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Building Community Food Resilience: Tracing Socio-Technical Infrastructures of *Ollas Comunes* in Chile's Food Deserts

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Abstract

Food deserts highlight the uneven distribution of food infrastructure that disproportionately impacts marginalised communities, exacerbating their food insecurity. Residents in these areas face daily food access challenges and, in the global South context, rely on informal markets and community-based solidarity networks. This article seeks to draw lessons for resilience from community-led initiatives that contribute to food security in urban food deserts. It focuses more specifically on *ollas comunes* (community soup kitchens) in Santiago, Chile, understanding the role these played before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Using institutional ethnography, the article examines how *ollas comunes* address immediate community food insecurity, and sustain themselves over time through complex, dynamic socio-material assemblages. The research considers how relationships are structured between participants, and how space, material objects, norms, and routines, shape and reconfigure interactions and outcomes. The findings reveal critical factors that bolster community food resilience: the involvement of diverse actors, their adaptive capacity, and their ability to reconfigure social and material networks. Additionally, the research highlights the uneven barriers to resilience, faced by formal and informal groups. This study contributes to rethinking urban food environments from the ground up, emphasising how bottom-up initiatives respond to systemic gaps within food deserts. It offers critical insights for policy and planning to build food resilience, highlighting the need to support and recognise the social infrastructures that sustain communities in times of crisis and beyond.

Keywords

community kitchens; community resilience; food deserts; *ollas comunes*; social infrastructure

1. Introduction

The urgent need for food system transformation is increasingly recognised in the face of climate change and multiple interconnected crises including biodiversity loss, economic inequality, and geopolitical conflicts (Béné et al., 2019; Leeuwis et al., 2021). Recent studies highlight that six planetary boundaries have been exceeded primarily due to human activity (Richardson et al., 2023). Food systems are central to this crisis, contributing approximately 34% of total greenhouse gas emissions (Crippa et al., 2021), while being highly vulnerable to climate-induced disruptions such as more severe droughts, floods, and heatwaves. These disruptions pose severe risks to agricultural productivity and food security, especially in urban areas that rely on complex and often fragile supply chains (Wiebe et al., 2019).

Access to food in cities is not homogeneous. Urban food deserts, understood as areas where access to affordable, nutritious food is limited due to spatial, economic and infrastructural barriers, have become a relevant lens for understanding the uneven geographies of food insecurity (Widener & Shannon, 2014). While initially developed in the context of cities in the global North (Shannon, 2014; Walker et al., 2010), the concept has gained political traction in the global South, where rapid urbanisation, socio-spatial segregation, and fragmented food systems exacerbate vulnerabilities (Battersby, 2012; Battersby & Watson, 2018). In these contexts, food deserts are not simply zones of market failure defined by the absence of supermarkets or formal food outlets. Instead, they represent sites where systemic inequalities, rooted in planning decisions and mobility constraints, materialise in everyday struggles for nourishment (Battersby, 2019; Nicoletti et al., 2023). Thus, food scarcity is a socially constructed phenomenon; while food might be produced in sufficient quantities overall, access remains highly unequal due to systemic barriers (Sen, 1981).

In global South contexts, food deserts intersect with broader patterns of urban marginalisation (Battersby, 2019). Here, residents in low-income and peripheral neighbourhoods often rely on informal markets and community-based solidarity networks to meet their food needs (Duque Franco et al., 2020; Osuteye et al., 2020). Although resilience in food deserts is often embedded in everyday community practices, it frequently remains unrecognised by policy and planning frameworks (Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011)—only gaining visibility when major crises occur. Grassroots responses, for instance, became particularly visible during the Covid-19 pandemic. The disruption to global and regional food supply chains led to widespread loss of income and rising food prices, disproportionately affecting low-income populations (Clapp & Moseley, 2020). As many governments failed to meet the needs of their citizens, community food initiatives (CFIs) such as community soup kitchens (re)emerged as vital infrastructures of survival and care (Bezerra et al., 2025; Desmaison et al., 2022; Leetoy & Gravante, 2021; Osuteye et al., 2020).

This article contributes to research on urban food environments and resilience by examining how community responses adapt to crises and sustain food access and consumption in urban food deserts. Grounded in the first author's PhD research, it focuses on the case of Santiago, Chile, where institutional neglect and entrenched structural inequalities have contributed to the emergence of food deserts in specific urban areas. In this context, *ollas comunes* (community soup kitchens) have become essential grassroots strategies for addressing local food insecurity since the late 1940s (Gallardo, 1985). The central research question guiding this article is: *How do* ollas comunes *operate in Santiago's urban food deserts, and how do their actors and practices evolve in response to shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic, to ensure food resilience?*

Chile presents a paradoxical scenario. While it boasts one of the highest per capita incomes in Latin America and has made significant progress in reducing income poverty—from 38.6% in 1990 to 6.5% in 2022 (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2022; OECD, 2021)—it remains the most unequal country in the region, with the wealthiest 10% controlling nearly 60% of national income (De Rosa et al., 2020). This contradiction is also reflected in the country's food and nutrition landscape. Although Chile reports one of the lowest rates of food insecurity in Latin America, it faces alarming levels of malnutrition: 74% of the population is overweight, 38.9% is classified as obese, and nearly 40% cannot afford a healthy diet (FAO et al., 2025). These figures highlight the complex relationship between economic development, social inequality, and nutritional outcomes.

Urban food insecurity in Chile is further shaped by spatial and infrastructural disparities. Food deserts are typically located in low-income residential areas that lack reasonable walking access to the country's two main food distribution systems (Zazo & Orellana-McBride, 2023). On one hand, supermarkets—driven by market logic—offer a wide variety of food products but are unevenly distributed across the urban landscape. On the other hand, *ferias libres* (municipally regulated street markets) provide weekly access to fresh produce and are more common in low- and middle-income neighbourhoods. Moreover, food deserts in Santiago are positively correlated with higher rates of cardiovascular disease among elderly residents, particularly in low-income areas (Landaeta-Díaz et al., 2024).

