

RESEARCH ARTICLES

Tackling Global Food Waste by Leveraging Social Entrepreneurship and Technology

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Food waste is a critical global issue with significant economic, social, and environmental consequences, contributing to resource depletion, greenhouse gas emissions, and food insecurity. As technological advancements reshape social entrepreneurship, there is increasing potential for innovative and scalable solutions to emerge, engaging both individuals and businesses in tackling food waste more effectively. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of such initiatives by examining the real-life example of Too Good To Go, a leading social-tech enterprise that leverages digital platforms to redistribute surplus food. The analysis highlights how technology-driven entrepreneurship can foster sustainable behaviors and create impactful change. Additionally, the findings suggest that consistent exposure to sustainability-driven initiatives, combined with collaborations between enterprises, governments, and educational institutions, can further enhance awareness and long-term behavioral shifts. As we move into the future, the role of social-tech enterprises will become increasingly vital in promoting a more sustainable and responsible approach to food consumption and waste management.

Introduction

Climate change is a pressing issue and there is another global issue costing us approximately USD 1 trillion annually (UNFCCC, 2024)-the food waste crisis.

In a world where a third of humanity faces food insecurity (United Nations, 2024), many nations are starting to face water crises, the quality of land for crop growth is degrading, and discarded food in landfills is releasing significant levels of methane - food loss and waste proves to be an economic, social and environmental burden. Unfortunately, despite some national and international initiatives and increasing conversation regarding this problem, enough is not being done to minimize and rectify it. Instead, the statistics suggest that it is just worsening.

With social entrepreneurship primarily focused on innovating to address societal issues, it has become a key player in the fight against food waste. In particular, the rise of social-tech entrepreneurship presents a promising solution, as it leverages technology to transcend boundaries, engage the masses, and enhance accessibility and sustainability. In light of this, this

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research paper aims to answer the following question: To what extent does social entrepreneurship, leveraging technology, provide a feasible solution for tackling the global food waste crisis?

Background & Problem Statement

Food waste consists of food meant for human consumption that is lost or discarded across all stages of the supply chain, from farmland to households. Food waste, therefore, entails two main concepts - food loss and food wastage - the former pertains to waste that occurs during the early phases of food production, while the latter involves food that is completely safe for consumption but is thrown away for other reasons (Lewis, 2022).

Food waste is a pressing global issue. In 2022, for example, it was reported that the global population produced approximately one billion metric tons of food waste, accounting for roughly 17% of the total food supply (Tiseo, 2023). Household food waste was the largest contributor to this, making up 60% of the overall total, and the food service industry was the second largest source (Alves, 2025). Country-based findings suggest that “China wastes an estimated 108.7 million tonnes of food per year while India discards 78.1 million tonnes. The United States creates 24.7 million tonnes of food waste annually, while in Europe, France and Germany produce between 3.9 and 6.5 million tonnes per year” (Fleck, 2024). The same has been illustrated in an infographic below:



Examining the difference in food waste patterns between developed and developing nations reveals that in the former, over 40% of waste occurs at retail and consumer levels, whereas in the latter, 40% is lost during post-harvest and processing stages (Robinson, 2024). Fresh fruits and vegetables are the most frequently discarded foods, much of which is thrown away

at the retail stage due to quality standards that prioritize appearance over functionality. For example, in the US, around half of all produce is discarded because it is considered too “ugly” to eat, leading to 60 million tons of fruits and vegetables wasted each year (Lai, 2021). At the household level, waste often arises from poor management practices, inadequate skills, and a lack of knowledge (Baggini, 2024). Additionally, food waste is a critical concern at the consumer level due to unsustainable practices in the hospitality sector, including those by restaurants, hotels, and even in related industries such as aviation. As per an article published by Walker in 2020, for example, in the UK, over two million tons of waste was being produced by the food and hospitality industry every year. Of this, hotels were found to be producing 79,000 tons of food waste (9% of total food waste from the sector), pubs were producing 173,000 tons of food waste (19% of total food waste from the sector), and restaurants were producing 199,100 tons of food waste (22% of total food waste from the sector). Certain practices, such as buffet-style food consumption, have been highlighted as particularly problematic and have contributed to this problem extensively.

