Food Banks: The Building Blocks of Civil Society

SUMMARY

Food banks typically distribute food and other services to eligible recipients through local beneficiary agency networks. The food bank and their partner agencies work through a variety of program structures and innovative practices that meet differing local needs and make use of local resources and opportunities. The food bank serves as the nucleus of community activity, coordinating with and strengthening civil society institutions to provide hunger relief where the need is greatest.

This first-of-its kind research project shines a light on the community-building effects of food banks. Food banks and their networks have impacts beyond the provision of food: They affect economic mobility, education, health, job training and more broadly, self-sufficiency and economic potential.

DEFINITIONS

Food Bank: Food banks address food insecurity and malnutrition by unifying two missions in one entity: the reduction of food waste and the delivery of food resources to food insecure people.[1]

Agency: An agency is a community service organization/beneficiary organization that partners with the food bank to distribute food directly to people who need it. Examples include orphanages, homeless shelters, senior centers and food pantries (grocery distribution).

Food Security: Food security is access to the adequate nutritious food necessary to lead a healthy, active life. A project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) is an eight-question survey designed to be administered face-to-face to gauge a respondent's access to food. The FIES questions ask about varying degrees of access, including worry or anxiety about having enough food, reducing portions, and skipping meals or not eating for a whole day.

[1] GFN, "Understanding Food Banking."

INTRODUCTION

GFN envisions "a world free of hunger." This vision reflects the aspirations of the global community articulated in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 2 – Zero Hunger: *to end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular, the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.* The challenge in reaching Zero Hunger is not a lack of food but a lack of sufficient access to food, a frequent or even daily occurrence for as many as 757 million people suffering from chronic hunger worldwide, 2.33 billion lacking access to regular food and 2.8 billion not being able to afford healthy diets.[2]

History and experience show the challenge of hunger is solvable. Our world has enough food to feed everyone, with surplus. Achieving a world free of hunger will require a range of partners and interventions, with greater focus on the communities where food insecurity and hunger persist and food access for the economically disadvantaged is limited. Food banking is one such intervention, representing one of the most cost-effective and socially impactful pathways toward Zero Hunger.

"Food banks played a crucial role during COVID-19; they proved that by increasing access to food, they could help minimize the risk of a global hunger crisis."

–Máximo Torero, FAO chief economist

Since the founding of the first food bank 58 years ago, the food bank model has become a massive nongovernmental movement for food assistance, operating in nations at all stages of development. Food banks today reach more than 66 million food-insecure people globally.[3] An outgrowth of informal, grassroots networks of private-sector and civil society stakeholders, food banks mobilize resources to address food insecurity in local communities.

[2] FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2024. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2024 – Financing to end hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition in all its forms.* Rome.

[3] GFN, Advancing The Sustainable Goals: A Roadmap to 2030" https://www.foodbanking.org/resources/advancing-the-sdgs/

These efforts are often supported by the public sector as an accompaniment to government social safety net programs. While not part of government per se, they serve as a "safety net of the safety net,"[4] providing food assistance to people facing hunger who are not adequately reached by government food assistance programs or filling in gaps where no programs exist.

"Nutrition is one of the best drivers of development: It sparks a virtuous cycle of socioeconomic improvements, such as increasing access to education and employment."

–Kofi Annan, former U.N. secretary-general

In times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic or a natural disaster, and in ordinary times of social and economic disparity, food banks serve an important role in the communities they serve. Food banks provide food access to marginalized people, aiding in community resilience and attentive to community needs as they operate closest to where food insecurity exists and can identify and implement the most effective solutions. As food requests rise from cut-off, disadvantaged, or quarantined communities, the pre-existing transport, inventory, and logistics infrastructure of local food banks may be deployed rapidly and effectively to assist impoverished people isolated due to closed schools, public support agencies or overwhelmed health systems. **Food banks can do the hard relief and recovery work because they act as the building blocks of civil society: they are deeply rooted in community, build strong partnerships, and inspire and promote cooperation among all sectors.**

