

## Keeping the baby when we throw out the bathwater: social supermarkets for community development

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*Published in:*  
Community Development Journal

*DOI:*  
[10.1093/cdj/bsab057](https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsab057)

*Publication date:*  
2022

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*  
Stettin, S, Pirie, C & McKendrick, JH 2022, 'Keeping the baby when we throw out the bathwater: social supermarkets for community development: social supermarkets for community development', *Community Development Journal*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 399–403. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsab057>

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## Reflections

# Keeping the baby when we throw out the bathwater: social supermarkets for community development

Sebastian Stettin, Clara Pirie and John H. McKendrick\*

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*‘The voluntary support given to food banks is “rather uplifting” and shows what a compassionate country we are’ (Jacob Rees-Mogg in BBC, 2017)*

### The troubling presence of food banks in a strong economy

It is not difficult to find fault in the sentiments of the then Member of Parliament for North East Somerset. Although opining that the state ‘can’t do everything’, he contended that the proliferation in food bank use was a direct result of more effective practice in the operations of the state, namely that the governing party had allowed Jobcentre Plus to advise people that food banks were available.

Many faults can be found in Rees-Mogg’s contention: food bank use has continued to rise (Trussell Trust, 2021), suggesting that increasing awareness of their existence in 2017 is not the only reason for increased demand; and the suggestion that raising awareness through Job Centre Plus explains increased use seems to lack understanding that many food bank users are already in paid employment (O’Connell *et al.*, 2019) and that access to food banks is often by referral rather than self-presentation. It is also questionable whether we should celebrate food banks: the food provided is not always suitable for users (Simmet *et al.*, 2017); food banks are a crisis solution to what is often an enduring problem; and more fundamentally, concerns are

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expressed by users, scholars and social commentators that food banks are an undignified solution to the problem it seeks to address.

Food insecurity persists in the United Kingdom (Trussell Trust, 2021), despite the United Kingdom being an affluent nation with, for example, the fifth largest gross domestic product in the global economy. As Caraher and Furey (2018) have contended, the juxtaposition of food banks in a strong economy may owe more to ideological, political, and cultural factors, rather than monetary and resource scarcities. Similarly, in sharp contrast to the views of Rees-Mogg, Philip Alston, the then UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights observed that ‘... much of the glue that has held British society together since the Second World War has been deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos’ (UN, 2019, p.1). The very existence of food banks is troubling as they aim to address and alleviate an issue whose existence is contradictory and preventable in the first place.

At the time, it may have been easy to dismiss Rees-Mogg’s views as only those of a rebellious figure within the governing party, whose traditionalist attitudes and often controversial political views provoke irk and ire but are not taken too seriously by the political establishment. However, Rees-Mogg’s political trajectory—and perhaps the mindset he represents—has strengthened in recent years to the point he has been Leader of the House of Commons since 2019.

On the other hand, Rees-Mogg’s opinion was not entirely baseless. As the Trussell Trust notes, millions of hours from tens of thousands of citizens are devoted to mitigating food insecurity through food banks in the United Kingdom every year. The challenge is thus: given the urgency of the problem, can activists, scholars and communities find ways to harness this concern for the wellbeing of others through creative and novel interventions to tackle food insecurity, which overcome the problems associated with a food bank ‘solution’?

## ‘New’ solutions in search of dignity

There are a growing number of pantries and community growing/sharing initiatives that claim to constitute a dignified approach to tackling food insecurity. Social supermarkets belong to this family of alternative and more progressive solutions to food poverty. They are typically not-for-profit social enterprises providing surplus and subsidised food in a supermarket environment. They are often presented as community hubs and sometimes include a café and advice facilities. They are more commonplace in continental European nations and constitute a novel approach to tackling food insecurity in the United Kingdom (Schneider *et al.*, 2015).

Good Food Scotland identified the Threehills neighbourhoods in south-west Glasgow as being one in which there was a need for a new initiative

to tackle food insecurity. Most of the immediate area, and much of the wider area, is among the 20 percent most deprived areas in Scotland, a characteristic that has endured for decades. Access to places to purchase food is not the problem, with 24 supermarkets, 59 take away facilities and 38 convenience stores located nearby.

