Food insecurity and the covid pandemic: uneven impacts for food bank systems in Europe

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Abstract

Over the past few decades, large food banks that collect, warehouse, and redistribute food have become institutionalized across Europe. Although food banks gained increased visibility as important food relief mechanisms during the covid pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the crisis also highlighted their structural weaknesses and the fragility of the charity-based emergency food system. In particular, many European food banks faced higher costs, lower food stocks, uneven food donations, and lower numbers of volunteers and personnel as demand for food relief increased sharply. Also, many food banks lacked personal health and safety equipment for front-line staff and volunteers, many of whom were vulnerable or aged, thus forcing the closure of some charities due to health concerns. Yet, the impact of the pandemic was uneven across the continent as the covid pandemic strengthened some food banks while others were weakened. To explore these dynamics in detail, this paper utilizes in-depth interviews and surveys of key food bank operators in the Netherlands, Norway, and Greece to analyze how and why European food bank systems fared so differently from the pandemic. In short, the findings in this paper reveal how the Norwegian food bank system leveraged its position to increase fundraising and visibility, while the Netherlands food bank system suffered from long-term structural weaknesses, and the Greek food bank system was further embroiled in government tensions that threatened its existence. The preexisting structure of food bank systems, broader political economy, and historical context significantly impacted how food relief networks fared during the pandemic.

Keywords Food bank · Food system · Food insecurity · Covid pandemic · Europe

Abbreviations

FEBA European Food Banks Federation
ADFB Association of Dutch Food Banks
MD Food Banks Norway
FBG Food Bank Greece

Introduction

Food insecurity remains a critical issue in many places across the world, as persistent poverty limits food access for hundreds of millions of people worldwide (Food and Agriculture Organization 2021). In order to mitigate this crisis, a range of government, for-profit, and non-profit organizations have built programs to reduce food insecurity. However, the covid pandemic has challenged the viability of these systems as the crisis has produced a series of severe shocks. This includes widespread economic fallout, informal livelihood collapse, sharp increases in food insecurity, and disruptions in food system operations (Food and Agriculture Organization 2020).

Food banks, institutions that collect, systematize, and redistribute a range of unused and pre-packaged foods, have developed in more than one hundred countries across the world (The Global FoodBanking Network 2020). As part of this process, food banks redistribute food to beneficiary charities which then provide food to households. In this food system, food banks operationalize a broad definition of food waste. This conceptualization allows food banks to discursively frame their narrow food rescue operations as a solution to the food insecurity crisis (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003; Booth and Whelan 2014; Lohnes and Wilson 2018), even though food surplus is not interchangeable with food waste (Garrone et al. 2014; Teigiserova et al. 2020).

In order to align with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), food banks have positioned themselves to...
overcome key challenges associated with food insecurity, food waste, and climate change (The Global Food Banking Network 2021). To this end, food banks have worked in line with corporate sustainability initiatives and government food policies to expand their appeal to donors and stakeholders. However, as food banks expand across the world, it remains unclear if they can achieve their goal to reduce food insecurity.

In Europe and North America, scholars have critically examined the development of food bank systems. This includes analysis of food banks’ organizational structure, financial and human resources, state-civil society relations, and impacts (Williams et al. 2016; Lambie-Mumford and Mook et al. 2020). Even though the food bank is often promoted by advocates as community-led, self-funded, efficient, and high-impact, some researchers have suggested that these perspectives are not supported by data (Lorenz 2012; Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015; Lohnes and Wilson 2018). As noted by Lougheed and Spring (2020), “win–win” food redistribution solutions have the potential to create unintended consequences through new labor regimes, institutional bureaucracies, and regimes of control. Moreover, while food banks have increased their visibility during the covid pandemic, the crisis has also highlighted their structural limitations and the fragility of the charity-based emergency food system (Kulish 2020).

To start, scholars have analyzed how food banks have become key institutions in the neoliberal governance of food systems with the rise of the corporate driven charity sector (Poppendieck 1998; Lindenbaum 2016). To this point, food banks participate in the regulation of the labor market (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005; Dickinson 2019) and further marginalize the poor in food systems (Garthwaite 2016; Middleton et al. de Souza 2019; May et al. 2019). Also, as noted by Fisher (2017), the food industry has influenced food banks to the point whereby they are dependent on corporate donations yet are also politically and institutionally constrained by them. In line with Young et al. (2012), the mission of food banks may be compromised, as food insecurity is framed as a technical issue to be solved with the market rather than an outgrowth of food system inequality, injustice, or financial speculation. Furthermore, scholars have highlighted how food banks focus on size and influence rather than asking the difficult questions about the origins of food insecurity (Henderson 2004; Richards and Silvasti 2014).

Importantly, researchers note that there are no studies which show a direct correlation between the development of food banks and a reduction in food insecurity (Riches 2018). When food banks point to record numbers of food delivered or people served, these trends need to be placed in perspective (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015). Food banks only process a very small amount of the food waste produced in the globe given that they focus on surplus food (Riches 2018). Moreover, food banks have contradictory goals, as they promote food waste and food insecurity reduction at the same time that they depend on a constant supply of surplus food from the corporate sector (Mourad 2016).

Over the past few decades, food banks have developed rapidly across the European continent (European Food Banks Federation 2020a). Due to repeated economic downturns, inconsistent government support for social welfare, and increased corporate interest in surplus food reduction, food bank systems have become institutionalized across European society (Gentilini 2013; Galli et al. 2018; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2020). However, due to the covid pandemic, many European food banks have faced higher operational costs, uneven food donations, and lower numbers of volunteers and personnel. Also, at the beginning of the pandemic, numerous food banks did not have health and safety equipment for staff and volunteers, many of whom were elderly, thus forcing the closure of some charities (European Food Banks Federation 2021).

Yet, the impact of the pandemic was uneven across the continent as it strengthened some food banks while it weakened others. To explore these dynamics, this paper examines food bank systems in the Netherlands, Norway, and Greece to analyze how and why European food bank systems fared so differently from the pandemic. Two research questions drive this study. First, what are the structure, mission, and roles of food banks in Europe, and how and why have they developed? Second, how has the covid pandemic impacted food bank operations in Europe? Given the proliferation of research of food banking in North America and Europe, it is important to understand if the experiences of food banks during the pandemic have reinforced existing concerns about their development.