Food insecurity can be chronic or transitory, and is experienced in nearly every country, wherever people in poor or vulnerable situations lack sufficient access to food for economic or other reasons. When persistent food insecurity exists, the social fabric of communities can be torn. Food insecurity can lead to a cycle of poverty undermining human capital development, preventing social investments or stalling economic advancement.[5] As the World Bank Group noted – **the "pivotal role of food security is central to any poverty response," as food access is the key priority among people living in poverty, absorbing most of their financial, mental, emotional, and long-term planning resources.**[6] In nations with high rates of chronic malnutrition the economic losses can be significant, leading to reductions in gross domestic product (GDP) of as much as 2% to 3%.[7] Put another way, improving the food security status of economically disadvantaged persons is a necessary pre-requisite to economic growth and poverty reduction.[8] For example, for every 10 percent increase in income per capita, the prevalence of stunting declines by an estimated 3.2%.[9] Additionally, the annual global cost of malnutrition could be as high as US$3.5 trillion annually.[10]

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[4] Gentilini, Ugo. (2103). IDS Working Paper: Banking on Food: The State of Food Banks in High-Income Countries. Centre for Social Protection, Institute of Development Studies. London, UK.

[5] M. Torero, IFPRI "Food security brings economic growth — not the other way around" (October 2014)

[6] Harold, Alderman, Ugo Gentilini, and Ruslan Yemtsov, The 1.5 Billion People Question: Food, Vouchers, or Cash Transfers? (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1087-9.

[7] Global Panel. 2016. The cost of malnutrition. Why policy action is urgent. London, UK: Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition.

[8] Torero, IFPRI. https://www.foodbanking.org/blogs/can-we-prevent-another-food-crisis-a-qa-with-dr-maximo-torero/

[9] Development Initiatives. (2017). Global Nutrition Report 2017: Nourishing the SDGs. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives.

[10] Global Panel. 2016. The cost of malnutrition. Why policy action is urgent. London, UK: Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition.

Public sector social protections, cash transfers, school feeding and food assistance programs aimed to improve food access are the basis of national social safety nets and essential to better food security and reducing poverty. Yet, the public sector safety net may be underfunded, inadequate, or difficult to administer equitably and effectively, especially in emerging and developing economies with fiscal constraints. Inequality within societies is a drag on growth — both human capital and economic — both a cause and consequence of food insecurity and with lasting negative effect. Without stable and long-lasting food security, there is negative effect on human capital and development, raising government costs and public spending, leading to stagnated economic growth in the long term.[11]

Often, more vulnerable households and communities have limited capacity and access to public sector protections and are therefore disproportionately food insecure.[12]

Currently, only 45% of the global population is effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, and half the world's population lives without any — with millions more where social protections are limited or access uneven.[13]

In thousands of communities worldwide, food banks and their local networks of civil society organizations are filling the gaps in social protection and food access. This private sector, community-led movement reduces food insecurity and advances poverty reduction, human capital and community development. The food bank model is a proven, adaptable, cost-effective and sustainable means for civil society actors to aid communities.

Food security, climate change and malnutrition can no longer be addressed independently of one another.

Meybeck, A., Laval, E., Lévesque, R., Parent, G., 2018. Food Security and Nutrition in the Age of Climate Change. Proceedings of the International Symposium organized by the Government of Québec in collaboration with FAO. Québec City, September 24-27, 2017. Rome, FAO. pp. 132. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO.

[11] Torero, IFPRI.

[12] Modernizing Foreign Assistance Network, "Principles and recommendations for a Strategy on engaging local civil society." (2020). https://oldsite.modernizeaid.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Principles-for-Engaging-Local-Civil-Society_detailed-version.pdf

[13] ILO, World Social Protection Report 2017-19. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_605078.pdf

As part of their food recovery and redistribution efforts, food banks are truly a "green" hunger-relief intervention. **Currently, the world produces enough food to feed everyone, yet 1.3 billion tons of food is lost or wasted.**[14] Wasted food isn't just wasted calories that could have nourished people but a great strain on natural resources, including land, water and energy. Food waste that decomposes in landfills releases methane, a greenhouse gas that is 28 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Because of food banks' commitment to sourcing nutritious surplus food that might otherwise end up in a landfill, an estimated 1.8 billion kilograms of CO2e are mitigated annually. The potential for growth is huge: Today, food banks recover less than 1% of the total global food wastage, so identifying opportunities for recovery at all levels of the supply chain, introducing technological advances, bringing together new partnerships and scaling food banks all have a tremendous role to play in the large opportunity that is reducing food loss and waste.

