Background

• Efforts to recover on-farm food losses by food banks or businesses serving secondary markets are often framed as a “win-win” solution to both food waste and hunger.  

• While previous research highlights numerous economic and logistical challenges associated with agricultural food recovery, including transportation and storage, labor, and timing, some few studies explore these challenges from the perspective of growers.

• Past research also largely neglects the role of stakeholders’ social relations in facilitating or impeding efforts to overcome various challenges to food recovery.

• Our study seeks to address these gaps, drawing on qualitative interviews with fresh produce growers and food recovery organizations in California.

Data & Methods

We conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with growers and recovery organizations in California. First, we interviewed 25 growers of leafy greens, tomatoes, and peaches, three major crops with varied production methods. Next, we interviewed 15 staff at emergency food organizations and businesses serving secondary produce markets.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in an inductive process. Through multiple rounds of coding, we identified the relational and economic/logistical dynamics of food recovery as a central theme.

Results

Interviews suggest that food recovery recovery efforts can face two types of challenges: (1) economic and logistical challenges and (2) relational challenges. Success is less likely when there are significant challenges in either domain. However, certain relational strategies have enabled stakeholders to overcome challenges in one or both domains. Below, we explain how interviewees deployed various relational strategies at two key stages in the relationship.

Stage One: Establishing Recovery Partnerships

Establishing successful partnerships with growers can be a major challenge for recovery outlets, which often reported that it is difficult to identify or reach growers who might be interested in participating. Interviewees described three relational strategies that helped address social and material barriers at this stage: connecting through established networks, developing mutual understandings of partners’ worldviews and day-to-day operations, and finding shared interests.

Stage Two: Sustaining Recovery Partnerships

Sustaining recovery partnerships requires partners to offer each other flexibility and consistency and engage in collaborative problem-solving to work through inevitable obstacles. These strategies require nontrivial investments of time, money, and/or attention that are often in short supply. However, stakeholders who are willing and able to conduct this relational work often achieve long-term benefits.

Conclusion

Relational work is a key dimension of agricultural food recovery that has often been overlooked. Stakeholders’ relationships can be an additional barrier to recovery alongside the better-documented logistical and financial barriers. At the same time, certain kinds of relational work can be a promising strategy for addressing these constraints.

By examining the experiences of both growers and their partners in food recovery outlets, our research highlights what it will take to make food recovery more successful. The path forward appears less rosy than presumed by those who view the challenge as just creating a better “app,” but also more promising than presumed by those who see structural challenges as insurmountable. Our work suggests that food recovery is difficult yet possible in some scenarios. Its success largely depends on the ability to build sustained relationships capable of addressing the economic costs and logistical challenges associated with recovery.

References


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