

AGRICULTURAL RECOVERY

Asociación de Bancos de Alimentos de Colombia

Context

In 2024, the national network of food banks in Colombia, Asociación de Bancos de Alimentos de Colombia (ABACO), recovered 10,467 tons of food through agricultural recovery, marking a 36% increase compared to 2023. The network aims to achieve a 70% growth in the distribution of nutritional foods, including dairy products and water, by 2025.

ABACO is also exploring opportunities to secure tax benefits for alternative donors and partners supporting food banks through logistics and transportation. If successful, this initiative will grant a 37% tax benefit to logistics and transport partners. Additionally, the network sees port recovery as an opportunity for agricultural recovery with untapped potential. However, challenges related to data integrity and segmentation have made it difficult to determine where to start. To address this, ABACO is considering increasing stakeholder outreach and engagement with relevant authorities to strengthen port recovery efforts.

Case Study Outline

This case study explores various agricultural recovery models implemented by three of the 26 food banks within Asociación de Bancos de Alimentos de Colombia (ABACO), Colombia's national food bank network. It examines how these food banks have successfully adopted different approaches to food recovery and engaged with partners and communities to scale their agricultural recovery efforts.

The first section focuses on market recovery led by **Banco de Alimentos Bogotá**, which has developed a multilayered partnership strategy with market management and traders over decades. Today, they are the primary partners of [Corabastos](#), the largest wholesale food market in the country, in managing unsold surplus produce, facilitating food recovery and supplying other charitable organizations. This partnership not only provides a timely logistical solution but also streamlines donation distribution, ensuring that beneficiary organizations receive food through a single, efficient channel.

The second section highlights how the oldest food bank in the network, **Fundación Saciar**, has expanded its agricultural recovery efforts, pioneering the REAGRO program and working closely with farming communities and wholesale markets to source produce for beneficiary organizations and *templos comedores* ("dining temples"). It also explores how the food bank is managing territorial expansion to recover more surplus food and effectively distribute it through remote strategic distribution points.

The third section examines the highly effective partnership engagement and retention cycle that has been central to the success of **Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos de Medellín**'s agricultural recovery program. It discusses the strategies implemented to minimize food waste recovered from markets, thereby reducing transportation and disposal costs. This section also highlights low-cost, effective approaches to food transformation, including dicing, slicing and processing food into finished products such as bread and cakes. These measures help reduce waste and ensure a balanced food package for distribution and promote consumption of fresh produce.

1. Banco de Alimentos Bogotá

There are two main models at Banco de Alimentos Bogota: on-farm recovery with 365 small-medium scale farmers (owning an average of 0.5 hectares of land) and market recovery at the country's largest wholesale farmers' market, aggregating large quantities and varieties of fresh produce from all the regions of the country.

On-Farm Recovery

Programa de Rescate Agrícola (PREA) is the agricultural recovery program of Banco de Alimentos Bogotá. It operates on a model in which the food bank:

- Recovers fresh produce, through donations (27% of the distribution recovery sources) and/or provides a solidarity contribution (recovery value – “*valor de salvamento*”) to reimburse the farmer for part of the expenses incurred in the production and recovery of the products. In 2024, 43% of all recovered fresh produce was distributed using the recovery fee model.
- Purchases fresh produce, paying the farmer a value between the recover value and the commercial value.

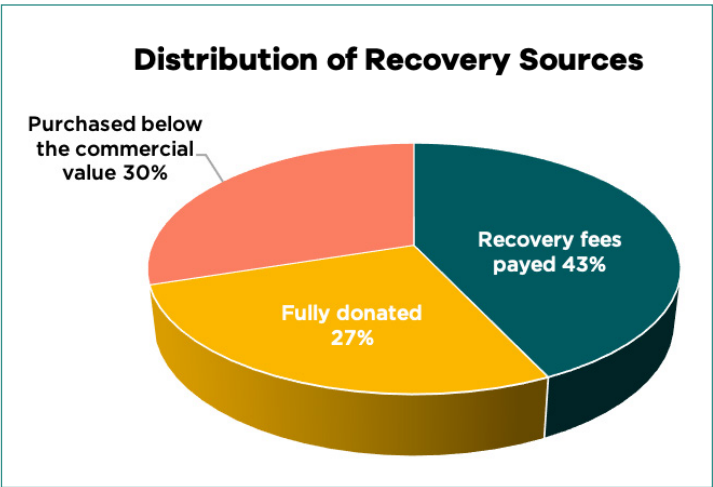


Figure 1 - Breakdown of agricultural recovery: 43% for which recovery fee is paid; 27% is fully donated; 30% is purchase from farms at 70% below commercial value (based on Corabastos pricing).

