The Food Bank Report #2

The Journey of Surplus Food: A Complex Path of Conflicting Goals and Interests

ätbart

Contents

Authors: Julia Berglund & Li Kristjansdottir
Translation: Zuni Vargas Catalan
& Joséphine Lefranq Fröjd
Layout: Sofia Dellve
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Foreword

At the Museum of Gothenburg hangs a colourful painting. It features women and children brandishing rolling pins and ladles in a blind range. They are warring with the long arm of the law, striking out vehemently against the governing forces.The food rations – 200 grams of flour per day, the equivalent of half a loaf of bread – offers no protection against hunger and disease. The police raise their sabres to suppress the uprising. The year is 1917, and the painting portrays the Great Bread Riot in Gothenburg. Calls to action and widespread anger mobilized women across Sweden who left their homes and took to the streets. They protested against soaring food prices, against the "goulash barons" who exported domestically produced meat, and against the meager rations imposed as a consequence of the ongoing world war. They demanded political action, food for their children, and – on several occasions – stormed shops harbouring secret food supplies, paying what they could afford. This was the women's arena, for it was their responsibility to feed their children. Even my great-grandmother Astrid, who along with her own mother and grandmother ran a small grocer's in the district of Masthugget, was forced to close the shop when rising food prices meant that their customers could no longer repay their debts. She found herself marching in the street alongside her former customers.

More than a century later, social vulnerability is once again on the rise within Sweden's borders, and the protest against the unjust distribution of resources may echo the spirit of the bread riots. The criminalization of climate justice activism, the termination of trade unionists, the proposal of the swedish reporting act and the looming threat of revoked residence permits – these are just a few of the many forces silencing social dissent. Unified, large-scale protests are conspicuously absent, even as many raise their voices against deepening inequalities and the exploitation of the very systems that sustain us. Among those calling for systemic change are scholars from both the natural and social sciences as well as journalists and economists. Because unlike in 1917, there is no shortage of food. At least not yet. On the contrary: Sweden throws away 1.3 million tonnes of food annually. Globally, our collective food waste accounts for at least 10% of greenhouse gas emissions and contributes significantly to the looming mass extinction of an estimated one million species. The food system is responsible for roughly 30% of global emissions and is rooted in exploitative resource extraction – an architecture grounded in colonial histories. Millions of lives have been, and continue to be, lost in pursuit of ever-increasing and unequally distributed production. Our dependency on this inequality becomes clear when we insist on maintaining a "business as usual" pace of production. But food waste reveals something more: the outdated idea that the market merely responds to consumer demand simply does not hold up. As this report will show, both primary and secondary consumers are flooded with products that, in reality, no one wants to eat.

Food insecurity and food waste. Never before have these issues been so intimately nor so fundamentally linked. The food industry no longer resembles my great-grandmother's small-scale enterprise. What, in her time, truly constituted "food donations" to those in need, now appear as a Trojan horse: a double-edged gift from the food industry, delivered under the guise of social aid. Food surplus is undergoing a transformation from an alarm bell-indicator of the urgent need for change in the food system, to a commodified good within large-scale, reputably charitable organisations. This evolving economy of charity has well-documented consequences. The social underclass who receive surplus foods are paraded in the food industry's corporate social responsibility (CSR) and social welfare agendas. At the same time, the internal economies of aid organisations expand. Rationing has made a comeback – but now in the form of memberships in social supermarkets. So ultimately, surplus-based rationing applies only to some, but not to others who might need it.

Perhaps this is why we at the food waste organisation Ätbart remain steadfast in our efforts to spark dialogue about this development. With this follow-up report, we hope to encourage further problematization – where social, environmental, and economic sustainability are not viewed as three separate pillars, but as deeply and inextricably interconnected.

Change is possible – it can be both appallingly and astonishingly quick. But it is time to make demands, come together in collective action, and apply a critically informed perspective on power.

Li Kristjansdottir
Executive director Ätbart

Thank you!

This report has been developed through ongoing collaboration and engagement with researchers across various disciplines. We have also maintained valuable dialogue with public authorities, organisations and companies.
We would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Niina Sundin, Mattias Eriksson, Magnus Weber, Elinn Leo Sandberg, Johan Rindevall, Marie-Louise Åsenklint, Karin Fritz, and Adele Wylie. A special thanks goes to Professor Marcus Herz, who generously took the time to review and provide feedback on the report in its entirety prior to publication.

We also wish to express our deep appreciation to all the civil society organisations and grassroots networks that continue to fight for a more sustainable and equitable world. Without your efforts and steadfast commitment, it would have been far more difficult to arrive at the insights necessary for writing this report So thank you FEBA, Reformaten, Mission Matmiljö, Rebellmammorna, Fridays for Future, PUSH, Frisk Mat, Naturskyddsföreningen, Stadsmissionen, Matmissionen, Svenska Kyrkan, Hela Människan, the Red Cross, and many, many more.

Ätbart and The Swedish Food Bank Network

Ätbart is a non-profit organisation founded in 2019 in Skövde. Its initial aim was primarily to reduce food waste, but with growing social inequality, its mission expanded to include redistribution initiatives targeting socially vulnerable groups. This led to the establishment of *Mathjälpen* (E.g. Food Aid) in Skövde, Skara, Mariestad, and Götene. It is no exaggeration to say that the founders of *Mathjälpen* spent fourteen hours a day for several months collecting, sorting, packaging and distributing food. Today, *Mathjälpen* in Skaraborg continues without Ätbart's direct involvement.

Through the work with *Mathjälpen*, Ätbart learned a crucial lesson: there was a complete lack of national support structures and clear information regarding food banks in Sweden. An even more significant realisation was the imbalanced power dynamic between food companies and civil society. While individual food banks often struggle to assert their rights, collective action can strengthen their individual voices. Unlike many other countries where support networks exist to map, represent, and amplify the voices of food banks, Sweden has lacked such infrastructure. Ätbart sought to change this. With funding from the Swedish Postcode Foundation, the Region of Västra Götaland, the Sparbanksstiftelsen Alfa, and the Åhlén Foundation, Ätbart launched the *Swedish Food Bank Network* in March 2023.

As part of the launch, Ätbart initiated a comprehensive mapping of food banks across Sweden. The groundwork and insights from years of operating Mathjälpen proved essential to the rapid development of the *Swedish Food Bank Network*. As of November 2024, Ätbart had identified over 230 confirmed food banks, though there are strong reasons to believe that number will continue to grow. The Swedish Food Bank Network includes both large and small initiatives involved in grocery bag distributions, community meals, social supermarkets, or solidarity fridges. Their common denominator is the redistribution of unsold food to people in need. The mapping process – and the ethical and practical dilemmas it uncovered – led to the publication of "*Food Bank Report #1 by whom and how is surplus food being redistributed in Sweden?*" The report has since been presented at a Nordic food waste conference for public authorities, within the EU working group on food donations, and cited in academic dissertations.

The Swedish Food Bank Network hosts monthly digital meetings for experience-sharing and dialogue, distributes newsletters, gathers national statistics and data, and facilitates new collaborations between organisations and grocery stores. Perhaps the most important task of the network, however, is to listen to the stories of food banks. Sweden's civil society carries part of the climate burden and assumes social responsibility for those left behind. Food banks are the primary witnesses to the societal impacts of the pandemic, austerity measures, inflation, and war. But they are also the foremost witnesses to the food industry's overproduction and waste.

Ätbart is, foremost through the work of the Swedish Food Bank Network, an organisation that examines, challenges, questions, and acts on issues related to food waste, food surplus, donations, and food poverty. As part of civil society, our work is mission-driven – we have no goal other than to help reduce food waste at a systemic level and without negative side effects.

Concept / Definitions

Food bank / food redistribution initiative	An organisation that directly or indirectly redistributes surplus food from food industry actors to recipients. This may include the distribution of food bags, the operation of social supermarkets, or the provision of cooked meals.
Social supermarket	A form of redistribution in which surplus from food companies – otherwise destined to become food waste – is resold in stores operated by charitable organisations. Membership is often required, and the target group is socioeconomically vulnerable individuals.
Food assistance	Food initiatives that take place in civil society, mainly by charities and religious communities. Those in need receive or are allowed to buy heavily discounted food. The food can either be redistributed or purchased.
Redistribution	Refers to surplus or unsold food that is donated to food banks, managed, and then distributed or cooked and served.
Surplus food / Food surplus	Items or meals that remain unsold or uneaten, either in stores or food service settings.
Food waste	Food that is still good to eat but, for various reasons, is not eaten or consumed. Food waste, in other words, is food that is discarded or thrown away entirely without necessity.
Food loss and waste	A condition in which an individual is forced to forgo certain nutritious, healthy, or essential foods due to financial constraints. The concept, derived from the English term food poverty, was introduced in Sweden by researcher Magnus Karlsson and gained wider recognition following its use by Stadsmissionen in the “Fattigdomsrapporten 2019”.[1]
Food environment	Encompasses factors in the physical and social environment that influence our food choices and consumption. These factors affect not only public health but also the environment.[1]
Food insecurity	A condition in which an individual is forced to forgo certain nutritious, healthy, or essential foods due to financial constraints. The concept, derived from the English term food poverty, was introduced in Sweden by researcher Magnus Karlsson and gained wider recognition following its use by Stadsmissionen in the “Fattigdomsrapporten 2019”.[2]
Charity economy	A term used to describe the economic and social dynamics that emerge when charity, philanthropy, and voluntary labor assume a central role in the welfare system. In a charity economy, civil society is partly funded by the private sector and operates as a provider of social support.
Civil society	There are various definitions for the term “civil society”. At Ätbart, we refer specifically to non-profit, non-commercial associations and organisations. Thus, companies are not included in this definition.
Food companies	This is referring to the term ‘livsmedelsföretag’ used in the original Swedish publication of this report. In this report, hence, ‘food companies’ is used to refer to large scale food production companies, or alternatively as a term that groups larger actors within the food industry such as wholesalers and grocery chains. The term is used in a general sense and therefore not every statement made using the term applies to individual actors.

Introduction

Food poverty in Sweden is less about food insecurity (although it does unfortunately exist) and more about the lack of access to a nutritious diet. However, the concept of food poverty has become increasingly established since it was used in Stadsmissionen's Poverty Report 2019[2], and in some respects, it has been interpreted that people are lacking food rather than lacking in equal living conditions. When Lena Andersson argued in an opinion piece that people can afford porridge and legumes despite a vulnerable economy, the debate gained momentum.[3] *She was reminded by one response that a diet based on porridge was precisely the cause of little Anna's death in The Emigrants*[4]*, while others simply called the analysis arrogant. Certainly, Andersson was right in that oatmeal and dried chickpeas are as cheap as many products sold in social supermarkets, but there are, of course, many complex reasons behind our consumption of food, regardless of economic status. A key factor in all our consumption, however, is the power and influence of the food industry over both the primary market (traditional grocery stores) and the secondary market (social supermarkets).

For those interested in food donations, the resource hierarchy is nothing new. All food waste that cannot be prevented should, according to the resource hierarchy, be donated to those in need. In Sweden, this indirect encouragement has partly resulted in more and more grocery stores donating their surplus as part of their sustainability efforts – but there are also other reasons for the increased donations. Primarily, it has become economically profitable. In Sweden, the prioritisation order of the resource hierarchy is used as a recurring argument from various parties to increase food donations. What is often overlooked, however, are health perspectives, as well as sociological perspectives on what kinds of products are donated and the consequences of this. There is also a lack of holistic analyses and research on the relationship between donations and overproduction. In Ätbart's work, it has become clear that there is a tendency for goal and interest conflicts between the ambition to reduce food waste through donations, according to the resource hierarchy, and other goals and strategies regarding consumers' ability to make sustainable and healthy choices.

We would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that this report is based on the premise that the food industry significantly impacts the climate and environment negatively, which must be fundamental to the discussion on the redistribution of surplus food. Our position is similar to that of sociologist Zygmunt Bauman in that any attempt to solve the problems created by modern society must have a global bearing in a global world. This long-term perspective forms an important distinction between Ätbart, which is an environmental organisation with a social focus, and charitable organisations whose primary mission is practical social work. This also means that individual needs for food assistance (which exist to a large extent) are not central to our analysis. Rather, we investigate how the food system facilitates food assistance made up of surplus and what effects this might have from a longer and more holistic sustainability perspective.

This report takes its starting point in conflicts of goals, economic interests, and consequences when donations of surplus food become a growing system and a market. The report includes interviews with key stakeholders, summarised research on food waste and food assistance, and testimonies from consumers in social supermarkets. Ätbart has conducted over 140 startup meetings for food donations to food banks from grocery stores, thus gaining broad insight into how the discourse surrounding food waste-based food assistance is framed between these actors. Ätbart has also visited eight social supermarkets.

