Communicating Goals and Impacts of Urban Food Sharing

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Urban food sharing – which includes collective or shared practices around growing, preparing, eating and redistributing food – is experiencing a technology-fuelled renaissance, but are these activities contributing to more sustainable food systems? Delving into the project's research findings, this article analyses the goals of ICT-mediated urban food sharing initiatives from nine global cities and examines the ways that these organisations are communicating their activities and impacts through their online profiles. Five categories – social, environmental, economic, health and political – are used to classify goals and impacts. The article concludes by distilling the key challenges of establishing sustainability impacts.

In an era of planetary urbanisation there is growing clarity regarding the unsustainability of cities. Sharing, particularly ICT-mediated forms such as social media platforms, websites and apps, is increasingly identified by advocates as a potentially transformative mechanism for reorienting urban environments on to more sustainable pathways by reducing consumption, conserving resources, preventing waste and providing additional opportunities to interact with others. In the arena of food, sharing includes the physical exchange of food products and meals, connecting people who may also wish to share land and tools for food growing, and the sharing of kitchen spaces, food preparation and storage devices. Importantly, it also enables the exchange of knowledge, skills and information about the availability of food and the means to grow, process and cook it.

Although sharing food is certainly not a recent development, the new world of ICT-mediated food sharing stretches the territories over which people can share, increases the numbers of people who can be brought into sharing initiatives and brings into focus new forms of sharing among strangers. However, despite the claims of sustainability being made about urban food sharing, little is known about the collective scale, scope and impact of these systems. In response, SHARECITY – a project funded by the European Research Council – has begun to map out these reinvigorated international landscapes of urban food sharing.

Urban food sharing

Focusing on 100 urban areas drawn from all corners of the globe, more than 4000 food sharing initiatives, ranging from informal and community groups to charities, social enterprises and for-profit businesses, have been identified, categorised and mapped through the open access and interactive SHARECITY100 Database. This study demonstrated that there was little consistency across initiatives regarding how goals and impacts were being communicated in the online profiles of these initiatives. This is important, as all initiatives utilise their online profiles to communicate what they do with existing sharers and to recruit new ones, to

Examples of shared urban spaces: Skip Garden (London) and Himmel Beet (Berlin). Photos by SHARECITY

build and maintain relationships and to facilitate the exchange of new ideas, cooperation and innovation. Such communication also provides an element of transparency, which can help build trust within an initiative as well as with other initiatives, organisations and communities. In response we conducted a textual and visual analysis of the goals and impacts of 37 diverse initiatives from nine global cities – Athens, Barcelona, Berlin, Dublin, London, Melbourne, New York, San Francisco and Singapore – that focus on shared practices around growing, eating and redistributing food. This article reports on the goals and impacts that were uncovered. These cities were selected because they provide contrasting geographical, political and cultural contexts. The initiatives were selected in order to provide insights from different types of food sharing.

Communicating goals

The goals of the food sharing initiatives were identified through an examination of their mission statements or descriptions that explain the purpose of the initiative. Among the 37 initiatives, **social goals** were identified in almost every case (95%), showing food sharing remains an important means of prosocial behaviour among friends and family in the 21st century. **Environmental goals** were also articulated by the vast majority of initiatives (89%), with recurrent themes emerging of food waste reduction, local produce and small scale agriculture, and improved human connections with nature. **Economic goals** were identified for 59% of the initiatives assessed. While the economic goals identified were diverse, recurring themes included the promotion of alternatives to the traditional market economy and reducing inequalities. Just under half (49%) of the initiatives stated **health goals**, centring on the idea of increasing access to fresh, healthy or nutritious food. Explicit **political goals** – goals which seek to change the ways in which power and resources are distributed – were given by only 27% of the initiatives.

Communicating impacts

In this analysis, impacts were considered to be what the initiatives claimed to have achieved through their activities. Whereas goals were directly stated in every instance, communication of impacts tended to be more uneven across initiatives, with some communicating impacts explicitly and quantitatively and others implying impacts qualitatively through images or statements from those who share, sometimes using stories, testimonials or endorsements about achievements that resulted from the activities or services provided. Visual cues, such as graphics and photos, were also examined, as they feature prominently on initiatives' online profiles as a means of communicating both what they do (e.g., images of people growing food) and the results (e.g., images of harvests). With regard to social media, recent studies have found that posts with images produce 650% higher engagement than regular text posts. The images were scrutinised in terms of their setting (e.g., indoor, outdoor), any representations of nature (bright, pristine, rugged, urban, pastoral, rural etc.) and foodstuff (e.g., raw, "ugly", cooked), and the presence or absence of

Melbourne Food Justice Truck. Photo by SHARECITY

people and collaborative activities (growing, eating, moving, cooking, playing, learning, creating etc.). These visual cues were then also categorised along the five impact categories.

