

Food Banks as Ambivalent Infrastructures: Care, Deservingness, and Governance in Milan and Manchester

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Abstract

Food banks have become central infrastructures of contemporary food systems, reflecting rising food insecurity and the restructuring of welfare provision. No longer confined to emergency relief, they operate as enduring arrangements through which access to food is organised and governed. This article offers a comparative ethnographic analysis of food banks in Milan (Italy) and Manchester (UK), examining how urban food governance is enacted through everyday practices of redistribution and moral judgement. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in community-based food aid initiatives, we argue that food banks function as ambivalent infrastructures of care, where support and control are co-constituted. In Milan, food sharing is embedded within a “caring economy” grounded in circularity and collective responsibility, yet constrained by neoliberal logics. For Manchester, food banks often regulate access through narratives of scarcity and gratitude, while also enabling forms of resistance and mutual support. Across both contexts, care emerges not as an alternative to governance, but as one of its primary modalities. The article contributes to urban food governance debates by: identifying food aid infrastructures as key arenas of post-2030 transformation; foregrounding the temporal politics of food insecurity; showing how food banks both challenge and reproduce social hierarchies; and centring care as a core mechanism of governance.

Keywords

care; deservingness; food banks; food insecurity; urban food governance

1. Introduction

Food banks have become emblematic infrastructures of contemporary food systems worldwide. While late-20th-century societies were characterised by abundance—where food was increasingly framed as a cultural commodity rather than a material necessity (Baudrillard, 1998)—this condition remains partial, uneven, and deeply contested. Contemporary food cultures have obscured the persistence and expansion of food insecurity with food banks emerging not as residual responses to crisis, but as infrastructures that make scarcity visible within systems otherwise organised around abundance.

No longer confined to emergency relief, food banks now operate as enduring arrangements through which access to food is organised, mediated, and governed. In many contexts they have expanded and become institutionalised (Riches & Silvasti, 2014). This reflects rising levels of food insecurity alongside transformations in welfare provision, urban inequality, and the shifting responsibilities between state, market, and civil society.

Food insecurity, considered as the lack of reliable access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food necessary for an active healthy life (Anthem, 2025), extends beyond a condition of scarcity. Rather, it is structurally produced and socially mediated, with significant holistic health consequences for physical, emotional, and mental well-being (World Health Organization, 2026). Critical research has highlighted how food insecurity is embedded within broader transformations of the agri-food system and intersecting inequalities such as housing precarity, labour market instability, and uneven welfare provision (Lima, 2008; Seo & Park, 2021; Spring & Rosol, 2022).

Building on these insights, food banks cannot be understood solely as redistribution sites. Rather, they emerge as “ambivalent infrastructures” wherein care and control are co-constituted through everyday practices. Conceptualising food banks as infrastructures foregrounds the relational and organisational dimensions through which municipalities, charities, volunteers, and community organisations govern food aid. As Davies and Evans (2019) argue, food banking operates within “multilevel geographies of food sharing governance” involving public, private, and civil society actors. Together, these actors not only redistribute surplus food but also shape the norms regulating access.

Within these governance arrangements, food aid simultaneously alleviates food insecurity while reproducing social inequalities through everyday practices of care and governance. In doing so, access to support is frequently negotiated through moralised frameworks of deservingness.

Drawing on comparative ethnographic research in Milan and Manchester, this article examines how care, deservingness, and infrastructure are co-produced through everyday interactions, organisational practices, and temporal arrangements.

Across both contexts, care emerges not as an alternative to governance, but as one of its primary modalities. The article contributes to debates on urban food governance in four ways. First, it highlights everyday food aid infrastructures as key, if fragile, arenas of post-2030 food system transformation. Second, it foregrounds the temporal politics of food insecurity, revealing the disjuncture between institutional time and lived experience. Third, it shows how food banks both challenge and reproduce social hierarchies through

practices of access, evaluation, and distribution. Finally, it centres care as a vital but underexamined mechanism in food systems, calling for a shift beyond redistributive responses towards more transformative approaches to urban food governance.

2. Care, Deservingness, and the Ambivalent Infrastructures of Food Aid

Understanding how food insecurity is governed in practice requires examining how access to food is organised, evaluated, and negotiated in everyday life. While food insecurity is rooted in broader relations of social reproduction, welfare restructuring, and urban inequality, it cannot be reduced to a problem of insufficient access or individual deficiency. Rather, it emerges from the intersection of low incomes, precarious labour, and rising housing and energy costs, forcing households to negotiate trade-offs between basic needs (Seo & Park, 2021). As such, it is a relational outcome of constrained resources and welfare gaps, shaped by power relations that structure access and conditionality.

Against this backdrop, food banks and other charitable organisations are not simply responding to food insecurity, but actively organising access to resources while embedding forms of evaluation, control, and differentiation. This structural perspective does not fully capture how food insecurity is experienced and governed in everyday life. Research shows that access to food aid is shaped by moralised frameworks of deservingness, through which food banks, welfare institutions, and frontline practitioners interpret and judge need, while reinforcing distinctions between the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor within political discourse, particularly in contexts of austerity (Garthwaite, 2016; May et al., 2019; Shildrick et al., 2012). Within this “moral economy of scarcity” (May et al., 2019), need is reframed as a question of merit, shaping institutional practices and subjective experiences. Research has shown that charitable food systems are not neutral redistributive mechanisms but socially and morally charged spaces in which food aid organisations, volunteers, and welfare institutions interpret, evaluate, and manage poverty through everyday practices. Food banks regulate access to food aid through expectations of responsibility, gratitude, and restraint (Martin, 2018; Strong, 2021; van der Horst et al., 2014), producing moral subjectivities and shaping how individuals understand themselves and are judged by others. These expectations are particularly salient for low-income mothers, who must navigate competing norms of care, consumption, and responsibility as a “good mother,” a “good consumer,” and a “good food program participant” (Martin, 2018, pp. 115–120). These dynamics position food aid as key sites where stigma, dignity, and responsibility are negotiated. In the Italian context, Guazzo (2022), drawing on Garfinkel’s (1956) notion of “degradation ceremonies,” highlights how stigma is subtly produced through organisational and interactional practices, reinforcing expectations around work, responsibility, and deservingness.