* The Emigrants is a canonical Swedish work of literature by author Vilhelm Moberg that was adapted to the screen in 1971. The story follows Swedish people emigrating to the USA in the 1840s and 50s in a time of great famine.

Redistribution of Surplus Foods – Who Foots the Bill?

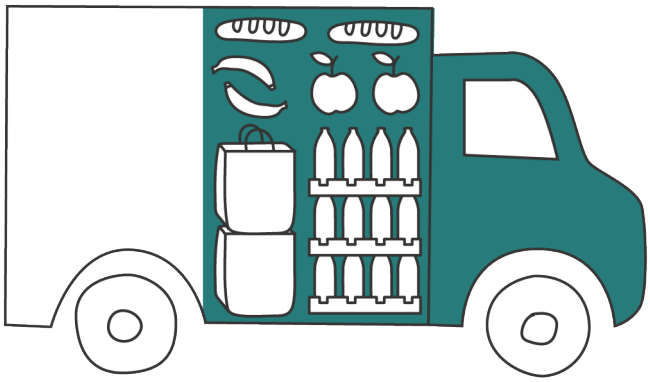
This section examines changes in the development of food donations and how this work is financed by charitable organisations.

The swedish food bank landscape

Most of Sweden's food banks have emerged as local grassroots organisations, often independently of one another – despite frequently being part of larger organisations, such as the Church of Sweden. This largely relates to the Church's organisational structure, which, like many other civil organisations, is highly decentralised, with the local unit being the dominant one.[5] Local religious communities and associations have almost always conducted activities related to various types of food assistance such as communal meals, gift vouchers, or food bags. Recently, the need for food has increased as have the number of requests from grocery stores for organisations to take in and distribute their surplus, and hence, local collaborations have been established across the country. Recipients of the donated food may sometimes be required to pay a symbolic fee for a cooked lunch or a food bag subscription, but according to Ätbart's assessment, they cannot be described as a consumer group in the traditional sense.

Another model for redistribution is social supermarkets. This concept is not exclusive to the Swedish second-hand food market, but according to representatives from FEBA (European Food Bank Association), Sweden stands out in terms of scale.[6] The model is widespread across Europe and has existed since the 1980s. Stadsmissionen (The City Mission) is the charity in Sweden that has most clearly focused on expanding its food distribution activities through social supermarkets. The initiative gained momentum after Axfood began collaborating with Stadsmissionen in 2015 to launch Matmissionen. Like many other organisations, Stadsmissionen has been running various types of food assistance activities since its founding. A clear change has been the significant increase in the proportion of efforts related to food assistance in recent years.

Matmissionen, or the Food Mission in Swedish, is also the primary actor that receives large-scale donations directly from wholesalers and food producers. Smaller food banks, as detailed in our previous report *Food Bank Report #1*, generally receive their donated food from stores.[7] In this way, the food bank landscape in Sweden can almost be described as two distinct systems: one for large-scale donations at a national level, and one for small-scale donations at a local level. This results in significant variation in the conditions, expectations, and execution of surplus food redistribution. Previous estimates produced by Ätbart in collaboration with Stadsmissionen (spring 2024) show that, in terms of weight, Stadsmissionen and Räddningsmissionen account for receiving at least half of the surplus food. Unfortunately, there is not enough data to determine the exact distribution between other actors, as the calculations are based on average figures.



Stadsmissionen and Räddningsmissionen receive at least half of all donated surplus food in Sweden.

The transformation of food assistance

In recent decades, civil society has become an increasingly established provider of social work. Many researchers and organisations have highlighted how basic rights such as food and housing are offered to people through charitable organisations.[8] Researcher Magnus Karlsson describes that the work of Stadsmissionen is "*no longer a complement*" to state and municipal welfare work.[9] In recent years, food assistance has in particular become an increasingly common service provided by charitable organisations. Researcher Elinn Leo Sandberg has worked extensively to map and problematise the relationship between food waste and food poverty in the Swedish context. According to Sandberg's research, 86% of Swedish church congregations were involved in food assistance in 2023[10] and Stadsmissionen reported that 72% of their efforts were focused on food. Ätbart's mapping of food banks shows that at least 300 local organisations across Sweden receive food surplus (food waste) that is redistributed to people in need. It should be emphasised that civil society has a long tradition of providing food assistance, but what is becoming increasingly common is that it is largely based on the food industry's waste.[11]

The reason for the increased demand for food assistance is generally described as a consequence of high inflation, particularly of food, in combination with increased social vulnerability for several groups in Sweden's municipalities. A weakened social safety net, where often people find themselves being continually referred to different authorities. makes it difficult to access the little social welfare support they are entitled to. To read more about the developments and reasons behind the food queues now forming outside of food banks, which include low-income earners, people on welfare support, single parents, people with addiction diseases, the sick, and pensioners, refer to our previous report "Food Bank Report #1: by whom and how is surplus food being redistributed in Sweden?"

Supply and demand

In tandem with the need for food assistance, the demand for waste-reducing initiatives within the food industry has grown significantly. From a market-oriented discourse, the supply, consisting of food waste which, according to the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's latest estimate, amounts to 82,000 tons per year in retail and 305,000 tons per year in the food industry[12], is seen to match the demand for food among people in social vulnerability. In Ätbart's mapping of food banks in Sweden, for example, it is evident that many food banks started redistributing surplus food in 2015–2016. Although many food banks state that they started in response to the needs of Syrian refugees, it is equally clear that they began redistributing because they had been approached by a food store. In 2024, it was estimated that at least 9,500 tons of food surplus is redistributed annually in Sweden.[7]

On January 1, 2024, a new waste regulation was passed. The law, which is currently a somewhat unique interpretation of an EU directive in Sweden, requires that food be separated from its packaging before being discarded.[13] While it was previously often more expensive to donate food than to send it to waste disposal, the requirement for separation has contributed to making it more costly to waste than to donate. This is particularly true for large-scale operations within the food industry for example, wholesalers.[14] DTherefore, this waste regulation has become a strong incentive to increase large-scale donations of surplus food. As described above, it is clear that food is redistributed due to a growing need amongst the population, but also because companies need to reduce their waste. There is food to be had because there is food to give. Moreover, it is important for most food companies that the donated food goes to a traditional charity, as described by an informant in *Food Bank Report #1: "Without the charity argument, everything falls apart."*.[7]

The researcher Marcus Herz (and others with him) has described the charity requirement as an opportunity for companies to look good from a social perspective. Large-scale collaborations with the food industry have, according to Stadsmissionen and the Church of Sweden, resulted in other social initiatives being reduced or having to be deprioritised in favour of food assistance initiatives.[15] Research within social work shows that the organisations respond differently to this development:

The establishment of the new type of food assistance has revealed some fundamental differences between the organisations, and what they do. Simply put, our empirical data suggests that the City Mission (Stadsmissionen) has proven to be much more comfortable with the expansion, while the church is more ambivalent.[16]

Food assistance based on surplus – a precarious situation

While food poverty and the need for food assistance are increasing, the food industry is simultaneously working to prevent surplus and food waste, for example with improved digital forecasting tools for procurement. From a food waste perspective, this is a positive development. However, food assistance organisations that are wholly or largely dependent on a constant flow of surplus quickly find themselves caught in the middle. It is a precarious situation both for the charities involved and for the individuals who must rely on the availability of food waste - when the primary interest of the food industry is, and should be, to reduce the volumes of surplus available for donation.
As of writing (March 2025), signals are mixed as to whether the supply of surplus food will continue to increase (as more actors begin donating) or decrease (as the industry's waste-reducing measures begin to take effect). In a conversation with well-known dumpster diver and author Andreas Jakobsson, he expressed skepticism over the idea that grocery stores have truly reduced their waste. He suggests that the incentive to donate may have been strong when the waste regulation came into effect, but that the ambition may have waned as companies realised their waste management was not being monitored.

On the one hand, Matmissionen is expanding rapidly, and according to their 2023 annual report, 90% of the food received by the organisation was redistributed through sales in their social supermarkets.[17] [17] This expansion is partly enabled by an increased inflow of surplus food. More shops have also begun donating, and one retail chain reportedly tripled its donations in 2024 compared to the previous year.

On the other hand, members of the Swedish Food Bank Network report receiving less and less food from shops, and that deliveries from Matmissionen are declining. Matmissionen redistributes part of the surplus food that they receive to other charitable organisations. These collaborations often involve receiving organisations paying up to SEK 100,000 per year in distribution costs (a sum that, in Gothenburg for instance, has doubled from SEK 50,000 annually after Matmissionen adjusted for increased diesel costs). Several independent sources have told Ätbart that the contents of these deliveries have changed in the past year, and that they must now reconsider whether the collaboration is worthwhile or not.

"Now we mostly get condiments, like mayo and white bread. That's not food I can stand for. Matmissionen says they're not getting any real food either. I don't know if waste has gone down or something", describes one food bank that supports five hundred people each week.

Another organisation puts it like this:
"Even Matmissionen doesn't seem to be receiving any food now. I don't know what we're going to do. Soon, we'll have to start purchasing food just to keep supporting people."

Matmissionen's rapid expansion – and the fact that they are opening more shops to reduce the risk of their own surplus – suggests that the supply of surplus is both increasing and decreasing at the same time. What becomes clear, however, is that surplus food cannot be relied upon as a consistent source to ensure support for people experiencing food poverty.

Financing

The social work carried out by charitable organisations has, in various ways, changed as a result of their relationship with the food industry. In addition to the above, work training within social supermarkets should be mentioned. This contributes to financing the redistribution of surplus food at charities such as Stadsmissionen, Räddningsmissionen, and Hela Människan, and means that people in work training are employed to manage food industry surplus. A common task is sorting out food waste from the edible surplus received by the organisation.

"For both trainees and employed staff, quality assurance and sorting of goods is something we do daily with all items donated to us", confirms a store manager at Matmissionen.

Another task involves collecting the donated food. According to Matmissionen's own statistics, donation partnerships result in savings of 1.2 million SEK per 1,000 tonnes annually for food companies.[19] However, this calculation does not take into account the labour costs for separating packaging from food as required by the new waste regulation; it only refers to savings related to waste collection. This means that the actual savings for food companies through donation partnerships likely exceed 1.2 million SEK per 1,000 tonnes.[20] Furthermore, surplus food donated by food companies is no longer subject to VAT, provided the food lacks market value in the traditional marketplace.[21] This clarification of the Swedish Tax Agency's regulations was partly pushed through at the request of Matmissionen, and thus represents yet another financial relief for food companies – while the handling of redistribution is funded through public grants, foundations, and donations from the public via civil society organisations.

The point here is that handling surplus food costs money, and that the charity capable of managing the largest volumes (and therefore likely has the greatest financial capital) is also the most suitable partner for many food companies. Since a significant part of Stadsmissionen's efforts revolve around food assistance, and most of the food received goes to Matmissionen, it can be argued that the costs and tasks related to separating food from packaging, waste management, and resale of surplus food via donation partnerships are shifted from food companies – through civil society – to the state. This is because Stadsmissionen, like many other charities, relies on various forms of government support to carry out its activities. The second group financing social supermarkets are the members themselves, as they pay for the products they purchase. As previously mentioned, this model is heavily criticised by the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA), which argues that food assistance or surplus handling should never be funded by people in need of financial support.

Revenue from sales is reinvested in Matmissionen and enables internal expansion of the chain. There are two main types of payment models for members of social supermarkets. One model implies that members do not pay for the products they take home, but for the service (i.e. the existence of the store). The second model implies that members pay per product (often about 30% of the market value). This variant means the social supermarket can face similar trade-offs as that of a traditional retailer. One example involves collaborations with boycotted food companies. In practice, large-scale partnerships with companies such as Mondelez mean that people fleeing Ukraine are exposed to products in social supermarkets that ordinary consumers have chosen to boycott in Ukraine's name. Other trade-offs concern product range and pricing. A store manager for a national social supermarket chain explains:

"If I don't upsell various types of snacks – which is what we receive the most of – it's simply impossible to run the store at all. Then our members would be left without a store, and we can't prioritise that way, even if I understand it's unsustainable in many ways."

A decade of redistribution

2015
The UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are adopted. Axfood intensifies its food waste efforts through donation partnerships. The social supermarket chain Matmissionen opens. Allwin begins collaboration with Lidl.

2017
The EU releases guidelines for food donations.

2018
The current version of the food waste hierarchy becomes established within the EU.

2021
Stadsmissionen redistributes 2,100 tonnes of food.Stadsmissionen and Räddningsmissionen operate three social supermarkets.

2023
Stadsmissionen redistributes 4,600 tonnes of food annually. 90% of this is resold through Matmissionen and MatRätt, Räddningsmissionen and Stadsmissionen operate 10 social supermarkets.

2023 / 2024
VAT on donated food is abolished.[22] The government allocates and makes permanent funding pot that civil society organisations can apply for through MUCF. * Ätbart maps 300 food banks across Sweden and establishes the Swedish Food Bank Network platform.

