

# BIA FOOD *Initiative*

MATCHING  
SURPLUS WITH  
SCARCITY

***Brendan Dempsey***

Founding Member of Bia Food Initiative







**Karen Horgan**

Project Manager at Bia Food Initiative

## IN IRELAND, SIX TIMES MORE FOOD IS PRODUCED THAN IS CONSUMED.

As a significant food exporter, tremendous amounts of food often go to waste. And yet in Ireland, people still go hungry.

Five years ago, Brendan Dempsey was just a local man volunteering with St. Vincent de Paul. Working out of the trunk of his car, he would deliver donated food to hungry families in and around Cork. As needs grew, this idea caught fire and Brendan and others decided to begin the Bia Food Initiative (BiaFi) which is now one of the largest food distribution centers in Ireland.

Far from a church program or a soup kitchen, BiaFi decided to think big from the start. They studied best practices taking cues from successful models in the US and UK. "We're not a food bank, we're a nonprofit food distribution center which is a different approach," says Brendan. "As a food distribution center, we can have a greater impact because we have the technology, the traceability and the expertise. We can take food in bulk from distributors and manufacturers and can be compliant with regulations around food safety. Essentially, we are a business-to-business approach: a bridge between 25 companies that donate to 47 charities in the area that need food."

Prior to BiaFi's formation in 2012, the distribution of food to charities in the Cork area was often haphazard and less effective. "When we came along we found we filled a niche. Many companies that previously had been donating food had pulled back and stopped doing it because they were afraid of how the food was being handled. It's still their brand on the table."

But the BiaFi model benefits everyone in the chain. The companies that donate can interact with a streamlined system that tracks their deliveries and provides feedback on exactly

where their donation goes. So if Kellogg's wants to know how many families have benefited from their donation of Corn Flakes, that information is available through regular reports from BiaFi. Volunteers can manage the user-friendly software that runs the engine. The charities that run the soup kitchens and hostels can efficiently request, order, and see what is available.

"We think there are over 50,000 tons of surplus foods available in Ireland every year," explains Karen Horgan, Project Manager at Bia Food Initiative. "Of those 50,000 tons, if we could get our hands on 10,000 of them, we'd be doing really well in getting that out to charities that can use them for people." With help from The Ireland Funds, their work in Cork is expanding to Dublin and Galway.

While BiaFi is proud of the systems that have been established, the human factor of hunger is always present and is the core reason that the Bia Food Initiative exists. "You don't understand what poverty is until you go into a house, put a box of food on the table, and a 7 year old boy pulls up a chair and gets excited looking at the groceries," says Brendan. "You begin to understand the need and what poverty really is."

The systems are robust, the model is simple, and BiaFi is tackling hunger one meal at a time. "There really is a credible alternative to throwing surplus food in a bin," says Brendan. "We are getting that food out to the people who need it and we have to thank The Ireland Funds' donors for allowing us to do that. Because people like them had the faith in us to do it, the wheels are now turning."