"First we give them food, then we give them love." (CEO, Social Supermarket)

This quote captures the complexity and humanity of food assistance. Food insecurity is a wicked global problem, and a growing concern in high-income countries, driven by rising living costs, stagnating wages, and widening inequities. Despite the scale and persistence of food insecurity, and decades of well-intentioned charitable responses, food assistance remains centred on short-term emergency relief, rather than as business models requiring strategic design, coordination, and governance. Consequently, many services lack the operational resources and systems needed to assist people transition out of food insecurity.

This thesis investigates how food assistance models can be designed and operated more effectively to support pathways out of food insecurity. It approaches food assistance as a system of interdependent organisational models embedded within broader welfare, social, and economic systems. Achieving long-term food security requires integrated supports and connections alongside food – addressing underlying causes like low income, insecure housing, and social exclusion. However, there remains limited understanding of how food assistance can be strategically redesigned to address these systemic drivers.

The overarching research question guiding this thesis is: *"How can food assistance models operate more effectively to facilitate clients' pathways towards food security?"* The research is underpinned by the premise that food assistance models are, in practice, business models dependent on complex resource flows, institutional limitations, and stakeholder relationships.

The thesis comprises three qualitative studies interconnected through a shared conceptual framework and dataset of fifty in-depth interviews with key decision-makers across the food assistance sector in high-income countries. Using a systems thinking lens, the research explores how food assistance can move beyond charity to support food security with dignity through improved business models.

Study One uses thematic analysis to develop a typology of food assistance models, examining how different models operate, and their potential impact on client dignity and outcomes. It critiques traditional models and highlights the importance of dignified, client-centred, integrated approaches. **Study Two** then applies Resource Dependence Theory to examine how those models access and manage resources – food, money, people, infrastructure – introducing a three-level framework (system, community, organisational) for improving sustainability and effectiveness.

Study Three builds on the past two studies, exploring innovative models through multiple case studies, identifying progressive models and elements that address immediate needs and long-term food security.

Collectively, these findings reconceptualise food assistance as a system of business models requiring strategic design, resourcing and coordination, rather than fixed charitable forms. The thesis integrates Resource Dependence and Social Innovation Theories, advancing both theory and practice. It provides actionable insights and tools for service providers, policymakers, and funders seeking to build more dignified, resilient, and sustainable food assistance systems, across geographical and system contexts. Key implications include the need for cross-sector partnerships and greater investment in innovative, place-based, and community-driven models that empower clients and reframe food assistance as socially-driven business models.

Future research could evaluate how scalable, socially impactful, and policy-integrated models addressing immediate and long-term food security might transform food assistance into sustainable, systemic support.