Building on this, we argue that care provides a critical lens for understanding how these structural and moral dynamics are enacted in practice. Feminist scholarship conceptualises care as a relational and political process through which life is sustained (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 2013), shaped by inequalities of class, gender, and responsibility. The key issue is how care is organised, by whom, and under what conditions. Moreover, food systems can be understood through an ethics of care that foregrounds material and relational forms of labour sustaining both people and environments (Morrow & Davies, 2022).

Recent work conceptualises care as embedded within infrastructures. Rather than an interpersonal disposition, care is produced through socio-material arrangements organising everyday life (Gherardi &

Rodeschini, 2016; Power & Mee, 2019). Food banks can be understood as infrastructures through which care is materially assembled and governed, shaped by volunteer labour, spatial configurations, and institutional practices. Care is thus unevenly distributed, reflecting underlying power relations that shape access and control.

This perspective can be further developed through Simone's notion of "people as infrastructure" (2004), which highlights the relational networks through which urban life is sustained under conditions of uncertainty. For food aid, this approach foregrounds the flexible and provisional relations among volunteers, recipients, and everyday practices that sustain access to food. Food banks thus emerge as nodes within broader relational networks, where care enables support and its structures, and shapes both inclusion and exclusion. This relational understanding resonates with work on urban food practices in public housing contexts. Basso (2015) shows how food-related spaces can function as informal relational infrastructures, reactivating marginalised urban environments while fostering social interaction, participation, and forms of urban citizenship. Concurrently, such practices may also counter processes of isolation and stigma within marginalised neighbourhoods. Crucially, recipients access networks by navigating relationships structured by volunteers' and organisations' moral judgements, wherein care becomes a key mechanism organising inclusion and exclusion.

This perspective aligns with work on social infrastructure, which emphasises the socio-material relations that sustain life beyond formal welfare provision (Silver & McFarlane, 2019). These are essential for everyday survival, yet remain fragmented and under-resourced, often relying on voluntary labour and operating "in the meantime" of welfare restructuring (Williams, 2022). Together, these insights highlight how food aid operates at the intersection of structural conditions, socio-material infrastructures, and everyday practices of care, providing the basis for the analytical framework presented in Figure 1. Rather than a linear relationship, this conceptualisation highlights the co-constitution of these dimensions.

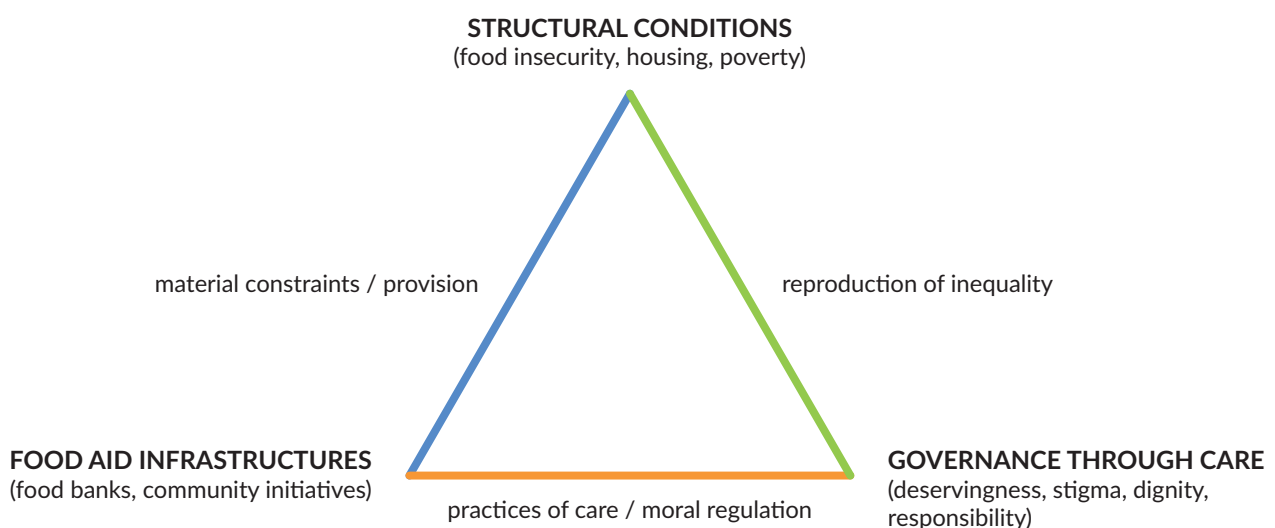


Figure 1. Conceptual triangle of food aid as ambivalent infrastructure.

Structural conditions such as poverty, housing precarity, and labour insecurity shape both the demand for and the form of food aid provision. Food aid infrastructures, including food banks and community initiatives, mediate these conditions by organising the material distribution of food and support. Meanwhile, these

infrastructures operate through everyday practices of care that regulate access, shaping experiences of deservingness, stigma, and dignity. Governance, in this sense, occurs not only through formal policy but through the organisation of care itself, where volunteers, organisations, and recipients enact and negotiate moral judgements in everyday practice.

The framework captures how food aid simultaneously responds to structural need, mediates access to resources, and reproduces moral and social hierarchies through care practices, allowing analysis of food banks as ambivalent infrastructures where care, inequality, and governance are inseparable.