To answer these research questions, this study analyzes in-depth interviews and surveys of key food bank operators to examine the historical development, mission, structure, and outcomes of food bank systems in Europe. Although the perspective from existing and potential food bank clients is important, this paper focuses on the motivations and strategies food bank operators in order to understand how and why food banks navigated institutional challenges associated with the covid pandemic.

In short, the findings in this paper highlight how the covid pandemic reinforced already existing dynamics in each country. In the case of the Netherlands, the food bank system suffered long-term structural weaknesses which built on pre-existing structural weaknesses. In Norway, the food bank system leveraged its position to increase fundraising and visibility, while the Greek food bank system became further embroiled in government tensions that threatened its existence. Across Europe, food banks have found a convergence of political, social, and financial interests to facilitate their support and growth. The operational structure and roles
that food banks play in each locale is varied and reflects each specific context. This paper suggests that even with extreme shocks, as seen during the pandemic years, food banks may remain a part of the European food aid fabric, even if they have small impacts or maintain problematic ties to the state or corporate sector.

The structure of the paper is as follows. This paper begins with a critical analysis of food banks and a discussion of the methods. Then, through the cases in Netherlands, Norway, and Greece, this paper examines the impact of the covid pandemic on European food banks.

**Conceptualizing the role of food banks**

A range of government, for-profit, and non-profit institutions manage programs to reduce food insecurity across the world (Moragues-Faus and Battersby 2021). Food relief programs include income and food support programs at the international, national, provincial, metropolitan, and household scale. In some countries, food relief has been integrated into social welfare state protection; however, the size, type, and scale of intervention varies (Food and Agriculture Organization 2021).

Within this context, food banks have become one of the most visible non-profits to confront the crisis of food insecurity in the world’s regions since they developed in North America in the 1960s (The Global FoodBanking Network 2020, 2021). Given their rapid growth, food banks have been the subject of significant debate, as they gain public support, private financing, institutional legitimacy in many contexts, and operate within the contradictions of scarcity (May et al. 2020; Lohnes 2021).

In particular, scholars have critically analyzed how food bank development may be problematic. To start, food banks are key institutions in the neoliberal governance of food insecurity, as they strongly influence how food systems are organized and food aid is delivered (Warshawsky 2010; Lindenbaum 2016). Food banks first developed in the U.S. as a consequence of welfare state retrenchment and sharp economic recessions in the 1970s and 1980s and the growth of corporate philanthropy and privatized food aid in the non-profit sector since the 1990s (Poppendieck 1998). With these changes, food banks and their network of charities have produced new bureaucratic regimes to regulate the poor through a “corporate food charity state,” create patterns of inequality in the labor market, and unevenly integrate the experiences and knowledge of food recipients into food systems (Middleton et al. 2018; de Souza 2019).

Building on these perspectives, scholars have noted that food banks actively refocus advocates’ attention towards metrics which emphasize the institution’s size rather than the causes of food insecurity (Riches and Silvasti 2014). In particular, staff within food banks and the food industry point to record numbers of kilograms of food delivered or meals served as evidence of food banks’ value to society, even though it is unclear how these data result in the reduction of food insecurity (Loopstra and Tarasuk 2015). In addition, donors and volunteers are praised for their contributions, and the narrative that charity works as well as or better than government food programs is reinforced, even if there is inadequate evidence to support this claim (Warshawsky 2015). In line with research conducted by a range of scholars, food banks may contribute to the depoliticization of food insecurity as some states use charity, including the food bank system, as a way to deflect attention away from their own program or policy failures (Lohnes and Wilson 2018; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2020).

In many ways, the development of food banks mirrors the rise in corporate philanthropy, as food companies support food banks to demonstrate their commitment to corporate social investment programs (Guthman 2008). As the food industry has increasingly provided essential financial and in-kind donations to food banks, corporates have gained significant influence over them (Fisher 2017; Riches 2018). Food companies provide resources and organizational legitimacy to food banks in exchange for placement on non-profit boards, brand enhancement, liability protection for donations, tax benefits, and reduced attention on the structural causes of food insecurity (Lohnes 2021). This interdependency has limited the mission of the food bank’s work to food distribution as food companies actively reframe food insecurity as a technical problem which can be fixed within economic markets (Henderson 2004; Lindenbaum 2016).

Although food banks have grown in size and location over the last few decades, there are no research studies which show that food banks reduce food insecurity. In part, this is because food banks have developed during a time when social welfare states have declined in size across many contexts (Riches and Silvasti 2014). There are also many intervening social, economic, and historical factors associated with poverty, housing, health care, food costs, and public health that impact the rise and fall of food insecurity.

Food waste is equally difficult to measure, because of the unavailability of data from the food industry and the lack of universal definitions on food waste, food loss, and food surplus (Teigiserova et al. 2020). As noted by Huang et al. (2020) and Teigiserova et al. (2020), institutions at different scales, sectors, and contexts have operationalized these concepts differently depending on the location and political purpose.

In contrast to food loss in production, post-harvest, and processing and food waste in households, food service, and retail, food surplus is often defined as food in any part of the food system that can readily be redistributed for human consumption (Garrone et al. 2014; Damiani et al. 2021). Given
these definitions, food banks mitigate no more than 1–3% of food waste in Europe or North America (Riches 2018), because food banks only redistribute surplus food, which is a small part of the overall food waste problem (United Nations Environment Programme 2021).

As noted by Galli et al. (2018) and Hecht and Neff (2019) in their review of food rescue organizations, food banks and other food gleaning operations utilize the trope of food waste when needed to broaden their range of stakeholders and increase the flexibility of their mission. In this way, food banks often leverage a broad and vague definition of food waste to discursively frame their narrow food rescue operations as a solution to the food insecurity crisis (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003).

In contexts as varied as Australia (Booth and Whelan 2014), Germany (Lorenz 2012), and the U.S. (Warshawsky 2010; Lindenbaum 2016), studies of food banks have highlighted how they reinforce the status quo through corporate partnerships rather than engage the broader neoliberal structural causes of food insecurity. Building on these critiques, a range of scholars have examined why and how food banks develop (Caraher and Cavicchi 2014; Lambie-Mumford, 2017), connect to labor market inequality (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005; Dickinson 2019), produce stigma and shame for users (Garthwaite 2016; Middleton et al. 2018; de Souza 2019; May et al. 2019), and distribute nutritionally unhealthy foods (Simmet et al. 2017).

