

Governing Food Sharing in Barcelona, Milan and Utrecht

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Abstract

Urban food governance is expected to address food insecurity, waste, social exclusion, and resilience. Food sharing initiatives (FSIs) can contribute to these goals, but their capacity to operate depends on the governance arrangements in which they are embedded. This article examines how governance modes shape the conditions under which FSIs operate, endure, and contribute to urban sustainability. Drawing on comparative qualitative case studies of Barcelona, Milan, and Utrecht, the analysis focuses on actors, power, and rules. Barcelona is characterised primarily by self-governance: civic autonomy, neighbourhood embeddedness, and local legitimacy support responses to vulnerability, but initiatives depend heavily on voluntary labour and insecure spaces. Milan reflects closed co-governance, where recognised coalitions, infrastructure, and municipal coordination support food redistribution and access but privilege initiatives aligned with policy and philanthropic priorities. Utrecht illustrates open co-governance across health, green space, circular economy, welfare and neighbourhood development, but fragmented support limits continuity. The article uses governance modes not only to classify arrangements but to evaluate how they shape the resources, recognition, and autonomy available to FSIs. Beyond 2030, urban authorities and their partners need to balance coordination, flexibility, and autonomy while recognising diverse forms of value, care, and participation.

Keywords

cities; food sharing; governance modes; sustainability; urban governance

1. Introduction

Urban food systems face climate extremes, supply-chain instability, geopolitical shocks, and socio-economic inequalities, intensifying attention to cities where vulnerability and food-system futures are negotiated (FAO,

2025; Morgan, 2009; Sonnino, 2019). Cities are key nodes in multilevel food governance and socio-ecological transformation (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021; Moragues-Faus et al., 2024), while urban food governance extends beyond municipal policy to the processes through which diverse actors shape food-system outcomes (Moragues-Faus, 2020).

This growing focus on cities reflects their increasing prominence in sustainability debates (Gonzalez & Brandtner, 2024), while national food system governance has often remained fragmented (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015). Cities have also become central sites where food insecurity, malnutrition, social exclusion, and food waste are produced and addressed (FAO, 2025; Moragues-Faus et al., 2024). Urban governance has consequently become more multi-actor, territorial, and cross-sectoral (Patay et al., 2026), often organised through co-governance arrangements between state and non-state actors (Arnouts et al., 2012; Kooiman, 2003). Therefore, urban food governance is increasingly approached as a field structured by power, participation, legitimacy, and justice (Brons et al., 2022; Purdiansyah et al., 2026). This is particularly relevant to post-2030 debates on transformative and politically attentive governance (Moragues-Faus et al., 2024).

In these debates, food sharing initiatives (FSIs) are increasingly seen as alternative systems of provision responding to socio-ecological food system challenges (Davies et al., 2019; Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2026; Mackenzie & Davies, 2022; Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, & Mont, 2026). They encompass diverse practices, including collective food growing (urban gardens), cooking and eating (social canteens), surplus food redistribution (food banks), and sharing food-related spaces, tools, and knowledge (Davies et al., 2019; Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, & Mont, 2026). FSIs also vary organisationally, from municipal interventions to local businesses and civil society initiatives (Davies et al., 2017; Davies & Evans, 2019; Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2026).

Urban agriculture cannot meet most urban caloric demand, but can support dietary diversity, fresh-food access and resilience. FSIs contribute by producing food near consumers, reducing waste, improving access, fostering social inclusion and supporting participation (Mackenzie & Davies, 2022; Micheline et al., 2023; Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, & Mont, 2026). They also diversify urban food economies and support food democracy (Davies et al., 2019; Leitheiser & Vezzoni, 2024; Loh & Agyeman, 2019). Yet many struggle to sustain operations and remain only partially visible in policy frameworks (Davies et al., 2025; Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, & Mont, 2026).

The development, operation, and sustainability potential of FSIs are shaped by governance arrangements that structure actor relations, resource access, institutional recognition, and participation. Emerging research shows that regulation, resources, discourse, power, participation, and knowledge condition how FSIs operate, while noting a “lack of robust accounts of food sharing governance” (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2026, p. 1165). Complex public problems increasingly require cross-boundary, collaborative arrangements beyond state-centric models (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012; Torfing et al., 2026). However, existing conceptualisations remain largely descriptive, for example by distinguishing ideal-typical governance modes based on relational power between state and non-state actors (Arnouts et al., 2012; Kooiman, 2003; Lange et al., 2013), prompting calls for more evaluative and normative approaches to governance. Consequently, there is limited understanding of how different governance modes shape the organisational conditions under which FSIs operate, endure, and contribute to urban sustainability.

Responding to calls within governance scholarship (Arnouts et al., 2012), and to gaps concerning the roles of diverse actors vis-à-vis municipal authorities (Sareen & Waagsaether, 2023), the significance of power relations (Moragues-Faus et al., 2024), and limited research on urban food governance (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2026), this article asks: How do different governance modes shape the conditions under which FSIs operate, endure and contribute to urban sustainability? The article moves beyond descriptive classifications of governance arrangements by evaluating how configurations of actors, power, and rules shape the organisational and sustainability conditions of FSIs. It draws on an in-depth comparative analysis of Barcelona, Milan, and Utrecht, selected because they combine well-developed food-sharing landscapes with contrasting urban food governance contexts and approaches.