In this context, *ollas comunes* are crucial social infrastructures (Valenzuela-Levi et al., 2024). They play a critical role in the collective preparation and distribution of meals, supporting low-income neighbourhoods where urban food infrastructure is already fragile—areas that exemplify the concept of food deserts. Its origins are often located in a shared historical memory that can be traced back to the organising efforts of women in low-income, peripheral neighbourhoods in Chile during the housing movement in the 1960s, and more visibly, during the economic and political crises of the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1980s (Gallardo, 1985; Hiner et al., 2022). These historical trajectories are activated in the present, shaping how women—many of whom are already primary caregivers in their households—and communities mobilise food, space, time, and care under contemporary conditions of precarity. As Jirón et al. (2022) argue, these practices reflect a gendered reconfiguration of care work, where domestic labour is extended into the public sphere in response to crisis.

Although the number of *ollas comunes* has fluctuated over time, they resurfaced during the mass social uprising of October 2019 (Fuentes et al., 2022), serving both as a means of providing meals to protesters and as a powerful symbol of resistance. Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, their presence became even more pronounced as unemployment surged and poverty intensified. Many grassroots food initiatives proliferated across Santiago and other urban centres, stepping in to fill critical gaps in food provisioning left by an overwhelmed and often absent state (Hiner et al., 2022; Valenzuela-Levi et al., 2024). Due to their deep historical and cultural embeddedness that enables rapid mobilisation in times of crisis, *ollas comunes* in Santiago offer valuable insights into food resilience, revealing their adaptive capacity and transformative potential in navigating systemic shocks.

To examine *ollas comunes*, we adopt a relational and material approach. Drawing on institutional ethnography (IE; Smith & Griffith, 2022), and focusing on their practices before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic, we uncover the coordination between formal and informal circuits. Using this approach we also aim to bring into view the diverse human and non-human actors that constitute *ollas comunes*—such as large pots, food

banks, digital platforms, municipal permits, and volunteers—that collectively contribute to building resilience. Rather than framing resilience as a neutral or purely technical capacity, we understand it as a contested and relational process shaped by gendered labour, material constraints, and institutional power (Béné & Devereux, 2023; Blake, 2019; Kaika, 2017).

The article is organised into four main sections. First, we review the existing literature on food systems resilience, arguing for the need to move beyond a narrow focus on physical or technical infrastructure and large-scale investments. Instead, we emphasise the importance of local scales and the recognition of people as infrastructure—particularly through community-based food initiatives. These initiatives, often overlooked in mainstream policy and planning, offer critical insights as they navigate everyday scarcity and systemic challenges. We examine how such initiatives have been addressed in existing scholarship and explore the added value of a social and material lens in understanding their role in resilience thinking. Second, we outline the research methodology employed in the research. Third, we present an analysis of the social and material arrangements underpinning selected *ollas comunes* in Santiago, focusing on their practices across different stages: food acquisition, cooking, distributing, and eating. Finally, we summarise the key findings and offer recommendations for policy, planning, and future research, with particular attention to the role of community agency in fostering resilient urban food systems.

2. Resilience in Food Deserts: CFIs as Socio-Technical Infrastructures

Food deserts offer critical insights into the nature of resilience. In these environments, scarcity is not an occasional disruption but a persistent, structural condition. Individuals and communities must continuously navigate limited access to affordable, nutritious food, often relying on informal networks, adaptive strategies, and creative resource management to meet their daily needs (Battersby, 2012; Battersby & Watson, 2018). This ongoing negotiation with scarcity reframes resilience—not as a reactive response to rare shocks, but as a lived, everyday practice embedded in social and material life (Battersby, 2019). When additional crises occur—such as the Covid-19 pandemic—these already strained realities are pushed even further, revealing both the fragility and the ingenuity of local coping mechanisms (Duque Franco et al., 2020). Examining how people in food deserts meet their needs during such compounded crises, including economic downturns or natural disasters, exposes the embedded capacities for adaptation, solidarity, and transformation that are central to resilient systems (Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011).

These real-world practices of resilience resonate with and enrich the theoretical foundations of the concept as introduced by Holling (1973) in ecological sciences, where resilience is defined as the capacity of a system to absorb disturbances, adapt, and reorganise while retaining its core functions and structure. The lived experiences in food deserts illustrate this dynamic vividly, showing how communities reorganise and adapt under chronic stress. In recent years, this ecological framing has been increasingly applied to food systems research, where scholars emphasise resilience at multiple levels—from individuals and households to entire communities. Within this context, resilience is understood as the ability to withstand and recover from shocks and stressors without compromising long-term wellbeing and food security (Béné & Devereux, 2023; Tendall et al., 2015; Zurek et al., 2022). The everyday realities of food deserts, therefore, offer a critical empirical context for exploring how resilience is enacted in practice, highlighting both the vulnerabilities and the strengths that shape food system dynamics under conditions of chronic scarcity.

Debates in this field have highlighted the complexity of building resilient food systems, particularly in navigating trade-offs among competing outcomes (Ericksen, 2008), managing tensions between local and regional scales (Allen, 2010; Born & Purcell, 2006; Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021), and addressing entrenched power asymmetries in food governance (Arthur et al., 2022). However, resilience is often framed in technocratic or managerial terms—as an imperative to adapt—rather than as a call to transform the socio-political structures that produce vulnerability in the first place. As Kaika (2017) notes, such framings frequently shift responsibility onto communities, expecting them to "bounce back" from crises without addressing the systemic inequalities that underlie their precarity. Pelling and Manuel-Navarrete (2011) similarly caution that resilience discourses often unfold within governance arrangements that prioritise stability over adaptability, thereby limiting long-term sustainability. This reflects what Humbert and Joseph (2019) describe as the "politics of resilience," where adaptation is promoted within neoliberal frameworks that normalise crisis, responsibilise communities, and ultimately reproduce the status quo.

Yet, despite these critiques, community resilience remains a vital focus in the global South, where structural inequalities, climate vulnerability, and limited state capacity often leave communities with few alternatives. The adaptive capacity of communities in the global South is not merely shaped by immediate environmental or economic stressors but is deeply constrained by historical legacies of colonialism, extractive development, and systemic marginalisation (Battersby, 2012; Wittman et al., 2010). These structural conditions have entrenched inequalities and weakened institutional support, leaving many communities with limited access to resources, decision-making power, and formal safety nets. In such settings, resilience cannot be reduced to technical interventions or isolated community efforts. Instead, it must be politically informed, culturally grounded, and socially inclusive. As Ensor et al. (2018) argue, resilience-building must engage with the broader institutional and political landscapes that shape both vulnerability and the capacity to adapt. This means recognising that CFIs are not merely coping mechanisms, but also potential sites of resistance, innovation, and transformation within unjust systems.

