

Institution: University of Sheffield		
Unit of Assessment: C-14 Geography and Environmental Studies		
Title of case study: Food Ladders: Increasing resilience and reducing vulnerability to food insecurity		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2009–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Megan Blake	Senior Lecturer	2001–2020
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>One in five UK adults experience food insecurity. Blake has redefined food support through her innovative framework, Food Ladders. Blake's work drove organisational and policy change achieving greater reach, access to resources and influence for food charities, including the UK's largest surplus food redistributor, FareShare. Her framework has led to policy interventions to eliminate vulnerability to hunger, poor nutrition and social isolation through collaborations locally and internationally. Food Ladders has been pivotal to the UK's planning responses, disaster mitigation, and longer-term strategy for more than 40 UK-wide charities, local and central government, and business during COVID-19.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Blake's research has established her as a leading expert on the effects of poverty on food security and community wellbeing. Her work shows how to repair those effects by transformative resilience that intersects along multiple points in food systems. To examine the systems that shape food consumption, community food support, commercial food access and surplus food redistribution, her research draws on participatory and ethnographic techniques alongside quantitative analysis. Her key research findings are set out below.</p> <p>A. Inequality of foodscapes. Blake's research on food landscapes (foodscapes) reveals how everyday social practices and national and local government policies play an important role in shaping diets. It highlights how food access is discriminatory and based on class and race [R1, R2]. Her methods include qualitative interviews, participatory video, and workshops with charities and those with lived experience of food insecurity. Drawing on intervention research she finds that foodscapes can be rebuilt with cost-effective interventions that enhance markets by increasing demand for healthy foods by providing consumers with resources to afford fruits and vegetables [R6].</p> <p>B. Food insecurity is a systemic problem with effects that extend beyond nutrition and economics. Blake's research demonstrates that the effects of poverty extend beyond the ability to afford food, hunger and poor health. Effects include loss of social networks, erosion of community spaces, denigration of local foodscapes and collective de-skilling that limits the community resources needed for self-organising [R3]. Findings that have been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic with more people describing themselves as squeezed, stressed and struggling.</p>		

C. The social value of surplus food. As a recognised global expert on how surplus food can be used to achieve social value Blake’s ethnographic research identified that food-centred activity contributes to reducing loneliness and isolation [R3, R4]. Using a survey methodology, she compiled the first dataset that quantitatively demonstrates the significant part that food support plays in improving diets and access to fruits and vegetables, introducing people to new foods and reducing loneliness and isolation [R3]. Furthermore, that efficient distribution of surplus food to third sector organisations frees up time for them to spend with communities, enables food-based social activity to take place that would not otherwise occur, and extends the reach of the work of community organisations [R4, R6].

D. Food Ladders as a mechanism for enhancing community resilience and self-organising. Following on from C, Blake’s research demonstrates that to address hunger we need interlinked solutions to create longer term change. She identified how different types of and combinations of activity (food banks, pantries, shared meals, holiday clubs, cafes) achieves different levels of resilience— *Catching*, *Capacity Building*, and *Transforming* within three areas of practice—*food*, *social and economic* [R3]. While there is coordination in some places, generally food support is offered in isolation. Blake’s Food Ladders framework articulates a roadmap to understand local food systems that can signpost what type and where further interventions are needed. It also offers a way for local government, industry and third sector organisations to collaborate to achieve shared aims and capitalise on available assets and resources [R5].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- R1.** Blake, M. K., Mellor, J., & Crane, L. (2010). Buying Local Food: Shopping Practices, Place, and Consumption Networks in Defining Food as “Local”. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 100(2), 409–426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00045601003595545>
- R2.** Blake, M. K. (2017). Building an unjust foodscape: shifting governance regimes, urban place making and the making of Chinese food as ordinary in Hong Kong. *Local Environment*, 23(11), 1047–1062. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2017.1328674>
- R3.** Blake, M. K. (2019). More than Just Food: Food Insecurity and Resilient Place Making through Community Self-Organising. *Sustainability*, 11(10), 2942. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su11102942>
- R4.** Blake, M.K. (2020). *Releasing Social Value from Surplus Food: An evaluation of the impact of British Red Cross funding to help address loneliness and Isolation through FareShare food redistribution*. Final Report. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.30789.27361>
- R5.** Blake, M.K. (2017). *Feeding Affordances and Decent Helpings - Working together to reduce food poverty and improve public health*. Final Report research grant R/145185. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.20070.93762/1>
- R6.** Relton, C., Crowder, M., Blake, M., & Strong, M. (2020). Fresh street: the development and feasibility of a place-based, subsidy for fresh fruit and vegetables. *Journal of Public Health*, Fdaa190. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdaa190>

