of food that is the cause of food poverty in Sweden. But food is nevertheless a resource issue and by avoiding some of the costs of food, the recipient can at best buy other necessities. Niina Sundin has studied this, among other things, by conducting a life cycle analysis of donated food.²⁵

From an environmental and climate perspective, however, Sundin's analysis shows that: "The main contributing factor to the overall negative environmental impact [...] was that the studied products replaced other products." As Sundin et al. point out, rescuing surplus food for charitable purposes does not necessarily have an optimal effect in reducing the environmental and climate footprint, as the recipient of the food is actually given the opportunity to consume something "more".²⁵ From a social perspective, it must however be seen as positive that people can get both food and new winter shoes for their children. It is also a clear example of the importance of including social aspects in sustainability analyses. At the same time, this raises the question of whether reducing food waste through donation actually reduces the environmental and climate footprint, something that is often claimed in regards to the relationship between food waste and food poverty. In social research, scholars argue that the idea of a win-win solution creates "...the illusion that everyone can win within existing structures. The illusion makes it easy to overlook the fact that food distribution is not a solution to the problem of people living in food insecurity in the first place."⁴⁴

The illusion of a win-win solution to food waste and food poverty becomes apparent when discussing the long-term social and climate benefits of unproblematized food donations. At first glance, food redistribution to people in need could be considered a circular approach that helps fulfil basic social objectives, while helping to keep resource use within the planet's ecological limits. This would be in line with the doughnut model's principles of fair and climate-friendly social development*. But the question is whether donations of surplus food, in the current system, lead to a double fallacy. In the worst case scenario, redistribution could become a method of 'rescuing' products that are harmful to both the environment and public health and should not be produced in the first place, thereby maintaining rather than challenging an unsustainable system**. If civil society saves tonnes of unhealthy food from being thrown

away, the expense of waste management is taken away from businesses, allowing overproduction to continue. These products are delivered to groups of people already at increased risk of food-related non-communicable diseases.⁴⁵ One of the country's major redistributors of surplus food describes the incentives:

"Firstly, we highlight the financial benefit to the food companies of not having to sort and dispose of the waste. Then we emphasise the charitable aspect. There's no way we'll get food sponsors if we can't offer that marketing. Without charity, everything falls."

The fact that the main interest of profit-driven companies is to make a profit, is not necessarily controversial in itself. What can be problematic, however, is that the model of redistribution and the claim to charity both presuppose poverty. Someone needs to be in need of donated food for the model to work, otherwise food companies' donations would be competing with the grocery stores themselves for potential customers. Although some food retail chains have started to challenge the notion of charity at the store level, for example by donating food to folk high schools and cooperative preschools, arguments about competing business interests are common when organisations such as Solikyl seek partnerships.⁴⁶ Researcher Anna Sofia Salonen has been extensively studying the development of Finnish food banks. She describes how, as a result of the economic crisis in Finland in the 1990s, bread queues run by civil society became a 'permanent solution' to the issue of poverty. Behind this, is the idea that food assistance based on surplus food, turns what otherwise would have been food waste into a resource to help the poor, and thereby the poor become tools to reduce food waste. This is a rather unsustainable idea.⁴⁷

Through extensive partnerships between nationwide organisations and food companies, civil society is placed in a position where they both are expected to, and do offer companies a quick-fix to the surplus problem. This position is described by international researchers as a double bind between the people the organisation intends to help on the one hand, and the need for justification from social actors who dominate the former group on the other*.⁴⁸ This, according to Swedish researchers such as Herz, may in the long run mean that civil society is made a tool for "the interests of donors and institutions rather than for the people they want to help."⁴²

* The doughnut model, developed by economist Kate Raworth, is a model that evaluates economic development in relation to meeting human needs without exceeding the earth's ecological limits (planetary boundaries). <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>

** For further discussion on the production of unhealthy food and its impact on climate and public health, see 'Matbarometern 4.0', 2024.

*** This criticism stems from the fact that organisations that are made dependent on government funding and corporate sponsorship in order to work towards equalising policies may find themselves in conflict with prevailing ideology or profit interests. This may mean that organisations have to compromise or even lose their original objective of working for equality.



People in Movement

However, it is important to emphasise that the theoretical critique of the system raised in this report is certainly present in the ethical discussions of the food banks, but at the same time absent in the actual reality in which they operate. It is, as researcher Anna Sofia Salonen says, "easy to 'look back' to a golden welfare state, but the truth is that it never existed for everyone". In times of Reporting Acts and a civic duty linked to militarism, when income gaps are widening and Sweden is becoming increasingly unequal^{49,28}, one has to ask whether political reforms in favour of equality and anti-racism are realistic. The social responsibility of food banks is undeniable. They welcome global citizens and take responsibility for those left out in the political agenda.