CFIs emerge as both practical responses to food insecurity and as strategic interventions that challenge dominant food regimes. CFIs—including for example community gardens, community kitchens, and solidarity purchasing groups—offer a grounded, justice-oriented alternative to top-down resilience frameworks (Blake, 2019; Tilzey, 2017). Agroecological models promoted within CFIs enhance ecological resilience by fostering biodiversity, supporting local knowledge systems, and reducing dependence on industrial food regimes (King, 2008). Community kitchens, as CFIs, represent not only alternative modes of collective cooking but also potential sites for agroecological urbanism (Gennari & Tornaghi, 2020). Strong local food networks contribute to social resilience by building reciprocal relationships between producers and consumers, expanding access to nutritious food, and fostering social cohesion (McDaniel et al., 2021). CFIs often operate on shared values of sustainability, equity, and collective responsibility, translating into tangible benefits such as enhanced food security, economic stability, and community empowerment (Allen, 2010; Campbell et al., 2022). For instance, Guidi and Andretta's (2015) study of Italian Solidarity Purchase Groups illustrates how resilience can function as a form of resistance, reconfiguring social relations through practices of mutual aid and collective care.

However, the transformative potential of CFIs must be understood alongside the persistent challenges they face. Limited resources, internal governance tensions, and divergent priorities can impede their scalability and long-term viability (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014). Moreover, CFIs may inadvertently reproduce the very

structural inequalities they aim to redress, including those rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and systemic racism (Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2007). As Blake (2019) argues, neoliberal policies often exhort communities to self-organise while simultaneously undermining their capacity to do so—eroding public support systems, weakening local ties, and limiting access to essential resources. Dowler and Caraher (2003) describe this contradiction as "new philanthropy," whereby structural neglect is reframed as community empowerment. In such contexts, CFIs frequently emerge as informal responses to state withdrawal, with the burden of care disproportionately carried by women and other marginalised groups.

While critiques of resilience discourse are valid and necessary, they should not overshadow the pragmatic and transformative potential of community-based food initiatives in the global South. When supported and scaled appropriately, these efforts can serve not only as buffers against shocks but also as foundations for more just and sustainable food systems (Allen, 2010). Realising this potential, however, requires a shift in how resilience is conceptualised and operationalised—one that moves beyond a narrow focus on physical infrastructure and embraces the importance of social infrastructure as a critical foundation for community wellbeing. Yet, despite growing recognition of the value of social infrastructure, resilience policy and planning—particularly in urban contexts—continue to prioritise physical infrastructure (e.g., transportation, water, energy, telecommunications) as the primary means of ensuring functionality and stability (Graham & Marvin, 2002). This technocratic bias assumes that urban areas, by virtue of their infrastructure density, can inherently meet residents' needs. As a result, policy often favours large-scale, capital-intensive investments (Nijman & Wei, 2020), sidelining the everyday, community-driven practices that sustain urban life. Scholars working in and on the global South have increasingly challenged this view, calling for a more situated and relational understanding of infrastructure (Kaika, 2015; McFarlane, 2009). In these contexts, infrastructure is often fragmented, improvised, and co-produced—emerging through everyday practices that blur the boundaries between formal and informal, material and social (Battersby, 2012; Battersby & Watson, 2018; McFarlane & Silver, 2017).

Recognising these dynamics is essential for reimagining resilience not as a return to normalcy, but as a pathway toward more inclusive and context-sensitive urban futures. This shift has prompted what scholars describe as a "relational turn" in infrastructure studies, which foregrounds how infrastructures are not merely physical systems but are deeply shaped by institutional logics, power relations, and embodied labour (Renner et al., 2024). Rather than viewing infrastructure as static or purely technical, McFarlane (2021) advocates understanding it as a mode of urban life, constituted through the interactions of people, materials, and institutions. From this perspective, social infrastructure is not secondary to physical infrastructure but is central to how cities function and adapt. It operates through dynamic processes of coordination, consolidation, and speculation (McFarlane & Silver, 2017), and is often most visible in contexts where formal systems are absent or unreliable. Simone's (2004) concept of "people as infrastructure" captures this vividly, showing how social relations and collective labour substitute for state services and challenge dominant planning imaginaries. This understanding has been further elaborated through work on infrastructures of social care (Hall, 2020) and infrastructures for social life (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019), which emphasise the everyday interactions and institutions that sustain community wellbeing. Feminist scholars have also drawn attention to the gendered dimensions of infrastructure, highlighting how the often-invisible labour of care—disproportionately undertaken by women—underpins the functioning of everyday systems, yet remains largely unacknowledged in mainstream planning frameworks (Hall, 2020; Hayden, 1980; Kern, 2021).

This conceptual broadening of infrastructure invites a reconsideration of food systems through a socio-material lens as socio-technical arrangements. Building on Callon's (2004) formulation, socio-technical arrangements refer to the interdependent configurations of social actors, institutions, material and technical elements that shape how systems function and evolve. These arrangements are co-produced through interactions between human and non-human entities—experts, users, tools, technologies, and regulatory frameworks—and are embedded in power relations that determine access, labour, and legitimacy (Monstadt & Schmidt, 2019). Food systems, in particular, are complex socio-technical systems encompassing activities from cultivation to consumption, embedded in socio-ecological structures and shaped by diverse actors (Tansey & Worsley, 1995). While physical infrastructure (e.g., transport and storage) is essential to food flow, social infrastructures—such as *ollas comunes*—are equally vital in ensuring food access and reinforcing local food security.

3. Methodology: Exposing the Actors and Coordination of *Ollas Comunes*

To explore how *ollas comunes* operate and adapt, this article adopts an IE approach. Developed by feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith, IE is an interdisciplinary mode of inquiry that takes a relational and socio-material perspective to understand an institution (Smith & Griffith, 2022). "Institution" in IE is not another word for organisation or establishment, nor is it an objective entity that intervenes in people's lives. It refers to the complexes of activities organised around a distinctive function. This aligns with Callon's (2004) notion of socio-technical arrangements, in which IE not only brings interactions between people to the fore, but also encourages an understanding of materially mediated practices. IE enables one to explore and talk about the ways in which material entities are able to order people's activities and thus highlight the transactions that take place (Smith & Griffith, 2022).