2. Urban Food Governance and Food Sharing

2.1. *Relevance of Food Sharing for Urban Food Governance Beyond 2030*

Urban food governance is a multi-actor process in which governmental, civil-society, and market actors shape food systems through rules, norms, and practices across scales (Chen et al., 2021; Moragues-Faus, 2020; Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021; Vara-Sánchez et al., 2021). This reflects a shift from state-centric governance towards more collaborative approaches (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Arnouts et al., 2012; Emerson et al., 2012). Cities are both sites of vulnerability and arenas for experimentation, while power asymmetries and institutional constraints shape whose interests are represented (Moragues-Faus, 2020; Sonnino & Coulson, 2021). Post-2030 governance therefore needs to address environmental outcomes alongside social justice, participation, and contested priorities (Moragues-Faus et al., 2024).

Building on this perspective, FSIs offer a valuable lens for examining the dynamics of urban food governance across geographical contexts. Operating at the intersection of sustainability, resilience, social innovation, and everyday practice, FSIs bring together diverse actors and organisational forms (Davies et al., 2017; Davies & Evans, 2019). Their activities span the entire food system, from production to consumption and waste management, and encompass multiple forms of exchange, including gifting, sharing, and hybrid market arrangements (Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, & Mont, 2026). FSIs support sustainability transformation and urban food resilience through alternative practices and values (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2026), but their operations and sustainability potential are shaped by existing urban governance contexts, including access to resources, regulatory frameworks, institutional support, and user acceptance (Sadovska, Mont, & Voytenko Palgan, 2025; Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, & Mont, 2026).

2.2. *Analytical Framework of Governance Modes*

Governance-modes scholarship examines the shift from hierarchical state steering towards coordination among state, market, and civil-society actors. Kooiman (2003) distinguished hierarchical, co- and self-governance; Arnouts et al. (2012) further separated closed and open co-governance according to actor roles, power, and interaction rules. Treib et al. (2007) analysed governance through politics, polity, and policy, while Pahl-Wostl (2015), Driessen et al. (2012), and Lange et al. (2013) stressed that empirical arrangements are usually hybrid and require more precise specification than broad hierarchy, market, and network types. This article therefore uses Arnouts et al.'s dimensions of actors, power, and rules as its analytical structure.

2.2.1. Actors, Power, and Rules

Arnouts et al. (2012) treat *actors* as a central dimension of governance arrangements, distinguishing between governmental and non-governmental actors and analysing how they form coalitions around shared objectives. Treib et al. (2007) situate this concern within the politics dimension of governance, focused on the relationship between public authority and societal autonomy. Pahl-Wostl (2015) similarly emphasises changing roles for state and non-state actors, particularly in participatory, networked, and hybrid arrangements. Based on this literature, the actor dimension is operationalised through two categories: actor composition and status, and coalitions and networks.

Power is understood here as a relational phenomenon that extends beyond formal authority or domination to include the capacity of actors to shape decisions, mobilise resources, influence agendas, and define which issues are recognised as legitimate (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005). In governance arrangements, power is therefore expressed not only through control over resources but also through the ability of actors to act collectively, influence priorities, and shape institutional responses (Lukes, 2005). Building on this broader understanding, Arnouts et al. (2012) conceptualise power as the relative influence of governmental and non-governmental actors in governance arrangements. This influence is linked to the resources that actors possess and mobilise, including legal authority, finance, expertise, and legitimacy. Arnouts et al. (2012) further show how power differs across governance modes: concentrated with government in hierarchical governance, pooled among selected actors in closed co-governance, diffused across broader constellations in open co-governance, and located primarily with non-governmental actors in self-governance. Pahl-Wostl (2015) adds that power is distributed differently across hierarchical, networked, and market-based arrangements, while emphasising that empirical governance systems are typically hybrid and often combine elements of these ideal types. The power dimension is therefore operationalised into four broader categories: resource control and mobilisation; decision-making and agenda-setting; the agency and capacity of actors to act; and recognition and legitimacy.

Rules are the procedures and routines that structure interaction among actors in governance arrangements. Arnouts et al. (2012) identify two central types: access rules, which determine who may participate in a governance arrangement, and responsibility rules, which allocate tasks and obligations among actors. Treib et al.'s policy dimension makes this more precise by distinguishing between legally binding and softer forms of steering, rigid and flexible implementation, the presence or absence of sanctions, and material and procedural regulation (Treib et al., 2007). Pahl-Wostl (2015) also emphasises the role of formal and informal institutions, monitoring, evaluation and conflict resolution, especially in hybrid or networked governance systems. Based on this literature, the rules dimension is consolidated into four broader categories: access and inclusion rules, responsibility and role-allocation rules, formality and institutionalisation, and flexibility and adaptation.

2.2.2. Governance Modes

Arnouts et al. (2012) use actors, power, and rules as the organisational dimensions through which governance arrangements can be analysed. They distinguish between four ideal-typical governance modes: hierarchical governance, closed co-governance, open co-governance, and self-governance. Each mode reflects a specific configuration of actor involvement, power distribution, and interaction rules and is used here to interpret the

dominant governance configuration in each case. The four governance modes and their core dimensions are summarised in Table 1 and discussed below.

Table 1. Four ideal-typical governance modes (Arnouts et al., 2012).