The food waste issue affects society, economies, and the environment. Discarding food means wasting valuable resources used in its production, including land, natural resources, environmental costs, and biodiversity. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) found that food waste is responsible for wasting a quarter of America’s water supply in the form of uneaten food, amounting to USD \$172 billion in wasted water (Forbes, 2018). They also calculated that over \$220 billion is spent on growing, transporting, and processing about 70 million tons of food that ultimately ends up in landfills (Leonard, 2022). Consequently, food that is wasted consumes up to 21% of freshwater, 19% of fertilizers, 18% of cropland, and 21% of landfill space in the country (Forbes, 2018). Furthermore, globally, food waste contributes to one-third of all greenhouse gas emissions caused by humans and results in 8% of annual emissions (UNFCCC, 2024). When food decomposes in landfills, it produces methane, a potent greenhouse gas that is twenty-five times more effective than carbon dioxide, exacerbating the ongoing climate crisis.

Given this context, food waste is a significant factor hindering the achievement of various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the United Nations. Goal 12, for example, addresses ‘Responsible consumption and production,’ while goal 11 focuses on ‘Sustainable cities and communities.’ Currently, food waste can be seen as a clear instance of market failure that illustrates how negligence in food consumption and production leads to inefficient resource allocation, resulting in negative externalities that inhibit nations from reaching sustainability. While numerous initiatives exist at both international and national levels to tackle food waste, innovation remains vital to managing the issue and preventing it from worsening. User-

friendly and convenient innovations could offer a solution to this crisis, with social entrepreneurs playing a key role in their introduction and implementation.

A Theoretical Review of Social Entrepreneurship

When reviewing the field of social entrepreneurship, the literature recognizes three key terms with a clear link: **social entrepreneurship** refers to the active process where individuals, known as **social entrepreneurs**, establish and expand organizations classified as **social enterprises** (Defourny & Nyssens, 2008; Mair & Martí, 2006). There is no concrete definition of social entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurs, but several attempts have been made to define it. For instance, the definition by Dees (2001), initially published in 1998, is one that is commonly accepted, and it describes social entrepreneurs as change agents in the social sector who commit to generating and maintaining social value (not merely personal profit), identify and consistently pursue opportunities that align with their mission, engage in ongoing innovation, adaptation, and learning, act assertively without being limited by their current resources, and demonstrate heightened accountability to the communities they serve and the outcomes they achieve. Further studies have focussed on the processes of social entrepreneurship. Mort, Weerawardena, and Carnegie (2003) characterize it as a complex concept that embodies virtuous entrepreneurial behavior aimed at fulfilling social missions, coherence of purpose amid moral challenges, and key decision-making traits like innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking. Mair and Marti (2004) define it as a process involving innovative resource use and combinations to pursue opportunities, targeting sustainable social change that meets fundamental human needs. Zahra et al. (2009) regard social entrepreneurship as encompassing activities aimed at identifying, defining, and exploiting opportunities to improve social wealth by either creating new ventures or innovating within existing organizations.

Despite differing opinions, there is consensus on several core characteristics that define the boundaries of actions of social entrepreneurs and enterprises (Martin & Osberg, 2007; Nicholls, 2006a). All definitions highlight a primary focus on social or environmental outcomes rather than mere profit maximization. Another key attribute is innovation, which can manifest through novel organizational models, products, services, or fresh perspectives on social issues. Many social entrepreneurship initiatives merge these innovative approaches. Additionally, numerous scholars emphasize how social entrepreneurs promote their innovative solutions through market-driven, performance-focused actions, aiming to expand their reach and achieve broader, more sustainable impacts. Furthermore, what makes social entrepreneurship as impactful as it is is that it challenges the status quo. The status quo is essentially the state of current affairs. Challenging the aforementioned is one of the most powerful tools to enhance our world and is at the core of the changemaker mindset as it allows for different perspectives to be explored, opinions to be weighed, and rather than

Type of social entrepreneurship	Definition
Community	A community social entrepreneur focuses on addressing the needs of a specific local area, typically the community in which they reside (Hayes, 2024). They are not as focused on the particular details of their initiative; instead, their main goal is to contribute positively to their surrounding community.
Non-Profit	Non-profit social entrepreneurs are the most common, with their enterprises characterized by goals that aim to benefit individuals, although not exclusively their immediate community. Such organizations work similarly to traditional organizations; however, the key difference is that they prioritize the allocation of maximum funding toward their mission rather than seeking financial returns for investors in a bid to continue enhancing their purpose (Indeed, 2025).
Transformational	A transformational social enterprise is created when an entrepreneur creates an organization with the aim of tackling an issue that is perceived to be overlooked by the government. This kind of organization usually adheres to the processes and practices typical of a specific government department or ministry and may, therefore, be subject to various regulations and laws (Indeed, 2025). They may also form direct partnerships with relevant government agencies.
Global	When enterprises seek to address broad social issues like poverty, mental health challenges, or inadequate living conditions, the efforts of the social entrepreneur transcend boundaries and geographical limitations, making their initiatives global social enterprises (Hayes, 2024).

assumptions, common goals and truths to guide the world towards a better future. All these aspects align with what Nicholls and Cho (2006) identify as the essential elements of social entrepreneurship: social impact, innovation, and market orientation.