More than a research methodology, IE offers a distinctive ontological and epistemological framework for understanding the social world, emphasising how discourse and things coordinate people's actions in different settings (Smith & Turner, 2018). A core principle of IE is a commitment to "taking sides," which means adopting a situated standpoint rooted in the lived experiences of marginalised groups in order to examine how institutions work in practice (Smith & Griffith, 2022).

This approach proves valuable for tracing how *ollas comunes* in Chile respond to community food insecurity as an *institution*, and how their socio-technical assemblages shift to sustain that role. It attends to the structure of relationships among participants, as well as the influence of spatial arrangements, material objects, norms, and routines—both within and beyond the *olla común*—in shaping interactions and outcomes.

IE's practice of mapping enables researchers to trace coordination across time and space. While Smith foregrounds "texts" as key mediators, this study positions food itself as a central organising element. Following its journey, from procurement and collective cooking to distribution and consumption, reveals the interconnected actors, practices, and places that sustain *ollas comunes*. This lens illuminates food's capacity to mediate activity and anchor social relations within broader institutional landscapes.

The existing data evaluation involved submitting a public data request under the Transparency Law to all 52 municipalities within the Santiago Metropolitan Area, seeking information on *ollas comunes* that operated between 2020 and 2024. The request asked for details such as the names of the organisations, their

addresses, and other relevant information. Of the 52 municipalities contacted, 45 responded. Among these, 32 provided data on active *ollas comunes*, while 13 either reported no available information or stated that no such initiatives were recognised within their jurisdictions. Analysis of the official data revealed that approximately 1,097 *ollas comunes* were operational at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. This number declined over subsequent years, with 428 active in 2021, 157 in 2022, 142 in 2023, and 104 still functioning in 2024.

From this dataset, 16 *ollas comunes* were selected for further study, focusing on those that remained active in the post-pandemic period and were located in low-income, peripheral neighbourhoods of Santiago, Chile (see Figure 1). The research included 31 semi-structured interviews with participants from these 16 *ollas comunes*. Participants were recruited through purposive snowball sampling, using publicly available information from social media platforms. Initial contact was made via WhatsApp, followed by the distribution of information sheets and consent forms through email. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face and focused on participants' everyday practices within the *ollas comunes*, capturing their lived experiences as they sourced ingredients, prepared meals, and distributed food to community members. Additionally, 14 interviews were conducted with academics, local government officials, NGO representatives, and policymakers to gain broader perspectives on the role of *ollas comunes* and to explore the interactions between the state, private sector, civil society, and informal food systems.
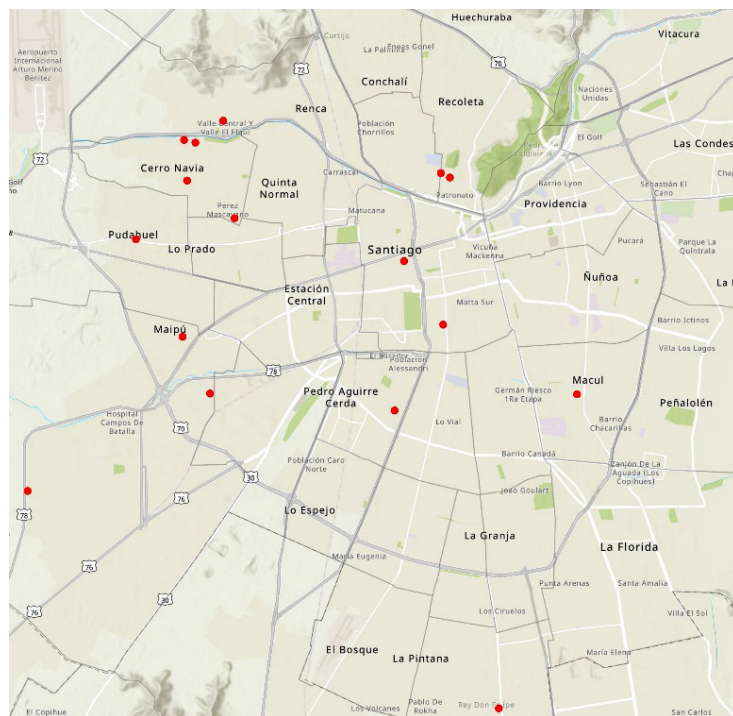

Figure 1. Map of the *ollas comunes* interviewed in Santiago Metropolitan area. Source: Authors' own using ArcGIS.

Additionally, the research incorporated two focus group discussions to deepen collective reflection and co-produce knowledge. The first session, conducted at the outset of fieldwork, brought together 15 participants from three *ollas comunes* to identify shared challenges and collaboratively define the research scope. The second focus group, held at the conclusion of the fieldwork period, involved

17 participants from eight *ollas comunes* and served to validate preliminary findings and facilitate collective reflection on the research outcomes.

Participant and ethnographic observation were central to the research design, complemented by shadowing through active volunteering in the daily operations of the *ollas comunes*. This immersive approach enabled the researcher to observe mundane procedures, routines, and practices, offering insights into the micro-processes of assemblage formation that sustain food provisioning in contexts of scarcity. The analysis focused on understanding how coordination unfolds, the evolving roles of different actors, and how these dynamics influence outcomes over time. In essence, the research sought to capture the everyday mechanisms through which *ollas comunes* operate and adapt, revealing the relational and material infrastructures that underpin informal food systems. All interviews, focus group discussions, and ethnographic field notes were transcribed and systematically coded using NVivo software to support thematic analysis and ensure methodological rigour.