As food banks position themselves with the state and the food industry in many contexts, some researchers are concerned that these relationships are prioritized over the food insecure (Fisher 2017; Riches 2018). To shift these dynamics, Anderson and Mayer (2021) and Trauger et al. (2017) suggest that the food industry needs to recognize the food sovereignty of local communities rather than use corporate sustainability initiatives as opportunities to increase brand or profitability. In addition, an increasing number of food scholars have suggested that states need to more explicitly support the human right to food to ensure that the food system is morally, legally, and politically responsible to communities (Ziegler et al. 2011; Riol 2016; Riches 2020). As noted by de Armiño (2014), the human right to food approach allows for a more critical collective solidarity perspective to develop to understand who benefits from food banks and why.

Thus, food banks systems have faced a number of institutional challenges which predate the covid pandemic. However, with the pandemic health crisis and its subsequent economic and social fallout in 2020 and 2021, food banks were confronted with a series of new and unprecedented of institutional challenges that threatened its existence (Kulish 2020). Covid has also provided new opportunities for food banks to fundraise and collaborate (European Food Banks Federation 2021). Given that researchers have identified reasons to be concerned about food bank development, it is critical to understand whether the pandemic has reinforced existing concerns about their food banks.

### Methods

Between 2016 and 2022, I utilized in-depth interviews and surveys to examine food banks systems in nineteen European countries (Table 1). Twenty-seven semi-structured interviews were conducted in English with country-specific food bank administrators in Europe and international food banking organizations such as the European Food Banks Federation to understand the development, mission, structure, roles, and impact of food banks.

Interviewees included food bank managers, administrators, and fieldworkers. Interviews revolved around the history, mission, programs, organizational structure, funding, outcomes, institutional challenges, relationships with other organizations, and impacts from the covid pandemic. Also, I asked food bank managers about their approach to food banking and how they frame food waste and food insecurity in their mission, programs, and impact. Interviews were conducted in person with food bank staff when possible, or virtually when necessary. Through the use of the triangulation method (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003), I cross-checked

| Case study | Years research conducted | Types of methods used | Medium | Data |
|------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|--------|------|
| Greece     | 2021–2022                | In-depth interviews of food bank management and standardized survey of food bank operations and staff during the covid pandemic | Virtual | Qualitative interview and survey data and quantitative survey data |
| The Netherlands | 2016–2022            | In-depth interviews of food bank management and standardized survey of food bank operations and staff during the covid pandemic | On Site, Virtual | Qualitative interview and survey data and quantitative survey data |
| Norway     | 2021–2022                | In-depth interviews of food bank management and standardized survey of food bank operations and staff during the covid pandemic | Virtual | Qualitative interview and survey data and quantitative survey data |
interviews across data sources to ensure that perspectives were accurate and cited appropriately.

Also, nineteen surveys were conducted in English with food bank administrators in nineteen European countries in 2021 to assess how food bank systems fared during the pandemic. In line with standardized survey protocols set forth by Fowler (2013), the survey asked food bank administrators about their operations, financial and human resources, food supplies, and organizational challenges during the covid pandemic.

In what follows, this paper examines food banks in the Netherlands, Norway, and Greece (Fig. 1). Although it is important to know the perspectives from existing and potential food bank clients, I analyzed data from food bank administrators to understand how food banks navigated the challenges associated with the covid pandemic. While the data from these case studies are not representative of all food banks, they highlight how the pandemic impacted food bank systems differently across Europe.

The European Food Banks Federation

The European Food Banks Federation (FEBA) is one of the largest food bank networks in the world. It redistributes 860,000 tons of food to 12.8 million people through its 48,126 partner charities across 335 food banks in 30 countries across Europe (European Food Banks Federation 2020b). European food banks receive 70% of their food from producers and retailers, with smaller amounts from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (17%), EU and National withdrawn produce (7%), and food collections (6%) (see Fig. 2) (European Food Banks Federation 2019).

FEBA provides food banks with training opportunities, best practice information, enhancement of food sourcing, fundraising assistance, and marketing of food bank activities.

FEBA’s network is strongest in Western Europe as it has a more well-developed set of food corporations and nonprofits to work with food banks. Although Eastern Europe has relatively high levels of food insecurity, post-communist states are often suspicious of non-governmental initiatives, especially those with ties to Western Europe or North America (Administrator, European Food Banks Federation, 20 July 2016).

FEBA has created a number of programs to stabilize its member food banks. However, the results of five internal FEBA food bank surveys suggest that its network of food banks struggled with institutional crises as a result of the economic and social fallout associated with the covid pandemic, especially in Eastern Europe.
pandemic in 2020 and 2021 (European Food Banks Federation 2020f).

Most notably, demand for food relief increased quickly and without any forewarning. FEBA surveys estimated that food banks confronted increases of approximately 50% during the early months of the pandemic in March and April of 2020 (European Food Banks Federation 2020c). This happened as food donations plummeted as a result of disruptions in the food system when food retailers and manufacturer struggled to stabilize food stocks in stores (European Food Banks Federation 2020f). This increase in food demand persisted, as the average FEBA member food bank reported an increase of 40% in September 2021 as compared to one year earlier (European Food Banks Federation 2021). Many of these food recipients were unemployed, families, or elderly people. According to survey results, FEBA member food banks were only able to help 70% of the people who asked for food aid in September 2021, as food banks still struggled to acquire food, money, or transportation (European Food Banks Federation 2021). Thus, even 18 months after the start of the pandemic, food banks struggled to operate.

This does not account for the number of people who are food insecure but do not visit the food bank network or those who remain food insecure after receiving food from the food bank network.

In many contexts, food banks or their network of food pantries, soup kitchens, and beneficiaries had to close due to the possibility of coronavirus exposure. According to the European Food Banks Federation (2020f) survey of food banks in March and April of 2020, 41% of food banks stated that the closure of beneficiary organizations was a major problem for their network, as 53% stated that they had to downscale the number of charities or people that they served as a result of the closures. With a doubling of demand, significant reductions in food and personnel reduced food bank services (European Food Banks Federation 2020f).