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Impact 1: Creating organisational change leading to enriched foodscapes

Charities

Food systems and the food support sector can lack cohesion and collaboration (Finding D). Blake's work has been credited with promoting and delivering collaborative working and widespread sectoral change. Food ladders are mentioned in discussions and meetings amongst food sector organisations from large organisations such as Food Ethics Council and Feeding Britain to smaller charities [S1].

Blake's research (Findings A, C and D) has enabled **FareShare** (the UK's largest charity fighting hunger and food waste supplying to more than 11k charities) to:

- **Better understand the role of food support** and work more strategically. Dr Blake's work *"provided us with key insights ... simply providing food does not necessarily increase social interaction. It depends how the organisations use and engage with the food. This helps us to know who we can engage with to properly tackle the issues of loneliness"* [S2].
- **Redefine their key performance indicators:** *"FareShare can evaluate and report on its impact as well as allow for data driven decision making across all levels of the organisation [S2]"*. FareShare now measures how their support enables people to increase diet diversity and make healthier choices [S2].
- **Demonstrate their social impact** to food industry partners. FareShare has **extended its long-term funding** from key players in the food sector valued at around £19 million [S2] and **Expanded from working with one major retailer**, Tesco, to four including Asda and Waitrose.

In addition, Blake's research has supported food charities across the UK including **City Harvest London**, a charity supporting 300 organisations in the city [S3] and **The Bread and Butter Thing** (TBBT), a Manchester-based charity. TBBT's CEO identifies Blake's work as ground-breaking and accessible to practitioners *"Dr, Blake is one of the few academics in the field who have not only researched this but presented it in a pragmatic, practical way that practitioners in the sector can use"* [S4].

Business and industry

Blake's research has influenced major producers in the food sector including Sanworth Brothers, GreenCore, Institute of Grocery Distribution, Business in The Community (BiTC) and the British Poultry Council leading to changes in working practices, strategies, and campaigns.

- Blake contributed to the new **Greencore** Sustainability Report and Plan launched in 2020. The plan aims to roll out their community engagement programme **#StartsWithFood** to every site and sets out a commitment to ensure 100% of surplus product is donated to communities by 2022. *"For a business understanding how community groups work and how best to work with them can be daunting. Dr Blake steered us through those...discussions and planning and helped us to think about it in a new way"* (Head of Sustainability, Greencore [S5]).
- The Strategic Partnerships Director at **BiTC** credits Blake's work with dramatically shifting their perspective, *"She has helped us better understand the food and charity landscape by introducing us to her research... We recognise now that food donations and access to emergency food are only part of the solution"* [S6]. Underpinned by the

Food Ladders Framework, BiTC have developed a programme that matches community organisations with businesses to strengthen capacity in 10 cities across the UK.

Impact 2: Generating collaborations and policy for social welfare and health

Community-based networks, policy, and food action plans

Blake initially targeted councils and regional alliances in the North of England with particularly high rates of poverty and more limited resources. Blake's collaborations with local authorities and key stakeholders led to concrete changes in how local councils (now responsible for public health services) tackle food policy. They are now addressing poverty-based food insecurity through coordinating community services to meet the needs of constituents, moving away from previous approaches reliant on individual interventions.

Examples include:

- **Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council (DMBC)**'s Food Action Plan. According to the Director of Public Health Blake's research has been "*instrumental...and has highlighted to us the role of community organisations in supporting communities to eat well*" [S7]. Leading to DMBC being recognised as a "sustainable food city" in 2017 by Sustain, which granted them funding for their Veg Cities project. With Clare Relton (Queen Mary University London) Blake received £1.7 million in funding from the National Institute for Health Research to partner with Doncaster Council to implement a fruit and vegetable voucher scheme to those living in low-income neighbourhoods [S8].
- **Sheffield City Council's (SCC)** Health Impact Assessment on diet and obesity now includes the recommendation that council and partners follow the principles of food ladders across provision [S9]. Recommendations were adopted by the Food Board in October 2020 *Dr Blake is a key expert in directly shaping Food Policy in the City* (Health Improvement Principal, SCC [S7]). Linked to this **Yes2Ventures** has secured council space for a social enterprise food-based business and skills incubator.
- **Together4Sheffield**, a consortium with voluntary and community organisations, is actively mapping support across the city using the Food Ladder's framework. This is generating new collaborations and new knowledge about the support available.
- **Manchester City Council** Established a series of learning lunches targeting food support organisations. The first session drew more than 30 participants from across the city. Through this Manchester is improving capacity among the third sector to enhance access to additional support for those receiving food support. This will escalate the mobility of beneficiaries up the ladder through referrals and increase collaboration across the network to create useful intelligence and influence transformation in the city's foodscape [S7].

The reach of Blake's work has extended across the UK and Food Ladders is now being used in plans being developed in Birmingham, Newcastle, Liverpool, and Glasgow. Food Ladders are also being promoted in Ireland by Food Cloud (Ireland's version of FareShare) and Ireland's All Island Poverty Network co-chaired by SafeFood and The [Food Standards Agency—Ireland](#).

National collaborations and programmes

- **FareShare** now collaborates with other national organisations, (e.g. **British Red Cross**) to address additional needs arising alongside food insecurity, including poor mental health and social isolation (Findings B, C). FareShare continued to seek Blake's expertise and funded her to evaluate this work. They paid Blake to embed the Food

Ladders framework during and after COVID-19 to support their network of charity organisations.

- A network of ten independent surplus food redistributors, **Xcess**, was established with Blake's help with the aim of releasing more surplus food from the supply chain to achieve maximum social value. *"The use of (Blake's) food ladders ... (is) a simple replicable model to show how important it is to unlock more surplus food and redistribute this through channels that address each aspect of support"* (CEO, **TBBT** [S4]). Smaller or more regional redistribution organisations are now more visible to policy makers alongside the large redistributors at meetings with the food industry, WRAP, Defra and others.

Impact 3: Reducing vulnerability to food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic and providing a roadmap for the future

Blake was invited to join the **UK Voluntary and Charity Sector Emergency Planning Board's** response to COVID-19 and Brexit. The group is led by FareShare. *"Our work with Dr Blake has helped us to have a wide overview of the food support landscape in the UK and therefore we are uniquely placed to lead on this work"* [S2]. The group identifies and promotes interventions including providing vouchers and hardship funds, improving food access and creating diverse foodscapes, linking communities and informing government policy. It drew directly on Blake's Food Ladders framework to structure its collective response (Finding D). This changed Defra policy with regard to crisis food support, shifting from centralised food parcels to funding collaborative local provision. It also influenced the children's hunger policy change resulting in £170m in grants to local authorities in the winter of 2020 to support low-income families

"The board has improved inter government relations with the third sector. Having Dr Blake on the board, with her many years of research knowledge, has given it credibility which is incredibly powerful" Independent Government Policy Advisor [S10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- S1.** Testimonial letter from the Non-Executive Director of Company Shop and Chair of Good Food Barnsley.
- S2.** Testimonial letters from FareShare including Head of Organisational Development, Head of Information Centre, Impact and Evaluation Manager and Head of Network Partnerships.
- S3.** Testimonial letter CEO City Harvest, London.
- S4.** Testimonial letter from CEO The Bread and Butter Thing.
- S5.** Testimonial letters from Commercial organisations-IGD and Greencore. Greencore Sustainability Report 2020.
- S6.** Testimonial letter from Strategic Partnerships Director at BiTC.
- S7.** Testimonial Letters from city councils: Director of Public Health, Doncaster; Food Response Lead, Manchester; and Health Improvement Principal, Sheffield.
- S8.** Fresh Street webpage (<https://freshstreet.uk/>) describing the £1.7M NIHR project in collaboration with Doncaster Council to implement a fruit and vegetable voucher scheme.
- S9.** 2020 Health Impact Assessment from the Diet and Obesity Sheffield City Council.
- S10.** Testimonial Letter from Independent Government Policy Advisor specialising in food and public health, Poverty and Inequality Commissioner, Poverty and Inequality Commission Scotland and member of the National Lottery Community Fund Scotland.