	Hierarchical governance	Closed co-governance	Open co-governance	Self-governance
Actors	Mainly governmental actors	Select mixed group of actors	Large mixed group of actors	Mainly non-governmental actors
Power	With government	Pooled	Diffused	With non-government
Rules	Governmental coercion	Restricted cooperation	Flexible collaboration	Non-governmental forerunning

In *hierarchical governance*, governmental actors dominate decision-making through top-down rules and prescribed responsibilities, while non-governmental actors operate within state-defined frameworks. Given the focus on how diverse actors shape FSIs, hierarchical governance is excluded from the analysis. *Closed co-governance* involves a selective coalition of governmental and non-governmental actors collaborating to achieve shared objectives. Participation is restricted to a defined group, reflecting controlled access. Power is pooled among participants, as outcomes depend on their resources and capacities. Rules emphasise coordinated action, with jointly defined responsibilities. In *open co-governance*, governance arrangements are more inclusive and flexible, involving a broader mix of actors. Access is relatively open, allowing multiple, often loosely connected coalitions to form. Power is diffused, as actors retain control over their own resources and mobilise them independently. Rules are less formalised, enabling flexible collaboration and distributing responsibilities across autonomous actors. Finally, *self-governance* is characterised by the predominance of non-governmental actors who organise and manage their activities independently. Although governmental actors may still control resources, they are not centrally involved in decision-making. Power resides primarily with non-governmental actors, and rules are internally defined, reflecting autonomy in determining access and allocating responsibilities.

3. Research Design and Methods

This article compares Barcelona, Milan, and Utrecht, city partners in the CULTIVATE project, selected through a maximum-variation logic because they combine established food-sharing ecosystems with contrasting urban governance contexts. Data collection was based on a Mobile Research Lab (MRL) approach, a collaborative, ethnography-inspired method in which a research team conducts in-situ, transdisciplinary analysis to study a phenomenon within its real-life organisational and institutional context (Voytenko Palgan & Sadvoska, 2023). It combines desktop research, semi-structured interviews, site visits, participant observation, and workshops. The method was applied consistently across the three cities. Field research typically lasted five days, supplemented by preparatory online interviews. Participants included FSI organisers and volunteers, municipal and policy actors, NGOs and academic experts, selected purposively from previous FSI mapping, project partners, research networks, and desktop research, with additional participants recruited through snowball sampling. Interviews lasted 30–80 minutes and were recorded, transcribed, and coded. In total, 74 interviews were conducted: 30 in Barcelona, 22 in Milan, and 22 in Utrecht. Site visits, participant observation, guided tours, local events, workshops, and reflexive sessions complemented the interviews and supported joint interpretation of governance arrangements and everyday practices.

Data analysis combined deductive and inductive thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, field notes, observation records, and materials from workshops and desktop research were systematically coded in NVivo to analyse FSI evolution, business models, costs, investments, perceived value, challenges, risks, and drivers of success. For this article, governance was a central empirical focus, examined through Arnouts et al.'s (2012) framework of governance modes. We applied the framework to code pre-processed empirical data, compare data, and interpret observed patterns. The analysis identified shared and context-specific dynamics in how food sharing is governed and examined how governance modes shape the operation and sustainability potential of FSIs. Discussions with city representatives broadly confirmed the governance modes identified for each city.

The study is context-specific and not statistically generalisable. Its three European cases, purposive sampling, and in-depth engagement do not cover all relevant FSIs or stakeholders. The MRL approach also relies on close interaction and in-situ observation, making the analysis interpretive, while providing insight into how values, priorities, and governance relations are negotiated. We therefore adopt a reflexive stance: knowledge production is embedded in power relations, and sustainability and resilience are contested objectives shaped by competing views of what should be sustained, whose priorities count and which food practices are legitimate (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Zerbian & de Luis Romero, 2023).

4. Governance of Food Sharing in Barcelona, Milan, and Utrecht

4.1. Food Sharing Landscapes and Urban Sustainability Challenges

Urban food sharing in Barcelona, Milan, and Utrecht responds to overlapping sustainability challenges, including food insecurity, food waste, social exclusion, pressure on urban space, and the need for more resilient local food systems. However, the food sharing landscape in each city reflects different urban conditions, policy priorities, and forms of civic mobilisation.

Barcelona has the largest and most diverse food-sharing landscape, with redistribution and urban growing particularly prominent (Davies et al., 2025). Shaped by socio-economic vulnerability and neighbourhood solidarity, food sharing connects food provision and waste reduction with mutual aid, the social and solidarity economy, urban commons, and the right to the city. Community kitchens, informal food banks, and redistribution organisations address food poverty while supporting participation and collective organisation.

Milan has a smaller but more institutionally coordinated food-sharing landscape, closely linked to municipal policy and redistribution infrastructure through food recovery programmes, hubs, and social supermarkets (Davies et al., 2025). Food sharing is framed around waste reduction, food poverty, and social inclusion, while community gardens, social restaurants, and regeneration spaces also connect food to labour inclusion, education, and neighbourhood support.

Utrecht has the smallest landscape, dominated by multifunctional and community-oriented initiatives (Davies et al., 2025). Food sharing is less focused on emergency redistribution and more on participation, wellbeing, ecological learning, and neighbourhood development. Community gardens, shared meals and circular initiatives connect food to care, social inclusion, and environmental engagement, while municipal support is dispersed across green space, health, and circular-economy policies.