Zia Khan, Chief Innovation Officer at the Rockefeller Foundation, gives a good explanation of how the impact and success of social entrepreneurship might be deduced by stating that “Social innovation is not just an invention. Social innovation has to do with how that invention, whether it’s a change in a product or a process or a new organization, actually changes the status quo, is sustainable over time, and has a big scalable impact on a large group of people, particularly poorer, vulnerable populations” (Milligan & Schwab, 2015).

When reviewing the literature on social entrepreneurship, there have also been attempts at categorizing it into different types based on the reach, scale, purpose, and impact. The table below contains definitions of four commonly identified types of social entrepreneurship.

Social entrepreneurship has the ability to reshape existing markets as well as play a crucial role in establishing new markets and niches, exemplified by movements like fair trade (Nicholls, 2010) and microfinance (Armendariz & Morduch, 2007). Microfinance specifically has been highlighted in the literature as a hallmark of social entrepreneurship as a result of its global impact and recognition with Grameen Bank and its founder, Muhammad Yunus, being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Overall, the purpose of social entrepreneurship may differ from stakeholder to stakeholder. For civil society actors, social entrepreneurship can be a catalyst for systemic social change (Nicholls, 2006), a platform for innovative partnerships (Austin et al., 2006), or a framework for political change and empowerment (Alvord et al., 2004); for governments, social entrepreneurship, largely through social enterprises, presents potential solutions to shortcomings in welfare provision (Nyssens, 2007); for

businesses, social entrepreneurship opens new market avenues (Karamchandani et al., 2009) and aligns with the growth of socially responsible investments (Freireich & Fulton, 2009).

The Emergence of Social-Tech Entrepreneurship

In the last few decades, the world has witnessed some disruptive events. Of these, the most prominent have been the growing inequalities in society, the acceleration of climate change, and, very obviously, the COVID-19 pandemic (Calderini et al., 2023). It is a common debate among scholars whether these events are to be perceived as game-changers triggering new socio-economic paths or accelerators of already well-established socio-economic trends. Regardless, it is inarguable that our world and societies have entered what may be recognized as the ‘next normal.’ As per Sneader and Singhal (2020), “In this unprecedented new reality, we will witness a dramatic restructuring of the economic and social order in which business and society have traditionally operated.”

This shift has brought about an inflection point. This is triggered by two factors - the need for digital solutions is urgent, and, at the same time, the practical barriers to their deployment are coming down (Courtois & Bonnici, 2022). Digital technologies enable reach to an extent rarely witnessed historically. Beyond reach, it is also a powerful tool for empowerment, providing greater control and access to information for a great percentage of the population - many of whom were isolated previously. There is also an ongoing commoditization of technologies, particularly in the digital and software domain. This means that there is a decreasing adoption cost and increasing ease of use and user-friendliness (Meige & Schmitt, 2015). This is symbolized by the close-to-universal ownership of mobile phones - a basic tool of digital communication in the 21st century.

Considering the above, social entrepreneurship is undergoing a dramatic transformation as a result of the varying factors, i.e., emerging societal challenges, evolving consumer preferences towards sustainability, advocacy for more equitable societies, and new technological opportunities (Desa & Kotha, 2006; Poonamallee et al., 2020). The new genre forging the values of social entrepreneurship fueled by technological opportunities is merging and is well poised to mend the economic and social wounds that have been inflicted on the world. This is often referred to as social-tech entrepreneurship and is recognized as being crucial in inaugurating a new generation of innovation-driven policies inspired by a more inclusive idea of growth (Calderini et al., 2021).

Many question the vitality of social-tech entrepreneurs in a world where high-tech companies exist. There is, however, a stark difference in how the both operate. As stated by researchers Geoffrey Desa and Suresh Kotha (2006), social-tech entrepreneurs specifically aim to “develop and deploy technology-driven solutions to address social needs.” Essentially, these types of entrepreneurs are not only likely to leverage technology to make parts of

their operations more efficient but also to prompt more disruptive change in the manner that a social problem is addressed whilst safeguarding economic sustainability.

Alongside promoting more equitable and inclusive innovation, social-tech entrepreneurship has the potential to significantly support and strengthen the third sector (Calderini et al., 2021). The severe repercussions of COVID-19 on health, social, and economic stability have amplified the challenges faced by charities, social enterprises, NGOs, and other third-sector organizations. While these groups have been crucial - and at times heroic - in tackling the aftermath of the pandemic, many have found it difficult to exhibit resilience on a larger scale resulting from significant rises in operating expenses, responsibilities, and risks.

