



## The diversity of food sharing in the city



Buying food is part of everyday life, and seems a normal way to gain access to food. In contrast, food sharing as a means to secure sustenance is somewhat less common in developed cities, at least beyond our friends and family. However, sharing is a fundamental form of cooperation that existed in human societies long before the supermarket. Over the last few years, with the rise in awareness of food waste and its environmental implications as well as emerging discourses around a “sharing economy”, there has been renewed interest in food sharing practices and particularly the role that information and communication technologies (ICT) can play in extending the spaces and sites in which food sharing can take place.

Such ICT-mediated food sharing initiatives hold many promises, not least reducing food waste, increasing food security and forging new social relationships, but do they deliver on such promises? Up until now there have been no inventories of food sharing activities that could answer this question, but the European Research Council project SHARECITY is seeking to change all this. Examining the practices and potential impacts of initiatives that use ICT to facilitate sharing beyond friends and family networks, **researchers have produced a useful [typology of food sharing](#)** for any city willing to map existing sharing activities within its territory and an interactive open access database – [the SHARECITY100 Database](#) - of more than 4000 initiatives across 100 cities around the world.

In a new [publication](#) the researchers explore the characteristics of these food sharing initiatives with the goal of making them more visible to stakeholders keen to support the development of more sustainable urban food systems; a fundamental pre-requisite for understanding what they do and the impacts they create.

### Food sharing is not only about food

The SHARECITY team analysed what was shared in these initiatives. Food, of course, comes first. This can take several forms, from the unfortunately all too familiar features of emergency food relief such as soup kitchens and food banks (where food is given or sold at a very low price to lower-income households) to novel Apps that share the location of untapped urban harvests or connect people who want to experience new food cultures, share meals and meet new people.

The redistribution of surplus food is at the core of many food sharing initiatives (although not all). New technologies have allowed new initiatives in this space to emerge, such as [FoodCloud](#), which is a web platform matching businesses with surplus food to local charities and community groups in Ireland and the UK.

Technologies have also made often informal practices of gleaning and foraging easier, as they enable information (about places where food may be found, for instance) to circulate amongst a greater amount of

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people. However, whether this leads to more sustainable food systems is not clear with fears around over-exploitation of our urban food resources.

Interestingly, the initiatives gathered by the researchers showed that food sharing was not only about the material 'stuff' of food. Initiatives are also often involved in a great array of interactions such as:

- **Sharing spaces and kitchen devices:** some initiatives pool common resources in the preparation of food. For instance, [Capital Kitchens](#) in Austin (USA), provides commercial co-working spaces with a commitment to zero waste. Meanwhile, in Portland (USA), [Kitchen Share](#) provides a public library of kitchen utensils that "strives to build community through the sharing of tools, traditions, skills and food". It aims to be a place where community members can borrow equipment and share in the joy of processing, preserving, and serving food.
- **Sharing knowledge and skills.** For instance, [The People's Kitchen](#) in Detroit (USA) aims at sharing cooking skills (making cheese, preserving food, etc.) and at enabling people to cook together. Community kitchens, which can, for instance, teach children to cook healthy meals, are also a way to bring people together around food. [Falling Fruit](#), provides a global, collaboratively developed map of urban harvests. The map already points to over a half million food sources.

Analysis of the database showed that **initiatives usually share several things, with more than half sharing some kind of knowledge or skills beyond food items.**

Therefore, this project unveils the breadth of this "sharing infrastructure" that enables urban dwellers to access food or food-related activities beyond mainstream monetary exchanges.