ABOUT THE FOOD BANK MODEL

Since the 1960s, the food bank model, a private sector, grassroots response to the problem of food insecurity, has emerged and now operates in approximately 80 countries worldwide. The food bank model has been described as the "safety net of the safety net," a secondary form of social protection operating an efficient, community-led complement to public sector programs, offering food access to economically disadvantaged people when social protections are lacking or absent.[15]

The food bank model is distinguished by three primary characteristics: 1) Food banks are private sector, community-led organizations formed primarily to address local food insecurity needs; 2) Food banks recover and redistribute surplus, wholesome food from throughout the supply chain; and 3) Food banks foster local networks of civil society agencies to distribute or serve food resources, providing food access for vulnerable and economically disadvantaged people, while also providing budget alleviating support to the agencies.[16]

Food banks are community-established, rooted in the socioeconomic and cultural context of the communities in which they are formed to address local food access needs. Food banks operate through the recovery and redistribution of wholesome but otherwise unmarketable or surplus food that might go to waste. This model offers an environmentally beneficial and economical means to remove excess product from the supply chain, thereby strengthening food system resilience and efficiency, while redirecting the surpluses to offer greater food access and social benefit.

Food banks typically distribute food and other services to eligible recipients through local beneficiary agency networks. The food bank and their partner agencies work through a variety of program structures and innovative practices that meet differing local needs and make use of local resources and opportunities. The food bank serves as the nucleus of community activity, coordinating with and strengthening civil society institutions to provide hunger relief where the need is greatest.

[14] FAO. 2011. Global food losses and food waste – Extent, causes and prevention. Rome

[15] Gentilini, U. "Banking on Food: The State of Food Banks in HICs," IDS Working Paper, 2013.

[16] GFN – How a Food Bank Works.

The model is an efficient, community-led complement to public sector social protections enhancing food access to people in tandem with public programs or filling gaps when social protections are lacking or absent. The characteristic of food banks to distribute services through local partner agencies generates a multiplier effect that strengthens civil society and the social ties that bind both institutions and people in close geographical proximity, promotes community resilience and vibrancy, and enables grassroots decision-making to enhance food security.

FOOD BANKS AS BUILDERS OF CIVIL SOCIETY

Food access and assistance, human services, and similar benefits to support people and communities often require civil society actors to address, in part or in whole, gaps in social protections. Documenting and assessing the interactions and collaborative efforts of food banks and their civil society partners has been well studied in high income countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, where food banks are long established and where social protections are often robust, but there are still inadequacies such as limited benefits or eligibility or gaps in access.

> **"Civil society comprises organizations that are not associated with government — including schools and universities, advocacy groups, professional associations, churches and cultural institutions (business sometimes is covered by the term civil society and sometimes not). Civil society organizations play multiple roles. They are an important source of information for both citizens and government. They monitor government policies and actions and hold government accountable. They engage in advocacy and offer alternative policies for government, the private sector and other institutions. They deliver services, especially to the poor and underserved. They defend citizen rights and work to change and uphold social norms and behaviors."**
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> *(Civil society: An essential ingredient of development; Brookings Institution. 2020)*

Civil society actors have different roles, impact and capabilities in different socioeconomic and political contexts. In emerging markets and developing economies, civil society can serve a crucial role in providing essential human services where social protections are lacking, economic gains uneven or where labor markets are characterized by high rates of informal employment without protections. In countries where incomes, social protections or economic development are lacking, rates of severe and moderate food insecurity tend to be highest. In emerging and developing economy countries, civil society actors may be the only consistent providers of food assistance and food access for people in vulnerable circumstances.