Almost 80% of food bank respondents stated that funding was a problem early in the pandemic in Spring 2020, as costs increased (European Food Banks Federation 2020f). Given less resources, only 39% of food bank staff responded that they were providing food to their usual clientele. During this initial crisis phase, 76% stated that they needed more
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money to operate. As a result, more than eighty percent of food banks created new fundraising initiatives. Money was raised from new and old donors including corporates (83%), individuals (78%), foundations (61%), and institutional bodies (34%) (European Food Banks Federation 2020c).

The pandemic also created pressure for food banks to employ more people and protect them from the virus. This was a costly process, as many food banks are operated by elderly volunteers (European Food Banks Federation 2020f). Whereas dependence on volunteer labor was initially a strength, it immediately placed food banks in a place of vulnerability as elderly volunteers were not safe from the covid pandemic in food bank warehouses (European Food Banks Federation 2020f). In the Spring of 2020, 42% of food banks stated that they needed additional volunteers to operate, and 77% of food banks stated that they needed masks, gloves, and hand sanitizers for staff and volunteers. Additionally, food banks did not have sufficient vehicles or boxes to transport food safely. As the pandemic persisted, this became increasingly problematic as food banks became more dependent on new strategies to collect, store, and distribute food without exposing the staff, volunteers, or beneficiaries to the virus.

As a result of the economic and social fallout associated with the covid pandemic in 2020 and 2021, European food banks received significant press for their food redistribution efforts. This visibility led to increased fundraising for food banks and an opportunity to develop new flexible modes of food delivery (European Food Banks Federation 2021). However, it also highlighted the inherent weaknesses in the food bank charity system. It was never designed for a crisis on this scale; yet, it was often the first-place people thought of when the crisis emerged. In addition, given that recent studies suggest that food banks only rescue 1% of what they define as food waste in Europe (Riches 2018), the impact of food banks may not be as significant as they often suggest.

To explore the differences among food bank systems across Europe, the case studies of Netherlands, Norway, and Greece are examined in more detail.

Food banks in the Netherlands

The Association of Dutch Food Banks (ADFB) (Voedselbanken Nederland) is one of the most well-established food banks in Europe. It was founded in 2002 by Sjaak and Clara Sies to confront food insecurity in the Netherlands. Over the past eighteen years, the ADFB has grown to comprise more than 171 food banks and 10 distribution centers across the country (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2022b, d). As one of the wealthiest economies in Europe, the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity is measured at a relatively low 4.7% during the 2018–2020 period, a slight drop from 5.7% during the 2014–2016 period (Food and Agriculture Organization 2021). In addition, with the relatively low 2.0% severe deprivation rate and 3.8% unemployment rate from the most recent 2019 statistics (Eurostat 2020b; c) and a sizeable social welfare state with 28.9% of GDP expenditures on social protection benefits (Eurostat 2020a), the Netherlands may not be expected to have a large food bank system. However, in proportion to the size of the country, the ADFB has grown to be one of the most well-developed food banks systems in Europe.

The social welfare state in the Netherlands includes a range of support programs. This includes schemes for unemployment support, child benefits, old-age pensions, survivor benefits, long term nursing, sickness, maternity, and occupational disability (European Commission 2021b; Government of the Netherlands 2022a). The Dutch social welfare state has a number of programs to provide income or cash assistance, rather than direct food aid. The Netherlands has signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1978 and supported other UN right to food resolutions since then. However, it does not specifically guarantee the right to food as a basic human right within the constitution (Food and Agriculture Organization 2022).

The Dutch government has also developed new food donation policies, in line with the UN’s SDGs and the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste (European Commission 2019a, 2020b). As part of this drive to reduce 50% of food waste, the government developed the Dutch Alliance for Sustainable Food in 2013, which with the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority, codified the processes whereby food should be donated (Government of the Netherlands 2022b). In 2018, the Dutch government developed the United Against Food Waste campaign to bring together relevant government departments, research institutes, and key food supply chain actors to set a national standard for food donations. These initiatives explicitly promoted the ADFB and ensured that companies receive a 100% corporate tax deduction for their donations (European Commission 2019b, 2020a).

Within this Dutch context, the ADFB’s mission is to redistribute food to people in the Netherlands through a volunteer network (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2022c, d). Although the poverty rate in the Netherlands is low, there are more than one million people living below the poverty line in the country. To provide food insecure residents with temporary food relief, the ADFB receives a range of unused or mislabeled donated food primarily from supermarket chains and food manufacturers, with supplemental amounts from local produce growers and non-perishable items from fundraising campaigns (see Table 2) (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2021).

To be eligible for food aid, prospective food bank recipients have to meet certain income thresholds once fixed costs are subtracted from income (Association of Dutch Food
Food recipients are not referred by a government agency, but rather people request assistance if they feel they need food aid. People can receive food weekly for up to three years or as long as they are eligible for aid (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2022a).

According to recent statistics, the ADFB distributes food to 160,500 people per year. This is implemented with 13,000 volunteers in 172-member food banks and 10 distribution centers. Food banks are active in 366 out of 380 municipalities in the country (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2020a). In 2020, the budget was €10,732,731, with 36% from non-profits, 32% from companies, 23% from private individuals, and 1% from lottery organizations. In many ways, 2020 was an unusual year, as financial donations increased to the ADFB 494% from €2 million to €10 million. This increase was primarily due to the €6.8 million in private and individual donations as part of the Calamity Fund set up as a fundraising tool to scale up during the pandemic (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2020b).

According to ADFB staff, the Dutch food bank is designed to provide temporary assistance to supplement the government’s social welfare state, not replace government programs as has been contended in the U.S. (Poppendieck 1998; Riches and Silvasti 2014).

We are working towards the place where we are not necessary, but that will never be the case. With our great (social welfare) system, we have government systems in place to help people. We think the food bank is a (good) complement to the existing (government) system (Administrator, Association of Dutch Food Banks, 10 August 2016).