For all distributions, beneficiary organizations pay a solidarity fee, which is usually lower than the cost of recovery (a maximum of 10% of the commercial value of the products). For example, under the solidarity contribution model for purchased food, the food bank buys 20 kilograms of food from farmers for 11,000 pesos (US\$2.66) and receives 1,100 pesos (US\$0.27) from beneficiary organizations as a contribution for the same amount of food. This means that, in principle, the food bank ‘loses’ approximately US\$2.39 per 20 kilograms purchased. This deficit is covered through fundraising efforts targeting donors who support PREA.

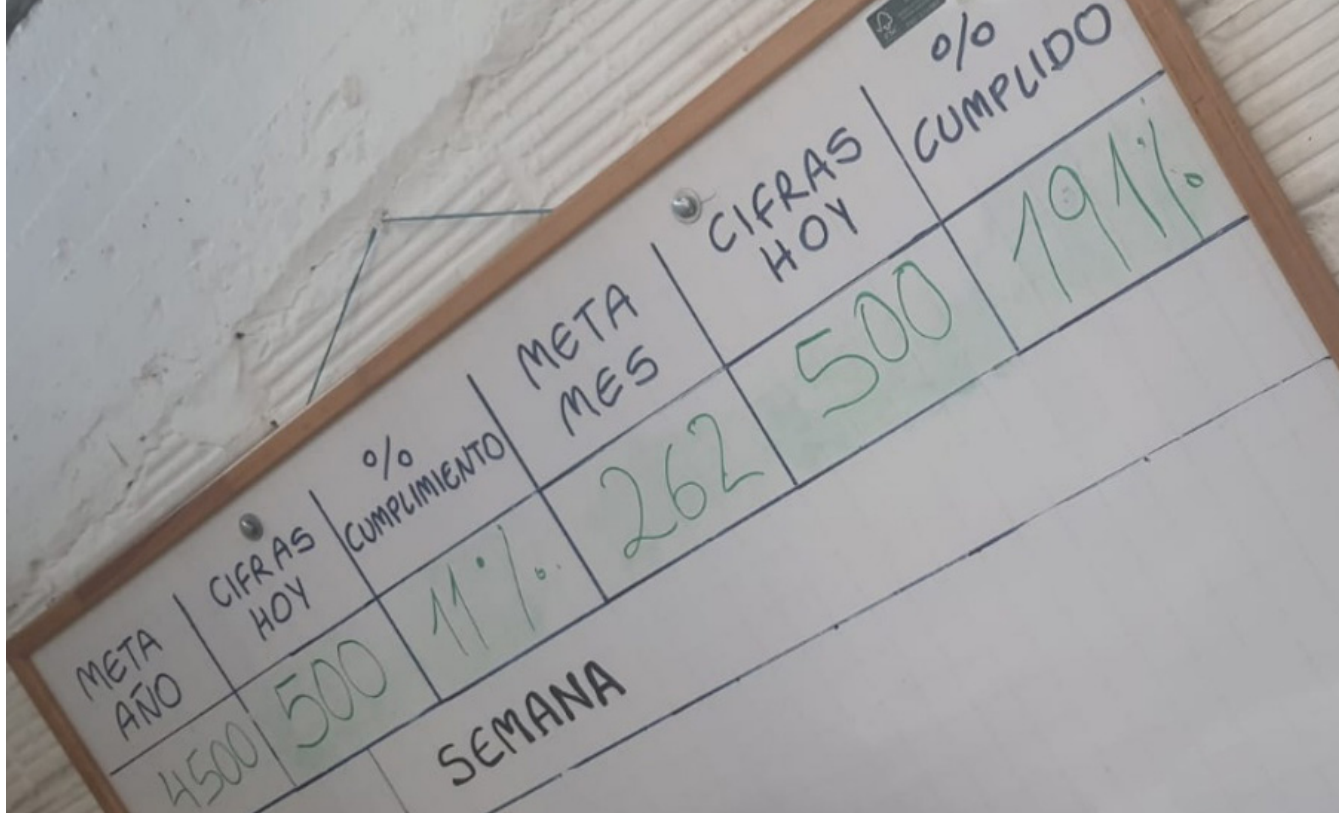


Figure 2 - Dashboard displaying the annual target (4500 tons), monthly target (262) and the percentage of monthly target achieved (191%)

The in-field logistics system is designed to ensure that all farmers have a collection point close to their farms where they can deliver their donations. These product pick-up points also serve as marketplaces for the farmers, where they can access other food products, such as basic basket products, complementing their nutritional requirements. These collection points enable farmers to consolidate their donated produce, share and transport their purchased products from the food bank, optimizing the use of available transport.

