

Beyond Charity? Insights on the Upcycle Kitchen: A Food Rescue Work Integration Social Enterprise in Guelph, ON

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Abstract

This research investigates a food rescue work integration social enterprise in Guelph, Ontario that upcycles surplus food into value-added products and meals. Charitable food aid organisations are widely criticised as stigmatising and ineffective by food insecurity and food waste scholars. We found that the Upcycle Kitchen's social enterprise approach to food upcycling reduced the stigma associated with feeding rejected food to marginalised people, and the root of food insecurity (income inadequacy) is addressed through a training and employment program. This approach represents a compelling alternative to charity, and might affect waste and hunger policies through public advocacy and education.

Key words

Social enterprise; food rescue; food security; upcycling; Canada

Introduction

This research presents a case study on the Upcycle Kitchen, a food rescue work integration social enterprise (WISE) which employs young adults who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) in Guelph, ON. The goal of this research is to understand and assess the potential of a social enterprise to address food waste and food insecurity in ways that circumvent the shortcomings of charitable food aid. Drawing from qualitative interviews and participant-observation, this case study documents the development of the Upcycle Kitchen's tandem social, environmental, and economic goals.

Context: food waste, food insecurity, and social enterprises

Food waste has reached unprecedented volumes across the globe and especially in industrialised countries. In Canada, it is estimated that up to 58% of food is lost or wasted across the food supply chain (Nikkel et al. 2019), and this has significant environmental and economic consequences (Gooch et al. 2010). Nikkel et al. (2019) estimate that a third of wasted food is still edible and could be redirected for human consumption. This suggestion is not novel: surplus food redistribution is already an ensconced activity through charitable food aid organisations such as food banks.

In Canada, the first food bank was established in the 1980s and was seen at the time to be a win-win: hungry people received free food, and surplus food was diverted from the waste stream (Riches 2018). Meant to be a temporary relief measure, the demand for food banks has grown over time: in March 2019, 1.1 million Canadians accessed food banks (Food Banks Canada 2019), a number reflective of only a fraction of food insecure households across the country. Yet the contemporary charitable model of surplus food redistribution, and food banks specifically, has proven problematic, and more effective approaches are needed.

Many food insecurity scholars are critical of the negative social and political consequences of food banks. In particular, scholars are critical of how food banks fail to address food insecurity, depoliticise hunger, do little to address food waste, foster shallow corporate-charity partnerships and claims to corporate social responsibility, and romanticise the power of local communities to make systemic change - a tenet of neoliberalism (Booth and Whelan 2014; Loopstra and Tarasuk 2012, 2013; Poppendieck 1998; Riches 2018; Tarasuk and Eakin 2003; Warshawsky 2010, 2015, 2016). Despite the legitimisation and institutionalisation of food banks over the decades, research shows that many food insecure people avoid using these types of resources, and that these programs do not address systemic problems at the root of food

insecurity (Booth and Whelan 2014; Cloke, May, and Williams 2017; Mansfield et al. 2015; Miroso et al. 2016; Riches 2018; Tarasuk and Eakin 2003, 2005; Warshawsky 2015). Most food banks lack the financial, logistical and staffing resources to safely store perishable items such as fresh produce, dairy and meat and are therefore unable to provide a balanced macronutrient profile to clients (Kinach, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020; Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2009; Millar, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020). Moreover, the paradigm of feeding ‘leftover’ food to ‘left behind’ people is stigmatising (de Schutter et al. 2019; Millar, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020). Scholars and advocates thus call for alternative interventions to address the root of food insecurity, which in Canada and other affluent countries is a lack of income (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2013; Mansfield et al. 2015; Riches 2018).

In terms of food waste prevention, scholars argue there is little evidence that food banking is a solution to food waste across the food supply chain (Lebersorger and Schneider 2014; Millar, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020; Miroso et al. 2016; Warshawsky 2015). Rather, it is argued that this model allows food retail corporations to advertise their charitable activities while deflecting attention from the root of the issue, which is broadly the capitalist mode of (over)production (Booth and Whelan 2014; Gille 2013; Lindenbaum 2016; Weymes and Davies 2019). Even if food recovery operations become more widespread and efficient over time, Riches (2018) comments that the quantity of food rescued will only ever be a small fraction of total available food surplus. The solutions to waste reduction across the global supply chain is complex, and food banking has proven to do little to ameliorate the problem despite claims to the contrary.