The Role of Social-Tech Entrepreneurship in the Fight Against Food Waste

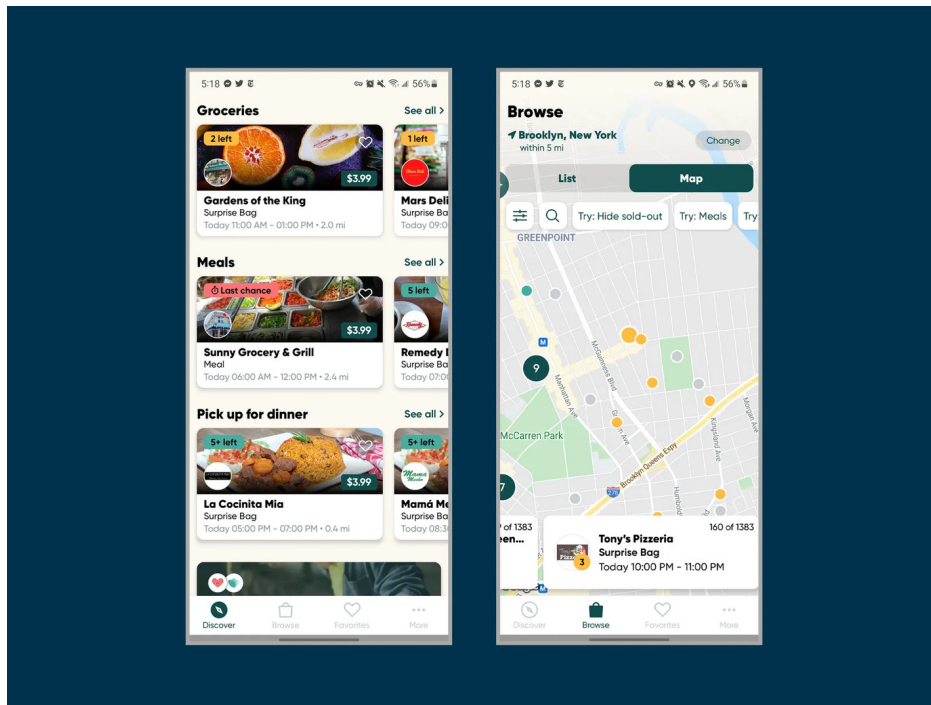
Where does social-tech entrepreneurship fit into the conversation regarding the food waste crisis? One of the key features of this intersection between social entrepreneurship and technology is the benefits it holds for the sustainability of our future world. Digital technologies, including digital platforms, software, applications, or infrastructure, have the ability to simplify access to various sustainable actions as a consequence of providing an open, accessible interface to connect, communicate, and share sustainable ideas and projects (Skivko, 2021). This implies that social-tech entrepreneurship has the ability to trigger a complete revolution in the space of food waste management. And, arguably, this is already being done.

Too Good To Go (TGTG) serves as an excellent example of this. Established in Denmark in 2015, the initiative was inspired by one of the founders witnessing perfectly edible food being discarded at a buffet. Thus, to combat food waste, a group of tech-savvy entrepreneurs from Europe developed TGTG, a social enterprise facilitated through a mobile application (Irina, 2022). According to the website, the organization “now operates in 19 countries across Europe and America and has expanded to a robust community of 100 million registered users and 175,000 active partner businesses worldwide” (Too Good To Go, 2025). The company also holds a B Corp certification, which is evidence of its dedication to social and environmental standards.

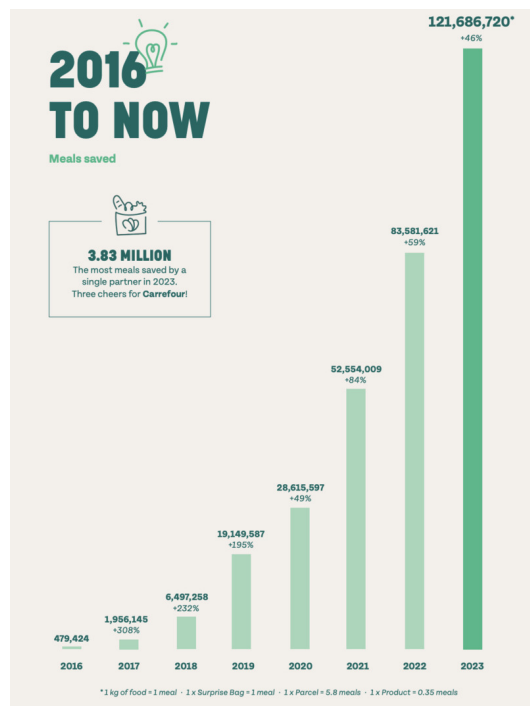
One of the primary features of a social enterprise is its ability to recognize a challenge and then address it. TGTG’s mission statement emphasizes its goal to motivate and enable everyone to fight food waste and save food that is still too good to go. While food waste and its worldwide implications may be recognized as the challenge here, it might be more precise to state that the bigger challenge the company was trying to address was to develop a contemporary solution that promotes easy involvement and prevention-focused social movement. In a true social-tech entrepreneurship style, by