Additionally, the ADFB has actively courted the food industry, as there has been mutual interest in food donation partnerships (Administrator, Association of Dutch Food Banks, 10 August 2016). While the ADFB has scaled up its operations over the past eighteen years, it only saves 1–2% of consumer food waste in the Netherlands (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2020a). Food redistribution systems have been presented as “win–win” solutions for food corporations and the food bank, even when results are insignificant, unintended, or negative (Lougheed and Spring 2020).

As noted by numerous academic studies and data, the ADFB has struggled with numerous institutional challenges. To start, some scholars of the ADFB have grown concerned at the quality of food provided and stigmatization of food recipients to food bank recipients (Neter et al. 2014, 2016, 2018), issues well-documented by other scholars of food banks globally (Poppendieck 1998; Riches and Silvasti 2014; Simmet et al. 2017).

In addition, in line with research by other scholars of charity and philanthropy in the food sector (Henderson 2004; Lipinski et al. 2013), the AFDB is overdependent on

| Country | Food distribution process | Food aid eligibility | Key food donation policies and initiatives | Legal impact of food donation policies |
|---------|---------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Netherlands | Unused food is donated from supermarket chains, food manufacturers, and food producers to food bank warehouses to local charities to households | Recipients self-refer and must meet income thresholds set by national food bank system | Dutch Alliance for Sustainable Food (2013); United Against Food Waste Campaign (2018) | 100% corporate tax deductions for food donations to charities |
the financial and human resources of the broader community (Hospes and van der Meulen 2009). The ADFB is operated by volunteers, many of whom are aged. This is both positive for the food bank system’s financial stability and a structural weakness to be managed without any paid staff (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2019). With the onset of the covid pandemic, this human resource dependency became a serious institutional vulnerability (Administrator, Association of Dutch Food Banks, 16 February 2021, 23 February 2021).

An important part of our volunteer force is over 70 years old. (During the covid pandemic)…as much as fifty percent of our volunteers were no longer able to work in a way that guaranteed their safety (Tom Hillemans, Vice-President of the AFDB as qtd. in Scholten et al. 2020).

For these reasons, approximately 10% of food banks closed their doors during the pandemic (Administrator, Association of Dutch Food Banks, 16 February 2021).

Increases for food aid during the pandemic also placed pressure on the ADFB network, as the network already faced more demand for services due to the 2007–2008 recession, refugee crisis of 2015–2016, and flagging state support for food relief (Verschuren 2015; Food bank administrator, Association of Dutch Food Banks, 10 August 2016; NL Times 2019). To cope with these increases, the ADFB delivered 7.2% more food in 2020 (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2020a, c).

In March 2020, suddenly the alarm went off…Food banks were short of hand to organize work differently as a result of (the pandemic). Some were forced to close the doors. Hoarding behaviors in stores caused our food flows to completely disappear. We had a huge problem. How could we ensure that our customers continued to receive food aid? (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2020c, p. 1).

In 2020 and 2021, the covid pandemic contributed to increased costs, less food for delivery, beneficiary closures, uneven service hours, and decreases in personnel when demand for food relief was highest (Association of Dutch Food Banks 2020a, c). This was exacerbated by a lack of health and safety equipment for frontline personnel, many of whom were elderly (Administrator, Association of Dutch Food Banks, 16 February 2021, 23 February 2021).

In short, while the covid pandemic reaffirmed the value of food banks in the Netherlands to meet extreme food insecurity, it also exposed the structural vulnerabilities of the food bank network as the volunteer managed philanthropy-based system was never designed for a crisis of this magnitude (Candel and de Zwarte 2020; Dekkinga et al. 2022). Importantly, primary interview data and secondary data from reports confirm that the ADFB was aware of its vulnerabilities before and during the covid pandemic; yet, the organization existed in this precarious institutional position regardless. These data reinforce a central contradiction of food banking: they can only exist with a steady flow of surplus food from the food industry (Mourad 2016).

### Food Banks in Norway

Food Banks Norway or Matsentralen Norge (MD) in Norwegian, is one of three major food bank systems in the Nordic region (Hanssen et al. 2014; Capodistrias 2015; Gram-Hanssen et al. 2016). It is an important case study given that it is in one of the most food secure regions on the planet. According to recent statistics, the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Norway is measured at a relatively low 4.1% during the 2018–2020 period, a slight drop from 4.8% during the 2014–2016 period (Food and Agriculture Organization 2021). The most recent statistics available from 2019 reveal that Norway has a severe material deprivation rate of 2.0%, which is one of the lowest rates in Europe (Eurostat 2020b).

Norway has one of the most well-developed social safety nets in the world, as 26.4% of GDP spending is on social protection benefits (Eurostat 2020a). The social welfare state in Norway includes support programs for the poor, unemployed, families, pregnancy, birth, adoption, healthcare, occupational disability, old age, and survivors (European Commission 2021c; Government of Norway, Labour and Welfare Administration 2022). The Norwegian social welfare state provides a range of programs with cash assistance, rather than direct food aid. In addition, although Norway has signed and ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1972 as well as many other UN resolutions since that date, Norway does not have any constitutional language recognizing food as a human right in its constitution (Food and Agriculture Organization 2022).

The Norwegian government has developed new food donation policies, in line with the UN’s SDGs and the EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste (European Commission 2019a, 2020b). The government developed the 2017 Industry Agreement on Reducing Food Waste as a voluntary agreement between the Norwegian government and the food industry to reduce food waste in half by 2030 (Government of Norway, Climate and Environment Ministry 2020). As of 2022, Norway does not have national legislation to codify food donation processes; rather, food banks follow similar protocols to the food producers and retailers when it comes to food safety and food procurement. Currently, food donors receive a VAT exemption on donation foods it is given to a charity (European Commission 2019b, 2020a). As noted by Szulecka and Strøm-Andersen (2022), the governance of food donations is in the process of shifting from a model of industrial self-regulation to governmental regulation, as
increased political support for uniform food donation policies has emerged in Norwegian society.

Although Scandinavian welfare states are global leaders in size and strength (Eurostat 2020a), food bank systems have developed across Northern Europe (Nordic Co-operation 2015).