Despite the evidence that the food bank model of food surplus redistribution inappropriately conflates food waste and food insecurity (Kinach, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020;

Millar, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020; Riches 2018), some academics still consider food banking a positive opportunity to reduce waste and feed hungry people (Mousa and Freeland-Graves 2017). Cloke, May, and Williams (2017) argue that despite the valid criticisms of charitable food aid, and in the absence of adequate policy to improve income security, emergency food aid organisations are doing important and meaningful work ‘in the meantime’ by feeding millions of hungry Canadians every month and providing spaces of care and social connection. Indeed, emergency food aid can be a short-term resource for food insecure people (Cloke, May, and Williams 2017; Millar, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020). Moreover, barring a total restructuring of the food supply chain’s management of surplus and waste, Papargyropoulou et al. (2014) posit that redistributing food surplus for human consumption might still reduce the environmental consequences of food waste. While advocates work toward long-term structural change, is there an alternative to the food bank model that can reduce food waste and feed people in more dignified ways ‘in the meantime’? Booth et al. (2018) suggest that food rescue social enterprises are compelling alternative models to charitable food aid because there is potential to enable choice, reduce barriers to access, and redress inequalities.

The funding landscape for non-profit organisations has shifted in the past two decades or so, characterised by dwindling government and private financial support (Hailey and Salway 2016; Medina Munro and Belanger 2016). One strategy for non-profits to achieve financial self-sufficiency is to diversify revenue streams (Carroll and Stater 2009). Over the past few decades, many non-profit organisations across the world have started social enterprises to generate revenue (Hailey and Salway 2016). Social enterprises are businesses that engage some kind of ‘trading activity to generate revenue’ (Powell et al. 2018, 2), where surplus revenue is reinvested to advance social or environmental change rather than the wealth of owners or shareholders.

Another goal of social enterprises can be raising socio-political awareness of marginalised groups, such as those who face barriers to employment (Nyssens 2006). Social enterprises are compelling alternatives to the charity model because they straddle non-profit and business principles while achieving social and economic goals, and these qualities provide unique advantages (Powell et al. 2018). Booth et al. (2018) suggest that social enterprise models have the potential to circumvent uneven power relations endemic to food banks, and might contribute to more dignified recipient-centered services. Weymes and Davies (2019) suggest that food rescue organisations build and contribute to ‘informational flows’ in that engagement with food rescue activities might spark tighter regulation and policy change up the supply chain, an impact that van den Bosch and Rotmans (2008) call ‘scaling up.’ While a social enterprise model holds potential for food rescue initiatives to reduce waste and incur positive social impacts – emerging as an alternative to charitable food aid – scholars including Reynolds, Piantadosi, and Boland (2015) and Weymes and Davies (2019) call for further research.

Work integration social enterprises (WISEs) are a unique category of social enterprises. The objective of a WISE is to support people who are excluded from the labour market by integrating them through training and employment opportunities, such as cleaning, groundskeeping or catering (Cooney 2011; Nyssens 2006). The premise of this model is that economic empowerment and human development will be achieved by expanding people’s access to the labour market (Mendoza and Thelen 2008). Scholars purport that WISEs promote well-being through skills building in a supportive environment. Participants are said to gain self-esteem, social capital, and experience less stigma as a result – all of which are believed to improve overall health (Ho and Chan 2010; Roy et al. 2014). The skills and experience gained

are seen as a steppingstone towards self-sufficiency (Ho and Chan 2010; Krupa, Lagarde, and Carmichael 2003).

Recent literature highlights that social enterprises experience tensions and trade-offs (Siegener, Pinkse, and Panwar 2017). Because their goals span across business and charity sectors, hybrid organisations straddle both organisational forms while also deviating from each form, creating internal and external tensions (Powell et al., 2018). Moreover, there are concerns regarding the long-term effects of the marketisation of non-profit organisations. At the extreme, Eikenberry and Kluver (2004) argue that the marketisation of non-profit organisations, while helpful in the short-term, is a threat to democracy and can erode civil society. The non-profit shift towards market practices can be seen as a form of neoliberal co-option, constraint and depletion of activism in the third sector space (Bondi and Laurie 2005).