Since 2015, the food bank model has been expanding rapidly in emerging markets and developing economies. Currently, 84% of people served by GFN member food banks globally live in emerging market and developing economy nations, according to the International Monetary Fund.[17] The role of food banks in natural disasters and other emergencies, and their role in long-term recovery, is important. How food banks and their agencies can advance community development, improve social outcomes and increase food security and food systems in emerging and developing economy countries warrants greater study.

[17] NAR CY2023

Quantifying the impact of food banks and the civil society networks they foster has largely been limited to key indicators of people served, volume of food sourced and distributed, meals served, and numbers of agencies in local networks. In quantifying the broader impact, both direct and indirect benefits of food banks and their civil society partners to improve food security and socioeconomic gains is important to inform policymakers and the field of development assistance.

CIVIL SOCIETY AGENCY SURVEY SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Gaining better understanding and quantifying the interaction of food banks and local agency networks to support community resilience and advance human capital development is imperative. In 2022, GFN undertook its first data collection project in partnership with network members to provide the first-ever measure of food-bank-aided human capital development from a regionally representative sample of food banks and their agencies in emerging and developing economy countries.

We collected more than 1,000 surveys from nine food banking organizations, including Banco de Alimentos Rosario, Banco de Alimentos de Colombia, Banco de Alimentos Quito, Banco de Alimentos Honduras, India FoodBanking Network, Feeding India by Zomato, FoodCycle Indonesia, Food Banking Kenya, and Red de Bancos de Alimentos México. Overall, response rates were good (above 50%) and provide broad representation across networks.

Historically, GFN has lacked insight into the types of programs and services offered by the agencies of food banks, although we did include this segment of questions in Network Activity Report (NAR) CY23, our annual network-wide survey of food bank operations and programs. In the past, when we included a question in the NAR about agency types, response was uneven and data was incomplete, particularly as the "other" category scooped up a lot of programs that could have possibly been defined within the categories provided. The results from the survey show that overall, "other," or mixed services, represents the largest proportion of the agency base.

Types of Agencies	
22.72%	Food pantry/food shelf/grocery distribution: organizations that provide food and grocery products directly to individuals for their use at home
17.78%	Congregate meal site: community kitchens, soup kitchens, organizations that offer meals to be eaten on-site, but the beneficiaries do not live there
17.69%	Shelter: temporary housing situation, homeless shelter, abused women's shelter, group homes
11.64%	Educational: organizations that provide educational services to the population served, such as colleges, schools, organizations that carry out school reinforcement
2.79%	Health/medical: clinics, hospitals, nutrition hubs
1.96%	Cultural: organizations that carry out cultural activities such as music, dance, handicrafts
25.42%	Other, please specify, including mixed type: offering a combination of multiple services

Excluding “other,” the highest proportion of agencies served by food banks is food pantries/grocery distribution. Mexico-Puebla overwhelmingly serves shelters (40%), and Indonesia serves educational-based agencies (24%).

Most agencies are secular nonprofits:

56.61%	Secular nonprofit organization or foundation
23.68%	Faith-based, religious, canon law or other
21.55%	Community service organization
9.81%	Academic or educational institution
4.90%	Clinic or health-based organization
2.31%	Governmental organization
6.48%	Other (please specify)

There are some regional differences, however. In Mexico-Puebla, 52% of agencies are faith-based.

Agencies typically provide food assistance services daily. Other services provided also follow a similar frequency.

Frequency of Food Assistance	
51.87%	Daily
25.19%	Weekly
11.57%	Monthly
3.45%	Several times a year
0.56%	Once or twice a year

Agencies are overwhelmingly female-run:

Excecutive Director Gender	
59.46%	Female
36.89%	Male
3.65%	Other

We asked for more information about services provided to illustrate the broad array of programming available through community-led agencies. While the majority provide food grocery distribution, others provide non-food grocery products, health and medical services, and employment assistance.