In Norway, food bank development is a relatively recent phenomenon. The first MD food bank started operations in Oslo in 2013 with six additional regional centers opening since then. The national MD umbrella organization was founded in 2018, and that is when MD officially joined FEBA. Although food redistribution had occurred in Norway for more than two decades, it was not until 2013 that the process of consolidating the food redistribution systems became realized (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

MD receives unused and mislabeled food from producers, wholesalers, and retailers (Table 3) (Food Banks Norway 2022a). This includes food from the country’s leading food industries, with secondary roles played by the agricultural sector (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021). This food is sorted and stored in food bank warehouses before it is distributed to the network of 480 non-profit organizations throughout the country. Neither the Norwegian government nor the national MD food bank determine food aid eligibility. Individual non-profits control the eligibility requirements for food aid (Food Banks Norway 2022a).

According to recent statistics, approximately 390,000 tons of food is wasted each year in Norway, with 58% from private households, 20% from food industry, 16% from groceries, and 6% other sources (Stensgård et al. 2018; Food Banks Norway 2022b). As of 2021, MD has approximately 300 member organizations which receive food directly from the food bank and then give food to their food insecure recipients (Food Banks Norway 2022a). The MD is only able to save 3,000 tons, less than 1% of household, retail, and restaurant food waste each year. Although the MD has grown significantly over the past eight years since its formation, its operations are quite small in comparison to what they could be. Interview data of MD staff suggest that they are aware of their limitations; yet, they actively pursue an expansion agenda (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

Even though Norway has one of the most robust social welfare states in the world, the covid pandemic produced significant social and economic distress across the country. Recent estimates suggest that as much as 7.5% of Norway residents may be food insecure because of increased unemployment and lost income due to the economic and social fallout from the pandemic (Government of Norway, Labour and Welfare Administration 2020). Although the Norwegian government passed stimulus measures to help mitigate poverty and unemployment (Government of Norway, Ministry of Finance 2020; Ursin et al. 2020) and corporations

| Country | Food distribution process | Food aid eligibility | Food aid frequency | Key food donation policies and initiatives | Legal impact of food donation policies | Voluntary/not voluntary tax deduction for food donations | VAT exemption for food donations to charities |
|---------|---------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Norway  | Unused food from producers, wholesalers, and retailers is donated to the food bank warehouse to local charities to households | Recipients self-refer and eligibility varies by rules set at local non-profit organizations | Varies by rules set at local non-profit organizations and initiatives | The Industry Agreement on Reducing Food Waste (2017) | VAT Exemption for food donations to charities | Voluntary |
Food insecurity and the covid pandemic: uneven impacts for food bank systems in Europe

donated food and money to the MD (European Food Banks Federation 2020; Government of Norway, Climate and Environment Ministry 2020), the rapid increases in demand severely stretched its capacities to deliver food aid, as almost 20% of its network agencies closed at some point during the pandemic (Food Banks Norway 2020). The pandemic also produced increased costs for the MD network (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

Even with these challenges, the MD increased its capacity to meet the steep demand for food aid; however, it was difficult to meet the rapid surge in requests for food aid. Although 24% more food was donated to the MD between March and July 2020 as compared to the previous year (Food Banks Norway 2020), food demand was up 40% during this same period. The closure of cafes, restaurants, and schools combined to provide an enormous surplus of food for the food bank. According to a survey of MD’s charities (Food Banks Norway 2020), 82% of organizations said that the amount of food delivered was the same or larger than before the pandemic. Similar results were noted for the assortment of foods available and food quality in MD’s charities that is served (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

Although the covid pandemic stretched the MD network initially, it also provided new opportunities to increase its legitimacy and visibility across Norway.

I will never forget how many people are surprised there is a food bank in Norway. The President of Norway recently said, ‘During all of these years I always wondered why there was a food bank in Norway. But, seeing how well the food bank has been able to rescue food suddenly that became available during the pandemic and help all of those charities that were struggling, I am so happy there is a food bank in Norway.’ So, that shows that we became stronger during the pandemic and we brought in more partners without losing focus on our mission (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

More than increased visibility, the covid pandemic increased the MD’s bottom-line and capacity to grow its operations. As stated here, primary interview data and secondary data from reports reveal how the covid pandemic produced both new challenges and opportunities for the MD.

There was an awareness that the foodbank has a key role to rescue food and help people eat. So, all of the charities started collecting more food, and all of the charities had more people coming to them. So, we were kind of stuck in the middle of these two worlds, and we became very relevant. A lot of projects we were dreaming of suddenly we had the opportunity to set in place because funding started coming in place (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

In addition, the small size of the food bank emerged into an asset for the MD network to pivot to new opportunities (Food Banks Norway 2020). Some regional food banks in Norway partnered with local kitchens to develop a program called Matsentralen Kitchen. This program transformed surplus food to make prepared meals for charities to pick up at the food bank. Similarly, a program called Lunch Box was started by one of the regional food banks in Norway to create meals for charities to pick up from the food bank. The meals were prepared by a local cooking apprenticeship program that had to be closed down to the pandemic. The pandemic provided the MD an opportunity to invest in its own transport vehicles to streamline food donations by warehouse.

MD’s charities also pivoted to provide more food bags, food deliveries, and flexible modes of food distribution (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021). These charities noted that new food recipients tended to be low-income families, furloughed, unemployed, or poor in addition to the regular set of disabled, addicts, mentally ill, elderly, refugees, homeless, youth, work migrants, former criminals, and other clients (Food Banks Norway 2020). These various programs suggest that opportunities exist in food systems to strengthen local food procurement by connecting surplus food from food industries and some agricultural producers to food banks and their network of organizations (Soma et al. 2021).

Moving forward, the MD is in a strong position coming out from the covid pandemic; however, there are challenges moving forward. In addition to the constant struggle to meet demand through increased donations, the MD is also limited by geography as the country’s low density and ways to distribute to these faraway locations (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

Norway has a problem with depression and loneliness. It’s a very spread-out country so people need places to meet...Unfortunately, there is a lot of poverty and a need for food in these areas as well. It would be nice to be able to reach out there. But, we can only do so much. We are thinking through different concepts to figure out how we can redistribute more surplus food there (Administrator, Food Banks Norway, 4 March 2021).