These differences provide the context for comparing actors, power, and rules and identifying each city's dominant governance mode.

4.2. Actors Governing and Participating in Food Sharing

In Barcelona, food sharing is organised through civil society organisations, neighbourhood activism, social entrepreneurs, municipal programmes, and market actors (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2025). Actor coalitions are organised around specific practices, neighbourhoods, and shared commitments rather than through a single city-wide governance arrangement. One loose civic-municipal coalition is formed around the social and solidarity economy, connecting neighbourhood groups, cooperatives, and municipal support structures. One interviewee noted that “when talking about social and solidarity economy, in the latest years there has been a strong support from the city to develop...programmes but also funds related to that” (BA1). This suggests a coalition in which municipal actors provide enabling resources, while non-governmental actors retain considerable autonomy. More locally embedded coalitions are visible in initiatives such as Can Batlló, where community gardening, cooking, food bank, and redistribution are linked within the same neighbourhood ecosystem. Another coalition, Espigoladors, forms around surplus food redistribution, connecting peri-urban farmers, volunteers, food banks, and wholesale markets (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2025). These examples point to several practice-based coalitions without one dominant actor constellation steering the food sharing landscape.

Milan presents a more institutionally coordinated actor constellation than Barcelona, with a clearer municipal role and more organised redistribution infrastructure. Food sharing is shaped by non-profit organisations, charities, social enterprises, universities, philanthropic foundations, business associations, municipal actors, and community groups (Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, et al., 2025). Actor coalitions are structured around municipal food policy, food waste reduction, and social inclusion. The strongest example is the Food Waste Hub system, a relatively structured civic-public-private coalition around surplus food redistribution, developed through collaboration among the City of Milan, Politecnico di Milano, Assolombarda, foundations, NGOs, supermarkets, and food banks. Additional coalitions connect social supermarkets, such as Solidando, with food hubs, volunteers, and vulnerable households, while urban regeneration initiatives link food sharing to inclusion, education, and neighbourhood support. Milan's actor coalitions are therefore more integrated into formal policy and philanthropic infrastructures than Barcelona's, although some gardens and neighbourhood initiatives retain a grassroots character.

Utrecht's food sharing governance is shaped by a smaller but highly diverse landscape of initiatives. Municipal actors are distributed across departments such as public health, green space, circular economy, and social development rather than organised through a single food policy unit (Sadovska, Mont, et al., 2026). At the same time, non-governmental actors dominate everyday food sharing practices, including community gardens, edible neighbourhoods, such as Rijnvliet, shared meals cooked at BuurtBuik, Groentetas vegetable bag schemes, and circular food initiatives. Actor coalitions are fluid and overlapping rather than organised around one dominant coalition. The landscape is described as “quite bottom-up” (UT4), with community gardens and redistribution hubs functioning as “food commons” shared between state and civil society. Some coalitions are neighbourhood-based, relying on volunteers, local shops, and community centres, whereas others connect residents, planners, social enterprises, and municipal actors around ecological and social goals. Utrecht's coalitions are therefore more open, pragmatic, and project-based than Milan's more structured redistribution networks or Barcelona's more autonomous grassroots field.

4.3. Power Dynamics in Food Sharing

Power relations in Barcelona need to be understood against the city's wider context of socio-economic vulnerability, housing pressure, tourist gentrification, and limited land availability (Barcelona City Council, 2025). This context is reinforced by traditions of civic resistance and urban contestation, with many initiatives rooted in activist and social economy traditions rather than in food policy alone (Calvet-Mir & March, 2019). This makes them difficult for the municipality to categorise and support but also demonstrates that civic actors do not wait for public authorities to define either problems or solutions. Many initiatives frame their work around food poverty, social inclusion, migrant integration, community building, and the right to the city. Community kitchens and gardens, therefore, function not only as food infrastructures but also as spaces for social connection and neighbourhood support (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2025). Power is consequently not limited to control over funding or municipal spaces. It also concerns which actors can identify local needs, mobilise trust, and provide support where formal public provision remains insufficient. Non-governmental actors, therefore, hold substantial operational agency and local legitimacy. Public authorities still control important resources, including municipal spaces, public grants, and support through strategies for healthy food, the social and solidarity economy, and urban agriculture. However, the municipality does not define a unified food sharing agenda across the city. Power in Barcelona is therefore dispersed and politically embedded: public actors hold formal resource power, whereas grassroots and civic actors hold practical capacity, local legitimacy, and problem-framing power.

Power in Milan is pooled among recognised actors, but this pooling is selective and structured by access to resources, policy networks, and implementation capacity. The City of Milan exercises strong agenda-setting power through policies focused on reducing food waste, addressing food poverty, and promoting social inclusion (Sadovska, Voytenko Palgan, et al., 2025). These policies make some forms of food sharing more visible and governable than others, especially surplus food redistribution. Resource power is distributed across a recognised coalition: the municipality provides coordination and policy support; philanthropic actors contribute funding and infrastructure; universities contribute expertise; and business actors provide food flows and logistical connections. At the same time, influence depends on participation in recognised policy and redistribution networks that can mobilise funding, infrastructure, and compliance capacity. Civil society actors nevertheless shape the meaning and practice of food sharing beyond redistribution alone. Initiatives such as IBVA, SOSpesa, and Project Ruben connect food support to dignity, reciprocity, migrant assistance, and social inclusion rather than emergency food aid alone. Community gardens similarly create spaces for participation and social connection. However, their agency remains constrained by resource dependence. Initiatives may retain autonomy in everyday operations, but their capacity to act depends on funding, premises, volunteers, and recognition. As one respondent stated: "Without private funds, we would not be able to survive" (MI12). Power in Milan is therefore pooled through closed co-governance but remains asymmetrical: influence is concentrated among actors able to access recognised policy, funding, and implementation networks.