Market Recovery

Market recovery from Corabastos represents an important source of food for the food bank. In 2024, the food bank recovered 3,423 tons from the market. And the target for this year is 4,500 tons.

On average, under the current market recovery operation, the food bank recovers 12 to 15 tons of fresh fruits, vegetables and tubers from 1,600 traders. This represents a total reach of approximately 42% of fresh fruit and vegetable traders in the market.

The engagement strategy with market management and traders has been carefully designed to ensure that all donations are made directly to the food bank, which then consolidates and distributes them to other institutions. This approach simplifies the donation process, ensuring that market management works with only one institution and that all traders understand that surplus donations go exclusively to the food bank.

Maintaining strong relationships with market traders and management is crucial. The food bank staff at the market uphold high standards of professionalism, organization and timely service, positioning the food bank as a key logistics partner. As a result, whenever there is surplus, the food bank is prioritized for donations.

While this system has been effective, the food bank faces competition from informal buyers who purchase unsold surplus food from traders and resell it in smaller packets at much lower prices. For traders, these buyers provide an immediate source of additional income, which can be more compelling than the long-term benefits of donating surplus food to the food bank.

Key Success Factors

The market collection point manager, who has overseen the market recovery process from its inception through various stages of evolution, shared key success factors for starting and/or scaling a market recovery:

- Identify and pursue recovery opportunities regardless of scale. Continuously refine the value proposition to traders so that market recovery is seen as a valuable business solution rather than just a charitable activity.
- Engage traders and market management as partners in the solution. Position surplus recovery as a collaborative effort to reduce waste, making stakeholders feel actively involved.
- Give back to donors. Demonstrate the benefits of food donations by sharing data on environmental and social impact, such as emissions avoided, the number of meals served and families supported. Where applicable, highlight potential tax benefits for donors.
- Position market recovery as a corporate social responsibility (CSR) function when engaging market management. Encourage the market to showcase its role in helping communities through the food bank while promoting social and environmental responsibility.
- Maintain openness and accountability. For example, Banco de Alimentos Bogotá charges 270 pesos (\$0.065 USD) per kilogram of fruits and vegetables to cover logistics costs and uphold the dignity of beneficiary families by allowing them to contribute to their own welfare.
 - Traders are informed about this contribution and the reasons behind it to foster transparency, credibility, and trust — ensuring clarity that the food bank does not resell donated food.

Market Recovery and Distribution Process

The food bank has established a structured market recovery and distribution process to ensure transparency and efficiency of operations.

1. **Mobilization of traders:** The food bank encourages traders to donate surplus produce through advertisements or direct one-on-one engagement with food bank staff.
2. **Route mapping and collection:** Food bank staff map out daily collection routes for surplus produce. In some cases, on-demand requests are accommodated along these routes.
3. **Initial selection and classification:** At the traders' stalls, an initial sorting of surplus produce is conducted to minimize the transportation of excessive waste to the food bank's collection center.

4. **Reception at the food bank collection center:** Upon arrival at the collection center, donations are inspected, weighed and documented. Two copies of a receipt are issued— one for the trader and one for the food bank.
5. **Second selection and quality control:** A second round of selection is conducted to further minimize waste. This process is typically carried out by a group of volunteers.
6. **Distribution:** This is done in one of two ways:
 - a) **Direct delivery by the food bank:** Transport costs are shared between the beneficiary institution (60%) and the food bank (40%), with services provided by a third-party transporter.
 - b) **Collection by the beneficiary:** The organization arranges for an appropriate vehicle to transport the food.
7. **Payment:** The beneficiary organization pays approximately **\$0.065 USD per kilogram** as solidarity contribution.

Importance of a Donation Receipt

Every donation made by a trader is accompanied by a donation receipt, which serves several important purposes:

- **Accountability:** The receipt acts as a record for both the food bank and traders, ensuring transparency in the donation process.
- **Waste control:** It helps track how much of the donated food was usable and successfully redistributed, allowing for better waste management.
- **Market management oversight:** The receipt provides market management with visibility into the amount of surplus food being redirected to meaningful use instead of ending up in dumpsites.