The objective of the Threehills social supermarket in south-west Glasgow is to provide a sustainable long-term solution to food insecurity through the provision of affordable, nutritious food, offered in a dignified environment and with supplementary services including a café and an advice hub.

## Community visions in south-west Glasgow

We were invited to canvass public opinion to examine the needs, expectations and attitudes of the local community with regards to the Threehills social supermarket. The research comprised an online survey (247 respondents) and semi-structured interviews (17) and was administered in 2021. Steps were taken to ensure that the survey population represented the total population; the survey respondent profile matched the age and deprivation area status profile of the local population.

In Scotland, 9 percent of adults report that they had been worried about running out of food over the past 12 months, a figure that has not changed significantly over the last three years (Scottish Government, 2020). Our research in south-west Glasgow found that 37 percent of local residents worried about running out of food in the last year, including 18 percent of those in full-time work. Moreover, 20 percent of survey respondents in full-time work and 50 percent of respondents without work reported that they ate less food at some point in the last 12 months. Despite this, only 8 percent of survey respondents reported using a food bank in the last 12 months, with many more respondents utilising informal support to access food.

More than three-quarters (79 percent) of survey respondents indicated that *'quite a lot'* of people in their neighbourhood would benefit from using the social supermarket, with another 20 percent stating that it would help *'some'* people. Similarly, three-quarters of respondents indicated that they were at least likely to visit a social supermarket, with only a small minority stating this to be unlikely (5 percent). Although a strong sentiment of community gain prevailed, there was also some uncertainty over who would be entitled to use a social supermarket, with some of those in employment unsure if they were part of the community that was being served.

*'... I'm not sure if I would be entitled to [use the social supermarket] as I work part time'. (Female, 50-59, Working part-time)*

There was also an understanding among residents that *how* the social supermarket operated would be as important as *what* it offered.

*'... [T]hey are going to have to use people to welcome them that are not going to be condescending' (Male, 30-39, Working full time and part time).*

Thus, although social supermarkets have the potential to build confidence among its users, to break patterns of isolation and to ensure a dignified approach to food provision, there are issues to address if all within the community are to feel welcomed and benefit equally from what it has to offer.

### **The necessity of community development in approaches to tackling food insecurity**

Riches (2002) has argued that food aid de-politicises food insecurity, creating the illusion that 'something is being done', which in turn dissipates efforts to address the root causes of food insecurity. Similarly, Garthwaite (2017) has argued that interventions to alleviate food poverty such as food banks fail to address structural and ideological mechanisms that intensify food poverty such as austerity and neoliberalism. Therefore, it can be an unintended consequence of interventions—and in particular novel ones such as social supermarkets that manage to reach wider audiences through their increased accessibility, visibility, and availability—that they inadvertently strengthen the overarching ideological and structural predicaments that have led to their existence in the first place. This highlights the need to incorporate mechanisms to counteract this problem.

Social supermarkets have the potential to overcome the core problems associated with food aid. Simultaneous to addressing food insecurity, they have the potential to create additional social, cultural, and political capital through reaching out to a more expansive and diverse population and by fostering engagement and empowerment. The additional social opportunities that are provided—integral to the concept of a social supermarket—through activities in the community café, could strengthen social relations. This is critical as Glowacki-Dudka *et al.* (2013) point out that while individuals can create social capital for themselves, the ability to influence and confront larger systems of power is constrained without connecting social capital. As such, social supermarkets may also contribute to the enhancement of communities' ability and capacity to confront the root causes of the problem and would do so more effectively than systems of food aid. Moreover, the strengthening of social networks and a heightening of the sense of community could encourage communities to share other resources and respond to adversities beyond food.

Social supermarkets' ethos is grounded in key principles of community development, i.e. facilitating empowerment and supporting economic and personal development. Social supermarkets recognise and support the agentic capacity of people to make informed dietary choices and to challenge

unjust foodscapes. Moreover, social supermarkets arguably are a tangible enactment of an alternative food security system; one that can challenge the prevailing food-aid system that is currently dominated by food banks and the disempowering discourses associated with them. Consequently, and in contrast to food banks, social supermarkets must empower communities to challenge hegemonic discourses surrounding poverty.

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