Social enterprises in the food sphere are growing in practice, although existing research on them is scant. Food access social enterprise studies include McKay et al. (2018) and Haines et al. (2018)'s Australian studies, Miroso et al.'s (2016) New Zealand study, Hustinx and De Waele's (2015) study in Belgium and Gordon et al.'s (2018) study in Scotland. Case studies on food rescue businesses include Sedlmeier, Rombach, and Bitsch's (2019) research in Germany. Additional research on social enterprises focused on agricultural sustainability include Díaz-Correa and López-Navarro's (2018) case study on an eco-winery in Spain. Notably, existing research focuses on either food access or food rescue social enterprises; we have found no existing studies which investigate a social enterprise at the intersection of both food rescue and food access, although such projects do exist, including Food Shift Kitchen in California and DC Central Kitchen in Washington, D.C.

Materials and methods

The subject of this research is the Upcycle Kitchen in Guelph, Ontario. Guelph is a medium-sized city of approximately 135,000 residents. Regional statistics show that 14% of households experience food insecurity (Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health 2018). The Upcycle Kitchen's parent organisation, The SEED, is a project of the Guelph Community Health Centre (GCHC), a registered charity. Established in 1988, the GCHC is committed to 'working with and meeting the needs of people who may find it hard to access health care' ('About Us,' n.d.). Their priority clients are marginalised groups, such as those in financial poverty, the homeless, and newcomers.

The SEED runs various food access programs and social enterprises throughout Guelph-Wellington County with the goal of building 'a new kind of food system [...] fueled by community and filled with dignity' (The SEED, n.d.). The organisation was established in 2015 through a community-university partnership with the University of Guelph, which found that existing emergency food programs in Guelph-Wellington were unable to provide adequate access to fresh food. The SEED was thus established to operate 'outside of the existing emergency food provision system [and] was viewed as necessary to emphasise the importance of thinking beyond charitable models of emergency food provision and an opportunity to operationalise community food security' (Dodd and Nelson 2020, 9). The SEED's projects and social enterprises include pop-up produce markets (called Community Food Markets), cooking programs, monthly produce box delivery, urban and rural farming, and food distribution to partner organisations and schools.

The researchers on this project were a Masters student and a faculty member who has previously worked on community-engaged projects with The SEED. In this study, we used a community-engaged case study methodology to investigate the Upcycle Kitchen (Nelson and

Dodd 2017; Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire 2003). The purpose of a case study is to two-fold: to test or corroborate existing theory, and to understand how social or spatial phenomena play out in concrete and contemporary ways (Baxter 2016; Yin 2014). Given that the Upcycle Kitchen is a new initiative, this methodology was well suited to this research. When attention is paid to the nuances between concrete reality and abstract theory, case studies have the potential to be generalizable using the “external validity” test (Baxter 2016; Yin 2014). The mixed methods approach involved in this case study served as a form of triangulation: one method corroborated outcomes from the other method, which built a fuller understanding of phenomena at play (Hesse-Biber 2010; Yin 2014).

This case study involved interviews and participant observation, both of which were led by Vander Vennen. We conducted 13 semi-structured interviews (12 in the summer of 2019 and one follow-up interview in February 2020) with 12 research participants. Interview participants included the leadership team of the Upcycle Kitchen and The SEED, student researchers at the University of Guelph who had worked on elements of the Upcycle Kitchen’s development, and a food scientist involved in product development for The SEED. Interview questions focused on the development of the Upcycle Kitchen project, the logistics of the project, and participants’ understandings of the challenges and benefits of the social enterprise model for upcycling recycled food. The interviews were recorded with participant consent, and were uploaded to a “case study database” (Yin, 2014). The interview transcripts were coded using content analysis and thematic analysis of the discourses used by participants, drawing upon descriptive and analytic coding lenses (Cope 2010; Hesse-Biber 2010).

Vander Vennen employed the participant-observation method as a volunteer with The SEED’s Community Food Markets between May 2019 - March 2020. This volunteering included

unloading produce from the truck, setting up tables and displays, and fostering a welcoming environment by preparing free tea and coffee, and warmly greeting customers. Participant observation refers to “strategically placing oneself in situations in which systematic understanding of place are most likely to arise” (Kearns 2005, 196). The benefit of using participant-observation is that it enables a more direct “insider” experience of phenomena at play, the nuances of which can be hard to capture with other methodologies (Laurier 2010; Yin 2014; Kearns 2005). This method can contribute to building ground-up insights and descriptions, which other methodologies also cannot capture as fully (Laurier 2010). All data collection was carried out in compliance with our institutional Research Ethics Board’s protocols.