Power in Utrecht is diffused across municipal departments, civil society initiatives, social enterprises and community actors rather than concentrated in a single food policy structure. Unlike Milan, the municipality does not organise food sharing around one dominant model. Instead, food enters governance indirectly through green space, public health, circular economy, social development, and neighbourhood policy. Municipal actors therefore exercise agenda-setting power less through direct steering than by shaping

which activities become visible and eligible for support under adjacent policy objectives. As one municipal representative explained: “Food fits a bit into green, health, circular economy...but it is not a standalone theme” (UT01). This dispersed structure gives non-governmental actors considerable problem-framing power, but also requires them to translate food sharing into policy languages that public authorities can support. Initiatives therefore frame their activities through rehabilitation, participation, hospitality, solidarity or ecological engagement rather than food provision alone (Sadovska, Mont, et al., 2026). Resource power is also unevenly distributed. Municipal actors control land access, neighbourhood budgets, and some subsidies, whereas many initiatives depend on volunteers, donations, temporary grants, and informal networks. Limited infrastructure can restrict continuity and scaling capacity, despite strong local legitimacy and participation. Power in Utrecht is therefore negotiated and dispersed. Municipal actors enable and constrain through funding categories, land access, and departmental priorities, whereas civil society actors hold practical knowledge, local trust, and significant influence over how food sharing is defined and practised.

4.4. Rules Governing Food Sharing

In Barcelona, rules combine policy frameworks, formal procedures, and informal routines. The Barcelona Healthy and Sustainable Food Strategy for 2030, the 2030 Social and Solidarity Economy Strategy and the Urban Agriculture Strategy provide formal recognition for activities related to healthy food access, social and solidarity economy, and citizen-led urban agriculture. These strategies do not give the municipality direct control over the food sharing landscape, but they create opportunities for recognition, funding, and access to spaces. More specific formal rules are visible in permit-based municipal gardens, grant conditions, leasing arrangements, and food safety requirements. Restrictions on selling and, in some municipal gardens, even donating garden-grown produce limit the business models for urban gardens. One interviewee described this directly: “It is not allowed to sell the locally grown produce of the city. This has been an obstacle” (BA4.1). Access and inclusion rules vary across the field: municipal gardens may target retired people or people with disabilities, whereas initiatives such as Xarxa d’Aliments organise participation through neighbourhood solidarity and informal involvement. Responsibility rules are similarly distributed: municipalities may provide space, equipment or funding, whereas initiatives organise volunteers, cooking, redistribution, and training. At the same time, many practices remain governed through informal routines and locally defined responsibilities rooted in neighbourhood trust and solidarity.

Rules in Milan are more institutionalised than in Barcelona, especially around food waste redistribution. This is visible in the Milan Food Policy, the Food Waste Recovery and Redistribution Programme, the Food Waste Hub model, and regional laws on urban and social agriculture. These policies position food sharing within a broader municipal agenda for reducing food waste, alleviating food poverty, and promoting social inclusion. As a result, some forms of food sharing, especially surplus redistribution, become more visible and institutionally supported than others. Access and inclusion rules are especially clear in social supermarkets and subsidised meal schemes. Solidando, for example, serves families through a points-based system rather than ordinary monetary exchange. Points are allocated according to family size and socio-economic conditions, which makes access targeted and formalised. Responsibility and role-allocation rules are also clearly distributed in the Food Waste Hub system, specifying who donates, collects, stores, and redistributes food. Universities, philanthropic organisations and municipal actors support this chain through coordination, evaluation, and enabling roles. Formal rules further concern food safety, quality screening, storage, volunteer training, and compliance. For example, Gallarate Hub requires trained volunteers to manage redistribution

and the social market. At the same time, Milan's rules are not uniformly formal or rigid. Flexibility and adaptation remain important, especially in community gardens and neighbourhood-based initiatives.

Rules in Utrecht are defined less by a unified food policy than by food safety regulations, municipal policies on green space, public health, circular economy and social development, and *gedoogbeleid*, a tolerance-oriented policy culture. This flexible regulatory environment enables bottom-up innovation but also creates uneven support. Municipal and provincial support typically comes through adjacent policy instruments rather than direct food sharing policy. For example, the *Initiatievenfonds* can support community gardens and cooking events, whereas Social Return on Investment rules allow initiatives such as Restaurant Nula to connect food work to labour inclusion. Access and inclusion rules are often deliberately low-threshold. *BuurtBuik* provides communal meals without strict income testing, emphasising hospitality and participation rather than entitlement. Subscription models such as *Groentetas* similarly avoid strongly marking recipients as welfare beneficiaries. In these cases, rules are designed to avoid stigma, preserve dignity, and enable participation. Responsibility rules are negotiated locally. Volunteers collect, cook, distribute, and organise; community centres provide space; municipal actors enable initiatives through premises. However, the same flexibility also creates uncertainty, since support depends on departmental priorities, project-based funding and volunteer availability. Utrecht's rules, therefore, enable experimentation and adaptation, but do not provide the stable institutional architecture found in Milan's redistribution system.

