Examining the place of supermarkets in mitigating local household food insecurity

The University of Cambridge Institute
for Sustainability Leadership

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Summary

The challenge

The challenge of food insecurity, characterised by individuals and households having limited access to nutritious food, affects 11.3 million UK adults. In the paper, we emphasise the critical importance of addressing food poverty amid a rising cost-of-living crisis and persistent inequalities in the UK.

Where do supermarkets intervene?

Food retailers, especially supermarkets, have a pivotal role in supporting community health, wellbeing and resilience.

Typically, local government co-ordinates efforts against food insecurity, but supermarkets can play a vital role by participating in strategic and place-based partnerships.

Supermarkets have the potential to support food security through:
- good training and employment
- price reductions
- donations of goods and space in store
- outreach
- grant funding to community groups.

Opportunities

We advocate for supermarkets to see themselves and be seen as community 'anchors', and to integrate social goals with business objectives. We call for investment in innovative actions and cross-sectoral collaboration to enhance their social impact and contribute to resilience and sustainable growth.

Introduction

In the context of an intensifying cost-of-living crisis, and enduring inequalities between towns and regions in the UK and more globally, addressing food poverty and building resilience in communities has never been more important. Food retailers are an integral part of both food and food aid systems, and the COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted their unique role and positioning in communities. Occupying what is arguably an 'anchor' positioning within UK communities, supermarkets have significant potential to influence health, wellbeing and sustainability, eg through influencing consumption behaviours, training and employment practices. Recognising that, for these businesses, local communities simultaneously represent current and future customers, staff and suppliers, it is in their interest to act on 'social' goals alongside business imperatives.

Context

Food insecurity

Food insecurity is a key sustainability challenge in many areas of the UK, as it is globally. For this study, we use definitions provided in the House of Lords (2020) Select Committee report focusing on "limited access to food, at the level of individuals or households, due to lack of money or other resources […] limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (eg without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging or other coping strategies".[1] As such, we draw a pragmatic boundary around this work which is "distinct from discussions on the resilience and continuity of the food supply".[2] Ensuring access to food is also inextricably linked to physical and mental health and wellbeing, and 11.3 million people (14 per cent of all UK adults) reported experiencing hunger or struggling to get – or worrying about getting – food in the course of the previous year.[3] Household food security is distributed unequally across the country, reflecting poverty, wider inequalities, and the role played by systemic factors such as access to good jobs, fair wages and welfare support.[4] At the same time, social networks, community spaces and practical information-sharing and advice play a vital supporting role in providing a route out of poverty.[5] The generation, mobilisation and securing of such assets in local areas – in addition to economic resources – is likely to be influential in supporting household food security.

Food retail

Within the food retail industry, structural and operational changes have shaped business imperatives. The market share in the UK has been changing in the last decade, with the 'discounters' (Aldi, Lidl) increasing their share at the expense of the so-called 'Big 4' (Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda and Morrisons). Furthermore, the Institute of Grocery Distribution points to three key challenges for the food industry: supply chain disruption, labour shortages and low productivity, and food price inflation.[6] While a lot of market investment seeks to secure brand loyalty, price-sensitive customers are moving their custom to access lower prices.[7] Shifts in shopping patterns towards smaller, more frequent shopping trips – combined with a rise in online shopping – have also altered the size of store required to meet consumer needs.[8] The context for these businesses is thus becoming ever

more competitive, potentially constraining budgets for 'community programmes' (and therefore action addressing food insecurity). Such programmes are typically more developed in the Big 4 but commonly considered non-essential when pursuing profit – and consequently vulnerable to cuts. However, there is an argument for innovative support and proactive stakeholder engagement (including staff, customers and community) as a means of driving people in – and keeping them coming through – the door (both virtually and physically).