Rather than treating care, deservingness, and structural inequality as separate analytical domains, we show that they are co-produced through everyday practices within food aid systems. Care is not external to power, but a key mechanism through which volunteers, organisations, and welfare institutions enact deservingness through everyday practices of care and governance. This approach guides our comparative analysis of Milan (Italy) and Manchester (UK), foregrounding how these dynamics differ across contexts and contributing to debates on urban food governance beyond 2030. This perspective builds on and extends existing research on food banks, food insecurity, stigma, and deservingness (Garthwaite, 2016; May et al., 2019; Strong, 2021; Taylor et al., 2024). While previous studies have examined the lived experience of food bank use, the moral dimensions of food aid, and the role of food banks within changing welfare landscapes, our contribution lies in analysing how care, deservingness, and governance are co-produced through food aid infrastructures across distinct urban contexts.

3. Research Design and Methods

The study adopts an ethnographic follow-the-thing approach, tracing trajectories of surplus and donated food from collection to redistribution and final consumption. This perspective centres lived experience, examining how food insecurity is enacted and negotiated in everyday life. Ethnography offers a situated and relational lens on social action and institutional practice (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), enabling a critical interrogation of embodied practices, care, and social relations often overlooked in policy-oriented accounts. It also allows exploration of how recipients navigate stigma (Wacquant, 2007), deservingness, and interpersonal dynamics within food aid environments, situating food insecurity within broader processes of urban inequality and social reproduction.

Empirically, the study combines participant observation with narrative approaches to capture situated experiences (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2019). Attention to ambivalent interactions and critical incidents—moments in which taken-for-granted routines are disrupted—provides analytical entry points into underlying norms and moral framings (Gherardi & Rodeschini, 2016; Pols, 2015). The approaches draw on critical social science perspectives that move beyond what market relations immediately reveal, reconstructing the social and spatial relations embedded in commodity circulation (Christophers, 2011; Harvey, 1990). Following “food as a thing” renders visible the relational infrastructures of labour, care, and institutional mediation underpinning food aid.

After receiving institutional review board approval, we conducted a comparative study in two large European cities, Milan (Italy) and Manchester (UK), between May 2022 and December 2024, and between March 2018 and September 2019, respectively, spanning both pre- and post-pandemic periods. The selection focuses on

two countries with distinct welfare regimes and food policy traditions. Following Esping-Andersen (1990), Italy is typically associated with a conservative Southern European model, while the UK exemplifies a liberal regime. This distinction is analytically relevant as welfare regimes structure the provision of social protection, the state's role, and the organisation of care and subsistence. Comparing these contexts allows us to situate food aid within broader regimes of social reproduction and to examine how different configurations of welfare, market, and civil society mediate food insecurity.

These institutional configurations take specific forms at the urban level. Milan has emerged as a prominent laboratory for urban food governance, particularly following the 2015 Expo and the launch of the Milan Food Policy, combining policy innovation unfolding alongside deepening inequalities. Manchester, by contrast, reflects a more fragmented and charity-led food aid landscape shaped by austerity and a stronger reliance on third-sector provision.

Across the EU, around 8–9% of the population cannot afford a meal with meat, fish, or a vegetarian equivalent every second day (“Almost 9% in the EU,” 2025), highlighting the structural nature of food deprivation. In Italy, food insecurity and absolute poverty remain significant (over 2.2 million households), often intersecting with housing and labour precarity (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2025a, 2025b). In the UK food insecurity remains widespread with food bank use reaching record levels—over 2.6 million emergency food parcels distributed in 2025 (Trussell Trust, 2026)—and around 12% of households affected (Food Foundation, 2026).

This study is not a strict welfare-regime comparison. Rather, these contexts were selected to maximise variation in food policy arrangements and governance infrastructures, allowing us to examine whether similar dynamics emerge despite institutional differences.

Fieldwork in Milan was conducted in a neighbourhood food bank within a social housing estate in a marginalised area of the city, embedded in the municipal food waste hubs. Data collection included participant observation through volunteering, attendance at committee meetings, food collection and redistribution activities, and everyday interactions within the food bank environment. In addition, we conducted 13 in-depth semi-structured interviews and four focus groups involving a total of 22 participants. Ethnographic observations also included interactions with a wider and fluid group of actors who were not formally interviewed.

In Manchester, fieldwork was carried out in a food bank situated in an economically deprived area of the city which served only local people. Data collection included volunteer ethnography, including collecting donations, registering recipients, distributing food, and participating in activities (e.g., visiting parks, participants' homes, school runs). This was alongside 20 semi-structured interviews with food bank recipients, volunteers, and management, and participant observation within the local community setting.

Finally, the comparative analysis comprised three stages. First, open coding of ethnographic fieldnotes and interview transcripts to identify recurring themes related to everyday food aid infrastructures, temporalities of access and provision, moral evaluations of deservingness and social differentiation, and practices of care. Second, developing a shared codebook combining deductive codes from the literature (e.g., “everyday infrastructures,” “temporality,” “deservingness,” “stigma,” “conditionality,” “care”) with inductive codes emerging from the data (e.g., “informal organisation of provision,” “waiting and uncertainty,” “negotiating

fairness,” “gratitude and obligation,” “doing care”). Third, carrying out a constant comparison across the empirical materials from both cities, using ethnographic observations to contextualise interview-based categories and clarify the interactional mechanisms through which food aid infrastructures are enacted, time is experienced and managed, social hierarchies are reproduced or contested, and care is practised and negotiated in everyday encounters.

Ambivalence was treated as a sensitising concept from scholarship on infrastructures, moral economies, and care, and as an inductive pattern in the data. Participants repeatedly described food banks as fragile yet essential infrastructures, marked by temporal frictions, moral tensions around deservingness, and uneven practices of inclusion and exclusion, with care emerging as a central but ambivalent organising principle.

4. Urban Food Governance in Milan

To understand how food banks function as ambivalent infrastructures, it is essential to situate them within Milan’s food governance model, particularly its “caring economy,” the institutional and social organisation of care across state, market, and community actors (Razavi, 2007).