4.5. Governance Modes in Practice

The analysis identifies the dominant governance mode in each city. Barcelona is best understood as predominantly *self-governance* with selective open co-governance elements. Its self-governing character lies in the predominance of non-governmental actors that define their own purposes, organise activities and allocate responsibilities internally. Many initiatives operate through civic, cooperative or grassroots logics rather than through municipal steering. Open co-governance elements appear where municipal actors provide selective support through public grants, seed funding, access to municipal spaces, participatory spaces linked to the social and solidarity economy, and projects such as *Hort al Terrat*, *Bosc Turull*, and *BLOC4BCN*. The dominant mode is therefore self-governance with selective open co-governance elements.

Milan is best understood as *closed co-governance* with selected open co-governance elements. The closed co-governance character lies in the way key parts of the food sharing system are organised through a defined coalition of recognised actors, rather than through municipal hierarchy or grassroots self-organisation. The Food Waste Recovery and Redistribution Programme began as a "pact of main actors in the city," involving a major university for analytics and impact evaluation, a banking foundation and an industry association (MI9). This illustrates controlled access and pooled power within a recognised coalition. Assolombarda's role is especially revealing: one respondent described how the industry association encouraged food companies to participate through "moral persuasion," telling them: "if you are a food company, apply for this programme" (MI1). Open co-governance elements remain present in community gardens, regeneration spaces, and neighbourhood initiatives, but they do not define the dominant mode.

Utrecht is best understood as *open co-governance*, with elements of self-governance. Its open co-governance character lies in the flexible actor constellation through which food sharing is organised. Food sharing

develops through multiple overlapping collaborations between municipal departments, grassroots initiatives, social enterprises, neighbourhood organisations, volunteers, and residents. The key feature of this mode is that food sharing is governed through several thematic entry points rather than through one formal food sharing framework. The municipality may provide access to land, premises, neighbourhood budgets or green-space frameworks, but it does not prescribe one dominant model of food sharing. Self-governance elements remain present where initiatives define their own routines, values and access rules, especially in volunteer-led redistribution, community meals, and small-scale growing.

5. Discussion

The analysis shows that FSIs are not simply local projects operating at the margins of urban food systems. Their role is politically significant because they often emerge where formal urban systems do not fully address food poverty, vulnerability, social isolation, waste, or exclusion. This became especially visible during Covid-19, when sharing organisations rapidly mobilised food, spaces, volunteers, and critical workers to fill gaps in state provision (Mont et al., 2021). In all three cities, FSIs continue to perform such bridging functions, although the severity and character of sustainability challenges differ. The key question is therefore not only how FSIs contribute to urban sustainability and resilience, but how different governance modes support, constrain, or instrumentalise their capacity to do so.

5.1. Governance Modes Shape the Organisational Capacity of FSIs

The three governance modes support different forms of organisational capacity among FSIs. Barcelona illustrates a predominantly self-governing configuration, giving initiatives considerable autonomy to define local problems and develop situated responses. Food sharing is closely linked to mutual aid, the social and solidarity economy, neighbourhood organising, urban commons, and struggles over the right to the city. This mode is particularly responsive where sustainability challenges are experienced as interconnected social problems, including food insecurity, housing precarity, and exclusion. Its strength lies in civic legitimacy, participation, and responsiveness to needs that formal systems may fail to recognise. Its weakness is fragility, since many initiatives depend on volunteers, informal networks, short-term support, and insecure access to spaces. Recent longitudinal mapping of FSIs in Barcelona and Milan further shows that apparent growth in initiatives can coexist with high turnover and the disappearance of earlier initiatives (Davies et al., 2025). Self-governance can therefore support socially embedded and meaningful forms of food sharing, but it does not automatically provide stability, resources, or wider coordination.

Milan represents a more closed co-governance configuration. This mode strengthens organisational capacity through institutional coordination, infrastructure, recognised partnerships, and defined responsibilities. Food Waste Hubs, social supermarkets, and redistribution systems support continuity, scaling, and alignment with municipal priorities, especially food waste reduction and food poverty alleviation. Closed co-governance is therefore well-suited to sustainability challenges that require logistics, food safety procedures, storage, refrigeration, and stable donor networks. Its strength lies in turning food sharing into a more durable urban infrastructure. Its weakness is selectivity. Initiatives aligned with municipal and philanthropic priorities are more easily incorporated, whereas smaller, informal, or more experimental initiatives may remain peripheral. Cities may therefore become better at governing forms of food sharing linked to measurable policy goals, such as redistribution volumes and food waste reduction, while initiatives centred on care, participation, or

social transformation receive less recognition and support. Selectivity thus has a clear power dimension, since governance arrangements shape which practices and forms of value become institutionally visible and legitimate (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; Lukes, 2005).

