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Reclaiming Food Insecurity in European Urban Policies: Lessons From Public and Community-Based Initiatives

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Abstract

Cities are at the forefront of socio-ecological challenges, including food insecurity, rising inequalities, and environmental degradation. Despite a decade of progress in urban food policies, food insecurity remains a low priority in European cities, even as community and public responses increase, revealing persistent challenges in integrating different sectors in food policy-making. Limited evidence and conceptualisations further hinder the development of effective interventions that combine food availability and accessibility with sustainability and empowerment goals. This study proposes an analytical framework grounded on the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition's six-dimensional approach (Availability, Access, Utilisation, Stability, Agency, and Sustainability) to address these gaps. Applying this framework to the case of Barcelona, the study maps local food insecurity responses and develops a new typology of initiatives, which range from targeted access programs to more comprehensive efforts that incorporate multiple dimensions such as agency and sustainability. The analysis highlights significant tensions within and between initiatives, particularly at the intersection of sustainability, agency, and access. Tensions reflect broader structural challenges in European urban food policies, where weak sectoral integration across economic, environmental, and justice areas limits effective responses to food insecurity. More comprehensive initiatives offer bottom-up insights into navigating these tensions and trade-offs. We argue that embracing all six food security dimensions can support urban policies to better address food insecurity by redesigning individual initiatives and leveraging their diversity and synergies from a place-based perspective. A more critical, collaborative, multidimensional, and territorial approach that explicitly connects urban food policies with poverty reduction is essential for building inclusive, resilient, and just urban food systems.

Keywords

agency; community initiative; food security; sustainability; urban food governance; urban food systems

1. Introduction

The food system is a key driver of today's global socio-ecological crisis (Ericksen et al., 2009; Liverman & Kapadia, 2012; Richardson et al., 2023; Willett et al., 2019). From production to waste, current food practices contribute to environmental degradation, social inequality, and major public health challenges (Crippa et al., 2021; FAO et al., 2021, 2024). Various forms of malnutrition persist worldwide, reflecting deep misalignments between food system dynamics, sustainability goals, and food security outcomes (Swinburn et al., 2019; UNICEF et al., 2021). Cities concentrating on population and food consumption (FAO, 2017) are increasingly affected (High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition [HLPE], 2024). By 2050, the urban population will double, posing a significant challenge for society: to deliver food security—that is, "all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (HLPE, 2020)—without further degrading our ecosystems or increasing inequalities.

In this context, cities are also pivotal in driving sustainable change within our food systems (Battersby et al., 2023; Forster et al., 2023; HLPE, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2022). Cities can engage communities directly and implement innovative solutions. They can play a crucial role in transforming food systems towards models prioritising sustainability, resilience, and inclusivity, making them essential actors in tackling the global food security challenge (HLPE, 2024).

These global challenges are also increasingly evident in Europe, which, despite being one of the world's most affluent regions, has 21% of its population (94.6 million people) at risk of poverty or social exclusion (Eurostat, 2023). A rise in food insecurity mirrors this economic vulnerability: The number of people experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity increased from 48.6 million in 2019 to 60.7 million in 2023, with urban populations being more affected than rural ones (FAO et al., 2023). This situation reveals a paradox at the heart of European food systems. On the one hand, the growing reliance on food assistance points to widespread difficulties in accessing sufficient, nutritious food (Caraher & Furey, 2018). On the other hand, Europe also faces a rising burden of malnutrition in the form of overweight and obesity (UNICEF et al., 2021). These trends disproportionately impact vulnerable groups, including people with low incomes, women, older adults, those with limited education, people with disabilities, and individuals outside the labour market (European Commission, 2024; Garratt, 2020). Despite numerous studies, pilot projects, and policy innovations (Baker & de Zeeuw, 2015; Calori & Magarini, 2015; Halliday, 2022; Moragues-Faus et al., 2022), urban food insecurity remains insufficiently addressed and low on the European policy agenda.