Milan has played a leading role in shaping urban food governance through the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP), an agreement committing cities to developing inclusive and resilient food systems (Comune di Milano, 2015). The Pact promotes a rights-based and multi-sectoral approach, emphasising coordination across policy domains such as health, social protection, environment, and urban planning. It foregrounds cities as key actors in addressing food insecurity. Recent developments, including the 2026 renewal of the partnership with the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, further consolidate the MUFPP as a global platform, now involving over 340 cities (Comune di Milano, 2026).

Municipally, Milan’s Food Policy translates these commitments into a governance framework focused on sustainability, inclusion, and participation. Key priorities include improving access to healthy food, promoting sustainable diets, and reducing food waste (Comune di Milano, 2021), which connects surplus recovery to redistribution for vulnerable populations.

This approach is evident in the Neighbourhood Hubs network (*Hub di Quartiere*), decentralised nodes that collect surplus food from supermarkets, canteens, and the wholesale market (Sogemi) and redistribute it to local organisations (Comune di Milano, 2023b). Shown in Figure 2, the model operates through a daily cycle of recovery, storage, and redistribution, enabling efficient surplus management and more diversified food baskets, mitigating the “monoproduct peaks” often characterising direct donation systems (Comune di Milano, 2023b).

The hubs embody a distinctive governance model based on public–private–third sector collaboration (e.g., municipality, private partners, non-profits; Comune di Milano, 2020). This reflects a broader shift towards networked governance, where the municipality acts as coordinator, not direct provider.

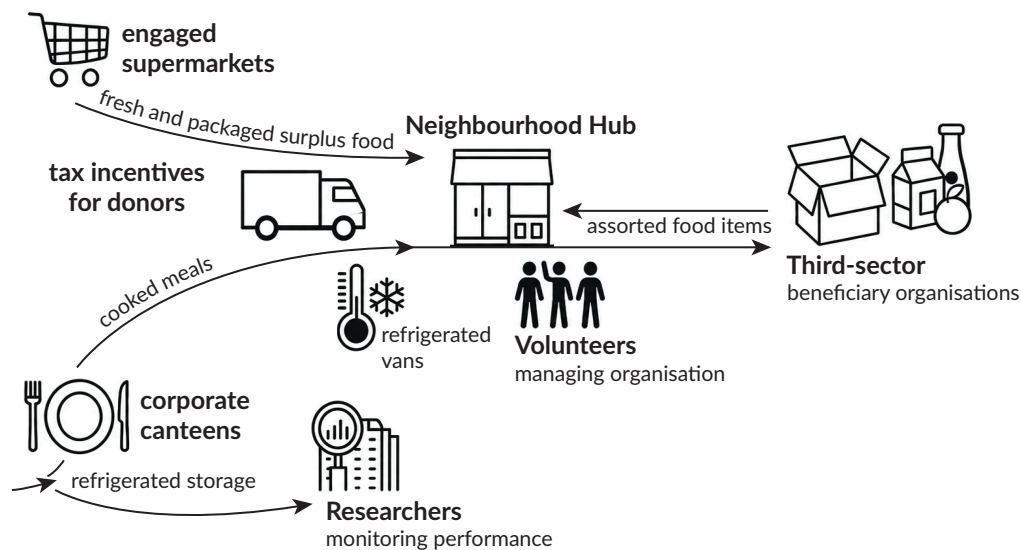


Figure 2. Neighbourhood Hub operational model in Milan: a decentralised infrastructure for surplus food recovery and redistribution, linking private donors, municipal coordination, and third-sector actors in the governance of urban food aid. Source: Adapted from Comune di Milano (2023b, p. 2).

The hubs are embedded within a wider ecosystem of food aid that has recently undergone significant transformation, particularly in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Prior to 2020, food assistance in Milan was largely delegated to third-sector organisations operating through European aid programmes (e.g., Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived) and surplus redistribution schemes. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the municipality introduced the Food Aid Scheme (*Dispositivo Aiuto Alimentare*) as a more centralised system for procurement and distribution (Comune di Milano, 2023a), reaching over 20,000 individuals weekly during the first lockdown.

Since then, the municipality has sought to coordinate initiatives—including neighbourhood hubs and social markets—into a more coherent framework (Comune di Milano, 2023a), combining funding with collaboration mechanisms such as communities of practice. Milan’s food governance thus reflects an ongoing effort to transform fragmented interventions into a more stable infrastructure of urban welfare.

5. Urban Food Governance in Manchester

In Manchester, austerity policies have increased food insecurity while reinforcing reliance on third-sector food banking. As in Milan, referral systems, organisational rules, and volunteers shape access through expectations of deservingness; however, these processes are more strongly associated with stigma and conditionality. Food aid thus emerges as a site of ambivalence, where access is negotiated through moral expectations and everyday survival strategies.

From 2009, austerity policies reshaped the UK welfare system, alongside the “Big Society” agenda, which shifted responsibility from the state to communities and volunteerism (Atkinson et al., 2013). As Shildrick (2018) notes, poverty has increasingly been framed as individual failure, reinforcing perceptions of the poor as undeserving. Therefore, the assumed fault of impoverishment and need for support was placed on impoverished individuals and families.

In the UK, charitable organisations and food banks provide most food aid (Taylor et al., 2024). Evidence links austerity to rising food insecurity and increased reliance on food banks (Jenkins et al., 2021), with a 74% rise in usage between 2015 and 2020 (Trussell Trust, 2026). The Trussell Trust operates the largest network, having been established to provide short-term emergency food aid of up to three days (Trussell Trust, 2026). However, given the scale of food insecurity—affecting an estimated 11% of the population (Frances-Devine et al., 2025)—such provision does not assuage chronic food poverty.