The initial interviews were conducted at a time when the Upcycle Kitchen was still in development, and this presented an opportunity to understand its development in real-time. The official launch for the Upcycle Kitchen was meant to take place in March 2020; however, that same month the province of Ontario declared a state of emergency due to the spread of COVID-19. The planned launch and growth of the Upcycle Kitchen were therefore disrupted, which means that we have been unable to assess the impacts of this social enterprise in its early stages of operation. This account therefore details the pre-launch prototype activities of the Upcycle Kitchen, including the sale of upcycled products at The SEED’s Community Food Markets and a weekly prepared lunch known as the Upcycle Kitchen Café. Currently, The SEED sells its Upcycle Kitchen products through their “Groceries from The SEED” home delivery service, which was initiated during the COVID pandemic.

Results and Discussion

Overview of the Upcycle Kitchen’s Operations

The SEED's mission is to eradicate food insecurity through making fresh, healthy food more affordable, because access to affordable fresh food 'wasn't occurring through existing channels in Guelph' (SEED Employee 1). The Upcycle Kitchen's primary mission is to improve food insecurity, and the secondary mission is to reduce food waste. The Upcycle Kitchen reduces food waste by rescuing and upcycling surplus food - primarily produce - into high quality products and meals. The rescued produce is still fit for human consumption but may be aesthetically damaged, ugly or overripe. Food waste had been 'something that we want to tackle somehow,' but 'in a less traditional way' (SEED Employee 1) compared to food banking. The Upcycle Kitchen improves food insecurity through a work training program for people facing barriers to the labour market, and by keeping prices affordable. Motivated by the opportunity to reduce food waste, yet uncomfortable with the decades-old narrative of feeding rejected food to marginalised people, the Upcycle Kitchen aims to reduce food waste and improve food insecurity in ways that overcome the stigma associated with food banking.

The Upcycle Kitchen's shelf-stable products ('Transformation Tomato Sauce' and 'Karma Ketchup') are made from upcycled tomatoes, are gluten-free, vegan friendly and have low sugar and sodium content. They also made bread baked from spent grain rescued from local breweries after processing. At the time of this study, the Upcycle Kitchen distributed food through two channels: retail sales of prepared products at The SEED's Community Food Markets and a weekly prepared lunch known as the Upcycle Kitchen Café, which used the Upcycle Kitchen products in their meals and was offered by donation to the public.

SEED Employee 3 estimated that about 80% of the food that comes through the warehouse for The SEED's other projects is purchased, and about 20% is received as donations from wholesalers and retailers. Most of the Upcycle Kitchen's food supply is sourced through

donations, since this addresses the environmental goal to reduce waste and is more cost-effective than purchasing food at market value (Reynolds, Piantadosi, and Boland 2015); however, the labour costs associated with rescuing and processing food can still be significant (Millar, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020). Food donations to the Upcycle Kitchen come from a variety of sources including surplus food from The SEED's other food projects and from outside donors. Although there was said to be a 'steady stream' of food surplus available to the Upcycle Kitchen, it was not always enough quantity for processing large batches of upcycled products. This challenge of small or inconsistent donations was brought up by SEED Employee 1 in a follow-up interview. This is a common struggle for food rescue organisations and highlights a tension in this field: the motivation to reduce food waste is paradoxically reliant on overproduction and an abundance of surplus (Lindberg et al. 2014).

The Upcycle Kitchen seeks to improve food insecurity in two ways: generating income opportunities and offering accessible pricing. The Upcycle Kitchen uses a work integration social enterprise (WISE) model to improve conditions of financial poverty for workers, wherein NEET people (young adults who are not in education, employment or training) who face barriers to the workforce are trained and employed. This demographic can face challenges 'which put them in a position where full-time work is really difficult for them' (SEED Employee 4), and by extension makes them vulnerable to food insecurity (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2013; Riches and Tarasuk 2014). NEET people might be searching for new opportunities and work experience, but 'may be falling through the cracks a bit' (SEED Employee 2), and so the Upcycle Kitchen offers a supportive learning and work environment. The Upcycle Kitchen's work training starts with The SEED's three-week unpaid introductory training called the Good Food Work Experience program (GFWE). For 15 hours per week, participants are introduced to The SEED's different

projects with the objective to gain a ‘better perspective on the broader food system’ (SEED Employee 5). At the end of the GFWE, participants earn a certificate of completion and can choose which of The SEED’s projects most align with their interest, such as the Upcycle Kitchen. Participants are then offered a paid position – provided there is adequate funding, supervisory capacity, and the opportunity aligns with the individual’s current and future aspirations. Alternatively, participants might explore employment opportunities outside of The SEED.