4. Tracing the Socio-Technical Arrangements of *Ollas Comunes*

4.1. Procuring, Collecting, and Transporting Food Resources

Procuring food is the first key step in the coordination of activities for an *olla común*. Building on critiques that food deserts overlook socio-spatial inequalities in the global South (Battersby, 2012, 2019; Battersby & Watson, 2018), our findings demonstrate how *ollas comunes* overcome these through formal and informal networks. Participants described a multifaceted system in which food is primarily obtained through donations rather than direct purchases. This includes contributions from food banks, *ferias libres* (farmers, street markets), micro-food banks, local shops, and municipal agencies. The connections between *ollas comunes* with *ferias libres* and local shops are often informal, based on previous relationships of trust and solidarity within neighbourhoods. In the case of the *ferias libres*, which operate weekly in several streets in low-income areas, their role was particularly crucial. Many of the organisers of *ollas comunes* were the same neighbours who had previously shopped at these street markets, allowing them to coordinate directly with vendors to collect damaged or unsold food. This was confirmed by one of the volunteers: "We collected unsold fruit and vegetables by hand every Thursday because the *ferias libres* vendors trusted us to use them for a good purpose, and we have known each other for so long."

Following the pandemic, some of these interactions evolved into more organised yet still informal practices, with vendors beginning to pre-sort surplus food for donation, thus streamlining the collection process for *ollas comunes*. These exchanges can exemplify a relational infrastructure (McFarlane, 2009; Simone, 2004), in which social ties and material practices co-produce food flows.

By contrast, food banks and micro-food banks tend to operate under more formalised protocols (e.g., having legal status, balance sheet and board). These arrangements are often based on food donations from the private sector (e.g., supermarket surpluses), which require a degree of accountability and traceability in order to monitor the flow of resources and assess their impact. In particular, before the pandemic, food banks tended to channel donations to various grassroots organisations. During the pandemic, however, this support shifted mainly to *ollas comunes*, a trend that continued in the post-pandemic period. Donations are also channelised through micro-food banks or NGOs such as CODEMA (Food Market Observatory

Corporation), which collect surplus from vendors at *ferias libres*. These practices can redistribute surplus in ways that reduce waste and promote access to food. These arrangements reflect a negotiation between informal grassroots practices and the institutional protocols that govern surplus management, reinforcing hierarchies within the food system and competing for scarce resources (Dowler & Caraher, 2003; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014). The need for accountability and traceability in these formal circuits also contrasts with the flexibility and immediacy of informal networks (Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011). These institutions often dictate what food is available, how, and to whom, reflecting underlying power relations within food systems (Arthur et al., 2022) and determining which actors and resources gain legitimacy. Most of these actors provide fresh produce such as fruits and vegetables, while proteins, which are considered more expensive and less frequently donated, often require additional purchases. This reflects how institutional discourses and practices around food security can shape the nutritional profiles of what is made available to grassroots organisations at local scale (Allen, 2010; Born & Purcell, 2006; Enthoven & Van den Broeck, 2021).

Digital platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook emerged as critical communicative infrastructures during the pandemic, enabling real-time coordination of donations, volunteer mobilisation, and inter-*olla* collaboration. These technologies mediate the mobilisation of material and economic support that bypassed institutional delays, reinforcing community autonomy and adaptability (Blake, 2019). As such, these tools represent informal, yet highly effective, modes of organising in contrast to more rigid institutional systems. These platforms also exemplify how socio-technical arrangements extend beyond physical assets to include relational and technological components that sustain resilience. As one volunteer explained: "We created a WhatsApp group for *ollas comunes* across the city. The purpose was to help each other with surplus food donations."

Some *ollas comunes* also engage in community gardens as a complementary source of food (Figure 2). While these gardens make a symbolic and limited contribution to the everyday cooking needs, they reflect grassroots efforts toward territorial autonomy and food resilience (Gennari & Tornaghi, 2020). Yet, structural barriers,

Figure 2. Community garden led by an *olla común* located in Santiago. Source: Authors.

such as lack of land, water access, and institutional support, limited their scalability, underscoring the uneven terrain on which community resilience is built. As one volunteer reflected on this:

> Since the pandemic began, we have set up community gardens in two different locations within the neighbourhood. Although they provide little in cooking, they can facilitate short supply chains. So where there is an *olla común*, there should be a community garden.

The act of collecting and transporting food itself is a form of labour that often goes overlooked. Volunteers frequently used personal trolleys, bags, or boxes to transport donations from *ferias libres* (Figure 3), reflecting a patchwork of material improvisation and social cooperation. In some cases, NGOs or neighbours lent vans to facilitate bulk collection from food banks like Lo Valledor, Chile's largest wholesale market. Beyond the pandemic, one NGO advocating for cyclists' rights mobilised its own vehicle to distribute food donations to *ollas comunes* throughout Santiago (Figure 4). As the leader of this NGO notes: "We often receive calls from *ollas comunes* asking us to use our van to collect food donations. They usually pay for the petrol, and then we organise a route together to distribute the food available."

This collaboration, coordinated often through WhatsApp, illustrates a creative reconfiguration of institutional and grassroots resources to meet urgent needs. These arrangements echo what McFarlane and Silver (2017) identified as the ways in which marginalised urban residents navigate the contradictions of urban life, while this reliance on community improvisation risks normalising crisis responsibility under neoliberal models (Kaika, 2017; Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011).

Figure 3. Collecting and transporting food donations in *ferias libres*. Source: Authors.

Figure 4. Collecting and transporting food donations in Lo Valledor food bank. Source: Authors.

Storage and refrigeration arose as critical infrastructural blind spots. Many donated items were close to expiration, and the lack of cold storage led to spoilage and waste. This gap between institutional assumptions about food donations and the material realities of grassroots distribution highlights the disconnect between formal food security frameworks and the lived experiences of communities in food deserts (Battersby, 2012, 2019; Battersby & Watson, 2018). This was corroborated by one participant: "During the pandemic, we received a lot of donations, often of poor quality. Many times we didn't have enough because the food spoiled before we could deliver it."

4.2. Cooking Together

The act of "cooking together" arises as one of the most symbolically and politically significant practices. At the heart of this practice is the pot. The pot itself acts as a socio-technical node (Callon, 2004), binding together ingredients, recipes, volunteers, and space into a dynamic assemblage of care (Figures 5 and 6). Participants emphasised the centrality of the large pot, both for its notorious utility in mass cooking and for transforming fragmented donations into warm and dignified meals prepared with care. A standard 50-litre pot can produce between 80 and 100 meals, a significant scale-up from the home-cooked meals volunteers are used to preparing for their families. This shift in scale poses both technical and embodied challenges. Volunteers usually have to learn through trial and error how to adapt traditional recipes, such as lentils, *carbonadas* (beef stew), or *porotos con riendas* (beans with spaghetti), to significant volumes and varying food inputs. Cooking becomes a collective and logistical act that requires skill, adaptation, and cooperation between volunteers.