In Manchester, these dynamics are particularly visible. Successive UK governments' austerity policies reshaped Manchester's urban food aid landscape, with third-sector food banks now embedded within the city's food poverty infrastructure (Oncini, 2021).

Eligibility to access food banks in Manchester can vary greatly, with some requiring a referral from a doctor, social worker, or health visitor (Manchester City Council, n.d.). As illustrated in Figure 3, individual food banks establish different governing rules, and access depends on a combination of functional factors (e.g., postcode, referral status) and institutional norms (e.g., punctuality, behaviour, compliance; Bruck, 2021). Moreover, although many food banks provide produce, meat, and dried goods, availability and quality vary greatly. Managers and volunteers also impose different sanctions when visitors fail to follow organisational rules.

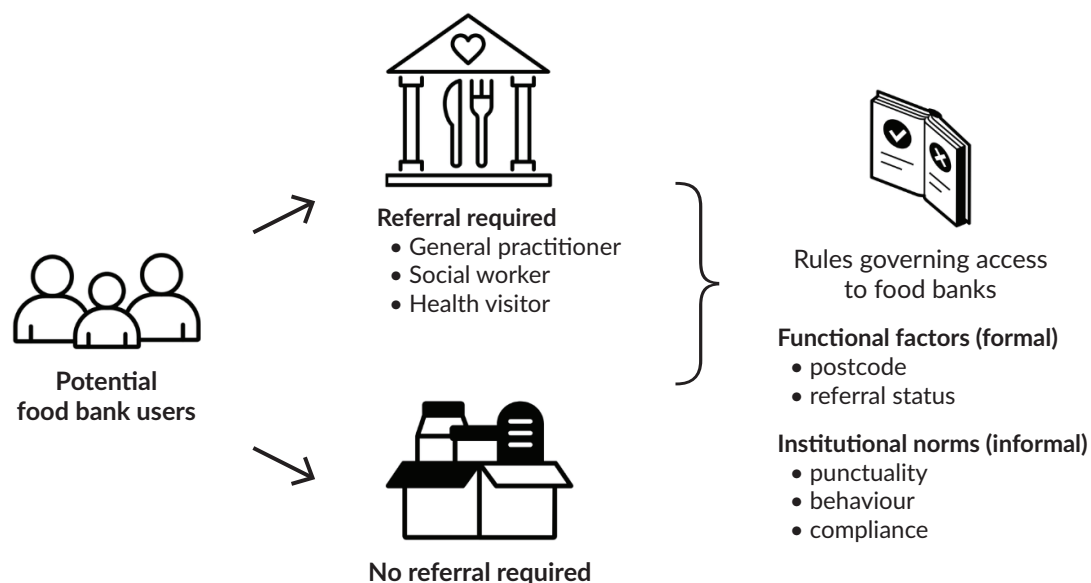


Figure 3. Variation in access pathways and governing rules across food banks in Manchester.

While Figure 2 illustrates the organisational and governance architecture of Milan's neighbourhood food hubs and surplus redistribution system, which represents a central feature of the Milan case and reflects the multi-actor governance approach promoted through Milan's Food Policy and the MUFPP, Figure 3 focuses on the governance of access in Manchester. This difference reflects the empirical focus emerging from each case study. In Milan, the key analytical issue concerns the coordination of food aid through a networked urban governance infrastructure. By contrast, in Manchester, fieldwork highlighted the centrality of eligibility rules, behavioural expectations, and differentiated access pathways in shaping recipients' experiences of food aid.

6. Ambivalent Infrastructures of Food Aid in Milan and Manchester

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Milan and Manchester, the following analysis examines food aid as an ambivalent infrastructure shaped through everyday practices of care, temporal governance, and moral evaluation. Consistent with previous research highlighting the ambivalent role of food banks as both sources of support and sites of regulation (Garthwaite, 2016; May et al., 2019; Strong, 2021), our findings show how these tensions are enacted through everyday practices of care, temporal governance, and moral evaluation.

6.1. *Everyday Infrastructures and Logistical Bricolage*

Food banks in both cities rely on heterogeneous infrastructures combining formal organisational procedures with improvised everyday practices. In Milan, the food bank operates through a structured system of procurement, storage, and distribution, supporting approximately 150–170 households (around 500 individuals), mostly migrant families. Access is biweekly and by appointment. The internal organisation spans product, user, volunteer, and administrative management, reflecting formalisation alongside everyday improvisation.

At the core of the Milanese infrastructure is a diversified system of procurement. Food is sourced through multiple channels, from last-minute surplus redistribution to more standardised provision of staple goods. Local hubs play a crucial role in circulating perishable products rapidly, particularly dairy items and eggs. Gradually, the basket has expanded to include non-food essentials largely absent from donation circuits (e.g., diapers, sanitary products, cleaning supplies), purchased directly through project funding. Told by a coordinator, “the priority was no longer saving waste, but filling people’s stomachs,” moving from an anti-waste orientation toward a more explicit food-security logic.

Operationally, the infrastructure relies heavily on volunteer labour and personal resources. Around 30 volunteers are involved, with a blurred boundary between providers and recipients, as “half of the volunteers [are] also users.” Preparatory activities (e.g., portioning distributions) take place shortly before distribution. Storage is spread across multiple locations, including former committee spaces and privately rented storage areas used to buffer supply fluctuations. Logistics are largely sustained through informal means, including private vehicles and van rental. Fieldwork observations revealed the extent to which this infrastructure depends on personal initiative and improvised solutions. During a period of funding uncertainty, one coordinator described how surplus budget resources had been converted into emergency stockpiles of essentials, which were then stored across multiple informal locations, including privately rented storage spaces and volunteers’ vehicles. He explained, “I couldn’t even spend the whole budget because I had run out of space.” These practices illustrate how continuity of provision often relies less on formal organisational capacity than on the ability of individuals to mobilise personal resources, networks, and logistical knowledge.