Utrecht illustrates a more open co-governance configuration. Open co-governance enables initiatives to develop across multiple thematic entry points, including health, green space, circular economy, social participation, welfare, and neighbourhood development. Its main strength is flexibility, allowing FSIs to respond to diverse sustainability challenges without adopting one dominant municipal agenda. This is particularly important where food sharing is less linked to emergency food provision and more to participation, wellbeing, ecological learning, and low-threshold support. However, its weakness is fragmentation, since initiatives often need to translate their activities into adjacent policy languages to secure recognition and support. This can stimulate creativity and experimentation, but may also produce uncertainty, uneven access to resources, and weak continuity. Open co-governance, therefore, supports diversity and responsiveness but does not necessarily provide institutional durability or collective coordination. Table 2 summarises the strengths and constraints of each governance mode.

Table 2. Strengths and constraints of governance modes for FSIs.

	Barcelona self-governance	Milan closed co-governance	Utrecht open co-governance
Strengths	Civil society autonomy and local legitimacy Situated problem definitions Neighbourhood embeddedness Strong participation Links to mutual aid, solidarity economy and urban commons	Organisational capacity and coordination Stable infrastructure Recognised partnerships Food redistribution and access Quality control and donor coordination Scaling and replication	Flexibility and experimentation Multiple thematic entry points Hybrid local models Links to health, green space and circular economy Participation and neighbourhood development
Constraints	Fragility and uneven continuity Dependence on volunteers and informal networks Short-term support and insecure spaces Limited capacity to address structural causes of exclusion	Selective inclusion and instrumentalisation Stronger support for initiatives aligned with municipal priorities Less recognition for care, participation and social transformation	Fragmentation and uncertain continuity Translation into adjacent policy agendas Fragmented support and uneven resource access Weak coordination and limited continuity

Cities should aim to strengthen the organisational conditions most needed for their governance mode. Barcelona highlights the importance of civic autonomy and low-threshold participation, while addressing the insecurity caused by temporary funding and unstable access to space. Milan shows the value of coordination and shared infrastructure, but also the need for transparent access and support for less established initiatives. Utrecht demonstrates the benefits of flexible collaboration, also showing that coordination is necessary to connect fragmented actors and resources. Effective food sharing governance depends less on choosing one ideal model than on addressing the specific weaknesses of existing arrangements.

5.2. Implications for Food Governance Beyond 2030

The findings contribute to urban food governance scholarship examining how cities can support more just and sustainable food system outcomes. Moragues-Faus and Battersby (2021) argue that the field needs a clearer distinction between urban food policy and the wider governance processes shaping food system outcomes, together with stronger attention to power and inequities. Moragues-Faus et al. (2024) similarly emphasise that transformative urban food governance requires attention to time, place, relationships, diversity, and power. LaRota-Aguilera and Moragues-Faus (2025) further show that urban food insecurity cannot be addressed through narrow access-based interventions alone, but requires multidimensional, justice-oriented approaches that connect food access, agency, and sustainability. Our analysis contributes to this agenda by shifting attention from whether FSIs are innovative or participatory towards the governance conditions that allow them to endure, remain autonomous, and contribute to sustainability without being absorbed into narrow policy agendas.

Food governance beyond 2030 should address the conditions that allow local initiatives to endure. Urban food governance scholarship often emphasises experimentation, collaboration, and participation as drivers of transformation, but these qualities are insufficient if initiatives lack stable access to resources, spaces, infrastructure, and recognition (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021; Moragues-Faus et al., 2024). This matters because FSIs frequently respond to needs that urban public systems only partially address. They provide food, but also social connection, dignity, learning, care, and local participation. Treating them primarily as examples of civic innovation without addressing their organisational vulnerability risks shifting responsibility for structural problems onto actors with limited resources. This implies that urban governance should move beyond short-term project funding towards longer-term institutional support, including stable access to land and premises, predictable funding mechanisms, and formal recognition of FSIs as partners in urban food systems rather than temporary service providers.

A related risk is instrumentalisation. Institutional support can strengthen FSIs, but it can also narrow their purpose when only measurable or easily scalable outcomes are prioritised. This echoes Moragues-Faus and Battersby's (2021) concern that narratives of successful urban food policy may obscure who benefits, who becomes invisible and how inequities are reproduced. In food sharing, redistribution volumes, waste reduction, and programme replication should therefore not become the only indicators of value. Less measurable contributions, such as mutual support, agency, trust, cultural belonging, and low-threshold participation, are equally important for a just urban food agenda.

Governance beyond 2030, therefore, requires a better balance between coordination, flexibility, and autonomy. Urban food governance scholarship increasingly calls for governance that is place-sensitive, relational, diverse, and attentive to power (Moragues-Faus et al., 2024). Our analysis shows what this means in practice for food sharing. Coordination is needed to secure shared infrastructure, stable funding, and strategic alignment across policy domains. Flexibility should enable FSIs to adapt to local needs rather than requiring them to conform to narrow programme objectives or sectoral boundaries. Autonomy should be preserved by allowing initiatives to define their own priorities and forms of value instead of becoming solely accountable for predefined policy targets. None of these qualities alone is sufficient: coordination without autonomy risks instrumentalisation, autonomy without support risks fragility, and flexibility without institutional anchoring risks fragmentation.