### Gift, barter, sell, collect

Echoing the diversity of *what* is shared is that of *how* sharing is taking place. This can take four main forms:

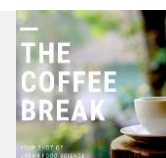
- **Gift:** i.e. giving without expecting a return. Researchers found that nearly half of the initiatives they surveyed had adopted this form of sharing. Gifting is about giving food, but also peoples' time, for instance when people volunteer in food surplus redistribution.
- **Barter:** i.e. exchanging food or food-related items against other good and services, without the use of money. This encompasses, for example, the time given by collective food buying groups participants to work on the farmer's land or by people involved in community supermarkets.
- **Sell:** some initiatives sell food with the goal of making a profit, while others adopt a not-for-profit model that still involves monetary exchange.
- **Collect:** i.e. gleaning, skip-surfing and dumpster diving

How are new technologies affecting this sharing infrastructure? They can allow organisations to extend their activities, for example to reach more people, quicker through their website or to recruit participants (through Facebook events, newsletters etc.). ICT are also allowing specific, "online only" services through Apps. Only 10% of the initiatives identified were Apps, but given the recent development of this particular on-line technology this is clearly an emergent slice of the food sharing sector. Two-thirds of the Apps identified were for profit, making them very much part of the emergent "sharing economy". One explanation for the decision to opt for a for-profit model in these cases could be that such hi-tech start-ups require considerable up-front investment to be developed, or it could be that the initiatives have fundamentally different value systems. However, there also are examples of non-for profit Apps. A good example is the [Byhøst](#) App in Copenhagen (Denmark) that supports urban foraging. Whether such for-profit food sharing activities will experience similar challenges as other sectors of the for-profit sharing economy certainly needs further examination.

### Towards a food-sharing ecosystem?

The SHARECITY100 database provides an important landscape level view of the food sharing in cities and to complement this the team have recently completed in-depth ethnographic data collection with thirty-eight initiatives in [nine case study cities](#). Their next step is to interrogate the current goals and reported impacts of these initiatives and begin the process of co-designing a toolkit to encourage greater transparency around the sustainability potential of ICT-mediated food sharing initiatives.

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However, according to Anna Davies, who is leading the project, some advice can already be provided to cities willing to give more space to sharing in their food policies:

- First, cities can **map existing initiatives on their territory**. This creates greater visibility of activities and it can also identify opportunities for new sharing initiatives to be developed.
- Second, city managers could think about **how such initiatives could be better connected into a food-sharing ecosystem to optimise their impacts**. There is scope for creativity! For instance, Anna Davies could well see how an equivalent of the [League of Urban Cannors](#), a Boston-based organisation that harvest fruit from private yards to make jams and preserves, could complement FoodCloud's activities in Ireland if it were to reach limits in its capacity to redistribute fresh food with a limited shelf-life.
- Third, city managers could **learn from successful food sharing cities**. Some cities have a high rate of food sharing per capita, pointing to local environments that are more supportive to food sharing, and this suggests a key role for local authorities. Cities can look at the [SHARECITY database](#) for inspiration.
- And finally, the SHARECITY project will produce a tool for initiatives, and cities that work with them, to improve the assessment and communication of their impact. A Beta version of the tool will be available in 2019.

#### THE SHARECITY PROJECT

"SHARECITY: The practice and sustainability of urban food sharing" is an Horizon 2020 research project (Project Number: 646883) and an affiliated project of the Systems of Sustainable Consumption and Production Knowledge Action Network (SSCP KAN) of Future Earth.

Its objectives are to establish the significance and potential of food sharing economies to transform cities onto more sustainable pathways the project by:

- Developing deeper theoretical understanding of contemporary food sharing
- Generating comparative international empirical data about food sharing activities within cities
- Assessing the impact of food sharing activities
- Exploring how food sharing in cities might evolve in the future

The project has also developed the first, international an open-access interactive database of more than 4000 food sharing initiatives from across 100 cities around the world providing a platform to inspire new initiatives, to foster learning between initiatives and to begin the process of classifying and categorising different practices; a fundamental pre-requisite to conducting any impact analysis.

A Special Issue documenting the findings from the case studies will be published in the journal *Geoforum* in 2018.

City officials can get in touch to share their experience about working with food sharing initiatives.

More information at:  
<http://sharecity.ie/>

January 2018

NB: the author would like to thank [Anna Davies](#) for her inputs and comments.

**Source**

[Davies, A., Edwards, F. Marovelli, B., Morrow, O. Rut, M., Weymes, M. \(2017\), "Making visible: Interrogating the performance of food sharing across 100 urban areas", \*Geoforum\*, Vol. 86, pp. 136-149](#)

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