In Manchester, infrastructures are configured differently yet are similarly fragile. While Milan reflects integrated and relational governance, Manchester illustrates more disciplinary and charity-led provision. Organisationally, the food banks rely on a core group of volunteers, mostly white-British pensioners, alongside employed management and technical teams. Roles range from recipient intake and registration to food distribution, queue management, and upholding of organisational rules, creating different points of

interaction with recipients and opportunities for exercising discretion. Provision depends on donations, subsidies, fundraising, redistribution circuits, and volunteer labour. Infrastructure is less visible in procurement than in the management of bodies, movement, and access, often through spatio-temporal control (e.g., opening hours, queuing, registration). As demonstrated during fieldwork, access to food was structured through routines, and those who did not adhere to the rules risked exclusion from the centre for the day. On one such occasion, the centre manager reprimanded a visitor in front of others for being late: “What time is it? What time do we close? Tell me! Every week!” These interactions emphasise how food aid infrastructures operate through temporal governance and conditionalities that regulate access.

Volunteers in both contexts play a central role in sustaining these infrastructures. In Milan, around 30 volunteers—many of whom are themselves recipients—carry out logistical tasks, often using their own vehicles. Their roles include food collection, stock management, preparing food parcels, registration, administration, and distribution. Leadership and coordination roles are concentrated among a small number of long-standing committee members, while many other volunteers contribute on a more occasional basis. Importantly, the boundary between providers and recipients is often blurred, as several volunteers are themselves food aid users. In Manchester, volunteers are more directly involved in regulating access, from managing queues, enforcing rules, and mediating interactions between service users and the organisation. In both cases, volunteers occupy an ambiguous position, simultaneously enacting care and control. Illustrative of structural governance constraining discretionary care, during fieldwork this tension was made evident when a long-standing visitor asked for priority in the queue so she could attend a welfare appointment. Despite expressing sympathy for her circumstances and having had a friendly relationship, the volunteer denied their request. They responded by saying “you can’t really give people special treatment, can you?” As a result of being denied priority, the visitor missed their appointment and subsequently had their benefits sanctioned.

These infrastructures are simultaneously adaptive and fragile. Their functioning depends on the ability to assemble heterogeneous elements—funding streams, donations, transport, volunteer labour, tacit skills, and social relations—into a working system. This process is a form of what Simone (2004) describes as “infrastructural bricolage”: the continuous assembly of heterogeneous elements—material, social, and organisational—into a functioning system. This bricolage is not only technical, but deeply relational, relying on trust, familiarity, and situated knowledge. Urban food system transitions are not driven solely by formal policy frameworks, but by precarious and relational everyday infrastructures, which sustain life while remaining constantly vulnerable to interruption. This raises critical questions about post-2030 agendas that, at times, overlook the fragility of lived experiences and food aid infrastructures, with greater emphasis given to resilience and sustainability.

6.2. Temporalities: Disjunctures Between Institutional and Lived Time

Across both Milan and Manchester, the organisation of food aid reveals a fundamental tension between institutional temporalities and the lived experience of food insecurity. In Milan, access is structured through fixed schedules, with recipients attending every two weeks. As one volunteer explained, “they rotate every 15 days so that we can manage to serve everyone,” highlighting how time is used to distribute scarcity. Simultaneously, the broader infrastructure is marked by instability. The availability of food depends on a patchwork of supply sources—surplus recovery, donations, and European aid programmes—resulting in

fluctuating quantities and types of goods. This instability is visible in everyday operational challenges, as a Milan food bank manager explained: “Banco Alimentare doesn’t always deliver products that fit recipients’ needs...sometimes it’s large ricotta boxes about to expire in two days, or things that just don’t make sense.” Even essential items may be unavailable for extended periods, requiring stopgap solutions such as stockpiling, emergency purchasing, or informal sourcing.

Recipients experience this system through a combination of routine and uncertainty. One participant describes the regularity of access—“I go every Thursday at five, five-thirty, take the groceries and go home...now every two weeks”—while also emphasising variability: “It depends on what they have...it’s not a fixed thing.” As observed, volunteers continuously adjust quantities and combinations of goods depending on daily availability, often having to explain shortages or substitutions to recipients. This highlights that uncertainty is actively managed in situ.

In Manchester, temporal governance is more explicitly disciplinary. Entering the food bank and securing a place in the queue depends on formalised rules, and failure to comply may result not only in exclusion on that day but permanent bans. Visitors are required to wait outside, regardless of weather, until admitted, with no prioritisation for punctual or early arrival. Registration closes at 10:30am, with little room for negotiation. Even those who volunteer may be placed at the back of the line if late due to doctors’ appointments, social worker meetings, or unreliable transport. Time becomes a technology of discipline, not merely a neutral organisational tool.

Shifting temporality to a mechanism of control is visible in staff interactions. During fieldwork, people attempting to enter early were met with “Get out! Get out! You can come in when I tell you to!”, and later, when visitors spoke among themselves during announcements, “Don’t talk over me! Then we will go back to a system that you really don’t like.” These moments make explicit what remains more implicit in Milan: Temporal governance is also disciplinary. Following Foucault (1977), scheduling, queuing, and surveillance do not simply organise access but produce compliant subjects through routine and correction.

Across both cases, three temporal regimes intersect and often clash: institutional time, shaped by bureaucracy, funding cycles, and administrative rules; infrastructural time, structured by procurement, storage, and expiration dates; and everyday time, marked by urgent household needs, childcare, transport constraints, and precarity. These temporalities are rarely aligned and generate a condition of temporal precariousness (Han, 2012), wherein individuals must continuously adapt to misaligned temporal regimes. The result is not only irregular provision, but a crisis of temporal synchronisation between institutional systems and lived necessity.