Research produced by the Nordic Council of Ministers (Gram-Hanssen et al. 2016; Hanssen et al. 2014) has reinforced these concerns about food bank capacity while also suggesting that food banks in Scandinavia may continue to have more potential to expand (Nordic Co-operation 2015). Yet, while food banks in Scandinavia may continue to capture some corporate surplus food, it is unclear whether food banks in Northern Europe will grow as large as those in Western or Southern Europe given the robustness of the Nordic welfare state. As noted in this section, interviewees
Food Authority has provided guidance for food safety, which MOU is not legally binding (Boroume 2020). The Hellenic to help mitigate food donation liability issues, although this based charity, developed a memorandum of understanding environment and Energy 2018). Boroume, the non-profit Greek mission 2019b; Government of Greece, Ministry of Envi-
 systems to process food loss and food waste (European Com-
 the National Ministerial Decision 91354 in 2017, which with 
 the National Waste Prevention Strategic Plan in 2014 and 
 Services to its central food bank warehouse where it 
 with MD staff suggest that they are optimistic about their 
 the 2014–2016 period (Food and Agriculture Organiza-
 1985 as well as many other UN resolutions since that date. How-
 to individual households. The types of foods given varies 
 provides a framework for food safety for the food donation 
 vable populations such as children, elderly, and the poor (Food Bank Greece 2021a). Along with other food banks 
 the FBG operates in the context of high unemploy-
 the Food Bank Greece (FBG) was founded in 1995 by Geras-
 The social welfare state in Greece is sizable and 
 includes a range of support programs which provide income or cash assistance. This includes programs for the 
 a severe material deprivation rate of 16.5% and unem-
 Food banks in Greece

Food Bank Greece (FBG) was founded in 1995 by Geras-
Bank Greece 2021a). Along with other food banks 
 the FBG operates in the context of high unemploy-
 The FBG system redistributes unused food from food 
 the 2014–2016 period (Food and Agriculture Organiza-
 These primary interview data point to the fact that Greek 
 These primary interview data point to the fact that Greek 
 The last decade in Greece has sent us a message that 
 food donations, in line with the UN’s SDGs and the EU 
 Food and Agriculture Organization 2022). The Fund for European Aid to the 
 The Greek government has also developed new food 
 Food and Agriculture Organization 2022). The Food Bank Greece, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2022). The Fund for European Aid to the 
 The Greek government has also developed new food 
 Food Bank Greece 2021a; Government of Greece, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2022). The Fund for European Aid to the 
 the FBG network (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021).

The last decade in Greece has sent us a message that everything can change…When I grew up, we had prosperity. Then, we had this awful economic crisis in 2010. We survived that crisis, and then we have the pandemic, which is a global crisis…The food bank system is important in that it supports people who would otherwise have nothing and save food that would otherwise go to the landfills. So, it’s a stress that we carry but it’s important work that seems to have a big impact in an important way (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021).

The FBG system redistributes unused food from food companies to its central food bank warehouse where it is stored and repackaged (Table 4) (Food Bank Greece 2022). Then, through its network of charities, food is given to individual households. The types of foods given varies by what food producers and food traders are able to give the FBG network (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021). Farmers play a very small role in this food
redistribution, as the food industry is the key institution which determines the quantity and type of food given to the FBG. Neither the government nor the national FBG network determine how food aid is operated at local charities. Eligibility for food aid is managed at individual soup kitchens and local non-profits (Food Bank Greece 2020, 2021b).

In 2020, the FBG rescued and redistributed 2,359 tons of food to 71,137 people through 263 charities. This represented a sharp 67% increase in rescued food from the previous year (Food Bank Greece, 2021b). In order to meet the increased demand for food relief, the FBG partnered with Greek and foreign donors abroad to develop the Emergency Food Fund in order to scale up its operations (Food Bank Greece 2021b).

According to a recent survey of FBG’s charities, 78% stated that they had enough food to meet most of the increased demand for food relief; however, 84% noted that adequate supply of food was a problem. Importantly, only 5% of charities closed during the pandemic, and only 6% stated that they were in danger of closing within the next two years (Food Bank Greece 2021b). The survey revealed that increases in food demand, insufficient funds, insufficient volunteers, and difficulty in delivering and receiving food were among the greatest challenges facing FBG’s charities. While 90% of charities surveyed saw an increase in demand for food aid, 85% thought that those receiving aid will not be able to find employment within the next two years. Supporting this claim, the survey revealed that unemployment, low pensions, health problems, psychological and mental health problems, lack of home ownership, and bank and government debt were among the many factors beneficiaries listed as reasons for continued food insecurity and lack of future employment. 85% of charities surveyed thought these dynamics will worsen in the foreseeable future for their clients. To mitigate these impacts, surveyed beneficiaries stated that they received food from a range of places, including the formal food sector, government assistance, and the non-profit emergency food system, including food banks.

Importantly, FBG does not work with the Greek government. The Greek government does not fund the FBG or its charities (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021). It also does not utilize its full contribution from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) (Food Bank Greece 2021b). The FBG suggests that the Greek government views the FBG with suspicion, as a competitor.

We have tried to establish cooperation with the government ministry and some local authorities. It’s very hard to establish a trustful relationship, and it’s very sad that the administration sees us as competitors... We make some suggestions...and they think we attack them. We are completely independent.
because there is nothing to expect in a short-term level from government, so we depend on food companies and other private foundations (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021).

In addition to high unemployment and increased demand levels for food aid, the FBG has other significant dynamics to confront. While donated food initially increased between March and September 2020 when food companies were forced to find a place to send their already produced food, the food industry has since become more efficient and careful not to overproduce. This reduced the amount of donations in 2021, while the demand for food aid continued to be high (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021). This reflects a central contradiction of food banking, as food banks are dependent on a constant supply of corporate surplus food in order to operate effectively (Mourad 2016).

During the first lockdown in 2020, we had huge quantities of food (donated from the food industry). Now in 2021, the food companies make more precise productions, so we have less (food) surplus for the food bank. The problem is that we have more people to support, a new economic crisis with more people asking for food (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021).

On top of the decline in food donations, the capacity to fundraise has also decreased at the local level, a historically important place for people to congregate and support their community. Without fundraising, local charities do not have the expertise to apply for funds (Administrator, Food Bank Greece, 11 March 2021).