Donated food removes a cost from the organisations and frees up funds that they can use to support their visitors (e.g. through the purchase of complementary food, gift cards or financial assistance). At a national level, The City Missions carries out invaluable work, partly through its direct social initiatives and partly through advocacy work, for example in the form of the Poverty Reports. Sweden has a strong civil society, both at large- and small-scale. At the local level, most of those who redistribute food within small organisations are upper middle aged women. The fact that this work is often invisible can, from an intersectional perspective, be interpreted as permeated by structures such as gender and age. However, this is a discussion that needs to be left aside for the time being. On an individual level, the drive to redistribute food seems to stem from knowledge of food preservation and creativity in cooking, but also from the desire to take care of other people.

"I could never throw food away. Even when we receive nets of oranges, some of which are rotten, I cut off the rotten parts and use the rest to make marmalade," says a housemother in eastern Malmö.

At Hela människan, Öckerö, a 93-year-old lady volunteers.

"This is our most active volunteer," says the manager. "She comes here every breakfast and shakes the visitors' hands. Then she asks how they are doing."

Each story reveals a moral sense of duty that drives people to help, but also a need to be needed.

"I see it as a community effort. You pitch in and help out. Much like during the pandemic. Without us retired nurses, we would never have been able to vaccinate at that rate," describes a 73-year-old volunteer at Hela människan in Jönköping.

Whatever the solution to all these ethical dilemmas will turn out to be, one thing is clear. Organisations that engage in surplus food redistribution, regardless of size or values, create a space of solidarity. A space that, unlike many other contemporary spaces, has the intention to support, not judge. In these organisations, the problems behind people's need for support is not formulated in terms of individual failure, but through the lens of

To start acting as a citizen for citizens, is to move away from 'me', to 'we'.

a hardened social climate. Even though the organisations are scattered across the country without contact or knowledge of each other, this kind of engagement can be seen as a growing movement. By citizens, for citizens. As one of the informants describes it:

"We think it's important to emphasise that everyone has a part to play in the societal development that we want to see. The current development is that we become consumers and the characteristics that are valued are superficial and focused on performance. We must ask ourselves what is important. Look at what the world is like. We humans are, in many ways, a disgusting species that consumes and exploits the earth and each other for completely selfish reasons. Prestige and facade. So much is a scam and fake. To start acting as a citizen for citizens, is to move away from 'me', to 'we'. Every citizen must take responsibility for the person next to them and increase our caring capital."

However, the fact that civil society is creating this space of solidarity does not mean that, in its current state, it can accommodate the needs of neither recipients nor food banks. It is not the responsibility of civil society to ensure that people have food and clothing. Nor should civil society be responsible for the abundance of unnecessary food that harms public health and the environment. But, perhaps the power of a united civil society can enable a more fair development. Perhaps we are now seeing movements for change, where the oppositional behaviour in relation to the state and social institutions should be a central part of the movement.

The Way Forward

There are many challenges to reducing food waste and tackling food poverty. Only time will tell what role food banks will play in the future. Major changes to the current food system are needed, but not in sight. With climate change leading to unpredictable harvests and with the path of rapidly increasing economic disparities that Sweden is following, neither food waste nor the need for food among the growing group of economically vulnerable will disappear. As most contemporary researchers emphasise, and as we at Åtbart agree with, donating surplus food is not a solution to either food poverty or food waste. Therefore, we see it as our duty to be critical of the current system and to investigate and question the increasingly common link that is being drawn where surplus food is seen as an important resource for reducing food poverty, in an alleged win-win relationship.

We therefore want to briefly highlight issues and perspectives that we believe would be relevant to explore further within the intertwined topics of food banks, food waste and food poverty. Both to raise the level of knowledge about these topics, but also to explore changes that could, at least in the short term, reduce food waste in a resource-efficient way and alleviate food poverty. Åtbart sees the following areas as relevant and important to explore further.

The Role of Food Banks

We live in times where topics of crisis preparedness and domestic food supplies are increasingly on the agenda. The current and near-term role of food banks is already a product of several low-intensity societal and welfare crises. Civil society testifies that a large part of Sweden's population is in the midst of a crisis, and our mapping of food banks has shown that there are already organisations across the country providing food assistance to try to alleviate the effects of these crises.