6.3. Deservingness and the Moral Governance of Aid

Access to food aid is shaped not only by formal eligibility criteria, but also by informal systems of moral evaluation. In Milan, access to the service is formally based on economic need, typically assessed through the *Indicatore della Situazione Economica Equivalente* (ISEE) and an initial intake interview. While income thresholds—typically requiring an ISEE below approximately €9,360 per year for access to this specific service—provide a baseline for inclusion, eligibility decisions also draw on locally embedded knowledge held by volunteers, committee members, neighbours, and housing caretakers. In practice, these actors contribute

to the informal verification of applicants' economic conditions, drawing on everyday information to assess whether declared incomes reflect lived realities or whether individuals may be informally employed and earning undeclared income. As emerged during fieldwork, decisions were often informed by what committee members, neighbours, and housing caretakers knew about applicants' everyday circumstances. In some cases, recipients were initially admitted on a provisional basis while their situation was informally assessed through ongoing interactions within the neighbourhood. This informal verification is intertwined with the temporal organisation of the service, as punctual attendance becomes part of how recipients are evaluated, with temporal compliance functioning as an indicator of deservingness. In this sense, committee members determine eligibility administratively, while community members informally verify economic circumstances, constituting a form of everyday moral governance. Such practices reveal how deservingness is not established solely through bureaucratic criteria, but is continually negotiated through locally embedded forms of knowledge and social observation.

In Manchester, to access the food bank, visitors had to provide both their postal code and proof of welfare benefit. Nevertheless, those who lived in unregistered housing or paid in cash for unofficial private housing were accepted. The centre was intended for short-term food assistance, but resulting from the consequences of austerity, some had been receiving support for years.

Committee members and volunteers negotiate access through situated interpretations of legitimate need. For the Milan case, as one participant explained, "Of 10 people sent by social services, nine don't last two months because it's not food they need." This is revealing because it narrows legitimate need to extreme food deprivation and implicitly excludes broader forms of hardship (e.g., housing precarity, debt, unstable work, family crisis) from counting as proper grounds for sustained access. Food aid is thereby framed as a last-resort intervention rather than a broader support mechanism. In Manchester, competing understandings of legitimate needs were similarly evident. When a visitor requested a second piece of toast without saying *please*, her tea was taken away and she was instructed to "ask politely." After complying, she remarked it was "a really bad day, but no one understands." This demonstrates how organisational governance can obscure volunteers' negotiation of recipients' legitimacy through their interpretations of deprivation and behavioural expectations.

These dynamics produce a localised moral economy structured around distinctions between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" (Fassin, 2012), reflecting wider welfare logics in which access to support is increasingly conditional and morally evaluated (Razavi, 2007). In Milan, these distinctions are enacted through community-based observation and informal surveillance; for Manchester, they are enforced through behavioural expectations and institutional interaction. Moreover, in Manchester eligibility is filtered less through local housing networks and more through a moral lens of deservingness grounded in compliance, acquiescence, and gratitude.

Throughout the Manchester fieldwork, volunteers appeared to have internalised this normative framework, particularly in situations where service users expressed preferences for specific foods. Requests were often practical, with certain goods being able to be turned into multiple meals or being more culturally appropriate, yet were frequently interpreted as demanding. These requests can also be understood as attempts to preserve dignity, cultural identity, and a degree of agency within a highly constrained system of provision. When recipients requested items such as tinned tomatoes opposed to of mushy peas, volunteers, at times, responded by putting food back on the shelves and describing service users as "ungrateful" or "pushy."

Other remarks included “You know, we’re not a supermarket!” and, when tea or toast preferences were expressed, “This isn’t a cafe!” or “You just have to have that! Go sit down!” These responses are rich in classed and, at times, racialised assumptions about manners, restraint, and the correct performance of need. They do not simply manage resources; they mark boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable forms of conduct.

Here Guazzo’s (2022) reading of food aid as a site of “degradation ceremonies” becomes especially useful. His argument is not that food banks enact overt humiliation, but that they often operate through organisational and interactional practices that can be justified as functional while still producing a subtle lowering of recipients’ moral and social standing, stigma, and moral distinction. Both cities can be read similarly as sites of “degradation-lite” practices: not necessarily dramatic or explicit humiliation rituals, but repeated micro-practices through which recipients are subtly repositioned as morally suspect, dependent, or inferior. For Milan, such practices appear through informal checking, public gossip, and classed comments about what is “good enough” to consume. In Manchester, they are more overtly enacted through verbal admonishment, public correction, and the expectation that recipients respond with gratitude and submission. Guazzo’s contribution is useful to understand the symbolic dimension of food aid, and also to identify variation across the two cases in the intensity and style of moral degradation.

In the interviews, Milan recipients recount experiences of stigma and exposure. As one recipient recalled, a volunteer publicly identified her as receiving food aid: “She said ‘that one goes to take the food package’...everyone was looking at me.” Stigma, therefore, is not only felt but publicly produced. Being identified as a food aid recipient is experienced as social exposure, producing embarrassment and shame associated with being seen as poor or dependent. Similarly, in Manchester, recipients learned to navigate a hostile environment by apologising rather than challenging volunteers, thereby maintaining the centre’s moral order. This experience illustrates how stigma is produced not only through material deprivation but also through public visibility and social recognition as a recipient of aid.

Concurrently, recipients in both cases actively engage in moral boundary-making. Statements such as “There are people who take advantage...especially at Christmas” and “It’s not like stealing” show how users themselves reproduce distinctions between legitimate need and opportunistic behaviour. In Manchester, these dynamics were also visible in the way some visitors learned the centre’s cartography, outwardly performing gratitude and compliance to secure smoother access. In this sense, these practices can be understood through a Foucauldian lens of governmentality, whereby individuals come to regulate their own conduct in line with implicit norms and expectations, internalising forms of judgement and adapting their behaviour to align with dominant regimes of truth (Foucault, 1977, 2007). Although the mechanisms differ across the two cities, both cases demonstrate that access to food aid is shaped not only by economic need but also by processes of evaluation through which deservingness is continuously negotiated, while responsibility for addressing food insecurity is increasingly devolved to local organisations, volunteers, and communities.