2024
A new waste regulation comes into effect.
A new estimate shows that at least 9,500 tonnes of food is redistributed in Sweden annually, of which 3,500 tonnes are handled by smaller food banks. Stadsmissionen, IVL Swedish Environmental Research Institute, Willys and Frigoscandia publish the Handbook for Food Donations.

2025
Matmissionen is expected to operate 22 stores. The organization Hela Människan plans to launch more social supermarkets. Räddningsmissionen operates three social supermarkets.

* This has been granted to several food assistance organisations

In another part of Sweden, a store manager from a different social supermarket chain describes how they "*honestly receive mostly rubbish*" and that they "*personally would prefer to decline it, but it becomes a matter of financial trade-offs*". In a third store (which follows the practices of the same social supermarket chain), 1.5 litres of unusually flavoured soft drink is sold for 3 SEK, despite the price tag indicating a regular price of 21 SEK in conventional shops. The reason for this is that the store sells it at an extra low price to "*avoid creating waste themselves*".

Many social supermarkets operate by providing work training, financed by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (*Försäkringskassan*) and the Swedish Public Employment Service (*Arbetsförmedlingen*). In 2023, 174 people participated in work training within the Matmissionen chain of social supermarkets. Of these, 39 people transitioned to employment. According to the Swedish Public Employment Service, the organiser receives 300 SEK per day per trainee and enhanced work training can be approved for up to one year.[23] According to documents obtained by Ätbart from the Swedish Public Employment Service, a total of 7,089,900 SEK was paid out to Stadsmissionen in organiser compensation during 2023. However, there is no detailed breakdown of how the trainees were distributed across the various activities of Stadsmissionen, though as previously mentioned, 72% of the organisation's work relates to food assistance. In addition to this, Försäkringskassan covers the daily allowance that each trainee is entitled to. This allowance can vary depending on factors such as age and whether the person qualifies for unemployment benefits.[24] For those without such benefits, the daily allowance is 223 SEK. Based on this, Försäkringskassan's expenditure amounts to 4,656,240 SEK for 174 trainees over a six-month period. Having people in work training rather than hiring staff is likely a prerequisite for running a social supermarket, as the cost of wages would otherwise be too high. In this way, it becomes a more profitable model, as salary and employer contributions can be replaced by revenue in the form of organiser compensation.

It is important to emphasise that our intention is not to assess whether it is beneficial or not to participate in work training at a social supermarket. Nor do we take a stance on work training as a concept. The point, once again, is that handling surplus food incurs costs, and more importantly, that someone is performing the task resulting from the food industry's overproduction and the economic system that enables it. In addition to revenues from work training and sales, Stadsmissionen received 91 million SEK in state funding, 242 million SEK in donations from members, 24.7 million SEK in corporate support, and 24 million SEK from the Swedish Postcode Lottery in 2023.[25] This provides further insight into the significant financial resources required to manage surplus food on a large scale. The purpose of presenting Stadsmissionen's income is to illustrate how various public actors are involved in paying for the handling of food industry waste.

The point, once again, is that handling surplus food incurs costs, and more importantly, that someone is performing the task resulting from the food industry's overproduction and the economic system that enables it.

An important point raised during a dialogue with social work researcher Magnus Weber is that the cooperation between social supermarkets and food companies establishes a potential cycle of labour.[26] Through work training within the charity sector, the cost of handling surplus food is partly shifted to the state via civil society. Those who have been trained in retail work at a social supermarket can then be employed by a regular food retail chain. Of course, there is nothing inherently problematic about people gaining employment after their work training – quite the opposite. The risk identified by Ätbart, in consultation with researchers, is that we forget to ask *why* people are expected to undergo work training within civil society rather than in mainstream retail, where the chances of obtaining regular employment may be higher. This question touches on a related issue – namely, why surplus food cannot be resold directly in regular grocery stores, but only through a separate chain for economically vulnerable people. Perhaps it is in the transformation from traditional charity to social supermarket chain (Matmissionen) that the food industry's influence on civil society's efforts becomes most visible. Still, Ätbart emphasises that this model is increasingly being adopted by other charitable organisations in Sweden as well.

Free food waste management?

Within Ätbart's initiative *The Swedish Food Bank Network*, it has become clear that there is an expectation for civil society not only to support residents in need of food, but also to take over the food waste management of grocery retailers — all free of charge. It is not only the retreat of the welfare state that increases pressure on civil society, but also expectations from the food industry. For smaller initiatives run by volunteers, these expectations can be particularly challenging.

One of civil society's well-known challenges, as previously highlighted by Ätbart, is the lack of funding. However, it has become necessary to emphasise the financial differences between small-scale civil society organisations – typically volunteer-run and driven by the principle of proximity – and large, well-established charities with an entirely different flow of funding from member donations, corporate sponsorships, and government support. The differences in financial resources – and thus in the capacity to handle food donations – are significant, and they also bring about shifting expectations from donor companies. Better-resourced recipient organisations can set new standards, which – in the absence of regulations – may make it harder for smaller organisations to demand that food companies cover even minor local costs associated with food waste collection.

"It's great that the chains make it mandatory to donate, but what are they supposed to do if they have no one to donate to? We already collect from six shops – it's impossible for us to squeeze in another one," describes a member organisation based in Stockholm.

Regardless of the type of organisation collecting the food, one of the central questions is: who should cover the costs associated with handling the surplus from the food industry? While donated food, according to multiple reports and studies, provides meaningful short-term relief for people in need, the question of who ought to fund the model – and what should actually be donated – remains unresolved. On the next page, you will find two interviews with different organisations, both of which operate social supermarkets.

The post has been censored, but the content is taken from a real social media post. What becomes clear is that the charity organisation offers food companies both complete waste management – something which, according to the new Waste Ordinance, is illegal (Ätbart has validated this interpretation of the post with an expert from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency) – and publicity in the form of mentions. It is, in part, this waste management that is carried out by individuals in work training programmes.

Interview

Johan Rindevall, Matmissionen

Johan Rindevall is Area Manager at Matmissionen and has led the development of Stockholm Stadsmissionen's social supermarkets since 2015. Johan brings experience from both the retail and grocery sectors as well as the public sector.

Hello Johan Rindevall!
Can you give us a snapshot of how things are going at Matmissionen?

I'd say we're in a strong phase of expansion. We've been around for nine years, but it's really in the past two years that we've gained momentum. We currently operate 12 shops, and if everything goes to plan, we will expand by up to ten more across the country in 2025. To reduce the risk of increased food waste as we grow and take on more partnerships, we ensure that we have facilities in place to handle the donated food and products.

Do you collaborate with all kinds of businesses that produce edible products?

We're open to receiving donations from most who want to contribute to our work, but of course there are exceptions. We make certain judgements when it comes to whether something conflicts with our core values and would benefit from being sold in our shops. If the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, we choose to accept the donation. Naturally, we don't accept products such as weapons, pornography, alcohol, or tobacco.

Can you give an example of a difficult judgement call?

It can be challenging when it involves companies with large surpluses because their products have been boycotted by some consumers. In such cases, we have to weigh that up against the benefit the goods offer our members, who are living in food poverty.

There's been a lot of research highlighting how food companies need to take responsibility for sustainability, particularly regarding the types of products exposed to consumers. For example, it's been proposed that shops should stop promoting unhealthy and unsustainable food. How do you arrange your shops?

We aim to make our shops feel as much like "normal" supermarkets as possible, to help normalise the experience for our members. We place fruit and vegetables by the entrance of the shop and confectionery at the back. We try to keep only a few shelves of sweets and never place candy at the checkout to prompt impulse buys. We encourage people to make good choices by introducing them to products they may not know. For example, many people want to buy yoghurt but aren't familiar with A-fil (a type of Swedish fermented milk). We can then help them discover new products by letting them purchase A-fil outside of their usual spending limit (SEK 300/week). I'm generally proud that a third of what's bought is fruit and veg, though we'd like to offer more protein. Wasting meat protein is particularly egregious – should we really raise animals just for them to become waste?

> It's effective to show companies how they can move up the hierarchy. Companies with a sustainability department that works closely with management are often the ones who understand the benefits of donation best.

But even if bacon or ready-made meatballs were once animals and have a high climate footprint, we know that plant-based proteins and less processed food are better from both an environmental and public health perspective. Isn't there a risk that overproduction of unsustainable products continues?

Civil society represents such a small part of the food system – we're too small to carry the full responsibility for legitimising production practices. That's a structural problem the industry itself must fix. However, we've generally seen that companies working with us tend to become more aware of their food waste and improve their prevention efforts. The waste regulation and its new requirements are one way to make waste more costly, but most companies still have exemptions – we'll have to see what happens.

Exactly – some waste isn't even costly at the moment. For example, crisps and soft drinks have very high profit margins for retailers. But the new waste regulation may increase the cost of waste. Isn't there a risk that civil society becomes a way out for companies looking to avoid waste management costs?

Sometimes you have to dare to say no. We've said yes, even knowing we might end up having to throw away or receive products we don't really want. If you're too "difficult" and say no the first time, the company might not call again. But our perspective is primarily about the vulnerable people we want to support. As a society, we must trust that people in poverty can make good choices and stop trying to politically control this group. Just because you have little money doesn't mean you lack the ability to make the right choices. I do believe people make good decisions – but of course, exposure and marketing have a strong influence. That's why we want to work more actively with health issues in the long run.

How often do you use the EU's waste hierarchy in discussions with businesses to encourage them to donate?

It's effective to show companies how they can move up the hierarchy. Companies with a sustainability department that works closely with management are often the ones who understand the benefits of donation best. Clearer guidance regarding the resource hierarchy would make it easier for us to navigate some situations – for example, if there were stronger incentives for companies to donate food that will be eaten instead of being used for animal feed or biogas. Some countries have introduced tax relief for donations, and that could start with nutritious or high-impact products – like fruit and vegetables rather than crisps.

You collect and partly sort products that would otherwise become waste. You also relieve businesses of labour costs related to sorting, in line with the new waste regulation. Should the food industry compensate you for this work, as a kind of reimbursement for waste management?

I think so. We're not there yet, but we're getting closer. The conversations we're having now wouldn't have been possible three years ago. Since the new waste regulation came into force, companies have become more aware of the costs of waste, and over time I think we'll be able to place more demands. Civil society has collectively been a bit too generous – we want to help as many people as possible. But it costs money to collect food, and if companies paid us, we could use our resources to expand our support for people in need.

> "If you're too "difficult" and say no the first time, the company might not call again."

What does your five-year plan look like?

I'd like to increase the focus on food inspiration and develop ways to measure health in relation to our product offering. That's where we want to go, although it's not our main focus in the next few years. I'd also like to see a new model for funding waste management, and a broader debate on food poverty. When I read the 2025 national budget, it's clear that the situation for the people we support at Matmissionen will only worsen. And while my ambition is that we eventually won't need to exist – I just don't see that future coming any time soon.

Interview

Marie-Louise Åsenklint, Hela Människan Norrköping

Marie-Louise Åsenklint is the unit manager at Hela Människan in Norrköping, which has been operating the food redistribution initiative Matbanken since 2019. Marie-Louise is a former pastor in the Equmenia Church and has a background as a teacher and coordinator.

Hello Marie-Louise! Can you give us a snapshot of how things are going for you?

Up until now, we've run Matbanken, where we've collected food from supermarkets and wholesalers. We've cooked meals and handed out food bags. The Salvation Army and the Church of Sweden have been primarily responsible for this work. But after years of conversations, we've come to the conclusion that this is not sustainable and doesn't align with our core values. We want to meet people at eye level. We don't just work to feed people – our aim is to strengthen people's existential wellbeing. And we believe we do that better by allowing people to choose what they receive. We also want people to be involved in shaping the service. The shop will be located in a food desert – there's no restaurant or grocery store nearby. The idea is that local residents will be able to volunteer or participate in work training, so that they, in turn, shape the shop. Volunteers are essential. That's how things get done – we simply can't afford to hire staff.

Why are you choosing to open a DeLa shop?

Partly because we want to change the current situation and help improve conditions for people in Norrköping. We're doing this by collaborating with companies and people in vulnerable situations. We're a non-profit organisation, and our budget basically runs at a deficit every year. Because of this, we can't afford to purchase goods – but if we had the resources, we would happily buy staple items (which are rarely donated as surplus). We also have a vision of a sustainable society, and our approach is to work locally. We want to be part of a local solution to food waste. It's both for economic reasons and because we want to make use of food that would otherwise be discarded. Everyone living in Navesta will be able to shop there, but we'll have a membership system that prioritises those who are most vulnerable. We hope that people working in nearby companies will come to eat and shop with us – and they will need to pay more, since they earn more.

Do you collaborate with all kinds of food businesses?