Programs Run	
52.27%	Grocery distribution (e.g., food pantry or meal kit distribution)
31.54%	Child-specific program (e.g., daycare, school, group home, orphanage, summer camp)
29.23%	Congregate meal site, non-residential (e.g., soup kitchen, drop-in centers for seniors)
20.81%	Shelter or camp food assistance (e.g., temporary housing, homeless shelter, abused women's shelter, migrant or refugee camp)
20.54%	Non-food grocery product distribution (e.g., diapers, personal hygiene)
18.69%	Mixed: offering a combination of multiple services/programs listed above
16.65%	Employment assistance, job training or counseling, skills training
14.43%	Job placement, job counseling or employment skills training
13.04%	Health/medical (e.g., clinics, hospitals, nutrition hubs)
9.07%	Mass food distribution site(s)
6.29%	Poverty alleviation programming such budgeting, financial education
1.94%	Direct cash transfer
1.94%	Loans or microfinancing
16.93%	Other

Agencies identify the food bank as a critical partner to service provision. Of agency respondents, 88% agree that it would have a damaging impact on the organization's services.

If the food bank were to close, it would have a damaging impact on my organization's services.	
62.11%	Agree strongly
26.29%	Agree
6.83%	Neither agree nor disagree
3.93%	Disagree
0.84%	Disagree strongly

And 92% agree that the food bank is one of the most important partners in service delivery and programming.

The food bank is one of our most important partners in service delivery and programming.	
58.90%	Agree strongly
33.33%	Agree
4.96%	Neither agree nor disagree
2.62%	Disagree
0.19%	Disagree strongly

- The average respondent agency was able to serve 2,772 people annually thanks to partnership with the food bank (people they might have otherwise been unable to serve).

- The average respondent agency saved US$139,000 annually thanks to partnership with the food bank.

FOOD BANKS ADDRESSING THE ROOT CAUSES OF HUNGER

In bringing together disparate stakeholders and partners unified in the cause of alleviating hunger, food banks also co-create substantive, lasting and creative programs to address the root causes of hunger, including poverty, unemployment and lack of education. In addition, the financial savings from receiving free or low-cost food from a food bank frees up budgetary funds to introduce other programming that supplements food provision, including financial support, income generation opportunities and employment support.

One of the ways in which food banks address the root causes of poverty is through income support programming, namely job training, education, placement and follow-up. Many food banks in the GFN network operate or support programs that help move people into self-sufficiency through meaningful employment situations. GFN recently developed case studies around five programs across the globe in Jordan, Mexico, Paraguay, South Africa and the United Kingdom.

In addition to its extensive feeding programs, including grocery distribution and hot meal provision, Tkiyet Um Ali has also expanded wraparound services to address food insecurity and poverty in Jordan. The food bank partnered with Dar Abu Abdullah, a local nonprofit that is focused on the economic empowerment of the most vulnerable communities, to implement the three-year pilot project, which will utilize a specialized data integration system to capture information on beneficiaries and ensure they receive both food support and required empowerment services, including capacity building and income generation.

BAMX-Puebla's *Food for the Future* program is a five-week educational sequence that recruits people looking to achieve self-sufficiency through regular feeding programs. Each of the five modules has a specific theme: One is recruiting, two is motivation, three is training and education, four is employment, and five is "acompañar," or walking with people, which ensures that support is ongoing. The program has a 98% graduation rate, and in the last six years, 1,700 people total have graduated. Among all of Puebla's many social programs, *Food for the Future* has the highest return on investment: For every MXN$1 invested, there is a social return of MXN$9.90 coming back into the community in return.

In Paraguay, Banco de Alimentos implements *The Poverty Stoplight*, a self-administered survey that helps participants identify areas for improvement in the household-level circumstances that have contributed to poverty. Participants identify their scores on a red, yellow and green scale in more than 50 areas, including housing, employment, education and health. Program managers can then access all of the data to identify systemic issues. The goal is to move scores from red to green through targeted programming both at the individual, family and community levels. In 2022 and 2023, 424 families completed the initial survey and 303 completed the follow-up survey. Among those who completed the program, there was an 18% increase in green results, a 9% decrease in yellow results and a 46% decrease in red results. Among the 303 families that completed the program, "no poverty" increased from 61% to 72%. Diets, income and household budgets also improved.