The SEED’s Community Food Markets use a sliding-scale pricing model for their produce, and Upcycle Kitchen products were also sold on a sliding-scale. The sliding scale is unique, because the customer chooses what to pay within a set price range. The ‘beginning’ of the price scale allows for cost recovery and the ‘end’ of the range generates a profit. Any profit made is reinvested back into the Upcycle Kitchen to offset operational, staffing and food processing costs. The goal of a sliding scale is that it enables choice, offers low prices, and generates revenue to offset costs. At the Community Food Markets, this concept has proven to be financially sustainable and effective, as it makes fresh food more affordable for people with restricted budgets (SEED Employee 1).

SEED Employee 1 discussed that good branding is essential for the Upcycle Kitchen’s competitive edge on the prepared food market. According to the Upcycle Kitchen’s website, four key points comprise the brand story: ‘All of our products: fight food waste, employ out-of-work youth, are community taste-tested and increase food access’ (‘Upcycle Kitchen’ n.d.). The Upcycle Kitchen’s approach to marketing the products with a strong emphasis on environmental sustainability may be a potential motivator for the target audience (Rohm 2017; Sedlmeier,

Rombach, and Bitsch 2019), particularly because the parent organisation's existing customer base had previously expressed interest in supporting an initiative that fights food waste.

Development of the Upcycle Kitchen

The Upcycle Kitchen's development began in mid-2018. Almost two years of planning took place before its planned launch, which was scheduled for March 2020. The Upcycle Kitchen was designed as a social enterprise because it was 'clear that using [the] model would be the best way to sustainably offer the services like this over the long-term' (SEED Employee 1). However, the organisation understood that success in the early days of the Upcycle Kitchen depended in part on external start-up funding. If not for successful grant applications from multiple foundations, 'funding would've been a big barrier to getting anything started,' including appropriate staffing and additional infrastructure (SEED Employee 1).

Three research teams at the University of Guelph worked on the development of the Upcycle Kitchen in its first year to help narrow the scope of its launch. Across the three research teams, 10 graduate and undergraduate students worked on the Upcycle Kitchen's development between September 2018-April 2019. Four graduate students affiliated with The Arrell Food Institute (AFI) completed a literature review of social enterprises, disseminated and analysed a volunteer motivation survey (see Rondeau et al. 2020), put together a kitchen and warehouse equipment list, compiled an upcycled ingredients recipe book, developed a food literacy training curriculum, and curated a catalogue of food businesses in Guelph that the Upcycle Kitchen could potentially partner with to secure food donations. Two undergraduate research students at University of Guelph were hired for the Fall 2018 semester to help scope the Upcycle Kitchen's business plan. They carried out customer discovery research at the local farmers' market and

throughout downtown Guelph to identify products that customers might be interested in purchasing from the Upcycle Kitchen. From this research, the product that emerged as a high demand processed grocery item that would fit with the Upcycle Kitchen's mission and capacity was tomato sauce. To assist with product development, the Guelph Food Innovation Centre (GFIC) at the University of Guelph recruited three undergraduate student volunteers in the food science department to help with developing a tomato sauce product.

In the development phase, there were many parties to coordinate with, including researchers, food distributors and funders. Project management was identified as a challenge throughout the Upcycle Kitchen's development. SEED Employee 2 commented that 'a lot of different points have to converge for the work to actually get done,' and this convergence made planning and programming a challenge. This challenge led to frustration among the student researchers regarding the ambiguity of their roles:

When we started that project, we wanted to change the world. We wanted to [...] contribute to that as much as we can. And we all felt like we have skills that can help that project a lot [...] but a lot of groundwork needed to be done, and I think that at the end, we kind of felt like we didn't achieve much. [...] I know that's not true, but yeah.
(Student researcher 3)

The uncertain and lengthy process of developing a sustainable social enterprise plan may therefore lead to volunteer disengagement throughout the process at different points.