Along the way, we've had to make some tough decisions and occasionally decline food we can't handle. Large milk containers, for instance, are difficult for us to manage. We hope that the restaurant and DeLa shop will help change that. We're currently discussing what kind of product range we want to have in the shop. We'll say no to goods that don't contribute to existential wellbeing – no tobacco, energy drinks, or items with

The DeLa shop will open here, in Navet Centrum.

lots of sugar or sweeteners. Our shop will be located opposite a school, and we're not going to be the ones selling crisps for three kronor to young people who don't want to eat their school lunch. We might even say no to crisps and soft drinks altogether. But we'll need to continue the conversation about that.

What challenges do you see with this redistribution model?

At present, we have no presence in the residential area where we'll be opening the shop. We'll need to invest a lot of time in building local awareness. We need to identify key individuals so we don't steamroll the people we're coming to support.
We'll also need to work on the inflow of food and broaden our partnerships to include primary producers. We have plenty of them near Norrköping who produce grain, dairy, and meat. We must ensure we can maintain a good flow of quality food into the shop.

Which trade-offs do you find most difficult?

We have to prioritise how we use the shop space. We can't do everything at once – we'll begin with the lunch restaurant and then open the shop.

The biggest cost will be staffing. We need to hire people trained in food handling. It's a complicated area, and we need skilled people who can support us. We need funding – and we don't have it yet.

> The shop will be located in a food desert – there's no restaurant or grocery store nearby. The idea is that local residents will be able to volunteer or participate in work training, so that they, in turn, shape the shop.

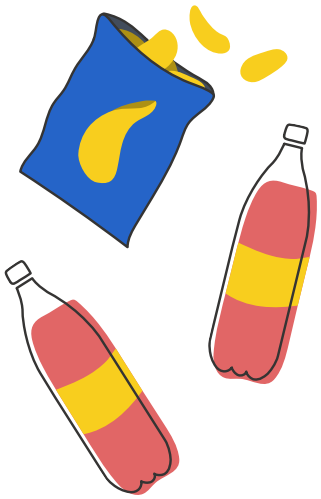
In your view, what distinguishes a social supermarket from a regular supermarket?

To some extent, perhaps we're not exactly a social supermarket, since we also sell to people who aren't experiencing food poverty. But we're trying to create an economic model that benefits those who need it most. We'll be creating jobs, inclusive environments, and a platform for connection. DeLa stands for Diaconal Efficient Food Responsibility. That alone suggests this is more than a social supermarket – and more than a regular shop. This is about taking responsibility for the food that exists and is produced – just as we want to take compassionate responsibility for the people who are going to eat that food.

What's the five-year plan?

I dream of us being able to use food waste that we can't sell or cook to go into our own food production. I want us to be self-sufficient in eggs, by having hens that eat the salad leaves we humans can't eat. I want to create an ecological system owned by those who work and live within it. Our DeLa shop could become a pilot and an inspiration for a model that could spread. Ecological redistribution at a local level that doesn't require large sums of money or big lorries. I want to avoid creating an expectation of gratitude from the people we work with. It's better to give people self-esteem and autonomy – a community to be part of. Those are the things that lead to existential wellbeing. We want to create a context around food, but move away from food as charity. We're called Hela Människan (The Whole Person) because we know that food isn't everything. We don't just offer food – we also encourage people, such as those struggling with addiction, to find strength to change their situation. It's only when you're part of a community and have a context that you can start to deal with your mental health challenges.

Perspectives on Social Supermarkets



Social supermarkets are often described as a more dignified alternative to receiving a food bag. However, there is some critique of the rise of social supermarkets – not directed at the concept itself, but rather at how it is being applied within our market-based economy. In this section, we will highlight some of these perspectives, including risks related to increased exposure to unhealthy products and the failure to challenge unsustainable market norms and the food industry's overproduction.

Availability and range

One question that is rarely raised is what products food donations actually consist of. Nevertheless, this is information that organisations such as Ätbart, the Swedish Cancer Society and the Swedish Food Agency have tried to obtain. Unfortunately, there are no detailed statistics on the types of products donated, but from observations, interviews and collected material, it appears that a significant share of donated food can be described as unsustainable and unhealthy—such as heavily processed sauces, newly sweetened varieties of dairy products, snacks and confectionery. What is available, however, is category-based statistics.[22] For example, it is possible to see that 18.1% of the food donated to Stadsmissionen consists of dairy, but the statistics lack information on nutritional value.[17] This category includes both organic yoghurt and candy-flavoured protein shakes, making the data difficult to interpret. Stadsmissionen's statistics also report a large share of fruit and vegetables, which is very positive from a health perspective and can, to some extent, be described as more sustainable and resource-efficient. However, even this category supports the possibility of unsustainable overproduction, for instance of exotic fruits flown to Sweden by air. It is also a category in which farmers operate in an economic system that requires large-scale agriculture—yields often achieved through the use of pesticides that deplete biodiversity and expose handlers to major health risks and poor working conditions.

The availability – and thus the range – of goods in social supermarkets is largely governed by what donors are currently willing to give away. As a result, the variation is significant, both per pickup and over time. Researchers Elinn Leo Sandberg, Johan Vamstad and Anna Angelin write:

"The distributed charity predominantly consists of goods discarded by consumers on the primary market as a poverty reduction strategy". [27]

Partnerships with certain food companies, however, result almost exclusively in donations of energy-dense, nutrient-poor products. Examples of such items can be found in donations from companies like Estrella, Cloetta, and Spendrups, which, like other food companies, may market their donations as part of their sustainability work.[28,29,30] But, as seen in the interviews with Betty and Hanna(pages 19–20), these products do not necessarily help reduce poverty, even temporarily, as they should not be consumed as a meal. Or as researchers Saxena and Tornaghi put it:

"So, while SSMs (Social supermarkets) offer affordability which is a vital aspect of food provision, there is a difference between making 'good' food affordable for everyone and selling 'not so good' food at low prices." [31]

Moreover, one is tempted to ask whether the overproduction – or even large-scale production – of crisps or fizzy drinks can ever be considered part of a sustainability strategy. There is currently no research or data on what proportion of redistributed food actually contributes to long-term poverty reduction. But in stores where the product range is entirely dependent on what the market discards, customers cannot expect to be able to purchase goods that can be combined into balanced meals.

"The ability of the SSM model to provide healthy and nutritious food is variable and often limited. So, within the context of health inequalities that already exist within communities, the impact of easy availability of 'cheap' food (especially when it is highly processed and nutrient-deficient) on household diets and consumption patterns and the long run implications for public health are being overlooked.". [31]

The illustration is inspired by a comment heard in a social supermarket.

Should 'everything' be redistributed?

We must reflect on whether everything that is produced ought to be eaten – just because it has been produced. This is often the prevailing approach and in line with the food waste hierarchy. However, if we shift our gaze to other sectors, the approach differs. According to a report from the EAT-Lancet Commission, unhealthy diets pose a greater risk for disease and death than alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and unprotected sex combined. Still, few would argue that all cigarettes should be smoked or all alcohol and drugs consumed just because they exist.

According to a report from the EAT-Lancet Commission, unhealthy diets pose a greater risk for disease and death than alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and unprotected sex combined.

At networking meetings in the Swedish Food Bank Network, as well as in interviews and conversations with organisations redistributing surplus food, discussions often arise about how to handle snacks, sweets, soft drinks and highly processed foods. Some organisations choose to decline them, some want to but are concerned about how that might affect other donations, some accept everything but ration the amounts, and others reason that the responsibility lies with the end recipient.

When we asked Matmissionen how they reason in terms of collaborations with all companies that produce edible goods, they explained the difficulty in declining corporate donations, as doing so might threaten their mission as a social charity. They value good relations with the food industry, as it means more items on the shelves – enabling more people to shop at affordable prices. This could be seen as an example of the negotiation currently taking place between the food industry's ambition to reduce waste and civil society's social efforts.

From observing the social media communication of food charities, yet another important argument for collaborating with "all" companies emerges: the idea that everyone has the right to a little treat – referred to in Sweden as "guldkant".

What is ”food”?

When it comes to reducing food waste, the question of what we actually classify as ”food” becomes highly relevant – and whether this differs from the term ”edible goods”. Snacks, sauces, condiments, and soft drinks are technically classified as ”food products”, but might not be seen as “food” when served on their own. They may, however, be components of food or meals.[33] At present, there are no more nuanced definitions of “food products” and “meals”, nor guidelines on when and how to distinguish between them. As it stands, saving sweets and fizzy drinks still counts as a food waste reduction effort.

The image shows products commonly resold in social supermarkets. *Industrial-sized jugs of taco* sauce may be difficult to sell to individual consumers

The desire to accommodate the food industry can partly be explained by the logic of a growing charity economy. The more food redistributed, the more financial support large charities receive in the form of grants, gifts, and sponsorship. At the same time, as this report shows, donation partnerships provide several benefits for food companies. In addition to the avoided costs of sorting and waste management, Angelin et al. describe how companies associated with food assistance organisations can tick off multiple items on their sustainability agendas:

“Being associated with food aid raises their CSR profile in what today is essential issues for almost any business.” [2]

In this way, producers of unhealthy goods can appear both “environmentally friendly” and “socially sustainable”. As mentioned earlier, food is value-laden. Other examples of this in the Swedish context include the Friday night snack ritual, Saturday sweets, and taco Fridays.[42] Similarly, “guldkant” in the form of crisps, soft drinks and sweets is a constructed concept. This does not mean that a bag of sweets on a Saturday or a taco night on Friday lacks value from a societal perspective. The feeling of joy and togetherness they offer is important and should not be rationalised away for selected groups. On a structural level, however, it is worth comparing the arguments for “guldkant” with the marketing of convenience food.
Matthew Kessler, part-time at SLU Future Foods and coordinator of several food systems podcasts, describes the marketing of ultra-processed fast food:

It may feel very convenient, right? But convenience in itself is weird. For food to feel convenient, what does it mean? There’s no taste like convenience, there’s nothing inherent in food that makes it convenient, the only thing that makes it convenient is the speed of our lifestyle.

If society and our lives were organised to allow more room and freedom beyond simply working to put food on the table, Kessler argues:

We would be able to slow down. The most convenient food would be the one that brought everyone to the table with the most happiness. But convenience these days just means eatable on the go and I just want to point out that the idea of convenience is in itself a product of the food system. There’s nothing natural about it. [34]

Just as Kessler points out, civil society is accommodating a logic shaped by the food industry. On the next page, you’ll find two interviews with social supermarket members who were given space to reflect on, among other things, the concept of “guldkant”.

Interviews

Members of social supermarkets

In order to explore the consumer perspective, Ätbart conducted two in-depth interviews with members of larger social supermarkets, and also spoke to another dozen or so members. The participants volunteered after Ätbart reached out via municipal social services. The aim of the interviews was to explore people's perceptions of the product range. As previously described, the range in social supermarkets can vary greatly – this is one of the fundamental characteristics of food surplus systems. It can also differ depending on how each social supermarket manages various product categories. These interviews aim to amplify perspectives that are rarely heard and to make space for a diversity of voices – even if the sample is clearly too small to draw scientific conclusions from.

Betty, 39, on sick leave

"I've been on sick leave for two years due to a psychotic illness. I'm 39 years old and trained as a nursing assistant. I became a member because I have very little money, quite simply. I knew about social supermarkets because I had applied for a job at one, but I didn't get it. When my financial situation worsened and food prices went up, I remembered that these shops existed."

Why are you a member of a social supermarket?

Because of the cost. Recently, though, I've stopped shopping there. There are no vegetarian products. Hardly any vegetables or beans. If you're lucky, you might find a few old carrots or some sad-looking mushrooms, sometimes tinned chickpeas. Occasionally there's frozen meat, like ready-made meatballs and such, but I want to eat climate-friendly and healthily, so I'm vegetarian.

How do you manage your food needs now that you've stopped shopping at the social supermarket?

I've usually had to shop elsewhere anyway. I always look for discounted items in regular shops – always the cheapest. A friend of mine works at a food warehouse and buys things that are about to be thrown out, the kind of stuff employees can buy. That often means a lot of beans, but no fresh vegetables. Now I've found a monk who distributes free food in public squares. At least he has vegetables – surplus from greengrocers and such.

Describe the product range, in your experience, at the social supermarket you're a member of.

Mostly it's lots of extras. Things you can't live on. The selection of carbohydrates is okay. But other than that, it's mostly fat and sugar. Loads of crisps and sweets. It would be great if [the charity organisation] could say no to some things. Like all those bloody sauces that just sit in the fridge, and all the sweets. I always leave with sweets or crisps I hadn't planned to buy. That's what happens when it's that cheap.

I always leave with sweets or crisps I hadn't planned to buy. That's what happens when it's that cheap.

Sweets and crisps – couldn't they add a little joy to life?

