

The COVID-19 lockdown measures and physical distancing or 'shielding' requirements impacted the supply of food across the globe. In Australia, the major supermarkets worked closely with governments and food charities to support the emergency response. This concerted effort maintained the supply and quality of food available.

Along with businesses throughout the food system, supermarkets also instigated numerous measures to protect the public, including online shopping and sanitation measures. Alliances such as the WA food relief framework (WAFRF) - a cross-sector committee led by the Western Australian council of social services - was well placed to assist the response. A description of the approach can be found on the organisation's website (www.wacoss.org.au).

An exciting innovation - the Food Stress Index⁷ - was socialised and developed with the WAFRF and will be developed further to assist the targeting for food relief.

Supermarkets describe their commitment to address food insecurity in their corporate social responsibility statements. Systems have evolved over time where they donate their surplus or waste food to charities to redistribute to feed the hungry.

In some ways, this alliance to address surplus food waste with food charities does help address the increasing demand for food relief in Australia. There is, however, increasing concern that this surplus food redistribution system does not respond to either issue well - that of reducing food waste or that of reducing food insecurity.

There have been calls for some time now to uncouple food waste mitigation as the main solution to hunger and food insecurity in Australia.⁸ For both economic and health reasons, reducing the overproduction and excess consumption of food is the main strategy used to reduce food waste.

The main concern with this is that, by framing the solution to food insecurity as waste reduction, the

issues of poverty and inequality - the two key reasons people are food insecure - are overlooked.

The COVID-19 pandemic also saw governments introduce additional social protection measures to support people undergoing financial hardship. The food security response pivoted, from a redistribution of surplus waste food, to one that has procured and provided safe and nutritious food as the main objective.

The social distancing and lockdown measures forced changes to the way food for food relief was procured, stored and distributed. Almost overnight, charities found themselves confronted by changes that meant they had to change their business model because volunteers and food distribution systems were no longer available.

Just as the restaurant and café sector had to change to takeaway service delivery, the food relief sector turned to hamper or boxed models with different distribution methods. New cohorts needing food relief appeared, for example, universities found themselves needing to support international students who lost their employment and were unable to repatriate.

Governments provided additional funding to support the disaster food response so the food relief system did not need to rely solely on surplus or waste food. Strong alliances were formed to procure, store and distribute the food. There was a need for a 'back to basics' diet, and it appears that the types of foods provided would support a basic nutritious diet, at least in the short term.

As the COVID-19 'recovery' phase continues, so will the need to focus on action to ensure that food insecurity, diet quality, food safety, environmental sustainability and a viable food economy persist.

References

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Frozen meals made available through the food relief network for Curtin University students.

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