Recibo de donación
Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos
NIT: 830.086.601 - 7
Calle 19A N° 32-52 Tel: 747 0828

#JUNTOS CONTRA EL HAMBRE
1159.56
Remisión
66300
01/02/25

Nombre donante Kampos C.C/ Nit _____
Teléfono 14 Puesto 17
Bodega 14

Producto	Kilogramos	Cantidad Canastillas	Bultos	Valor estimado
Zanahoria	18	1		
Limón	20	1		
Aguacate	18	1		
Frutero	17			
	<u>73</u>			

Recibido por: Gustavo Lopez

Certificado de donación Sí ☒ No ☐

ABACO

Global FoodBanking Network

CELULAR: 3219310942

2. Fundación Saciar

In 2024, Fundación Saciar recovered and distributed 4,046 tons of fruits and vegetables, representing approximately 60% of the total national volume.

Fundación Saciar's REAGRO program is an agricultural recovery initiative focused on collecting surplus fresh produce from farmers at no cost (without paying any recovery fee). The success of this model can be attributed to the altruistic culture of the farming communities and the comprehensive community engagement process that the food bank has invested in especially through existing community projects such as [*los templos comedores*](#).

Over the years, Fundación Saciar has developed a structured outreach plan to connect with its network of farmers through field ambassadors, who are food bank staff responsible for farmer engagement and recovery operations.

The outreach process can be summarized as follows:

- Mapping and surveying the agricultural zone to understand the area — its culture, the types of crops grown, etc.
- Building trust by showcasing existing projects by the food bank in the area. These are mainly the “dining temples,” where the food bank serves members of the community. These pre-existing projects provide a foundation for building trust and credibility for the food bank.
 - There are specific strategies for engaging different types of potential donors. For example, field ambassadors tailor their engagement approach to fit a solidarity/support model for smallholder farmers, while for agribusinesses, they emphasize social and environmental responsibility.
 - At this point, it is crucial that field ambassadors position the recovery process as a reliable logistics solution for farmers who often have surplus produce that needs to be collected promptly to ensure continuity in production. This includes providing necessary materials such as crates, boxes and storage space.
- Working closely with Municipal Units for Agricultural Technical Assistance (UMATA), as well as farmer associations and cooperatives at the local government level, to reach more farmers in the area.
- Building a list of farmers, including their locations (initially descriptive but gradually transitioned to georeferenced locations), contacts and the crops they grow.

Field Logistics and Route Optimization

Logistics is a key success factor for REAGRO because some donations are often unplanned — yet timely collection, as well as the management of human capital and logistical capacity, is essential to making these recoveries possible.

The food bank optimizes recovery routes through its strategically located epicenters (remote collection and distribution centers) or *templos comedores*, where deliveries can be made directly without the need to collect and transport to the central warehouse. The dining temples are an important recipient of recovered food, serving 2,000 people daily, including infants who receive nutritional follow-ups, with baseline and follow-up data collected. Data shows that the food bank provides up to 35% of the nutritional and caloric requirements for beneficiaries through the dining temples. Hence direct distribution to the *templos comedores* is an important redistribution channel that leverages existing network of this social feeding project.

Direct delivery to the dining temples and beneficiary organizations through the distribution centers further increases the utilization of the produce, as a smaller percentage is lost due to optimized handling and transportation processes. This results in a 98% utilization of the total volume recovered.

Market Recovery

Market recovery volumes grew from 310 tons to 365 tons in 2024, with an identified potential of up to 50 tons per day.

The food bank's value proposition to markets and traders is that the market recovery process helps address logistical flow challenges and contributes to a cleaner central supply center, ultimately reducing waste management costs beyond the permitted limit.



Figure 3 - Agricultural recovery in smallholder farms in Medellín. Photo: Norma Alonso, ABACO



Figure 4 - Agricultural recovery food bank staff at Saciar warehouse. Photo: Norma Alonso, ABACO

While markets offer a variety of products, they can also be a source of lower-quality produce compared to direct farm recovery. To balance this, the food bank has invested in sensitizing traders to donate higher-quality produce with a longer shelf life, reducing waste during transportation and handling. Additionally, food bank staff at markets pre-select produce at traders' posts to further minimize waste.

Markets also present an opportunity to trace surplus sources further upstream at farms. Therefore, building strong relationships with traders not only unlocks greater recovery volumes at markets but also has the potential to increase surplus recovery directly from farms.

Volunteering

The food bank works with a co-responsibility volunteer approach, where beneficiary organizations contribute volunteer hours at the food bank, typically sorting and preparing food packages for other institutions. This not only promotes responsible and meaningful work but also reinforces the principle of serving others as others serve you.

In total, the program saves up to 300 million pesos (about US\$73,000) per year in labor costs through co-responsibility volunteering while ensuring that institutions are served in a timely and dignified manner.