Yes, but there has to be proper cheap food as well. Otherwise, it's not joy – it's just harmful. There's a lot of diabetes and obesity, and those of us who are unwell already have an increased risk. Of course I like a sweet now and then, but not that much. Sometimes it feels like we're being taken advantage of – like it's stuff companies just want to get rid of somehow.

What do you wish social supermarkets would offer?

It would be great if they had more vegetables and fruit – frozen or fresh. I eat soya products too, so more of those would be welcome.

Hanna, 3, on sick leave

"I've been on sick leave for a few months. Before that, I was unemployed. My financial situation has grown steadily more difficult. I found the social supermarket through an advert and immediately knew I wanted to become a member. My food expenses are extremely high [relative to income, author's note], so the supermarket has become an essential way to make ends meet. It makes a big difference to my budget to be able to shop there."

Why are you a member of a social supermarket?

Before I became a member, I spent around 2,000 kronor per month on food. If I buy most of my food at the social supermarket, I can get it down to around 800 kronor. I usually need to buy some extra items elsewhere, but if I really have to, I can cut my costs by a thousand kronor or more each month. That's a lot of money for me – and honestly essential for getting through the month.

What do you usually need to buy elsewhere?

The shop rarely has plain staple ingredients. Sometimes you get lucky – like when they had loads of hot dogs. Then I could eat hot dogs for several days. But things like onions, pasta, meat – I usually need to buy those elsewhere. It's really hard to plan meals in advance since it completely depends on what they've received. So sometimes I have to buy more extras than expected, which makes budgeting difficult.

Can you describe the product range in the social supermarket, based on your experience?

They always have a lot of crisps – that's the only thing you can count on. And taco-related products and bread. I try to avoid processed foods, but there's a lot of that. I like to cook large batches and freeze meals, and make food from scratch, but I don't know how much tortellini I've eaten since I started shopping there. It's very rare to find vegetables, and when you do, they're often in such poor condition you don't want to buy them. Same goes for dairy – they have very odd varieties. If you want standard milk or soured cream, they're not there – just lots of unusual flavours. It's clear these are products other people didn't want. Like a new product line no one else buys – and then we get it. One time they had margarine with a best-before date in June. That's super rare – so I was thrilled. Last time, they had Turkish yoghurt and people grabbed as much as they could. It's obvious people want basic goods and plain flavours.

If you want standard milk or soured cream, they're not there – just lots of unusual flavours.

What do you wish social supermarkets would offer?

I'd like more staples, more vegetables, fewer processed products and crisps. Maybe they could work with farmers to get a surplus from them? I don't usually want to buy crisps and sweets, but I end up doing so anyway. I'm having a party soon, so I'm glad I can offer my friends something – but often it feels like companies are just dumping leftovers. Lately they've had loads of Trocadero Zero Raspberry Jelly flavour. That's got to be some bizarre test product no one wanted – and then we get it. I actually bought some for my party, but only because that's what was available. Another time they had loads of BBQ oil – a whole wall full that no one bought. I thought: "Come on – we can't afford food, why would we need loads of BBQ oil?"

Sweets and crisps – couldn't they add a little joy to life?

Yes, and that's where it gets tricky. On the one hand, it's good that they're there. Sometimes I can't afford crisps in a regular shop when I want to treat my friends. But when 50% of the offering is things you'd only want to treat yourself with on a Friday night, it's too much. They shouldn't remove crisps and sweets entirely, but they should reduce them – and lower the price of the other food. Change the assortment and limit the 'treats'.

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

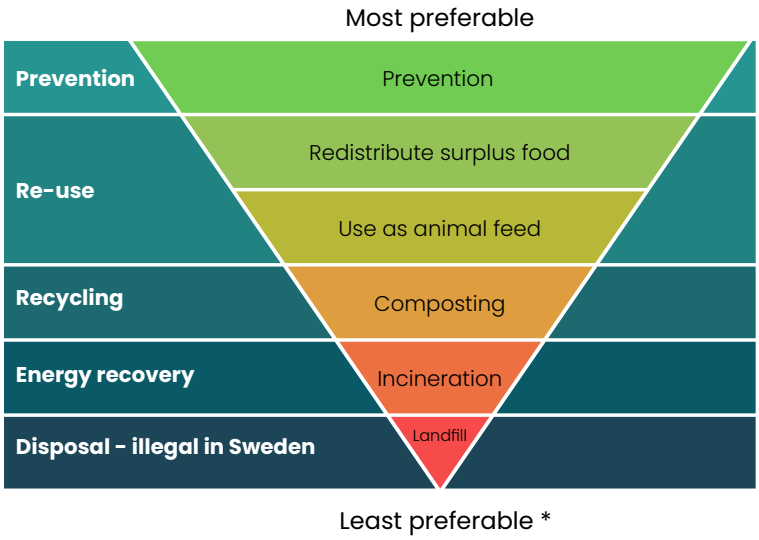
We buy what's available because it's cheap. That's what you see – people walking around with crates of crisps. It feels like something's gone wrong. Like the [charity organisation] means well, but something's off. Now that I've learnt companies save money by donating, I actually feel exploited – like we're being subjected to their products. It's not our fault that we're in this situation. We want to be able to buy normal products too. There needs to be more thought given to what people shopping here actually need. I'm lucky that I can sometimes buy extras elsewhere, but many can't.

Lately they've had loads of Trocadero Zero Raspberry Jelly flavour. That's got to be some bizarre test product no one wanted – and then we get it. I actually bought some for my party, but only because that's what was available.

It feels like something's gone wrong. Like the [charity organisation] means well, but something's off. Now that I've learnt companies save money by donating, I actually feel exploited – like we're being subjected to their products.

The Food Waste Hierarchy

The idea of a waste hierarchy dates back to the 1970s and was formalised in the EU Waste Framework Directive in 2008.[36] The United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) adapted the waste hierarchy to food in the early 2000s[37], and in 2018, the UK-based organisation WRAP launched its own version of a food waste hierarchy.[38] This model has since become widely recognised across Sweden and the EU. The hierarchy is primarily based on preventing food waste and food loss. Where this is not possible, it ranks alternatives for managing surplus, as illustrated in the figure below. Redistribution of surplus food is shown as the second most preferable option for reducing waste.



The European Green Deal & Farm to Fork Strategy

"Den Europeiska gröna given" (The European Green Deal) är en av EU:s satsningar för att sträva mot ett Europa med en cirkulär ekonomi och ren energi.[39] En central del EU:s gröna giv är "jord till bord-strategin". Den syftar till att påskynda omställningen av livsmedelssystemet till att bli rättvist, hälsosamt och miljövänligt. Där understryks bland annat vikten av att belysa länken mellan människors, samhällets och planetens hälsa. Ett av målen är att säkerställa att alla har möjlighet att göra hållbara och hälsosamma matval.[35]

** The food waste hierarchy figure above is the official graphic provided by the Swedish National Food Agency (Livsmedelsverket).*

Reduced Food Waste or Healthy Diets?

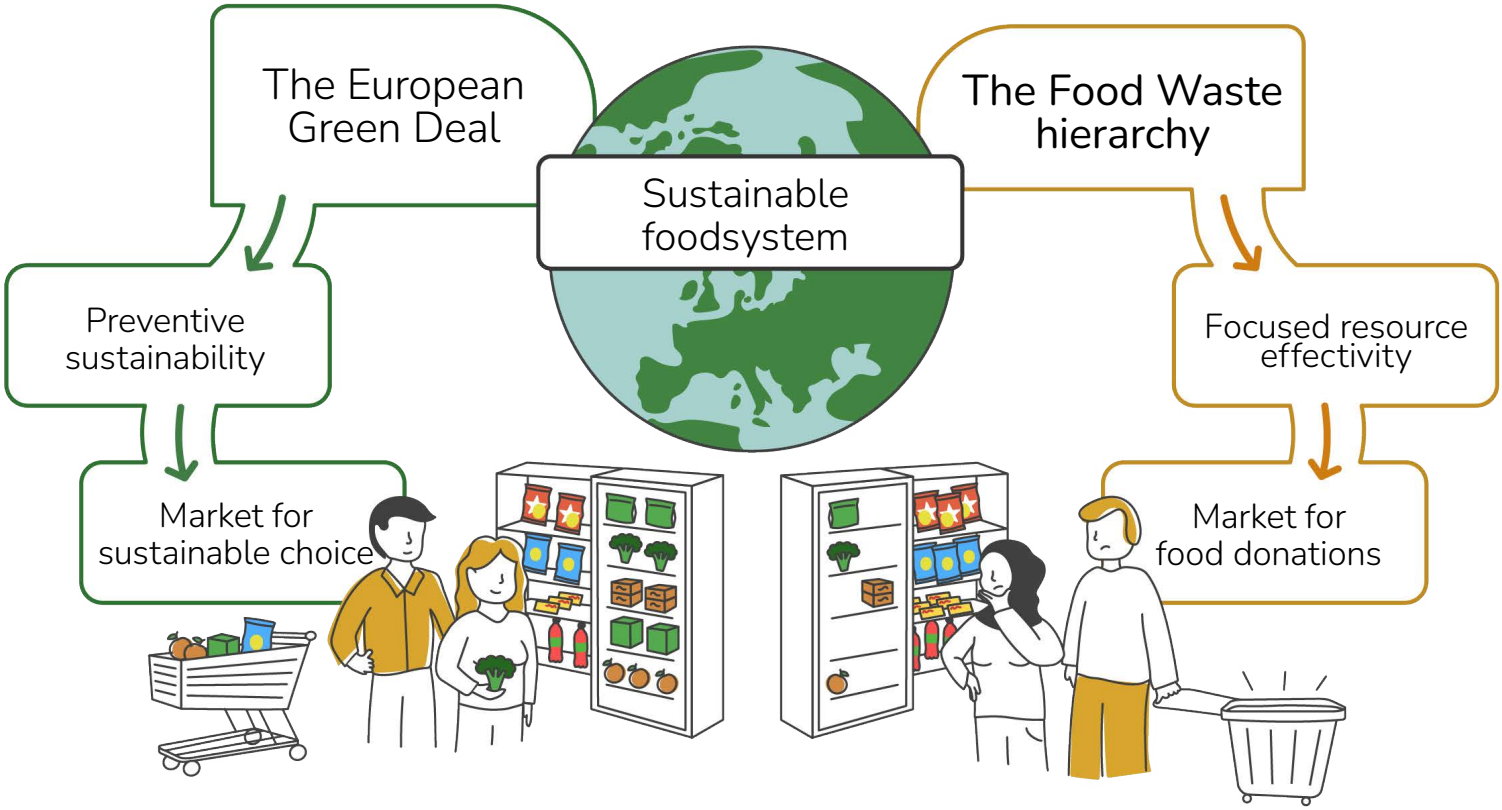
This section aims to unpack how a narrow interpretation of the food waste hierarchy can come into conflict both with efforts to prevent resource waste and with the potential to promote sustainable and healthy dietary habits. We also discuss the various factors that influence our food choices, as well as the responsibilities and roles of food businesses.

Goal conflicts

Several of the Sustainable Development Goals aim to improve the situation of people facing different forms of food-related vulnerability. They also seek to promote more sustainable food production and consumption. Targets such as halving food waste (12.3) and zero hunger (2) are often presented as mutually reinforcing. The food waste hierarchy (see fact box) is commonly used as a guiding principle when designing approaches to reduce food waste. Alongside this, there are broader strategies aimed at transforming the food system at both national and international levels. One example is the EU's Farm to Fork Strategy, a key element of the European Green Deal. It includes goals to enable sustainable choices and support healthier lives and that also benefit our environment and respect the work of primary producers.[35]

According to the principles of the food waste hierarchy, once food has been produced and waste has not been prevented, it should be consumed by someone—regardless of whether it is healthy, palatable, needed, or even wanted by the person eating it. The hierarchy's principles for dealing with surplus food are not inherently problematic or, based on research about resource efficiency, incorrect. However, what requires examination is how these physical principles are interpreted and applied within the framework of market-based mechanisms.

Ätbart has observed a tendency for conflict between the ambition to reduce food waste through donations – as promoted by the food waste hierarchy – and the Farm to Fork Strategy's goal of empowering consumers to make sustainable choices. One risk is the emergence of two parallel markets: one based on surplus, the



other for regular consumers. To validate this observation, we asked two prominent food waste researchers to comment:

"We believe there is a potential conflict between the food waste hierarchy and the Green Deal when it comes to food donations. The hierarchy focuses on reducing waste through reuse, meaning that surplus food that cannot be prevented should preferably be donated. However, health aspects are not considered within this principle [...]

The Green Deal, on the other hand, is a broader strategy aiming to improve the health of people, society, and the planet through sustainable choices. But it includes no specific guidance on food donations and no policy ensures that donated food is nutritious. In practice, this means that the quality of donated food often depends on volunteer efforts and goodwill, and this can result in low-quality products being targeted at certain groups, such as through social supermarkets.