Benefits of the Upcycle Kitchen model

The benefits of the Upcycle Kitchen's social enterprise model include its ability to draw upon diverse revenue sources, train and employ NEET youth through the WISE model, and the potential to reduce stigma and increase access to affordable foods via sliding-scale pricing.

To increase its capacity, The SEED aims to have a mixed economy, wherein the organisation's income comes from fundraisers, donors, grants and sales revenue. SEED Employee 1 emphasised that 'we don't want food security in Guelph and Wellington to be dependent on grants. We don't want the success of The SEED to be dependent on grants.' This finding is synonymous with the literature which suggests that diversified revenue streams are crucial for non-profit organisations' financial solvency (Carroll and Stater 2009). The Upcycle Kitchen's social enterprise diversifies The SEED's income streams by generating a modest profit to sustain operations.

An opportunity of the WISE model is that it has the potential to impart a lasting positive social impact on individuals. In The SEED's other programs involving NEET people, the feedback was that while the income was nice, the 'biggest impact is through feeling empowered and feeling [...] that what they're doing matters' (SEED Employee 5). These social impacts described are resonant with existing literature on social enterprises: in an appropriate work environment, hard skills (skills relevant to working in the food industry) and soft skills (such as socialisation and workplace attendance) can have positive influences on participants (Cooney 2011).

The social enterprise model also has the potential to reduce the stigma associated with accessing low-cost or free food. The Upcycle Kitchen actively eliminates barriers to access and sells products that are available to a range of income levels. The Upcycle Kitchen's standard of high quality appeals to customers of a higher socioeconomic status who are not food insecure, but who choose to purchase food that is produced ethically and sustainably. With the sliding scale pricing model, these conscious customers' purchases can cross-subsidise the lower price points for Upcycle Kitchen products. SEED Employee 6 described how effective the sliding

scale pricing model has been with regards to increased access and reduced stigma for low-income shoppers:

What's really amazing and great about sliding scale, and something we really value in it, is it really puts [...] dignity back into the equation for a lot of folks [...] when it wasn't there. Because often when your budget is stretched, you're worried about making ends meet, [...] that's never really [...] an option [...] to buy food in a dignified way.

The sliding-scale price system attracts a broad customer base and provides a dignified way for low-income customers to access affordable, high-quality foods. Importantly, these are the same foods offered to higher-income customers.

Challenges and limitations of the Upcycle Kitchen model

While there are many opportunities and benefits of the social enterprise model, there are also challenges and limitations. These challenges include achieving financial stability, the limitations of sliding-scale pricing, the risks of a WISE model that employs NEET workers, and the challenges of replicating this project elsewhere.

As previously mentioned, financial stability is critical for the longevity and efficacy of an organisation's program delivery (Carroll and Stater, 2009). Revenue diversification, while crucial, comes with risks as there is no guarantee that an income stream will materialise (Powell et al. 2018). Social enterprises typically operate on thin profit margins, and any profit is reinvested into the business. A major obstacle to enterprise growth is generating enough profit from product turnover to cover more than just operational costs (Hailey and Salway 2016). One respondent voiced concern that the Upcycle Kitchen might not generate enough revenue to cover operational costs while keeping product costs low, given the limited scale of its early operations and the reality of thin profit margins. Given the nature of industry competition, along with thin profit margins, the Upcycle Kitchen may require some income from grants or subsidies to sustain

its operations, thereby challenging its goal for financial self-sufficiency (although ongoing subsidies are typical for WISEs; Cooney 2011).

The sliding-scale pricing model has numerous benefits, as discussed, but there are limitations as well. A primary constraint is that it is not accessible for everyone, because customers need to have money to access it in the first place. This limitation is one that the organisation ‘fully recognise[s] and have been trying to make systems to address that’ (SEED Employee 6). SEED Employee 5 agreed that it is ‘not [...] a solution for everyone,’ and that is ‘a challenge that we’ve got to address.’