The FBG has faced numerous institutional challenges; however, many of these concerns pre-date the covid pandemic. Unlike Norway, the covid pandemic has exacerbated structural limitations for food banking in Greece. Without adequate financial or political support, the FBG continues to face a daunting set of challenges to its operations. As is clear from primary interview data and secondary data from reports, the FBG is a bit more pessimistic on its future as compared to the other case study locations. This is in part due to the fact that it is not as well supported by the country’s key institutions, especially the government.

Discussion and conclusion

Although European food banks have existed for decades, the covid pandemic disrupted the emergency relief network in an unprecedented manner. On the one hand, institutional challenges forced many food agencies to close or provide inadequate food (European Food Banks Federation 2020f). The pandemic also provided opportunities for food banks to reposition themselves within the broader food relief network as some food bank systems enhanced their financial or political position in the food system (European Food Banks Federation 2020a). The case studies in this paper have shown that the preexisting structural makeup of each food bank system, broader political economy, and historical context significantly impacted how each food relief network fared during the pandemic.

In the Netherlands, the covid pandemic highlighted already existing structural limitations with the ADFB. An overemphasis on elderly volunteers did not place food banks in a strong position once the pandemic related lockdowns limited mobility of its population. Although the pandemic increased the ADFB’s visibility, it was overwhelmed with higher demand levels, uneven food resources, and logistical challenges. In many ways, the covid pandemic exacerbated existing institutional weaknesses within the ADFB that predated the crisis.

In Norway, the covid pandemic enhanced the position of the MD as it was able to leverage the crisis as a way to increase fundraising and visibility. Although the MD was initially confronted with challenges associated with lack of human and food resources, the MD utilized the pandemic as an opportunity to expand its reach and increase its visibility across society. With its small size, short history, and flexible structure, the MD could then use this money to take advantage of new food sources quickly and rebrand its programs to meet increased demand for food relief. Even though its impact may not be significant as compared to other European food banks, its capacity to reposition itself quickly suggests that there may be a small role for food banks in places with a robust social safety net.

In Greece, the covid pandemic reinforced problematic state-civil society relations. In line with other food bank systems in post-communist Eastern Europe, the FBG suggests that the Greek government views the FBG with suspicion as a competitor to the state. Even though the FBG’s programs are arguably quite small, they may help to mitigate extreme poverty across Greece which has been an endemic part of society for decades. The FBG tends to avoid working with the government, as it views the FBG as a competitor to its programs or an enemy working to expose or delegitimize the power of the state. This does not bode well for food banking in Greece and Eastern Europe long-term given these tense dynamics.

Although the scale of operations differs quite dramatically across the continent, European food banks are positioning themselves to be players in food relief (European Food Banks Federation 2020b). In many cases, food banks have utilized vague definitions of food insecurity and food waste in order to frame their narrow food rescue operations as a solution to the food insecurity crisis (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003). As noted by Lougheed and Spring (2020), this positioning as a “win–win” solution even in the face
Given that food banks are positioning themselves to be part of the UN’s SDGs to reduce food insecurity and food waste (Global FoodBanking Network 2020, 2021), scholars need to critically analyze how and why food banks operate and for whom they serve.

As noted by Fisher (2017) and Riches (2018), food banks may position themselves as apolitical, but they are supported by food companies and governments that deflect attention away to the structural causes of food inequality. To better understand these dynamics, researchers should measure food flows, examine stakeholder roles, and the ways food banks operate in formal and informal food systems. The covid pandemic has highlighted the vulnerability of the food relief system and the need to more critically analyze how food charity intersects with the existing sets of government, nonprofit, and for-profit actors.

Lastly, given that this paper has examined food bank operators exclusively, researchers should analyze how food bank clients access food, waste food, and interact with food banks. Since many people do not visit food banks or remain hungry even after visiting the food bank, there is clearly an important difference between the act of distributing charitable food assistance and meeting the need for food relief (Middleton et al. 2018). To this point, it is critical to examine these dynamics so that the potential and limits of food bank operations can be recognized in their full context.

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of limited impacts and unintended consequences under-

scores the political and social influence that food banks carry in contemporary European society. In this way, food banks prop up the existing food system through corporate partnerships rather than confronting the structural causes of food insecurity (Lorenz 2012; Booth and Whelan 2014; Lindenbaum, 2016).

The three case studies in this paper reinforce concerns articulated by scholars that food banks remain overly dependent and influenced by food companies (Fisher 2017; Riches, 2018). In the context of well-developed social assistance programs, food banks have small impacts on food insecurity and food waste. Given the potential of food banks to create new regimes of control in the labor market (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005; Dickinson 2019), reproduce stigma in food aid systems (Garthwaite 2016; de Souza 2019), and divert attention away from the causes of food insecurity, data in this paper suggest that it is important to critically analyze how and why food banks develop (Caraher and Cavicchi 2014; Lambie-Mumford 2017).

The covid pandemic has also provided an important set of lessons. To start, the covid pandemic will continue to wreak havoc on social, economic, and food systems for years as food insecurity will likely outlast the pandemic by years (Abi-Habib 2020). The pandemic has highlighted the value of income and food relief programs provided by the state. The economic and social fallout of the crisis would have been more severe without the active intervention of central governments across Europe (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2020).

At the same time, food banks unquestionably gained increased visibility during the pandemic as the network of beneficiaries were many of the first places people could go to receive food assistance. However, the severe structural limitations such as lack of food and volunteers highlighted vulnerability of the emergency food system. Although many food banks developed innovative systems to deliver food, they were not large enough to meet the demand increase (European Food Banks Federation 2020a; c, d, e, f). The pandemic has shown that food banks may play a small role if they are better prepared to deliver food relief with flexibility, but they must have the resources to be scale up (European Food Banks Federation 2020a, 2019). Context matters, as states with a robust donor community and supportive government may be in a better position to support food banks. Food banks may be able to manage small operations where social welfare states are strong when their roles are well-defined.

Building on these dynamics, future research should build on this study to examine the development and structure of food banks across the world to examine whether food banks can operate effectively. In some places, food banks might fit within existing food systems, whereas in other contexts, their approach and structure may be less likely to succeed.
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