7. Conclusion: Ambivalent Infrastructures and the Everyday Governance of Food Aid

This article has shown that food aid operates as an ambivalent infrastructure, shaped by the intersection of care, temporal governance, moral evaluation, and material organisation. Through a comparative analysis of Milan and Manchester—situated within different welfare regimes in Italy and the UK—food banks emerge

not merely as mechanisms of redistribution, but as sites where support and control are co-produced through everyday practices.

Across both contexts, care constitutes a central organising principle of food aid. It is enacted through proximity and repeated interactions between volunteers and recipients, yet it is never neutral or evenly distributed. For Milan, the blurring of boundaries between providers and recipients—where many volunteers are also users—enables flexible and responsive forms of support grounded in local knowledge. Care extends beyond food provision to encompass everyday needs, including attention to specific household requirements and the distribution of essential non-food items. In Manchester, by contrast, care is more constrained and often mediated through formalised procedures. While small gestures—like offering tea or creating moments of interaction—remain meaningful, care frequently circulates through peer support among recipients, particularly in shared spaces such as queues.

In parallel, in both contexts care is shaped by discretion, selectivity, and moral judgement. Decisions about access are negotiated through informal assessments of need and behaviour. As such, care operates simultaneously as a resource and as a mechanism of differentiation: It sustains dignity and social connection, while filtering access and reproducing inequalities.

These dynamics characterise the food aid system. Temporal arrangements combine structured access with ongoing uncertainty, as fixed distribution schedules coexist with unstable supply chains and interruptions. Similarly, governance operates through a combination of proximity and adaptability on the one hand, and arbitrariness and informal control on the other. At the infrastructural level, systems of procurement and redistribution are sustained “from below” through volunteer labour, donations, and partnerships, yet remain structurally fragile and dependent on uncertain resources.

Table 1 summarises these constitutive tensions. Food aid infrastructures simultaneously produce inclusion and exclusion across four interrelated dimensions—care, time, governance, and infrastructure—revealing their ambivalent character. Inclusion comprises material and relational support, partial temporal stability, localised adaptability, and operational efficiency. Exclusion emerges through selectivity and moral judgement, waiting and unpredictability, informal control, and structural fragility. Ambivalence thus emerges as a defining feature of how food aid operates in practice.

Table 1. Ambivalence in food aid across Milan and Manchester: Inclusion and exclusion in everyday governance.

Dimension	Inclusion	Exclusion
Care	Material and relational support	Discretion, selectivity, and moral judgement
Time	Structured access and partial stability	Waiting, discontinuity, and temporal uncertainty
Governance	Proximity and adaptability	Arbitrariness and informal control
Infrastructure	Operational efficiency from below	Structural fragility and dependency

This ambivalence is also reflected in recipients’ lived experiences. While food aid is necessary and helpful, it can simultaneously generate discomfort, stigma, and a sense of moral disruption. Accessing support may be experienced as “asking for charity,” particularly for those unaccustomed to relying on such systems. These

experiences highlight how food insecurity is not only material but also deeply social and affective, involving questions of dignity, legitimacy, and belonging.

By foregrounding these tensions, the article contributes to debates on welfare, care, and urban governance. First, it challenges binary framings of food banks as either benevolent responses or mechanisms of control, showing how they operate as infrastructures in which care, control, and contingency are co-constitutive. Second, it advances an understanding of care as a primary modality of governance—an everyday mechanism through which access is organised and evaluated. This resonates with approaches that conceptualise cities as infrastructures of care (Manzo, 2026), highlighting how responsibilities for sustaining life are unevenly distributed across urban systems.

We conceptualise “moralised care infrastructures”: governance systems in which care is both the medium and the means through which moral evaluations of worthiness are enacted. The ambivalence of food aid reflects a broader contradiction within contemporary urban governance: While care is mobilised to mitigate inequality, it is often organised in ways that reproduce it. Food banks can be read—echoing critical theory insights on how systems of provision reproduce social contradictions (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972)—as sites where need is simultaneously addressed and obscured, transforming surplus into support while leaving inequalities intact.

Everyday practices within food banks—allocation, interaction, scheduling, and assessment—operate as micro-level mechanisms shaping access and reproducing normative expectations of need and behaviour. This brings into view the politics of injustice underpinning contemporary urban food systems: Food banks do not simply alleviate food insecurity, but actively govern it through selectivity, temporal uncertainty, and moral differentiation. These processes are not marginal, but symptomatic of wider structural inequalities and governance gaps increasingly managed through devolved and informal infrastructures of care.

From a post-2030 perspective, this raises critical questions about the institutionalisation of food aid. As such infrastructures expand amid welfare retrenchment and economic pressures, moralised forms of care risk becoming entrenched as substitutes for rights-based and redistributive approaches. Recognising food aid as an ambivalent infrastructure is essential to rethinking its role within broader systems of welfare and redistribution. In doing so, the article contributes to a growing body of scholarship on food banks, food insecurity, and the moral governance of poverty by showing how experiences of support, deservingness, and control are shaped through the socio-material organisation of food aid infrastructures.

Addressing these injustices is central to any transition toward more just and sustainable urban food systems. Moving beyond food aid requires shifting from managing scarcity to addressing its structural causes. Future urban food governance must engage more directly with inequality, social justice, and collective responsibility, centring dignity, interdependence, and lived experience in the food system transformation. Re-politicising care—by reconnecting it to rights, redistribution, and accountability—thus becomes a key condition for advancing just transitions beyond 2030.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data may be available from the authors upon request, subject to confidentiality restrictions.

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