leveraging technology and creating an app that features a straightforward, user-friendly, and convenient design, TGTG has seemingly triumphed over this challenge.

Therefore, how does TGTG promote participation - another essential aspect of social enterprises? This is achieved through its innovative approach. The solution bridges the gap between food producers (such as bakeries and restaurants) or food distributors (like grocery stores) and customers in various major cities within its operational countries. To utilize TGTG to reduce their food wastage, food producers and distributors are required to set up an account on the app and pay an annual subscription fee. After completing these steps, they can start to showcase their food offers. However, this is not done ordinarily; instead, it is done in a unique and enticing TGTG gamified format whereby the food is bundled and then sold in what is known as 'surprise bags,' typically ranging from \$4 to \$6. These bags are then advertised on the app and may be collected by the customers within a designated timeframe, usually toward the end of the business's operating hours. As mentioned previously, the company has ensured its interface and customer engagement process are exceptionally straightforward. The customer only needs to download the app, create an account, and then begin searching for 'surprise bags' from selected locations or providers - users are able to discover available deals by being presented with a list of all the participating providers or by searching for them based on a specific location using the TGTG map (as seen in the image on the left). While the customers can control which provider they wish to get their 'surprise bag' from, they are unable to select the contents of the bag. This is another strategic choice by TGTG as it creates a 'trick-or-treat' experience for adults, keeping them engaged in the process through an element of mystery. The end result is that consumers gain satisfaction through the discounted food items they receive and the positive contribution made to the environment. According to information provided by TGTG on their website, each 'surprise bag' saved represents 2.5kg of CO₂ that did not enter the environment (Le Gall, 2019).



The figure below from Too Good To Go's 2023 Impact Report illustrates the number of 'surprise bags' rescued by TGTG each year from 2016 to 2023.



Beyond TGTG, other initiatives, including Olio, an application connecting neighbors with each other and with local businesses so surplus stuff can be shared, not thrown away, also exist. Moreover, these apps tackle food waste at the consumer, household, and food retail levels. Other apps and initiatives are also in the market combating food waste lower down in the supply chain. The main takeaway here, however, is that social-tech enterprises are powerful. They have the ability to bring the global population together to combat food waste. TGTG was an initiative that started in Denmark and is now Global.

Olio, founded in 2015 in the UK, now has users in 60 countries. So, no initiative is ever too small; if social enterprises leverage technology positively and innovatively, gain a competitive edge, and provide some form of value proposition to consumers, they can inject themselves at any point of the supply chain and find a way to minimize food waste. Their role is crucial and one which can dictate the future of societies, economies, and planets.

Conclusion

By its very nature, social enterprises prioritize addressing a social issue in an innovative manner. As analyzed in this paper, the world has entered what is being recognized as a new normal as a result of multiple disrupting events occurring over recent decades, including increasing social inequalities and the COVID-19 pandemic. This shift has also brought about a transformation in social entrepreneurship, which is mainly facilitated by technological advancement. Social-tech enterprises, as they are formally recognized, are gaining importance in a world where the global involvement of populations is necessary for fighting some of the biggest economic, social, and environmental burdens - one of which proves to be food waste.

In assessing the extent to which social-tech entrepreneurship provides a feasible solution for tackling the global food waste crisis, the achievements of companies such as Too Good To Go stand out and prove that they are very viable. As we move into the future, initiatives, regardless of how small they may be, leveraging the right technology and finding innovative ways to address a challenge and involve people can be powerful. To enhance their effectiveness, these platforms may also take the opportunity to collaborate with governmental bodies and institutions, such as schools and universities, to educate and raise awareness regarding sustainable behaviors and practices toward food management. Constant exposure to such information and the ability to practice sustainable behaviors will ultimately cultivate behaviors that may prove to be the answer to what the world has been missing in the fight against food waste.

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