Nearly all (95%) initiatives provided some kind of statement about impacts, with an almost even split between cases where impact statements were purely qualitative and those that were quantitative. **Social impacts** were most commonly reported (89%), and these were expressed quantitatively by 52% of those initiatives. The most commonly reported quantitative social impacts were numbers of participants in events or partners of the initiative. For example, food-redistribution initiative foodsharing.de (Berlin) reports 200,000 registered users in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, with 32,461 volunteer "Food Savers" internationally. Qualitative social impact reports examined were often descriptions of activities that an initiative facilitates. For example, the urban harvest mapping initiative Ripe Near Me (Melbourne) simply says that their activities give "users a tool to connect with their local community". It was less common to find details of the scale or scope of impact in these cases.

Environmental impacts, meanwhile, were reported by just over two-thirds of the initiatives examined. This was the category in which initiatives were most likely to provide a quantitative impact statement. Claims of food waste reduction by weight, such as the "1,460,223 lbs of food rescued since 2013" noted by Rescuing Leftover Cuisine (New York), were a recurrent theme for this category. Qualitative reports of environmental impact tended to focus on food being produced locally or organically.

While social and environmental impacts were the main areas of concern for initiatives, at least in terms of their public communication efforts, it was also possible to identify **economic** (41% of initiatives), **health** (30%) and **political** (11%) impacts. Whereas just over half of the initiatives identifying economic impacts provided some quantified measures, only about a quarter of those reporting political impact did so, with even fewer of those reporting health impacts. This is unsurprising given the greater challenges associated with distilling direct cause and effect impacts in relation to health or political change. Further details of this goals and impacts analysis are detailed in the third SHARECITY Briefing Note (Davies et al., 2018), which can be accessed through the SHARECITY website.

The sustainability of food sharing

While examining the self-proclaimed goals and impacts of food sharing initiatives does not itself provide a means to establish the entire range of sustainability impacts of ICT-mediated food sharing – what we might call a sustainability "sharescore" – it is an important starting point. It does the essential job of documenting exactly how the initiatives present their goals and allows these goals to be compared with the impacts that they choose to represent through their ICT profiles. This is valuable even though initiatives also communicate in other ways, for example through face-to-face interactions and through reports to funders and other stakeholders.

The analysis shows clearly that while all initiatives include a goal of some kind, even if loosely articulated, the practices of reporting on actions and making claims about impacts are highly differentiated. Very few of the initiatives develop novel measures or metrics specifically for their activities and even fewer utilise the burgeoning number of generic sustainability assessment tools on offer. There are many and varied potential reasons for this that are currently being explored through in-depth ethnographies with these initiatives, such as financial cost implications or a limited range of available skills and capabilities to conduct such assessments, as well as the time it takes to collect and analyse the required data.

With regard to the online communications, in many cases goals are identified but no qualitative or quantitative data on impacts are provided. Unsurprisingly, where data are provided it is readily determined outputs that predominate, such as numbers of people engaged or the weight of food diverted from waste streams, rather than longer-term outcomes, which are hard to isolate and track over time. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with using qualitative or output-focused approaches to assessment and reporting, there are limitations. For example, communicating activity only along these lines may limit the initiatives' ability to convince external actors that their actions are making a significant difference to urban sustainability and miss important ways that initiatives affect the lives of urban citizens and urban environments more broadly. Although convincing decision makers or potential funders might not be a priority or even a necessity for some initiatives, establishing outcomes provides information for the initiatives themselves, and their participants, in terms of whether they are making progress towards stated goals.

Our research found that in many cases a key goal for food sharing initiatives revolves around social justice and community inclusion or cohesion, yet few statements or measures of such impacts are provided. This discrepancy is understandable, as measuring collective, relational and affective dimensions of sharing, such as generosity, community, or self-esteem, is far from easy. This begs the question of whether it is possible – and perhaps more importantly, appropriate – to apply measures or metrics in these cases. If it is, how should appropriate metrics be identified? And if it is not, then how are such qualities to be recognised in decisions around supporting more sustainable food systems? These questions form the basis for the next phase of the SHARECITY research project.

Next steps

Analysing the narratives provided by the initiatives themselves through their online profiles tells only one side of the communication story around goals and impacts. How these communication strategies are received is being further explored with food sharing initiatives, their participants and those who regulate or fund their activities, through in-depth ethnographic research. Building on the findings of this research, a period of collaborative work with initiatives will take place during which the SHARECITY team will design with them a flexible, online tool to assist in establishing trajectories towards their goals and communicating the worth of their activities more holistically.

We will be reflecting on the results of our co-design activities later this year and would like to hear from any food sharing initiatives who are interested in testing a beta version of the online sustainability impact supports we will produce. Our resources and outputs are freely available from the SHARECITY website detailed below. We would be delighted to hear from anyone interested in discussing our work further. Do get in touch!

Acknowledgement

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References

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Web resources

SHARECITY website: http://sharecity.ie/
SHARECITY100 Database: http://sharecity.ie/research/sharecity100-database/
SHARECITY Briefing Notes: http://sharecity.ie/outputs/publications/