In 2019, Food Forward South Africa (FFSA) sought to address high levels of employment among young people through its *Supply Chain Internship Programme*. While the program focuses on education and training related to warehouse operations, there are several educational modules that are applicable to any area of employment, including literacy and general workplace skills training. The program incorporates 29 days of traditional classroom learning with 75 days of on-the-job experience in the warehouse. There are more than 60 proud graduates, 19 of whom have continued working with and for the food bank. Others secured contract warehouse jobs through FFSA contacts with major retail partners.

In the U.K., FareShare's delivery partner SOFEA in the South Midlands and Thames Valley area of England addresses the training and education needs of young people for whom traditional education has not been successful. The three pillars of the program are work, education and well-being. Participants prepare for their secondary education certificates and work on behavior regulation, overcoming challenges and general employment skills while gaining real-world job experience in a warehouse setting thanks to FareShare. A new cooking program also teaches students culinary skills using surplus products so that they can feed their classmates and build a resume for potential future opportunities in the hospitality industry.

Addressing immediate food needs and long-term needs through comprehensive wraparound social services is a hallmark of food banking. Community-led food banks are able to adapt to their local circumstances and cultural contexts and create, operate and support programs unique to the needs of their populations. Food banks also serve as the building blocks of a healthy and just society, bringing together their agency networks, other service providers, corporate partners and community stakeholders to advocate for the holistic needs of the underserved and food-insecure populations in their communities.

FOOD BANKS AND THE SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT

GFN represents the most geographically and culturally diverse network of food banks in the world. Members operate in 45 countries through a network of 754 community-led food bank locations. Approximately 311,000 volunteers provided an estimated 3.5 million hours of labor at their community food banks. In 2023, GFN food banks provided services through an extensive network of nearly 77,000 local beneficiary agencies, providing food access and assistance to more than 41 million people. The GFN network offers a tremendous opportunity to assess the impact of food banks to address food insecurity and strengthen community-level institutions of civil society while quantifying the attendant social benefits these local networks serve in a variety of contexts.

The food bank model has been proven successful in a multitude of ways. As a hunger relief intervention, food banks impact each of the four dimensions of food security — availability, access, utilization and stability over time. In order to distribute food directly to food-insecure persons or to local beneficiary agencies, food banks operate dynamic systems of logistics and warehousing infrastructure that function similarly to commercial wholesale food operations. Each food bank typically acts as a central hub for a specific geographical region or community, securing resources, sorting product, and ensuring only safe, wholesome food enters the system, inventorying product and then distributing food out to a network of local beneficiary agencies and feeding programs, directly and indirectly serving food insecure people. Because of these efforts, food banks are highly effective at uniting public and private initiatives to reduce food insecurity in emerging market economies where public-sector nutrition safety net programs may be underfunded, overburdened or nonexistent.

We know that food banking provides value beyond the food distributed and received and can extend into economic, social and environmental benefits. Benefits also include improved food security, a reduction in health care costs, reduced stunting, household budget benefits and increased funds available for other important costs, reduced stress, higher educational attainment, employment gains, and reductions in methane outputs due to reduced food loss and waste. These and many other factors were considered as potential outcomes for food bank and agency food distribution. Other studies, including ones conducted by GFN members in Australia, South Africa and the United Kingdom have included calculations for reduced crime, reduction in landfills, improved mental health, a better night's sleep and more, which illustrates the wide variety of cultural and socioeconomic conditions specific to a particular country.

One means to measure impact is through social return on investment (SROI). Evidence suggests that the social return on investment for food banking may be significant. The value of the food recovered by food banks annually, for example, far exceeds service delivery operating costs (each US$1 invested in GFN supports the distribution of 14 meals worldwide). Further, evidence garnered by WFP research suggests that child feeding programs, which accounted for approximately 25% of the activity in the GFN network in 2019, provide US$3 to US$10 social return for every US$1 invested.[18] Reducing stunting, which involves nutrition, health and sanitation interventions, provides a US$45 social return for every US$1 invested.