Current delivery of support

Local government currently leads action on food insecurity within the UK, but the cost-of-living crisis – exacerbated by cuts to services – has placed these organisations under increasing pressure, inflating the ranks of residents requiring support and driving up the costs of doing so.[9] Local authorities cover food insecurity through a range of relevant strategies, plans and policies, and the impetus behind local action may be hosted by different tiers of government, departments or partners in different localities. Against this complexity within 'place', identifying *where* and *how* business can support is likely to be both necessary and desirable. While acknowledging that it is right to challenge whether supermarkets should be seen as part of the solution – when, for many, they contribute to the problem – they are already engaged in actions ostensibly intended to mediate food insecurity, and as such should be acknowledged as part of the support available in communities.[10]

Typical actions on food insecurity by supermarkets

Typically, actions by supermarkets that are badged as supporting household food security work indirectly, either via donations or funding to third-sector organisations with the relevant expertise. Examples of current actions include:

- donations of produce to food redistribution networks (such as national organisations like FareShare, the Trussell Trust and Neighbourly)
- food donations to local community organisations, including churches and faith groups
- reduced/frozen prices
- information and awareness-raising on healthy food choices
- supplementing vouchers/subsidised meals in store
- financial support to local groups including grant funding and donations of equipment.

Given the ongoing cost-of-living crisis and the reliance of an increasing number of people on food banks, it is important to learn what else is required – alongside the currently much-needed emergency support – to help mitigate and build resilience against food insecurity and facilitate sustainable access to affordable, nutritious and culturally appropriate food.

Opportunities, points of leverage and mechanisms of change

Place-based strategies

Many English Local Authorities (LAs) have adopted place-based strategies to tackle wider determinants and health inequalities in recent years, and policy has advocated place-based partnerships, most evident in the integrated care systems (ICS) recently established across England.[11] This direction of travel is also evident in asset-based approaches (ABAs) and Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), grounded in new operating models described as "a new way of working […] that acknowledges the complexity and interconnectedness of social issues and the people and organisations that aim to tackle them".[12]

Resilience theory and asset-based approaches are recognised in the 'Food Ladders' model. This model is a concept and tool which acknowledges that there are many geographical gaps in capability (to make decisions, to provide resources like food, housing, etc, and to build strong social networks) across the country, and that concerted local action is required to fill these.[13] As a result, it is important to identify where supermarkets do or could better engage their resources in the short, medium and longer term for local networks of support. This builds from 'catching' interventions for people in crisis, towards capacity- and capability-building actions and (perhaps) towards more transformative initiatives which contribute to greater community resilience.[14]

The 'anchor' positioning of supermarkets – namely, their size and/or physical presence and deep local economic ties to a community (employment, customers and potentially supply chain) – can mean their local influence is significant.[15] Furthermore, as place-based entities which are inextricably linked to sales and consumption of food, it seems logical that they should intervene to support food security. Exploring this anchor positioning with local government, especially in places concerned with local wealth building and inclusive growth agendas, can help raise awareness of untapped resources which could be mobilised towards supporting local communities.

Collaboration (strategic and operational)

Moving from awareness to effective action, however, is likely to be dependent on attention to both strategic direction and operational delivery at different levels (or scales) of 'place'. We need also to understand what levers there might be for better integrating support from businesses. We hypothesise that *collaborative action* is essential to mobilising and maximising the value of available resources or 'assets' and to building capacity to self-support within communities around a store. Stakeholder, partnership synergy and social practice theories support this premise, highlighting the importance of shared purpose, networks and good relationships to effective partnerships, in this case, in leveraging resources towards addressing household food insecurity in local communities.[16]

Partnerships around food insecurity already exist in England. At the higher and strategic level of place, levers might be part of a city's 'sustainable food', anti-poverty or even community health strategy. Such collaborations may be led by Statutory (LA/Health) organisations, or the Voluntary,

Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector, with associated infrastructure (relational and organisational) being key to operationalising services and support.[17] Sustainable Food Partnerships (SFP) have a diverse composition of community and voluntary sector organisations and local government partners, but do not currently include engagement with supermarkets. However, there is a willingness to engage with them to support partnership goals.[18] These or similar partnerships present a possible forum to share experience and engage in pragmatic 'quick wins', as well as supporting more challenging yet transformative goals over the medium to longer term. Likely enablers here – and essential to establish for effective delivery – are the presence of leadership, motivation and buy-in, ie a shared understanding, focus and trust across sector stakeholders, which may also necessitate a shift in organisational culture.[19] Points of leverage could be found, for example, around expanding existing work on the promotion of Healthy Start vouchers to low-income parents of young children, support to school breakfast clubs, or action on workplace wellbeing, eg signposting by supermarket staff to support services.[20]

To support concrete and pragmatic action on the ground in neighbourhoods and at the operational level, it is crucial for those working in neighbourhood teams to know where links could and should be made, with whom, what support is available from stores, and how flexibly it can respond to local needs.[21] This includes identifying the inputs/assets needed, the mechanisms supporting or constraining access to them, and what needs to be in place for supermarkets to contribute more effectively to place-based action. Staff members' agency and competency to act, as well as reasons for doing so, will influence whether or not resources (human, organisational and physical) are mobilised.[22] We anticipate awareness and mobilisation of support, communication and making connections, and the presence of enabling infrastructure to be important mechanisms in enabling or constraining the current effectiveness and reach of supermarket 'community programmes'.[23] Identifying the appropriate forum to facilitate links and shared understanding is not straightforward, so learning from examples on the ground and supporting innovation is important.

Leadership and the business case

To encourage that integration from the business side requires both incentives like those listed above, as well as guidance and leadership. New frameworks encouraging businesses to be more 'purpose-driven' also underline the role of activities associated with engaging, collaborating and advocating change as 'organisational enablers' of business transformation towards more sustainable practices.[24] Other developments potentially supporting leadership and implementation in the field include the recognition and monitoring of businesses' impact on health and wellbeing, economic growth, and environmental and social return on investment.[25] Crucially, paying attention to societal challenges and actively addressing them brings business dividends in the building of healthier, wealthier and more highly skilled communities. The creation of decent and inclusive jobs, better access to goods and services, and improvements in the supplier, customer and employee base all contribute to sustainable growth. In terms of actions that focus on hunger in local communities, a reputation for actively supporting local groups nurtures a positive perception that these businesses are alert to local need, which may translate to customer loyalty. Whether the motivator is purpose or profit should be explored as a predictor of commitment and shared values.

Concluding remarks

There is considerable potential for enhancing the value of supermarket support to household food security, but clarity is needed regarding the actions that local stores can undertake and how they can be more impactful locally in tackling household food insecurity. Accepting that there is a rationale for engaging supermarkets in both strategic and hyper-local collaborative action on food insecurity, we now need better evidence from current practices. We also need more support for innovation to guide the contribution of resources building on local strengths, collaborations and partnerships to improve responses to local needs. In addition, there is a requirement to support decision-making on community investments by concretely identifying both points of leverage and actions with 'shared value'.

The ultimate goal for many is more transformative action and alignment with Sustainable Development Goals such as decent work, reduced inequalities, and resilient communities and food systems.[26] Yet even among statutory and VCSE partners, making progress to these ends while also dealing with urgent household food insecurity and poverty in local populations is slower than hoped. Given this short-term versus long-term balancing act, we suggest there is value in identifying and demonstrating where intermediate steps might be better supported within current supermarket 'community and partnership' strategies. Our findings and recommendations will be presented in follow on reports in 2025.

CISL is undertaking research to this end under this Prince of Wales Global Sustainability Fellowship. CISL supports businesses in developing sustainable solutions to their challenges, advancing the boundaries of leading practice towards a sustainable economy through knowledge, skills and tools to enable transformational change and impact. CISL collaborates with business leaders and individual organisations on initiatives such as the 'Future of Boards', helping them to prepare for the future, benchmark their progress to become more purpose-driven through the 'Business Transformation Framework', while also developing their leadership capabilities through the 'Leadership for Sustainable Future' Framework.

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