Key Metrics

The agricultural recovery program at Saciar is monitored against the following key metrics:

- **Total volume of fruit and vegetables recovered**, typically driven by commercial farms donating just one type of crop.
- **Variety of fresh produce donated**, driven mostly by smallholder farmers. This is usually more complex to plan, as donations can sometimes be ad hoc and real-time when the daily route has already been mapped.

- **Number and type of donors**, i.e., small and large donor categories.
- **Contribution to food sovereignty**, particularly driven by smallholders, as they donate food that is grown and consumed by communities in their areas.

Recommendations

With years of operations and scaling, some of the recommendations from the program manager of REAGRO at Fundación Saciar are:

- Permanence and consistency in the field and with farmers are the cornerstones of a successful agricultural recovery program.
- Donor impact payback by sharing the impact made possible through their donations is key to maintaining relationships with farmers and building trust.
- Guarantee donor farmers that their donated produce will not be sold.
- Diversify funding sources for agricultural recovery by finding ways for non-typical stakeholders to contribute, e.g., through co-responsibility volunteering.
- Invest in branding and publicity for the program, specifically targeting the most common sources of information, such as radio stations.
- Generate value connections between producers and traders. For example, create market linkages where possible to reinforce that the food bank prioritizes farmer livelihoods.
- Understand the culture of the region/country and design the program to align with it.
- Cultivate emotional intelligence and develop a higher tolerance for frustration.

Given the growth trajectory, some important areas of expansion for the food bank (like food banks with many years of experience operating at a comparable scale) include:

- Decentralizing the distribution of fresh produce by establishing three more collection and distribution centers to enable broader coverage.
- Establishing additional food banks or converting large distribution centers into food banks.
- Significantly increasing the amount of produce recovered and expanding the beneficiary network.

3. Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos de Medellín (FUBAM)

Fundación Banco Arquidiocesano de Alimentos de Medellín's agricultural recovery sources come from small- to medium-scale farmers and central markets. The food bank recorded a 39.9% growth in the volume recovered from farms and markets (713.6 tons) in 2024 compared to 2023 and is projected to grow by 20% in 2025.

The food bank operates on a 100% donation model, meaning it does not pay recovery fees for recovered produce. Instead, in cases where the donated produce is not yet harvested, food bank staff and volunteers harvest and load the produce onto trucks.

FUBAM has recorded success in its donor farmer engagement strategy, as it has a well-defined farmer outreach plan. This includes identifying and onboarding farmers, demonstrating the potential impact of their donations, honoring the commitment to provide timely logistics support and reporting back on the real impact data after donation.

In the markets, the trader engagement strategy is similar. Food bank staff approach both the market management and individual traders, offering their value proposition of timely surplus management for unsold but still consumable produce. They work to maintain good relationships with market management, retain existing traders and scout for new ones. This process is viewed as reciprocal, positioning the food bank as a solution provider with the responsibility to report back, fostering trust and accountability. While the value proposition for market management focuses on environmental and social responsibility, the value proposition for traders is more tangible and immediate, emphasizing the cost-saving benefits of food bank recovery operations — particularly in reducing transport and waste disposal costs for unsold produce.

Quality and Efficiency in Market Recovery

Produce recovered from markets typically presents an opportunity for diversification of product types. However, in many cases, it has lower quality and shelf life compared to produce sourced directly from farms, often because traders seek to maximize profits.

To ensure that the food bank receives good-quality produce from markets, it follows these procedures:

- All donated fruits and vegetables are sorted and classified at the trader's post before being transported to the food bank's market warehouse.
- The food bank and traders agree that if the trader does not agree to classification at the trader's post, the trader will cover the cost of transporting and disposing of waste.
- The food bank conducts a simple awareness assessment to reinforce the idea that donated food should be of the same quality that the trader would consume



Figure 5 - Baked products from FUBAM's bakery, which is included as part of their food package to beneficiary agencies.

Maximizing Value Through Low-Cost Transformation and Utilization

The food bank's agricultural recovery program operates on the principle of minimizing waste and maximizing the conversion and transfer of value of recovered food to the beneficiary network.

Due to seasonality, the food bank often sources some produce in surplus, often in larger quantities and at a frequency that exceeds the beneficiary network's needs. In some cases, food sources such as carrots and cucumbers are of atypical sizes, creating a barrier to preparation and consumption. To address these challenges, the food bank has invested in low-cost transformation methods such as dicing and slicing to optimize storage, extend shelf life and promote consumption by distributing the produce in an easy-to-prepare form.

The food bank also utilizes surplus fresh produce in prepared and baked meals, which are distributed as part of the packages provided to beneficiary institutions. This approach ensures variety in meals while preventing the waste of highly perishable produce.