There are specific risks associated with the WISE model. Most WISEs operate in trades that are typically low-wage and low-skill, and this intensifies competition with industry counterparts (Cooney 2011). The challenge of industry competition is a risk that the Upcycle Kitchen faces because they aim to increase the manual labour associated with food processing. As GFIC Employee 1 discussed, the easiest way to keep product costs low is to automate processing and reduce costs associated with branding. However, these are two activities that the Upcycle Kitchen has chosen to invest in by employing a low-skilled labour force and establishing a high-quality brand. In terms of the NEET model of WISE adopted by the Upcycle Kitchen, Bloom et al. (2009) suggest that while employability might be improved short-term, increasing long-term employability is only realised through extensive pre-employment services. Although the Upcycle Kitchen is a promising example of an income intervention to improve food insecurity, the labour outcomes for NEET participants over time will need to be assessed.

The Upcycle Kitchen hopes to be ‘a reference point for other communities’ to help ‘[expand] social enterprise into other communities’ (SEED Employee 1). Importantly, Popielarski and Cotugna (2010) state that ‘[t]here is no blueprint to follow for the development

and success of a social enterprise venture nor is there a standard for the evaluation of them' (67). While there may be lessons from this case study for other emerging food rescue social enterprises, this project will likely not be directly replicable in other contexts.

Neoliberalism and community-led initiatives

In the literature, there are competing arguments on whether grassroots responses are effective at addressing food insecurity. On one hand, a community-led food insecurity intervention might best suit the unique needs of the community rather than a top-down approach. On the other hand, scholars advocate that food insecurity is a principal obligation and responsibility of the state at the national level (Cloke 2013; Riches 2018). With this tension in mind, theoretical questions emerge: Do unique community-specific solutions to food waste and/or food insecurity make up a patchwork of ad hoc band aid solutions to systemic problems, characteristic of the 'local trap' (Born and Purcell 2006), that in fact require national policy responses? Or are community initiatives, including social enterprises like the Upcycle Kitchen, able to serve the needs of the geographical area and socioeconomic makeup of local communities most effectively over the long-term without government intervention? Further, are these two approaches mutually exclusive?

One respondent took the position that local initiatives are the most effective response to food insecurity in the here-and-now. When asked whether it ought to be the government's responsibility to solve food insecurity, SEED Employee 5 responded:

Maybe. But they're not. And I'm sick of waiting for the government, or anyone else to do anything about it, and I think food security is something that could be solved by a community outside of municipal government, or provincial government, or federal government. That it *could* [...] generate enough revenue to make a difference, and also change the minds of how communities [...] can and should operate, and what we can expect from each other.

This excerpt highlights two key points about The SEED's approach to addressing food insecurity. First, this respondent believes that food insecurity can be solved at the community level outside of government. Second, this excerpt infers that grassroots initiatives can engage and mobilise the community towards social and political change. This highlights the crossroads at which the organisation is situated within the debate on whether social enterprises - which are community-based organisations at their heart (Roy et al. 2014) - are a neoliberal solution to the neoliberal problem (Warshawsky 2010, 2015). Following this line of thinking, social enterprises can be seen to re-embed the very market that exacerbates inequalities and that similarly, civil society efforts to overthrow neoliberalism can ultimately reinforce neoliberalism (Booth and Whelan 2014; Cloke, May, and Williams 2017; Guthman 2008; Warshawsky 2010, 2015).

On the other hand, activating the public at large on social and environmental issues to affect policy could be a means of creating systemic change. This finding is resonant with social enterprise research in which education was seen as the 'driver of change' both in the context of agricultural sustainability (Díaz-Correa and López-Navarro, 2018) as well as drawing attention to the problem of food waste (Sedlmeier, Rombach, and Bitsch 2019). In the context of food rescue, Lindberg et al. (2014) found that an organisation in Australia used public education and advocacy as a tool to apply political pressure to address the root of food insecurity. The authors stated that the advocacy work 'may necessitate a reconceptualization of the "problem," so that it exposes the underlying causes of food poverty and acknowledges the limitations of emergency food to address these' (1487). A 'reconceptualization' of the root cause of food insecurity shifts the public and political understanding of what the problem is, who the hungry are, and thus how to best go about addressing the root of the issue (Bacchi 2009; de Souza 2019; Wakefield, Fredrickson, and Brown 2015), including the stigma associated with feeding rescued food to

low-income people (Millar, Parizeau, and Fraser 2020). This problem-framing approach is precisely what the Upcycle Kitchen aims to do by drawing attention to income as a predictor of food insecurity, as well as the stigma associated with providing poor quality food to marginalised people.