Figure 5. Two large pots cooking *carbonada*. Source: Authors.

Figure 6. Large pot (up) cooking vegetables and large pot (down) cooking animal protein. Source: Authors.

The physical spaces in which cooking takes place vary according to the organisational structure of each *olla común*. More formalised initiatives, such as those run by neighbourhood committees or NGO facilities, often have access to essential infrastructure: large pots, gas cookers, utensils, and serving materials. These spaces are often embedded in community centres or existing kitchens, making them better equipped to respond to food insecurity during crises. In contrast, more informal or emerging *ollas comunes*, often organised around private homes, patios, or even streets, face significant infrastructure constraints. Many participants described transporting gas cookers to the street, setting up improvised kitchens, or cooking from their home kitchens and transporting meals afterwards. These improvisations speak to strategies of resilience and reveal how institutional systems assume a baseline of infrastructure that is rarely met in the urban poor (Nicoletti et al., 2023). As one participant explained:

> During the pandemic, sometimes we cooked in the community centre, sometimes in my house or even in the public square. Now that I have been elected leader of the organisation, we cook in my patio, which I have adapted for this purpose.

Cooking together during the pandemic introduced an additional layer of complexity. Volunteers had to interpret and adapt to government-imposed sanitary measures, such as physical distancing, lockdown restrictions, and the mandatory use of facemasks and hygiene products. Although these rules were put in place for public safety, they were often perceived as restrictive and impractical, especially given the lack of consistent access to basic supplies such as alcohol gel and cleaning materials. Meals were served in disposable containers and utensils, increasing both costs and waste. Interestingly, several eaters who depend on these kitchens started to bring their own pots or containers to deal with this issue. These adaptations underscore the relational and negotiated character of resilience (Béné & Devereux, 2023; McFarlane & Silver, 2017).

The process of cooking together follows a flexible yet coordinated rhythm. Menus are not fixed, but emerge from what has been collected, often dictated by the availability of vegetables or grains. As one participant noted: "It works like a house. First you see what you have and then you make the menu."

Protein inclusion depends on financial donations, with lentils and legumes often substituting for meat. The preparation process usually involves at least two or three core volunteers, who met on average three times a week during the pandemic, and one day a week on average from 2022 to the present. Some focus on chopping vegetables for the *sofrito* (the aromatic base), while others prepare ingredients for the main pot. Cooking can take from two to four hours, depending on the recipe, the number of volunteers, equipment available, and the type of meal. Recent research confirms that traditional culinary preparations are often based on sustainable and nutritious practices (Tiboni et al., 2025). However, in the context of *ollas comunes*, it is still a challenge to meet food security and nutritional standards in terms of calories, fibre, and protein on a daily basis (Daniels et al., 2021).

Volunteers' roles can vary from day to day, but the tasks are generally well distributed, from preparing the food to cleaning up and post-meal activities. As one participant cooking in a neighbourhood committee space confirmed:

There are a lot of logistics involved, but the team of volunteers is well organised and knows how to deliver the meals on time. Once everything is done, we must tidy up and clean because other organisations also use the space.

Participants recognise that these roles have evolved to achieve gender parity compared to past versions of *ollas comunes*. Although cooking practices are still anchored in the knowledge and caring labour of urban poor women, as confirmed by feminist analysis (e.g., Gallardo, 1985; Hiner et al., 2022; Jirón et al., 2022), new groups such as men, young people, older people, and migrant communities are getting involved in collecting food, transporting and delivering meals. These routines often end with a shared tea or meal, providing an opportunity for emotional and political discussion and reinforcing bonds of trust and mutual recognition.

Thus "cooking together" in *ollas comunes* exemplifies the relational, embodied, and infrastructural dimensions of food systems resilience (McFarlane, 2009). It is a practice that transforms scarcity into solidarity, domestic routines into collective action, and marginalised spaces into sites of care (Guidi & Andretta, 2015; Tilzey, 2017). In line with feminist studies (Hall, 2020; Hayden, 1980; Kern, 2021), by starting from the point of view of those doing the work, primarily women, we see how the act of cooking is a clear example of how care is not experienced in the same way, nor does it represent the same burden for different social groups. This reflects and contests broader systems of governance, food infrastructure, and resilience.

4.3. Delivering Food to Eaters

Once meals are prepared, the next key activity in the organisational cycle of *ollas comunes* is delivering food to eaters. This step reveals complex dynamics of care, improvisation, and negotiation with institutional structures. During the Covid-19 pandemic, government-imposed restrictions on mobility and gathering significantly disrupted the logistics of food distribution. Unlike earlier waves of *ollas comunes* in the 1980s, when food was sometimes delivered directly to households or served communally in public spaces, during the pandemic times *ollas comunes* had to quickly reconfigure how, where, and to whom food was distributed. As one volunteer declared: "We knew who couldn't come to our *olla común*, so we went to see them. It wasn't just about preparing the food; it was also about getting it to our neighbours who needed it."

In more consolidated *ollas comunes*, spaces such as community centres, neighbourhood committees and NGO spaces were adapted to meet these new requirements. Participants described placing tables at entrances to act as a transition point between the kitchen and eaters. Informal queuing systems were set up, often coordinated by volunteers who managed both the order of distribution and compliance with distancing protocols. Meals were packaged in individual containers, either purchased by the *olla común* or brought by the eaters themselves (such as plastic containers or family-sized pots), to be taken away. Each portion was usually accompanied by fruit and bread, packed in bags for convenience. Volunteers coordinated this operation with care and efficiency, for example, one at the door to manage the queue of eaters and one to three others to transport the food from the pot to the table. After post-pandemic restrictions were raised, some participants admitted that they still used plastic containers and utensils for meals and encouraged queuing systems to organise distribution among eaters.

