

Nutrition Society Congress 2024, 2–5 July 2024

Achieving SDG 12: impact of food choice, food waste and dignity

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Increasing food insecurity (FI) in the UK has led to increased food bank usage⁽¹⁾. This underrepresents true levels of need, since many with FI utilise alternative coping strategies⁽²⁾. Food banks are designed to provide emergency food for a limited time, requiring referral with proof of need. They have been critiqued for this and their limited food choices⁽³⁾, which add to the stigma experienced by many clients⁽⁴⁾. Their nutritional quality has also been criticised⁽³⁾. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) require action to address socioeconomic drivers of inequity. Several are nutrition-related including SDG2 (zero hunger) and SDG12 (responsible production and consumption)⁽⁵⁾. Part of SDG12 aims to halve per capita levels of food waste by 2030⁽⁵⁾. Surplus food is often used to feed those with FI through community support schemes like social supermarkets, alternatives to food banks. This study evaluated social supermarkets to identify client experiences and perceptions of surplus food, food waste and stigma.

Bespoke questionnaires were administered in two social supermarkets in Sussex on three site visits (n = 111). Additional optional telephone interviews (n = 25) were conducted. Ethics approval was obtained from Kingston University London. Of particular interest were client views on quality and choice of food available, and implications of this for SDG12. Thematic analysis of qualitative data was carried out to identify key themes, while quantitative data were statistically analysed to explore impact of demographics using Kruskal Wallis tests with posthoc Dunn's and Bonferroni correction.

Of particular interest were client views on the quality and choice of food available, and the implications of this for SDG 12. The majority (n = 102; 91.9%) agreed or strongly agreed that choosing what they ate rather than being given no choice mattered to them, while 76.6% (n = 85) agreed or strongly agreed that the social supermarket helped them to reduce food waste. Interviews revealed these were linked, and the impact on food waste was not solely due to the use of surplus food but to offering food choice with clients choosing what they and their families liked and would eat; being given no choice increased the likelihood of foods being wasted.

[Social supermarket client quote] 'I think [choice] is important, I hate, absolutely hate waste, I don't agree with it, I don't agree with throwing things away that you could eat. And if someone made that choice for you, you might not be able to eat it and want to eat it'.

Food choice therefore increased client agency, reducing the potential for stigma and trauma. Using surplus food to feed those dealing with FI is problematic. Nonetheless, offering food choice represents a more client dignified experience with potential to reduce food waste, thereby arguably helping to achieve SDG12.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to all those at the social supermarkets who took time to take part in our work.

References

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