

Relational and Logistical Dimensions of Agricultural Food Recovery: Evidence from California Growers and Recovery Organizations

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Background

- Efforts to recover on-farm food losses by food banks or businesses serving secondary markets are often framed as a “win-win” solution to both food waste and hunger.¹
- While previous research highlights numerous economic and logistical challenges associated with agricultural food recovery, including transportation and storage, labor, and timing,^{2,3} few studies explore these challenges from the perspective of growers.
- Past research also largely neglects the role of stakeholders’ social relations in facilitating or impeding efforts to overcome various challenges to food recovery.
- Our study seeks to address these gaps, drawing on qualitative interviews with fresh produce growers and food recovery organizations in California.

Data & Methods

We conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with growers and recovery organizations in California. First, we interviewed 25 growers of leafy greens, tomatoes, and peaches, three major crops with varied production methods. Next, we interviewed 15 staff at emergency food organizations and businesses serving secondary produce markets.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in an inductive process. Through multiple rounds of coding, we identified the relational and economic/logistical dynamics of food recovery as a central theme.

Results

Interviews suggest that food recovery efforts can face two types of challenges: (1) economic and logistical challenges and (2) relational challenges. Success is less likely when there are significant challenges in either domain. However, certain relational strategies have enabled stakeholders to overcome challenges in one or both domains. Below, we explain how interviewees deployed various relational strategies at two key stages in the relationship.

Stage One: Establishing Recovery Partnerships

Establishing successful partnerships with growers can be a major challenge for recovery outlets, who often reported that it is difficult to identify or reach growers who might be interested in participating. Interviewees described three relational strategies that helped address social and material barriers at this stage: **connecting through established networks**, **developing mutual understandings of partners’ worldviews and day-to-day operations**, and **finding shared interests**.

Recovery outlet: Before this, I worked on three different organic farms in the community. So just through having that position -- I met a lot of other farmers from working at the farmers’ market and just kind of being immersed in that community of people.

Grower: [The food bank staff] talked her way past our shipping department and got me and then said, “can I just walk through?” And then she pointed and said, “where does this go, where does this go?” When I said this goes to goats, she said, “we’ll take it.” And that started the relationship of realizing what they could take.

Recovery outlet: Our food sourcers are people from industry, they live in those communities, they already know everyone there.... It’s all about trusted partners.

Recovery outlet: I found I could not do it over the telephone or email. I find that one-on-one, the inspiration comes through. They hear that I know what I’m talking about and then if there’s enough time and personal contact, we can drop deeper and deeper until they recognize that we really have something to offer them.

Recovery outlet: My pitch is, I’m not here to tell you people are hungry. I’m here to say that there is a way to donate your excess and increase your prosperity at the same time. We want to be integral to your business model.

Grower: We give away lots of produce at the farmers’ market. The food bank will take whatever’s left at the end of the day, and as farmers, we’re happy. We don’t have to pack it up and take it home with us, so we’re pretty happy to let them have that stuff.

Stage Two: Sustaining Recovery Partnerships

Sustaining recovery partnerships requires partners to **offer each other flexibility and consistency** and **engage in collaborative problem-solving** to work through inevitable obstacles. These strategies require nontrivial investments of time, money, and/or attention that are often in short supply. However, stakeholders who are willing and able to conduct this relational work often achieve long-term benefits.

Recovery outlet: Growers want some consistency because they’re dealing 23 ½ hours a day with exceptions. You’re going to be here on Wednesday morning at 9 to pick this product up, as opposed to, “Well I’ll be there on Wednesday except maybe if some volunteer doesn’t make it in.”

Grower: When the juicing company takes the culls away from us, it simplifies their life if they have a minimum stop time. They go where they’re going to get good service. And where there’s enough volume to load their trucks. It’s not just the fruit they’re coming for, they’re also coming for the service.

Grower: I sold the food bank a bunch of totes. I told them, “This is the way to do this. Don’t do this in cartons.” Then we worked a deal with the cooler, where they donated the cooling. It stays there for the week, and then they can efficiently send a six-pallet truck over, pick it up, and then they don’t get inundated with, “Here comes two loads of product.”

Recovery outlet: We’ve been able to develop programs with farms where they’re going out and doing a second harvest for a certain grade of field-packed produce or setting up lines in their operations. For us, it’s just proving to farmers that there is going to be just enough demand on our side to make that investment worth it.