In more emerging *ollas comunes*, which often lacked access to the physical infrastructure to operate, alternative strategies were developed to meet public health needs. Some organisers mobilised large pots

using vans or bicycles, and set up temporary stations in public squares or streets to distribute meals (Figure 7). Others set up home-delivery systems to reach those most in need, particularly the elderly, disabled or street people, by going door-to-door or using trolleys and bicycles. This form of delivery, sometimes referred to as *ruta calle*, continued beyond the pandemic and in some cases evolved into monthly distribution of food boxes to vulnerable households. While these delivery practices are deeply rooted in care and solidarity, they also reveal institutional tensions. One of the major challenges faced by participants during the pandemic was navigating the bureaucratic requirements for movement under lockdown. The Chilean state required individuals performing critical labour to obtain formal authorisation through online permits, which were typically only available to legally registered organisations such as neighbourhood committees or NGOs. The need to partner with NGOs to obtain mobility permits illustrates how resilience is co-produced through negotiation with the inadequacy of institutional design with local realities (Dowler & Caraher, 2003; Ensor et al., 2018).

Figure 7. *Olla común* distributing meals and fruits to eaters in a public square in Santiago. Source: Authors.

Without access to state permits, volunteers were subject to surveillance and sanction by police and municipal authorities. Several participants reported being stopped or fined while delivering food to the most vulnerable population, ironically, for engaging in a form of labour that the state both recognised as essential and failed to adequately support. As research has pointed out (Kaika, 2017; Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011), communities are celebrated for their improvisation in times of crisis, yet penalised, in this case, for filling the state's inability to secure food for its population. In response, some *ollas comunes* formed alliances with formal organisations that could provide institutional cover. Volunteers were temporarily registered under the name of NGOs in order to access mobility permits and comply with state regulations. Today, although there are no state restrictions to prevent gatherings, there is still a police attention on *ollas comunes*, which are perceived as left-wing, radical organisations in some emblematic informal settlements in

Santiago. This dynamic illustrates how everyday activities are shaped and reorganised by relations of domination, and how actors navigate these structures and stigmas in practice.

4.4. Eating Together

The practice of "eating together" has historically been more closely associated with *comedores populares* (popular dining canteens) than with *ollas comunes*. In Chile, *comedores populares*, particularly those led by the Catholic Church, played a critical role during the economic crises and political repression of the 1970s. In a context where the Pinochet dictatorship banned many forms of grassroots and political organising, these spaces became sites of daily food access, but also spaces of social cohesion and mutual care (Gallardo, 1985). Similar models occurred across Latin America, such as in Peru and Argentina (Sordini & Arriola, 2023). In Peru, for example, self-managed *comedores populares* emerged in 1979 as a women's response to survival among the urban poor, but were institutionalised by the state in the 1990s, evolving into a hybrid model that combines state support and subsidised meals with ongoing community self-organisation (Sarmiento, 2017). In Chile, however, the institutionalisation of food support through *comedores* has remained more fragmented and primarily limited to church-led shelters and NGO programmes. These continued to operate in the urban poor, providing meals and shelter to homeless people. During the pandemic, when food insecurity increased, these *comedores* reached full operational capacity, demonstrating their importance in addressing food insecurity not only among the homeless but also among migrant communities and other vulnerable populations.

These distinctions between *comedores* and *ollas comunes* are not merely semantic; they reflect underlying institutional arrangements, legal recognitions, and access to infrastructure. Many participants in emerging *ollas comunes* expressed the vision to transform their spaces into *comedores*. This means places to eat together and to strengthen the social fabric within neighbourhoods. As one participant explained:

> Sometimes neighbours come over and we sit down together to socialise. We have tried not to turn it into a charity *olla*, but rather to give it social significance. To achieve this, we raise awareness of the reasons behind *ollas comunes*, why we cook for our neighbours and why they feel they need to come here for food.

However, these ambitions are often limited by a lack of formal infrastructure, economic constraints, voluntary unpaid work, and lack of institutional recognition. Without permanent kitchens, dining areas, or funding streams, *ollas comunes* typically rely on volunteer homes, borrowed venues, and short-term arrangements to operate.

These material constraints have also prompted radical and relational responses post pandemic. In several cases, *ollas comunes* have moved beyond the household threshold by reclaiming public space. For instance, using donated or rescued tables and chairs, some organisers temporarily set up dining areas on streets (Figure 8). For a few hours, the street becomes a reconfigured space of commensality, encounter, and solidarity (Klinenberg, 2018; Latham & Layton, 2019). These practices, while fragile and often precarious, challenge the institutional fragmentation of food support by reasserting the collective, relational aspect of eating. Moreover, this reappropriation of public space is not limited to meals distribution. Some *ollas comunes* have extended their presence to public squares in the evenings, handing out tea, coffee, and

sandwiches to people living on the streets or just neighbours who want to share a piece of bread. In these settings, eating together may take the form of a small, shared moment and a gesture of care (Hall, 2020). Volunteers and eaters often interact informally. This act reinforces the mutual recognition and horizontality that distinguishes *ollas comunes* from more institutionalised food aid efforts. As one participant reflected: "Something that is very significant for us is that today, three volunteers are people who came to the organisation asking for food. Now they are working with us inside."

Figure 8. *Olla común* appropriating public streets to cook and eat together with eaters in Santiago. Source: Authors.

Eating together can also be understood as socially and institutionally produced. What may appear as informal or improvised is, in fact, a strategic negotiation with institutional absence, where grassroots actors fill gaps left by the state while simultaneously working around the very structures that marginalise them. As one volunteer described:

> During the pandemic, I set up a table on the pavement in front of my house so we could all eat together. But as time went on, more and more people came, and I ended up occupying the whole street. Then I asked for a permit from the municipality so that I could operate in peace.

That negotiation illustrates how grassroots fill state gaps while navigating formal controls (Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011). These practices also illuminate how the intimate acts of cooking and eating together can be read as micro-political gestures embedded in broader institutional landscapes (Guidi & Andretta, 2015; Tilzey, 2017).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In the context of overlapping crises, *ollas comunes* emerge as vital infrastructures for addressing food insecurity in urban food deserts. Using an IE lens, this study has traced the actors and everyday practices of *ollas comunes*,

shedding light on how food circulates through formal and informal networks of solidarity, and how these arrangements have evolved in the aftermath of the pandemic. In line with existing literature on the role of communities for strengthening resilient food systems (e.g., Campbell et al., 2022; McDaniel et al., 2021), the article offers valuable situated lessons, particularly given that *ollas comunes*—under a variety of names and forms—are widespread across global South cities (e.g., Bezerra et al., 2025; Leetoy & Gravante, 2021; Osuteye et al., 2020).