As such, a market-driven tension arises between the hierarchy's aim of reducing waste efficiently and the Green Deal's ambition to promote sustainable, healthy diets. Since the hierarchy encourages food donation as a way to reduce waste, businesses and organisations may rely on donations to manage their surplus rather than work preventively. This can potentially create a market for donated products – often less sustainable – meaning that consumers, particularly those facing economic hardship, gain access to cheaper but potentially less nutritious food. Thus, a tension emerges between the Green Deal's aim to improve consumer health and support sustainable choices, and the food hierarchy's focus on redirecting surplus without considering health. While donations can be economically advantageous for companies, they risk preserving a market in which sustainable and healthy options are not equally prioritised for all consumers."

– Mattias Eriksson and Niina Sundin,
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

As the quotation confirms – and as this report aims to highlight – the drive to reduce food waste contributes to the shaping of a secondary market for surplus food that, for various reasons, is considered unsellable on the traditional market. Ultimately, this means that civil society and, above all, surplus recipients are made part of the mechanism for food waste reduction, even though such surplus may in some cases be described as products that risk contributing to metabolic food waste. The goal of improving the health of all consumers (or citizens) thus becomes increasingly difficult to achieve – particularly from an equity perspective.

> Let's not fool ourselves that boxes of broken biscuits, or mushroom and pecorino tarts at £2.20 a slice, hold any of the answers to feeding the poorest and hungriest in Britain today. [40]
>
> Jack Monroe, 2015
> British journalist on
> the topic of food poverty

Parallel consumer groups

The conflict between the goal of increasing opportunities for sustainable and healthy food choices – highlighted in initiatives such as the EU Green Deal – and the resource hierarchy's emphasis on resource efficiency becomes particularly evident when examining social supermarkets. These outlets offer membership to individuals with limited financial means, and proof of income is typically required. Through membership in a social supermarket, people experiencing socioeconomic hardship become consumers rather than recipients of aid. As Elinn Leo Sandberg notes:

"Increased autonomy and more appropriate support is also a common argument for establishing social supermarkets."

From an environmental and climate perspective, the large-scale model of social supermarkets is perceived as favourable, as it allows for the redistribution of larger volumes of "surplus" food. However, researchers Lopamudra Patnaik Saxena and Chiara Tornaghi emphasise the need to reflect on the discourse around "surplus", pointing out that such foods are in fact rejected and donated due to market norms and expectations placed on consumers and by consumers.[31]

"This reflects a discourse of food 'surplus' positioned as substantially different to food 'waste' and suggesting an inevitability about it (as reflected in the argument that 'there will always be food surplus because the market is unpredictable'), rather than being food which is being 'rejected' by market standards". [31]

The idea of dignity and the right to choose – even in a second-hand food market – is understandable, and the experience of being able to make one's own selections and pay for food is important to many who use these outlets. This may be particularly relevant for people who do not require other forms of social support but who find themselves in a temporary or long-term financially precarious situation. Arguments related to dignity are commonly expressed among those who operate social supermarkets in Sweden. Notably, within the Swedish context of food redistribution, dignity often appears to be closely linked to the ability to identify as a consumer.

At a structural level, however, the rapid growth of large-scale social supermarkets entails certain sustainability risks – not least through their beneficial effects on the profitability of food companies. The implementation of the resource hierarchy appears to shift parts of the market's surplus – or otherwise unwanted products – into social supermarkets, thereby establishing, to some extent, parallel consumer groups. Saxena and Tornaghi describe this phenomenon as a form of dualism: "*good food for the rich, and other food for the poor*", where one group can make sustainable choices on the conventional market, while another is confined to selecting from the market's rejected goods.[31]

However, social supermarkets not only risk creating parallel consumer groups – they also risk excluding some people from the food "secondary market" altogether. Social supermarkets are often located in disadvantaged areas and offer membership to people receiving income support or those in similar financial situations. Typically, membership requires some form of documentation to prove one's economic status. This requirement has been criticised for excluding individuals who cannot meet these criteria. Examples include those whose income is slightly above the eligibility threshold but who may still be in a more vulnerable financial position due to high housing costs or debt. People without residence permits may also struggle to provide formal documentation of their economic situation. Ätbart has also received criticism from parents receiving student loans who, in an attempt to escape precarious work situations, have chosen to study and thus temporarily live on a low income – yet are ineligible for membership in social supermarkets.

“Who” controls our food choices?

Whether you are a consumer with sufficient financial means, able to choose freely between products, or someone with so little money that even basic needs are difficult to meet, a variety of factors influence what food you choose to buy and eat. In discussions of food poverty, it is sometimes argued – much like in Lena Andersson’s well-known porridge opinion piece[3] * – that eating healthily need not be expensive. Dried pulses and grains are typically affordable and widely available. But, as the responses to Andersson’s argument highlighted, our food choices are not determined solely by price, availability, or what we know to be good for our health. Cultural and social norms, knowledge gaps, lack of time and unfamiliarity may all contribute to why even inexpensive, healthy foods are not always chosen in times of economic hardship. One way to understand this is to consider the powerful market forces that subject consumers to constant marketing of cheap, nutrient-poor, and easily accessible products.[41] Since these products are relatively inexpensive to overproduce, they are often found in the secondary food market – donated to social supermarkets or other redistribution initiatives.

According to Ätbart’s experience, people living in food poverty are frequently described as indifferent to the selection or expiry dates of products in social supermarkets.

“People who come to us live in food poverty. They can’t afford to care about such things,” as one representative of an established social supermarket chain put it.

Whilst this is something that we at Ätbrat hear often, it is also a narrative we think is worth questioning given the accounts that have come to light in interviews. This does not mean that people in food poverty should be expected to make better or worse choices for their health, but rather that we must recognise how complex such choices are, given the market conditions they are made within. If, based on research and the reasoning of established scholars, we agree that the general food supply must be transformed to protect human and planetary health[32], then the same should apply to the supply within the secondary market. In fact, the very existence of such a market ought to be critically examined. Since all consumers, regardless of income, tend to consume unsustainably in some way, the food system must be regulated through political instruments and public responsibility. Food historian Richard Tellström, who has long argued that individual eating habits are not easily changed through appeals alone, is worth quoting:

“Unsustainability has been created by people through the agency of the state. It is the state that has allowed for exploitation, extraction, and so on. So the ball is now on the state’s side of the pitch. [The transition] must happen through legislation and lawmaking; it cannot be based on appeals. [...] Politicians are paid to make difficult decisions for the common good, so it’s time they earned their keep. You can’t avoid the issue—if you do, it won’t be solved at all, and the result will be an unliveable environment. The climate itself doesn’t care whether the world collapses; that’s not the climate’s concern. But it is our living environment we’re talking about. And that is the responsibility of politics.” [41]

In line with Tellström’s framing, the issues of food waste and food poverty have, to some extent, “solved themselves” within the current system. The EU’s appeal to reduce food waste and apply the food use hierarchy may be understood as a political plea, but the result has been a questionable model: one that essentially implies that “everything that has been produced must be eaten”, enabling food companies to operate at the second-best level – donation – rather than prioritising prevention. This has consequences for the people at the bottom of the social hierarchy who receive surplus food. What Ätbart wants to highlight is that while making sustainable, healthy choices is already difficult for the average consumer, the possibility to do so in a social supermarket is even more limited. Consequently, the freedom of choice that social supermarkets appear to offer is in fact a highly conditional form of “freedom”, particularly in relation to sustainable consumption. This potentially increases the risk of diet-related illnesses.

* See mention of Lena Andersson’s opinion piece page 7.

Despite having more knowledge than ever before as well as public authorities that continuously inform us about how we should eat for better health, diet-related illness is a growing public health and societal problem. An estimated quarter of the Swedish population dies prematurely due to food-related diseases.[42] At least 20,000 Swedes die each year from food-related causes, and obesity and diabetes are increasing among young people. During the conference Den hållbara maten, biologist and researcher Julia König held a lecture on "The human being as an ecosystem and the role of food in health and well-being". She described, among other things, how the human gut microbiome is affected by the "Western diet". In short, König explained that this diet – shaped by the offerings of the food industry – leads to a decline in the biological diversity within our own bodies.

It is important to underline that this kind of depletion of our internal biodiversity must be understood in the context of the agricultural policy pursued over the past century. Traditional heritage crops and grains have been displaced by imported pulses and high-yield wheat varieties. As SLU researcher Karin Gerhardt puts it:

"Today's modern cereal varieties contain less genetic diversity. […] Breeding has been geared towards uniform grain size, high protein content, high yield, and baking qualities suitable for the bread industry.".[43]

It is worth noting that this high-yield production model – which fundamentally involves favouring certain species at the expense of others – contributes to the well-known problem of bread surplus. So much bread is produced that even food banks struggle to manage the excess. The unhealthy supply described by Betty in the interview on p.19 illustrates that people in need of food assistance are not only more vulnerable to illness, but also disproportionately exposed to an unsustainable food system.

In *Every Bite Is a Thought* (2024), Richard Tellström outlines a widely acknowledged sociological insight: dietary advice and information rarely change individuals' eating habits. This is as true in Sweden as it is internationally – now, as well as in the past.[44] The groups most at risk of overweight, obesity and premature death are those living in socioeconomically vulnerable areas. Regardless of individual differences such as education level, the local context – the food environment – appears to affect how people consume on a group level. Explanations for these regional differences in diet include "food availability, marketing, and social and cultural norms".[45] What influences people's eating habits, then, are practical changes to their food environment.[41] Social supermarkets are often placed in socioeconomically vulnerable areas and are becoming an increasingly accepted method of charity. The question we must ask is what kind of food environment this trend is creating in the long term – especially since this model depends on the offerings and surpluses of the mainstream food industry.

The photo above was taken in a social super-market. The price tag shows that 3 kilograms of Dumle sweets can be purchased for 99 SEK. Next to this, the tag lists the regular retail price – 300 SEK. According to standard sales logic, this signals to the consumer that they will have saved 200 SEK, to which one might react just as one will when buying a discounted item in a regular store. However, the “saving” only applies if the product in question was something the consumer had intended to buy in the first place.]

An employee at a foodbank who recieved the pictured products said: ”You can barely call this food.”

Social norms, food environments and pricing

Diets and eating habits are shaped by social belonging, peer pressure and identity. As argued by the authors of *Why healthy eating is bad for young people's health: identity, belonging and food*, our food choices are influenced by a desire to conform, by the status of food and food retail chains, and by general sensitivity to trends. The young participants in the study agreed that both shopping at a low-status supermarket and buying "uncool" items – such as bananas – could threaten their social status.[46] A current example could be the "carnivore trend"*, which runs counter to the Swedish Food Agency's dietary guidelines encouraging reduced meat consumption and increased intake of legumes. Despite the fact that all research and information points to an urgent need to reduce meat consumption for both human and planetary health, counter-trends emerge that promote the opposite.

One undeniable factor that shapes consumer food choices is price. Price always matters, but it becomes even more important in times of hardship. The Public Health Agency of Sweden's most recent report shows that we tend to eat what is cheap, rather than what is sustainable.[45] The report *Why We Eat the Way We Do*, as well as SLU's podcast *Feeding Your Mind*, both refer to what researchers call "the impossible food triangle". The triangle captures a key issue with the current food system: the difficulty of choosing food that is simultaneously convenient, affordable, and healthy. Most food options fulfil only two of these criteria: they are convenient and healthy but expensive; affordable and convenient but not healthy; or affordable and healthy but not convenient. If we also add "sustainable" to the equation, the challenge becomes even greater in today's foodscape.[33, 41] Looking back at Lena Andersson's argument about porridge, it is not surprising – through the lens of the food triangle – that people with very limited incomes or difficult life situations seek membership in ultra-low-cost retailers like Matmissionen, Maträtt or DeLa.

However, how price influences our food choices is not only about ability to pay, but also about willingness to pay. The former is about our financial situation, while the latter is more about how we value different products. It is not nutritional value that determines our willingness to pay, but rather social norms about what counts as high-status food. One example is oysters, which are associated with the diets of successful people. The status of the product "rubs off" on the consumer, creating a feeling of success and luxury. Similarly, meat has long been a high-status food. A high-status item cannot simply be replaced with a low-status one, even if they have "roughly the same energy content" or if the latter is cheaper.[41]

Likewise, research has shown that different food retail chains carry different levels of social value, which in turn affects social status.[46] This touches on the idea that food inequality might be reduced by offering social supermarkets as an option for people facing socio economic challenges. Regardless of one's attitude towards social food stores as a concept, the fact remains that, despite their ambition to imitate traditional stores (see interview with Rindevall p.12), *they are not*. As members of Matmissionen, one must book a slot to shop, and shopping time is limited to 15 minutes per customer. Purchases are also subject to restrictions on quantities per person. In some respects, membership in a social supermarket resembles the food rationing systems that applied to all consumers in the early twentieth century. To date, there is no published research on the experience of membership in social supermarkets. Nor is there any research exploring the experiences of children growing up in households that access surplus food through these shops. This is, however, something Ätbart is calling for.