[18] World Food Programme. Cost-Benefit Analysis School Feeding Investment Case. July 2016. https://executiveboard.wfp.org/document_download/WFP-0000038526.

Food recovery efforts also produce a return on investment: One study found that for every dollar invested in food recovery, there was a societal benefit of US$4.50.[19] Food banks also allow the civil society agencies with which they partner to invest significantly more funds in delivering other core human services each year, such as employment training, educational or housing assistance, and other human services to marginalized communities, which translates to additional, indirect social impact.

SROI assessments have been conducted by food bank organizations in Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States, among others. Each of these SROI assessments deployed different methodologies to assess impact and community benefits. With the growth of the food bank model around the world, GFN proposes the development of a methodology for SROI that may be applied in differing socioeconomic and regional contexts, especially in low- and middle-income countries. A pilot SROI analysis of a food bank in Colombia suggested a ratio of benefit to the community of US$24.70 to every $1, through reduced food insecurity, better health outcomes and reduced stunting. Taking these factors and others into consideration, documenting the broad scope of civil society service and activity supported by food banks would help our organization better understand the impact food banks are currently having, as well as how we might make a broader scale impact in the future.

GFN sought to test the same methodology of the food banking model (using extant and attainable data sets and other empirical evidence) for food banks in four countries: Colombia, India, Kenya and Mexico. Because the aim of this project is a finalized SROI model that suggests a range of return on investment, measured in US$, that may be broadly applied to food banks globally, derived from food banks in varying stages of development, socioeconomic and regional contexts, the food banks were selected in order to represent the depth and breadth of the network and diversity of geography, age, and development stage and service modality.

Information used in the overall calculations provided by the food banks include CY22 operations information: costs (purchased food, transport, storage and handling) and distribution (kilograms and meal estimates). Because there is a lot of variation among food banks in people served and kilograms distributed (including kilograms distributed per person or “meals”), purchased versus donated food, as well as fixed costs (some food banks use donated space and therefore don’t have associated rent/lease costs), results vary.

The average of all participating food banks is a return of US$4.66. Three food banks have SROI values of over $7: Ghaziabad & Noida (India) $7.11, Puebla (Mexico) $8.66, and Cali (Colombia) $10.59. The average of these food banks is a return of almost US$8.80 for every US$1 invested.

In India, the overall range is even larger, and the average for the five food banks we studied in India is $3.40. Calculating India as a whole with all of the other countries (straight average, no weighting), the overall average is $6.76.

[19] Grace Clare, Gradon Diprose, Louise Lee, Phil Bremer, Sheila Skeaff, Miranda Mirosa, Measuring the impact of food rescue: A social return on investment analysis, Food Policy, Volume 117, 2023, 102454, ISSN 0306-9192, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2023.102454.

FFSA IMPACT ASSESSMENT

In 2019, GFN member FoodForward South Africa (FFSA) commissioned Impact Amplifier to conduct an impact assessment of the food bank's services, both to beneficiary organizations (and ultimately their clients) and society as a whole. Using two means, surveying and interviewing personnel at beneficiary organizations (BOs) and measuring the financial benefit of the food bank's services (SROI), **FFSA: An Evaluation of Impact 2019/2020** provides a lens into how FFSA supports and builds community. FFSA provides 34% of the food used for meals distributed network-wide, and 87% of BOs reported that FFSA positively impacted their overall food budgets. Thirty percent of BOs report that they would not be able to continue meal distribution without FFSA's partnership. Association with FFSA also promotes meal quality; although there is variation across agencies and programs, an average meal is balanced and diverse: 25% grains and cereal, 15% animal protein, 15% fresh vegetables and 9% fresh fruit.

Appendix 1:

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND AGENCY SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Participant food banks were selected based on several factors, including inclusion of food banks differing in size, age, maturity and region to ensure that a broad swath of food banks largely represented the diversity and breadth of The Global FoodBanking Network.