The research illustrates that central to the work of *ollas comunes* is a constellation of actors and evolving networks, including *ferias libres*, micro-food banks, local shops, NGOs, municipal agencies and, most importantly, the everyday work of volunteers, mostly women, and their neighbours. These networks reconfigured the urban food environment, transforming scarcity into solidarity through cooking together and care rooted in local knowledge, thereby providing a solid foundation for resilience and creating opportunities for innovation. For example, the collaboration between *ferias libres* vendors and *ollas comunes* not only ensured access to fresh food but also has contributed to a circular food economy by recovering food that would otherwise go to waste. This practice demonstrates the potential of community kitchens to facilitate the connection of alternative food initiatives to urban resilience.

What we note is that agility is a key factor in achieving durability. *Ollas comunes* prospered by being nimble and responsive, mobilising resources, adapting strategies, and activating informal partnerships to meet urgent needs. These socio-technical arrangements demonstrate how grassroots adaptability can rapidly transform material and social resources and thus reconfigure the assemblage. These findings are consistent with existing literature on the value of community resilience and the capacity to adapt in unjust systems (e.g., Allen, 2010; Ensor et al., 2018; Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011).

Digital communication technologies further enhanced these self-organising capacities. Through social media platforms, *ollas comunes* coordinated donations, shared surpluses, organised logistics, and raised funds for essential supplies such as gas, transport, and kitchen equipment. This emerging digital infrastructure, which remains active today, strengthens these local networks of solidarity, thereby contributing to resilience and mutual aid.

However, resilience is not uniformly distributed across all *ollas comunes*. More formalised initiatives—those with established organisational structures or stronger connections to institutional actors—were often better positioned to access government support, such as mobility permits during the pandemic and donations from food banks. In contrast, less formal *ollas comunes* operated under more precarious conditions. These groups typically relied on volunteer labour and informal donations, while grappling with limited infrastructure, irregular resource flows, and significant emotional burdens. This uneven distribution of resources and support reveals a hierarchy among *ollas comunes*, shaped by structural inequalities and institutional recognition.

Crucially, the role of women in sustaining these initiatives cannot be overlooked. While the composition of *ollas comunes* has become more diverse since 2020—with increased participation from men, youth, and migrant groups in food collection, distribution, and communal eating—the core practice of "cooking together" continues to rely predominantly on women. Their unpaid, gendered labour not only sustained households during the crisis but also redefined urban care practices and community resilience. This finding also echoes existing studies on caring labour in the public sphere (Jirón et al., 2022). Despite their heightened visibility

during the pandemic, post-crisis narratives often render this work invisible once again, underscoring the urgent need to recognise, support, and institutionalise women's contributions to urban transformation.

Building resilience across the different stages of food provisioning—collection, preparation, distribution, and consumption—requires greater attention to the structural inequalities that underpin food insecurity in marginalised urban areas. This finding resonates with existing literature on urban food deserts in the global South (e.g., Battersby, 2012, 2019; Battersby & Watson, 2018). Strengthening the socio-technical arrangements that support *ollas comunes* is therefore essential to enhancing their capacity to cope with and adapt to future shocks.

This study highlights several key lessons for policy and planning aimed at building more resilient urban food systems. Urban food deserts in the global South require particular attention, not only as a spatial analysis of the "absence" of food infrastructure, but also as sites of community resilience. Recognising how communities cope with scarcity provides critical insights into grassroots survival strategies and locally-led food access solutions. In order to design effective interventions, it is essential to understand how community-led mechanisms work. Rather than imposing top-down frameworks, policy and planning should recognise and support the embedded bottom-up coping capacities and adaptive strategies that already exist. In doing so, it is critical for policy makers to broaden their understanding of "infrastructure" beyond physical assets. People as infrastructure, coordination mechanisms, and the non-human actors involved in food acquisition, cooking, distribution, and consumption are equally important. Investment priorities should reflect this broader view, allowing for more responsive and context-specific resource allocation that builds resilience.

Moreover, as informal food systems play a critical role in meeting the needs of communities, especially in times of crisis, policies should recognise their value and promote better coordination between formal and informal networks to improve the overall effectiveness and responsiveness of urban food systems. Finally, increasing the agility of formal food systems is key. Rigid, centralised and highly regulated structures often fail to meet immediate, localised needs. Cities with more decentralised systems managed to maintain essential services during lockdowns, revealing the limitations of traditional infrastructure ideals and expanding our understanding of the crucial role of social networks in urban resilience. Learning from arrangements typically seen as temporary and unreliable is important because they have proven to be more responsive than formal systems. Building more adaptive systems that can respond quickly and equitably will be essential to supporting vulnerable communities and strengthening the resilience of urban food systems.

Incorporating these lessons into policy could foster more inclusive and context-sensitive urban planning. For example, rethinking land use to accommodate *ollas comunes* and community gardens could create shared spaces that support both food provisioning and social cohesion. Such integration has the potential to promote environmental education, strengthen community ties, and build more resilient, locally-rooted food systems capable of withstanding future crises. Moreover, the reclaiming of public space through collective food practices warrants deeper examination. These actions are not merely functional—they are deeply political. They operate as everyday forms of resistance that challenge dominant urban imaginaries and assert community agency in contested spaces. However, it is equally important not to romanticise or over-idealise the role of *ollas comunes*, particularly in contexts where food resources are present but unevenly distributed. Their existence should not obscure the state's fundamental responsibility to ensure the right to adequate food for all residents, in every neighbourhood. As highlighted in the literature (e.g., Humbert & Joseph, 2019;

Kaika, 2017; Pelling & Manuel-Navarrete, 2011), an over-reliance on community resilience to address systemic crises may reflect the ongoing failure of state institutions to fulfil their obligations. Furthermore, *ollas comunes* themselves can risk reproducing the very injustices they seek to challenge, particularly when they operate without adequate support, recognition, or integration into broader food governance frameworks. This tension points to the need for further research into the relationship between resilience and justice in the context of food deserts.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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