* A diet consisting only animalistic products.

The responsibility of the food industry

Against the backdrop of sustainability and health, there are increasing calls for the food industry to take responsibility. The "Farm to Fork" strategy highlights the need for a more sustainable food system. There are examples of supermarkets that have made more sustainable products easier to access, and of food producers developing healthier alternatives. As one proposal to challenge prevailing norms in food retail, the Swedish Consumers' Association has developed a prototype called *Kärnaffären* ("the Core Store"), in which unsustainable products are relegated to the less accessible parts of the shop, while the central core reflects national dietary guidelines.[47] This proposal is in line with the Public Health Agency of Sweden's report *The Importance of the Food Environment for Our Health*:

"Energy-dense and nutrient-poor food is marketed to a greater extent than healthier food. These products are also more commonly discounted in stores than healthier alternatives. Discounts on energy-dense and nutrient-poor food and drink appear to influence our purchasing behaviour more than discounts on healthier items." [45]

That market norms shape our diets is hardly a new or controversial claim – nor is the fact that the market generates enormous amounts of food waste. A first step in reflecting on surplus food donations might therefore be to question what this "surplus" actually is, and why it is not prevented in line with the food waste hierarchy, which prioritises prevention above redistribution. A closer look at how the food system operates reveals that surplus is structural. Researchers argue that surplus exists largely due to stockpiling. Over time, retailers have built up customer expectations to always find a wide variety of products from around the world, available every day of the year. This vast consumer choice has significantly expanded food selection, but it has also reduced predictability in purchasing patterns. Surplus – and the costs it entails (i.e. purchasing, storage, refrigeration, transport and waste management) – is therefore expected and built into final retail prices.[31] In times of skyrocketing food prices, this embedded cost increase becomes particularly sensitive.[48] And since it is not just ordinary consumers who shoulder the price of the surplus (or waste) that is later donated—but also the planet—we need to question how sustainable the donation model really is.

In light of these perspectives, Ätbart argues that it is particularly relevant to examine how the food industry has contributed to the establishment of the secondary market run by the major charitable organisations. However arrogant it may seem to simplify the issue of poverty by pointing to "porridge and pulses", it is a fact that cheap food items are available. The justification for setting up a new low-cost retail chain based on surplus – an initiative launched and maintained in Sweden by the food industry – becomes difficult to defend from both an ecological and a social sustainability perspective. This is not to say that there is no need for more affordable food – or, perhaps more importantly, for more equitable public policy—but it does suggest that the market is operating on the food companies' terms. Put bluntly, the surplus donation model extends the possibility for continued production, even if ordinary consumers – following the "Farm to Fork" strategy – were to choose more sustainable consumption patterns. The Swedish Competition Authority's most recent analysis also shows that both suppliers and grocery chains have made arbitrary price increases, independent of inflation.[49] These increases, along with generally rising food prices, have recently sparked protests and calls for boycotts of the major supermarket chains in Sweden.[50]

This is not to say that there is no need for more affordable food – or, perhaps more importantly, for more equitable public policy—but it does suggest that the market is operating on the food companies' terms.

In short, if food companies genuinely sought to meet low-income consumers' demand for affordable products, several alternatives to surplus food donations to social supermarkets could be imagined. One such idea is to offer targeted memberships in ordinary stores, just as student and pensioner discounts are currently available. When Ätbart raised the question of whether this approach could serve as an alternative in a future where food waste is reduced (and companies can no longer claim to "offset" costs for society's most vulnerable groups), at least two actors responded that they had instead chosen to contribute to the development of Matmissionen.

"I hope they develop their range if it's true that much of it consists of unhealthy products. After all, they are a food retailer like us and need to consider what they're offering their customers", said a representative from one of Sweden's largest supermarket chains.

Challenging the unsustainable food system

When major societal challenges are addressed as isolated issues, they are often met with overly simplified solutions. Such disconnected approaches tend to delay, or even reinforce, existing problems. This section emphasises the importance of analysing climate, health, economy and equity as interlinked components of a broader system – and of understanding the current moment by looking both forwards and backwards in time.

"We should hone our abilities to understand parts, see interconnections, ask 'what-if' questions about possible future behaviors and be creative and courageous about systems redesign." [51]

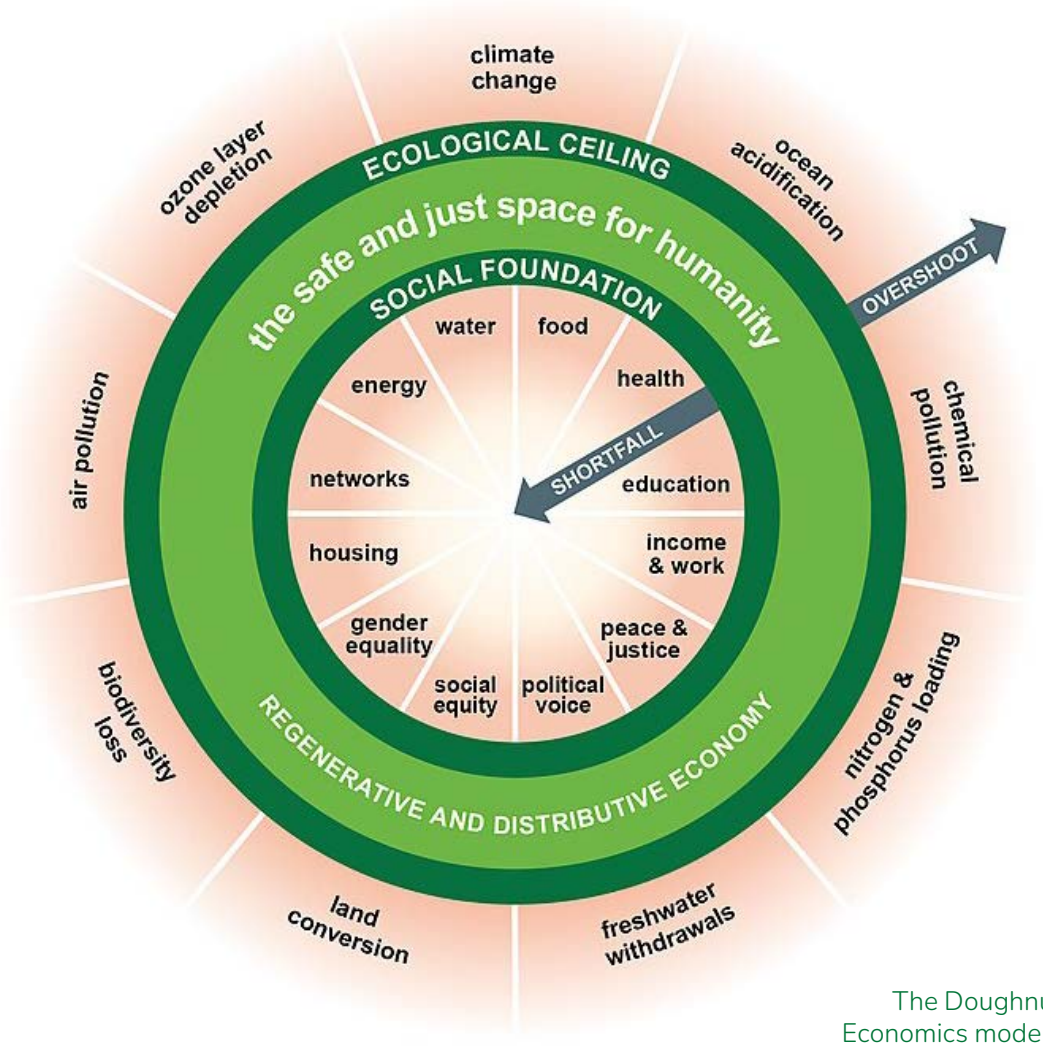
– Donella Meadows, systems thinker and researcher

Limitless growth

In *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*, economist Kate Raworth argues that actions for social, ecological and economic sustainability must be analysed from a holistic perspective. Echoing earlier voices in the field of systems thinking, Raworth contends that any analysis which fails to connect human and planetary boundaries (or social and ecological sustainability) is bound to repeat the very mistakes that brought us here. Social sustainability depends on ecological sustainability – humans are part of ecosystems, not rulers over them. The danger of treating ecological and social sustainability as separate "pillars" is that we end up placing band-aids on individual issues, without seeing how they are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.[52, 53] At the core of Raworth's analysis lies a need to renegotiate the growth paradigm. As long as economic growth remains the overriding goal, we will continue to exceed the planet's limits—without this necessarily leading to a fairer distribution of the earth's resources.

Applied to the context of food donations, Ätbart argues that there is a lack of in-depth analysis of the risk that parallel food markets will emerge and increasingly divergent food environments take shape in the implementation of the food waste hierarchy – in the name of "eating everything up". Put simply, the ability to buy cheap crisps for a party may be positive from a social sustainability perspective, but the overproduction behind them is undeniably destructive from an ecological one. What further complicates the issue is that, if companies do in fact reduce their waste once they become aware of it – as Rindevall and many others suggest – there is a real risk that the social support food has come to provide will be withdrawn. Several members of the Swedish Food Bank Network have reported that visitors who expect food bags or a certain range of products in social supermarkets face significant difficulties when organisations are unable to meet demand—precisely because their corporate partners have become more effective at reducing waste. The narrative of economic sustainability is applied to members of social supermarkets, but arguably it benefits food companies above all.

We need to implement policy interventions that aim for a long-term reduction in overproduction. Natural resources are running dry, and ecosystems vital to human survival are beginning to collapse. Even if the GDP growth curve has no theoretical end – and is, in traditional economic thinking, expected to point endlessly upward – researchers like Dennis and Donella Meadows demonstrated as early as the 1970s that this vision is destined to fail.[54] The dream of growth may be boundless (in every sense of the word), but natural resources are not. Dinosaurs did not go extinct simply because Earth was struck by a meteorite – but because of its impact on their environment. Sunlight was blocked. CO_2 levels in the atmosphere rose. Necessary food sources ceased to grow. In some ways, it seems we are unable – or unwilling – to grasp the fact that similar effects, caused by our own way of life, are now threatening us too.[55]



The Doughnut Economics model is used to measure the economy's performance in relation to how people's needs are met within the limits of the planetary boundaries. The doughnut symbolizes a safe area of operation for social and environmental sustainability. The inner ring consists of a social foundation that, amongst other things, represents the availability of good water, food and health. The outer ring shows the environmental ceiling that illustrates the limits within which we do not surpass the planetary boundaries for, amongst other things, biodiversity loss, air pollution and climate change. The aim is to fulfill the requirements of the societal aspects without surpassing the planetary boundaries in any of the nine environmental categories.

Figure: https://doughnuteconomics.org/about-doughnut-economics

It would, of course, be convenient if one could point to a single culprit and claim that if only this company, or that charity, or those national policymakers behaved differently, the problems would disappear. Sadly, that is not the case. The donation model and its rapid expansion are symptoms of a deeper, systemic failure. This report is an attempt to demonstrate how the logic of the current system tends to reproduce the very problems it seeks to solve through incremental reforms. It is also an attempt to highlight how the food chain, as it is currently structured, inevitably produces losers at both ends. On one end, consumers – who unknowingly pay for the waste margin that companies rely on – and recipients of food donations, whose needs risk becoming permanent. On the other end, farmers and small-scale primary producers – who cannot make a living from their farms, support their families, or resist the pressure to adopt high-yield crops imposed by larger agribusinesses.[31]

Lessons from History

In times of crisis, it is of course crucial to examine how other countries and actors address – or fail to address – the issue of equitable food production and distribution. It is important to develop prototypes for the future, to look to technology, and allow space for both utopian and dystopian visions. But it is just as important – if not more so – to examine one's own national historical successes and failures in this regard. Food prices have surged before, and this too affected heterogeneous groups of people who found themselves in economic hardship. The riots described in the foreword of this report were in part the consequence of the unequal living conditions of the 19th century: the relationship between landowners and the landless; between farmers and agricultural labourers. But they were also the result of political directives. In his work titled The Famine (Svälten in Swedish), historian Magnus Västerbro outlines how people without land or other means of subsistence were viewed – as having only themselves to blame. This logic is familiar. Today, unemployment in Sweden stands at 10.4%.[56] Food prices have risen by 25% since 2022.[57] In February 2025, the government proposed a new ceiling on social welfare, effectively reducing support.[58] In March, it announced that the high-cost protection for medicines would increase by 30%.[59] In April, a proposal was made to allow "deficient lifestyles" to be cited as grounds for revoking residence permits.[60] Meanwhile, the media reports on food distribution by charities and social supermarkets – almost never questioning the role of food policy in the rise of the philanthropy-based economy. The food that has become prohibitively expensive in regular supermarkets comes from the same companies that donate their surplus to charitable food assistance. This is a transaction facilitated by the state. The issue of economic vulnerability is thus "resolved" through market mechanisms, while what remains of the welfare state continues to erode. The expansion of charitable institutions with the intent of helping – and thus receiving subsidies to provide food relief for those with limited means – evokes parallels with Sweden's historical poor relief.[61] What is unique in our time, however, is that such measures may have become politically less contentious due to their purported climate benefits. Yet again, this reflects a flawed systems analysis of the consequences of using food donation as a method.