As an organisation, The SEED believes that eradicating food insecurity should come from systems and policy change. Affecting social and political change is a long process, however. Paralleling Cloke, May, and Williams's (2017) framing of community-based solutions to systemic change 'in the meantime,' SEED Employee 1 clarified the role that social enterprises such as the Upcycle Kitchen can play:

Changing anything in government takes time. Changing the mindset of a population takes a lot of time as well. So, what can be done in the meantime while you hope and contribute to those bigger changes? [...] We think that social enterprise can fill a gap, because there has been austerity through governments in terms of funding things on a local level [...]. [Neoliberalism has] been this devolution of responsibility for the public's well-being onto lower and lower forms of government—now on to the population itself, take care of yourself, right? So, we need to un-devolve that, [...] but at the same time, we need to take care of people as we're doing it. So then social enterprise can fill a gap, where if it's focused on health outcomes and you operate your intervention in such a way that it includes the population at large, rather than just focusing your intervention on those that benefit from it, then you've created this community that is sympathetic towards the intervention and sympathetic towards the hardships that people are facing through no fault of their own. And I think that's what we're trying to do here.

This respondent maintains that The SEED can 'un-devolve' the responsibility for the public's well-being back onto the government and still address hunger, while raising public consciousness of the problem 'in the meantime.' Similarly, Wakefield et al. (2012) argue that food security organisations can 'resist and reshape' (445) the neoliberal conditions which constrain food insecurity.

Social enterprises are uniquely positioned to act across and through the traditional silos of the state, market and community (Cooney 2011; Defourny and Nyssens 2006; Roy et al. 2014),

even as the distinction and responsibilities between these silos blur in the modern era (Billis 2010). Therefore, small-scale local social enterprises, such as the Upcycle Kitchen, might be able to influence social welfare policy through public education and reshape the conditions of financial poverty for NEET people while also reducing food waste. Weymes and Davies (2019) name the importance of food rescue initiatives, if imperfect and incomplete: ‘There is no guarantee that such heightened awareness will translate into actions to change these models to reduce wastage and the creation of surplus, but it remains a necessary if insufficient part of any such a transition’ (168).

Conclusion

The Upcycle Kitchen’s principal intervention is situated at the root of food insecurity: providing stable income through training and work opportunities for young adults who face barriers to employment. The Upcycle Kitchen’s secondary food insecurity intervention is through providing affordable access to high quality foods. These commitments work in opposition to the well-documented evidence that emergency food access points, such as food banks, are stigmatising spaces. These findings suggest that the Upcycle Kitchen’s model might overcome two key shortcomings of charitable food aid: failure to address the root of food insecurity, and the stigma associated with accessing emergency food aid.

There are many benefits to the social enterprise model and there are also potential risks. A principal advantage of the model is that it has the potential to generate revenue. One of the goals of the social enterprise model is to maintain organisational stability through financial self-sufficiency, although grant seed funding was essential in the Upcycle Kitchen’s early development stage. The WISE model created jobs and generated income for NEET young adults,

and respondents reported that the model also impacted participants' self-confidence and personal development. However, it is unclear how successful the work training program will be with regards to future employment opportunities for participants, given the food industry's constraints of low-wage labour.

This research suggests that an income-based food insecurity intervention might address the root of food insecurity in ways that the charitable model of food aid has markedly fallen short on. Furthermore, food surplus can be used in a dignified way by processing it into high quality value-added products, and this may subvert the stigmatising impact of food banks whereby 'left behind' people are given 'leftover' food (de Schutter *et al.* 2019). While addressing the systemic problem of food waste across the food supply chain may be beyond the scope of small-scale food rescue initiatives (Tarasuk Dachner and Loopstra 2014; Warshawsky 2015), it is nonetheless environmentally beneficial to use surplus food in a productive and dignified way rather than letting it go to waste (Papargyropoulou *et al.* 2014; Schneider 2013). The social enterprise model broadens the Upcycle Kitchen's reach to a diverse customer base, and this may improve public awareness and education about the hidden problems of food insecurity and systemic food waste. While some may question whether social enterprises might reproduce neoliberal social structures, mobilising the public might spur greater collective political awareness, thereby impacting policy and systems change aimed at food insecurity and food waste. Although systems-wide change is not guaranteed from such activities, it is still valuable to reduce food waste, employ young adults excluded from the labour market, and increase access to good food in the meantime.

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