Resilience should therefore not be treated as a neutral outcome of food sharing. Different governance modes support different forms of resilience and prioritise different values. Closed co-governance can strengthen logistical and institutional resilience by stabilising redistribution systems but may privilege measurable outputs and recognised partners. Self-governance can strengthen civic and relational resilience by mobilising local trust, mutual aid and situated knowledge, but may remain fragile without secure resources. Open co-governance can support adaptive resilience through flexible collaborations but may also reproduce fragmentation. These differences reflect the contested character of urban food governance, where sustainability and justice are negotiated through power relations, actor coalitions, and institutional recognition (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Zerbian & de Luis Romero, 2023). These dynamics resonate with critiques that voluntary and community-based initiatives may be incorporated into dominant governance agendas while assuming responsibilities previously associated with the state (Rosol, 2012; Rosol et al., 2017). Yet FSIs may also function as commons institutions when participants retain collective control over access, rules, and purposes, enabling a plurality of alternatives to dominant systems of provision (Leitheiser et al., 2022). Barcelona most clearly illustrates this commons-oriented potential, whereas Milan shows the risk of incorporation into institutional redistribution agendas; Utrecht occupies an intermediate position, with diverse autonomous initiatives that nevertheless depend on public funding categories and resources. The key distinction is therefore whether governance instrumentalises civic capacity or protects collective rule-making.

The comparison suggests that cities should address the trade-offs of their dominant governance mode rather than seek a single optimal model. Self-governance requires stronger institutional support; closed co-governance needs safeguards against selectivity and exclusion; and open co-governance requires coordination to prevent fragmentation. Effective urban food governance therefore depends on balancing institutional support, civic autonomy, and inclusiveness according to local contexts.

For urban authorities, these findings translate into several key governance priorities. First, support should shift from short-term projects to multi-year funding, renewable agreements, and more secure access to essential spaces and infrastructure. Second, municipalities should offer multiple support pathways, combining formal partnerships for established organisations with simplified grants and procedures for informal or volunteer-led initiatives. Third, participation criteria should be transparent and regularly reviewed to avoid gatekeeping by established actors. Fourth, cities should improve coordination across relevant policy sectors while preserving initiative autonomy. Finally, evaluation should go beyond output metrics to include continuity, accessibility, participation, trust, and community capacity. These measures help balance institutional stability with civic autonomy and diversity.

This article contributes by showing how different governance modes shape the organisational conditions under which FSIs operate and contribute to urban sustainability over time. Rather than merely categorising governance arrangements, the analysis demonstrates how configurations of actors, power, and rules influence access to resources, recognition, autonomy, institutional support, and continuity. For food governance beyond 2030, the central question is not only whether cities should support food sharing, but what kinds of food sharing they enable, on whose terms, and with what consequences for justice, agency, resilience, and sustainability (LaRota-Aguilera & Moragues-Faus, 2025; Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021; Moragues-Faus et al., 2024). For policymakers, this means designing governance arrangements that recognise and support diverse organisational models, balance accountability with civic autonomy, and

value social outcomes such as trust, participation, and care alongside measurable environmental and economic impacts.

6. Conclusions

This article examined how governance modes shape the operations, continuity, and sustainability potential of FSIs in Barcelona, Milan, and Utrecht. The findings show that governance modes influence FSI durability by distributing resources, recognition, decision-making authority, and institutional responsibilities differently. Barcelona's predominantly self-governed landscape supports civic autonomy and locally grounded responses, but remains vulnerable to voluntary labour, insecure spaces, and uneven support. Milan's closed co-governance provides coordination, infrastructure, and continuity, while favouring initiatives aligned with policy and philanthropic priorities. Utrecht's open co-governance enables cross-sectoral experimentation but risks fragmentation without stable institutional anchoring.

The sustainability potential of FSIs therefore depends on the governance conditions that make some practices visible, supported, and durable while leaving others precarious. Cities should not treat FSIs merely as service providers or instruments of food aid and waste reduction. Their contribution also includes social connection, dignity, ecological learning, care, and participation. Support requires access to land, infrastructure, and longer-term funding, together with arrangements that preserve autonomy while enabling coordination and continuity.

Future research should examine how governance configurations change during pandemics, cost-of-living crises, and climate-related shocks. Further work is needed on hierarchical and hybrid arrangements, on cases beyond Europe, and on how differences in welfare systems, informal economies, and municipal capacity affect food-sharing governance. Research should also connect governance modes more directly to sustainability outcomes, asking who benefits, which forms of value are recognised, and how governance arrangements shape the capacity of FSIs to contribute to just and resilient urban food systems. From a commons perspective (Leitheiser et al., 2022), future research should examine whether the transformative potential of FSIs depends on governance arrangements that merely mobilise civic capacities to sustain existing systems or, alternatively, those that protect collective rule-making and enable alternative forms of food provision.

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Conflict of Interests

In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Anna R. Davies (Trinity College Dublin), Dean Phelan (University College Dublin), and Ana Moragues-Faus (Universitat de Barcelona).

Data Availability

The interview data underlying this study are not publicly available due to privacy, confidentiality, and data-protection considerations. The data are securely stored at Lund University in accordance with the University's research data management requirements. Requests for access are handled in accordance with applicable Swedish legislation and Lund University procedures.

LLMs Disclosure

The empirical data were collected and analysed by the CULTIVATE research team and documented in three city reports on Barcelona, Milan and Utrecht. During preparation of this article, the closed version of ChatGPT provided by Lund University was used to support the structuring and synthesis of manuscript text based on the authors' analysis of the empirical material, and Grammarly was used for language editing. All analytical, interpretative, and final writing decisions were made by the authors.

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