There are both similarities and differences between the situation in Sweden around the turn of the last century and today's debates and protests over rising food prices. In our time, however, the growing number of "destitute" citizens and small-scale primary producers share much in common. Working-class individuals, those in precarious employment, and those with uncertain residence status are struggling to make ends meet. Farmers, dependent on adapting to the demands of large food corporations while simultaneously drowning in administrative burdens, find it increasingly difficult to make a living.[62] Despite growing research showing the need to transform conventional agriculture[63], despite historical evidence pointing to the importance of planning for domestic food production and distribution in times of crisis or war – very little is being done to enable sustainable farming from a political standpoint. On the contrary, a system that promotes unrestrained growth, inequality, overproduction and waste in many forms continues to be upheld.[64]

A historical retrospective

Sweden's most recent famine (1867–1868) was a tragic result of crop failure, but also of political reforms which saw grain that had previously been stored to protect the poor instead sent for export. There were no emergency reserves to draw on, and the most severely affected were the "vagrants", tenant farmers, and agricultural labourers – groups that were blamed for their own situation.[65] Although various factors – such as mass emigration, better harvests, and increased imports – helped curb the famine, highly unequal living conditions persisted well into the 20th century. During the war years of 1914–1919, food insecurity returned. The working class, both hungry and unemployed as a result of the war, suspected that food retailers and farmers were stockpiling goods while waiting for prices to rise.[44] In some cases, this turned out to be true, and as the foreword notes, the consequence was the outbreak of food riots, as people took to the streets – and into the shops.

But the protests were also directed at politicians who had failed to ensure an equitable distribution of food. During the war, public anger grew over the so-called compensation pork scheme. At the time, Sweden was a major exporter of pork and beef, generating large profits for the so-called goulash barons. To secure food supplies for its own population – especially after the United States and the United Kingdom banned exports to neutral countries – the Social Democrats decreed that 25% (later 75%) of export-destined meat should be redirected to the state-run *Centralsaluhallen* (central food market). Food would then be distributed to low-income households, who could claim it by presenting specific membership cards granting priority access. Public dissatisfaction was swift. Both the Social Democrats and the Farmers' League feared that the Russian Revolution—which had resulted in the confiscation of land—might spread to Sweden. As unemployment rose and more people qualified for the compensation quota, access to food became increasingly difficult for the general population, while producers continued to profit from exports.[61]

Rejected fruits and vegetables

Value and market Value

Ätbart has, with support from food waste researchers, already noted that food donations appear to create conflicts between resource efficiency and the promotion of sustainable and healthy diets. According to the application of the food waste hierarchy, surplus that *cannot* be prevented should be donated. Under current Swedish tax legislation, food that is deemed to be "without value" may be donated without incurring output VAT.[21] But this is where we must pause, for it is in the terminology – this seemingly innocent language – that the logic of the system reveals itself. What waste is considered unavoidable, and according to whose terms? That 40% of carrots in the fields become waste could perhaps be solved by food companies paying full price for them. Instead, we are faced with a situation where farmers, who already receive low returns on Class 1 vegetables, risk pricing themselves out of the market by selling "ugly carrots" (which food companies purchase at a discount, but happily market as climate-smart alternatives).[66] Further questions must also be asked. Do oats that expired yesterday truly lack value, even from a market perspective? Why don't food companies lower storage temperatures from eight to four degrees, when we know that doing so would prolong shelf life?[67] What do we really mean when we say that a product that has been cultivated, harvested, processed, transported, and handled is "worthless"? While we are not economists, we understand that the term refers to the *market value* on products that "otherwise would be waste" must be equal to zero in order to qualify for tax exemption. Beyond the issue of conflating market value with actual value, something else is troubling in this logic. The products clearly do hold market value – on the secondary market for donated surplus food: the social supermarkets. Moreover, we need to consider both national and international social sustainability. In Ätbart's opinion piece "Food waste is a profitable business for food companies" (DN, 27 March 2025), we wrote: *"Examples of food waste that companies claim cannot be prevented include batches of mislabelled products. A grevé cheese cannot be sold with a label that reads 'prästost'. Instead of relabelling the product—something charitable organisations appear to do with ease—it is donated or thrown away. One has to ask why food companies cannot carry out the relabelling themselves."* The answer we received from a senior figure at a food company was: "The staff in our stores are far too busy to have the time."

At present, the management of the food industry's surplus is partly financed through public funds. At the same time, donations of surplus food are tax-exempt, and so too are the revenues of charitable organisations. In this way, the marriage between food companies and charitable organisations becomes intelligible. Through their collaboration on surplus redistribution, a tax-free infrastructure is established – one that is, paradoxically, funded by taxpayers. While welfare-state policies once aimed to lift people out of poverty, public funds are now partly used to sustain a charity-based food

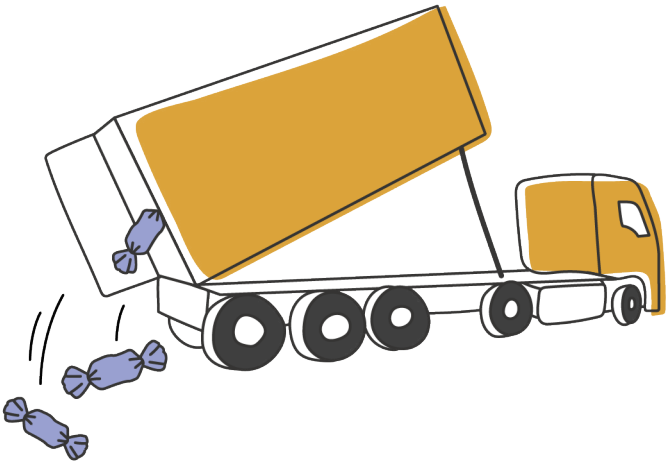
economy. This, alongside other observations we have raised in this report, prompts an uncomfortable question regarding the role of civil society and the risk that it may perpetuate the marginalisation of vulnerable groups. In partnering with the market to combat food poverty, civil society may in fact risk reinforcing it. Research has shown that close partnerships between charities and commercial actors may lead civil society to internalise market logics – affecting both ethical foundations and practical operations. Other examples of the welfare state's transformation in relation to food assistance can be observed, for instance, in Finland.[68] A coordinated effort between business, civil society, and government will likely be essential for the major transition required. But for redistribution of surplus food and/or food waste prevention to be genuinely sustainable, the following questions must be addressed:

1 Can redistribution of surplus food increase resource efficiency from a holistic perspective while also promoting sustainable food production and healthy diets—and if so, how? How can Sweden and the EU ensure that these objectives do not come into conflict?

2 **What financial requirements and policy instruments can be used to increase the food industry's responsibility for waste management, prevention, and equitable production and consumption?**

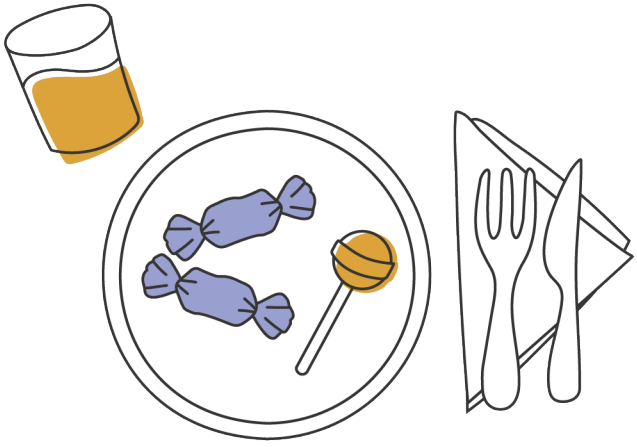
3 **In times when both national and international politicians turn their backs on climate science and equitable food systems, how can small-scale producers of sustainable crops and civil society join forces to secure a fairer future?**

4 **If charities' social work is to be negotiated alongside the sustainability goals of food companies, we must first expose the underlying logic of food waste. New EU legislation may soon mandate reductions in food waste, albeit with lower thresholds than the SDG targets. Should such targets become legally binding, states will be required to ensure robust reporting of waste data. In Norway, a recent proposal would make it compulsory for wholesalers to donate surplus food. A similar solution may soon be proposed in Sweden. As this report has argued, any such measure must be preceded by a comprehensive analysis of how it would affect equality and access to sustainable and healthy food in Sweden.**



The final destination of surplus food

Systems analysis is a complex field, and research on food surplus, donations, and their consequences is nowhere near keeping pace with the changing dynamics of the market. One thing, however, is clear: surplus must go somewhere. Either it ends up in the bin—where, in Sweden, it is typically turned into district heating or biogas, which are highly inefficient uses of the planet's resources – or it ends up in someone's stomach. While the latter may bring joy to the individual, it can, at population level, amount to a public health issue. The whole idea of redistribution – taking from areas of surplus and giving to areas of need – appears to offer a neat solution. Yet here is where things become more complicated. Once we start looking into the "details", such as the nutritional value of the food being donated, the system may prove to be counterproductive. If the food industry churns out a vast surplus of sweets and barbecue sauce which are then donated to charities, this will not compensate for a person's lack of economic means to buy vegetables. The result may be that sugar is simply moved from the bin into a person's body – swapping material waste for metabolic waste. What, then, have we solved – and what new problems have we created?



Conclusion

Researchers have recently warned that half of the world's food production will be under threat from extreme weather, droughts, and floods by 2050.[69] The drivers of this collapse are, as we know, climate change and the loss of biodiversity – areas for which the food system bears major responsibility. A halving of global food production will first and foremost affect countries and populations who have been subject to centuries of colonial oppression, but the scientists stress that no one will remain untouched unless the trajectory is reversed. All citizens will face the consequences of this threat – whether they currently shop in a social supermarket or in a traditional one.

This report has aimed to deepen the understanding of large-scale food donations in Sweden. Its purpose has been to offer a snapshot of the relationship between the food industry and charitable organisations, while also problematising the model from a holistic perspective. The report raises questions about the consequences of negotiating the food industry's market logic and sustainability goals with the social missions of charitable organisations. If Kate Raworth is right in arguing that civil society, the public sector, and the private sector must collaborate to achieve a sustainable and equitable society without exceeding planetary boundaries, then we must also ask: where do we draw the line for the growth logic of the market in its negotiation with civil society?

Our report highlights how food environments, pricing, and corporate marketing strategies strongly influence our eating habits. We also problematise the fact that all consumers in Sweden – who are effectively dependent on the country's four main retailers (ICA, Axfood, Coop, and Lidl) – contribute to corporate overproduction. We do so by paying, often unwittingly, the price margin that enables an oversupply of goods, by purchasing promotional deals, or by consuming surplus food in social supermarkets. We have said it before, and we will say it again: we must place stronger demands on the prevention of food waste. Because, as Hanna says (p. 20), while there appears to be good will to reduce food waste and combat food poverty, something has clearly gone wrong when the overproduction and donation of zero-calorie fizzy drinks and crisps can be reported as part of a company's sustainability work. To claim that resale efforts automatically reduce emissions is to ignore the fact that emissions are not prevented – let alone eliminated – by increasing consumption of food-like products that do not substitute for actual food. Let us also remember there is a word for this kind of claim: Greenwashing.

If the Farm to Fork strategy is intended to help citizens break free from the hegemony, exposure, and exploitation of the current food market, then the social work carried out by civil society should be leading the way – on behalf of the very groups it is meant to support. In a time when we fully agree with Rindevall's assertion that policy is moving in the wrong direction when it comes to equality, this mission becomes even more urgent.

We need radical, not incremental, change. Social supermarkets must do things differently – not copy the ordinary market. If real change is to happen, it is the conventional market that must change its behaviour. That may be asking a lot of civil society, and the response to our critique of our own field is often that responsibility for change lies with policy or industry. But we are firmly convinced that it is precisely civil society that must stand united to drive this transformation. That, at its core, should be civil society's mission – and what sets it apart from the business sector.

No one can define or measure justice, democracy, security, freedom, truth, or love. No one can define or measure any value. But if no one speaks up for them, if systems aren't designed to produce them, if we don't speak about them and point toward their presence or absence, they will cease to exist.

– Donella Meadows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