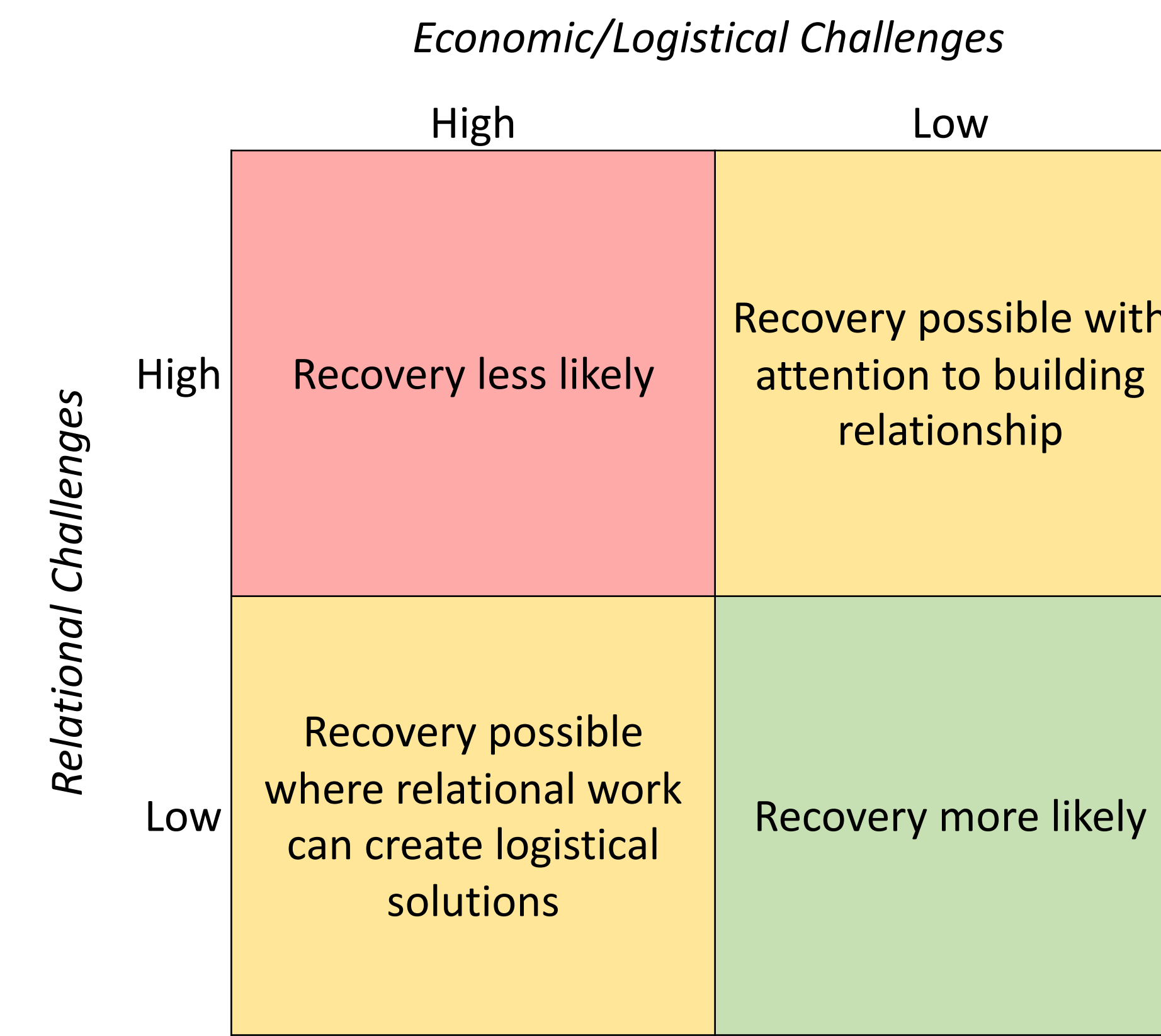


Figure 1. Key Challenges for Agricultural Food Recovery

Conclusion

Relational work is a key dimension of agricultural food recovery that has often been overlooked. Stakeholders’ relationships can be an additional barrier to recovery alongside the better-documented logistical and financial barriers. At the same time, certain kinds of relational work can be a promising strategy for addressing these constraints.

By examining the experiences of both growers and their partners in food recovery outlets, our research highlights what it will take to make food recovery more successful. The path forward appears less rosy than presumed by those who view the challenge as just creating a better “app,” but also more promising than presumed by those who see structural challenges as insurmountable. Our work suggests that food recovery is difficult yet possible in some scenarios. Its success largely depends on the ability to build sustained relationships capable of addressing the economic costs and logistical challenges associated with recovery.

References

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