- Argentina – Banco de Alimentos Rosario
- Colombia – Banco de Alimentos Cali
- Ecuador – Banco de Alimentos Quito
- Banco de Alimentos Honduras
- India – India FoodBanking Network (44 member food banks)
- India – No Food Waste
- India – Feeding India by Zomato
- Indonesia – FoodCycle Indonesia
- Food Banking Kenya
- Mexico – Red de Bancos de Alimentos México

Quantifying the impact of food banks and the civil society networks they foster has largely been limited to key indicators of people served, volume of food sourced and distributed, meals served, and numbers of community food distribution partners/agencies in local networks. This project has identified the typology of beneficiary agency networks and quantified the impact of the interplay of food banks and agencies through in-kind support for hunger relief, characterizing agency programming aided by the budget relieving effect of food bank support, innovative practices extended and collaborative efforts of private sector aided social protection.

Technical Advisory Group

GFN assembled a team of researchers based around the world, with an emphasis on countries conducting data collection, to aid in the design of the study and implementation. While the SROI methodology is intended to serve as universal, the researchers examined the pilot SROI study and provided information and insight into making the methodology as applicable and relevant in their own contexts.

- Craig Gundersen, PhD, Baylor University Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, chair and SROI project lead
- Vijay Ganapthy, Thinkthrough Consulting (India)
- Alvaro Garcia Leyva, Technological Institute of Sonora (Mexico)
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Food Bank Participation and Agency Survey Objectives

This report incorporates in-field research from data derived through survey forms, disseminated by the food banks with assistance from GFN. The survey data will be the primary source material for agency mapping, derived from food banks and their agency networks in eight emerging market/developing economy countries where social protections are limited and where rates of food insecurity and poverty are near or above global averages.

Agency mapping provides the primary source data for in-depth analysis of food bank and agency networks in the selected countries/food bank members as a geographically representative sample and varying socioeconomic contexts of emerging and developing economies in the GFN network. The survey data methodology informed and categorized agencies by type and programmatic activity. The goal was to gather information about food bank impact beyond just key performance indicators (output measures) of people served and kilograms of food and grocery product distributed. Generally, the agency mapping informed:

- Type and scope of agencies
  - About the agency (multiple characteristics)/service indicator by stakeholder type
- Agency services: food access and other programming
  - Programming/service delivery by type
- Role of food banks to foster and scale local agency networks, aiding in human capital development through economic mobility programming, job training, etc.
  - Output in people assisted and demographics of programming activity/service delivery by scope
  - Location-community type/service delivery typology
- Quantifying the budget-relieving role of the food bank, including what depth of programming or additional programming agency partners can engage in aided by the support from the food bank.
  - Agency alliance: local networks/mutually supporting interaction
  - Perceptions of food bank and its services

GFN built the survey in SurveyMonkey and provided each food bank with a unique link in each of the languages requested by the food bank.

The survey was designed to assess programming activities of agencies that broadly impact human capital development directly and indirectly supported by the food bank model. The programmatic activities are aligned to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), directly SDG2 (Zero Hunger) and less directly, SDG1 (poverty alleviation), SDG3 health outcomes, SDG4 educational improvement, SDG5 Gender Equity and others as identified by agency responses.

GFN supported food banks in-country to conduct the survey agency mapping exercise through grant support of US$10,000 per participating food bank member, technical assistance aided by consultants familiar with agency survey reporting and additional field support teams as necessary. The survey was disseminated by the food banks, in digital form (SurveyMonkey) in English and Spanish. The US$10,000 grant serves to incentivize ongoing food bank attention to the survey, offset staff time costs associated with distributing the survey and issuing of introductory emails to agencies being surveyed.

ABOUT THE GLOBAL FOODBANKING NETWORK

Food banking offers a solution to both chronic hunger and the climate crisis. GFN works with partners across 51 countries to recover and redirect food to those who need it. In 2024, our network provided food to more than 38 million people, reducing food waste and creating healthy, resilient communities. We help the food system function as it should: nourishing people and the planet together. **Learn more at foodbanking.org**.