- **The community function of food banks for crisis preparedness.** Many people already struggle economically to buy the food they need, and thus lack the means to have their own home emergency supplies. What role would food banks play in a sudden, acute crisis? Are there synergies and interest from food banks to become strategic food stockpiles?
- **Differences between short-term and permanent food assistance.** How can the ongoing trend of civil society bearing an increasing burden of caring for people living in economic vulnerability be challenged? How is the role of food assistance organisations as short-term support to help people get back on their feet, different from becoming institutions that people depend on for long-term food assistance? What is the role of the municipality?
- **Collecting data and evaluating what kind of food is being redistributed.** We think it is necessary to be critical and attentive to what kind of surplus food that appears in large volumes, and the composition of food products that are redistributed. How do we deal with products that are simply not worth spending resources on redistributing because they tend to have negative health impacts or are undesirable in other ways?
- **Power-critical perspective on the 'win-win'.** How do we avoid that civil society's mission as a challenger of unequal societal structures is exploited by politicians and profit-driven actors? How do we join forces to make common demands for a more equitable distribution of the planetary resources?

New Perspectives to Reduce Food Waste in Retail

The new waste regulations has made it more visible than ever that there is food in circulation that nobody wants, even for free, often because it is an odd product of low value. Moreover, the more processed the products are, the more difficult they become to dispose of. It is also clear that the cost of redistributing food is shifting away from food distributors and falling almost exclusively on food banks, and thus largely on volunteer work.

- **Reduce the number of products on store shelves.** How do consumers really feel about fewer products? What are consumers' expectations regarding the quantity and variety of products in a store? How can grocery retailers influence and drive change to steer store concepts and expectations towards sustainable, healthy and low-waste choices throughout the supply chain? What responsibility do and can stores take to influence consumers to reduce household waste?
- **Broadened perspective on the types of organisations that redistribute surplus food.** How can additional types of non-charitable organisations and associations be involved in redistributing surplus food? How can different actors work together to effectively distribute different types of surplus? Could municipal social services become recipients of surplus food? How do we avoid conflicts regarding competition and procurement rules?
- **Costs of taking care of and redistributing surplus food.** Who should actually pay the price for reducing food waste? What are different ways to enable better financing of food banks?

Food Poverty Cannot Be Tolerated amidst our Abundance

Food poverty in Sweden is not based on a lack of food, but on economic inequality and a lacking welfare system, and is fuelled by an unsustainable and unfair food system. Tackling food poverty with donations will not solve the root problem. Nevertheless, we need to think long-term and simultaneously act in the short-term with solutions to increase the availability of free or heavily discounted food for those in need. It is impossible for us as a collective to accept that thousands of people in Sweden do not have nutritious food to put on the table - amidst the abundance of food available to the majority.

- **Shortened logistics chains and the possibility to access surplus directly in stores.** How can more free or heavily discounted food reach people in need, in a dignified and resource-efficient way? What goods can reach those in need without having to pass through a food bank?
- **Subsidies on basic goods, fruit and vegetables in the form of targeted memberships.** Food price increases hit those with the lowest incomes the hardest - how can this be balanced? Is it possible to introduce discounts (such as student or pensioner discounts) targeted at low-income earners? The Nordic Council of Ministers is proposing to introduce sugar and meat taxes⁵⁰, could, for example, the revenue from these taxes be used for different types of targeted subsidies?

Final words

At a time when surplus food donations to charities are described as part of a good strategy to reduce food waste, perhaps one of the most important questions is: what is and should the role of civil society in relation to fundamental rights, such as food, be in the future? Åtbart sees it as our collective responsibility to act to challenge and change the existing food system. We cannot be content with claiming that we wish our organisation did not have to exist, we must critically examine how we are part of maintaining the current system. Because inequality and the waste of resources is a concern that affects us all. As part of civil society, we are also working to improve the surplus food donations, as a consolation to the situation many people find themselves in right now. However, it is worth emphasising that the more important the role of civil society becomes and the more financial resources it has at its disposal, the more responsibility we have to work together to change the situation of those who are victims of racism, dismantled institutions and widening socioeconomic gaps.

There are many indications that we are in a game-changing phase in relation to food waste. For donated surplus food to be a short-term alleviation of food poverty, we need to demand that it is nutritious and healthy, so that the food actually improves people's lives, and does not contribute to health issues. If donated surplus food is to be a piece of the puzzle in raising social standards, we also need to think more broadly about it than just emergency food assistance and charity. Our aim to be part of reducing food waste in the most resource-efficient way possible, while ensuring to minimise negative social impacts, may be ambitious. But let us conclude with a few words from the Swedish children's book author Astrid Lindgren: "Everything great that has happened in the world, first happened in someone's imagination."

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