In the last decade, the urban food community has highlighted the importance of integrated governance to advance positive food system outcomes (FAO, 2018; IPES-Food, 2017; Lang et al., 2009; MacRae, 2011). European cities have played a key role in advancing this governance innovation over the past decades: Nearly 40% of the cities involved in the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact—an international protocol promoting sustainable food systems and urban food policies—are in Europe (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact Secretariat, 2024). Although there is no one definition (see, for example, Moragues-Faus et al., 2017; Sibbing et al., 2019), by and large, integrated governance consists of including multiple actors, sectors, and scales in designing policies and strategies to account for the complex and interconnected challenges and resources required to transform food systems. Despite calls for integration, analyses of specific policies show disconnections across sectors and topics (Doernberg et al., 2019), lack of participation of specific actors (Moragues-Faus,

2020), lack of mechanisms to ensure coherence across scales (Kidd & Reynolds, 2024; Parsons & Hawkes, 2019), and an overall failure to measure the material impacts of these integrated policies in changing specific urban food system challenges, such as food insecurity (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021).

Recent international comparative analyses of urban food policies show that interventions focus primarily on shaping local agricultural systems, sustainable and healthy consumption, and governance (Filippini et al., 2019). For instance, an analysis of 41 global urban food strategies identified four main objectives: strengthening local production and consumption; strengthening the agricultural sector's robustness, sustainability, and innovativeness through promoting agroecology; economic development; and education (Candel, 2020). This research revealed that food security, nutrition, and access are more prominent concerns in urban food strategies in the Global South and North America than in Europe. Studies focused on European countries show similar results. Sibbing et al. (2019) analysed the food policy of 31 Dutch municipalities, finding that they primarily address "health and well-being, the economy, learning/empowerment, and urban-rural linkages; they do not address community development, the environment, social and cultural aspects, and food-security/social justice" (p. 10). Moreover, the integration of food as a cross-cutting aspect in public policies is limited, and the types of instruments used to implement these food strategies are predominantly non-coercive, based on information dissemination and organisational tools such as information campaigns, program monitoring, and collaborative events. Comparable results were found in Germany, where an analysis of 10 cities revealed that food policies remain highly fragmented and based on individual or sectoral initiatives that mainly use instruments like awareness-raising or public procurement (Doernberg et al., 2019). Issues such as food security and food justice are not widely recognised as urgent concerns or relevant frames of reference for urban food policies in the studied cities. Key limitations include insufficient funding, political commitment, and human resources for more ambitious actions. Similarly, few European strategies explicitly reference social justice despite aligning with its goals (Smaal et al., 2021), which may reduce public visibility and political traction.

The disparities between urban food insecurity data, initiatives, and policy action highlight the urgency of addressing food and nutritional insecurity from an integrated perspective that considers sustainability, agency, and social equity in urban areas (Clapp et al., 2022; Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021), as well as better understanding the tensions preventing effective integration. In this line, recent contributions highlight the importance of understanding the difference between urban food policies—deliberate processes endorsed by the public sector where different actors can participate—and governance—which includes all the actors shaping urban food systems—as well as how they relate to each other (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021). In this regard, there are actors largely absent or marginal in food policy-making processes, from big corporations to financiers or community initiatives (Battersby, 2017; Brons et al., 2022; Clapp, 2021; Smaal et al., 2021). Community action processes have historically played a central role in tackling food insecurity. Beyond this, they offer innovative approaches to public health challenges, well-being, and sustainable urban development by fostering grassroots resilience, strengthening local food systems, and integrating multi-level strategies (Abdillah et al., 2024; Tarasuk, 2001). Furthermore, community self-organisation fosters place-based resilience, offering a framework for policy responses that enhance social equity and environmental sustainability. However, participation of grassroots initiatives in policy-making processes remains challenging due to limitations in terms of resources (Vara-Sánchez et al., 2021) or opposition to increasingly emerging mainstream policy discourses and frameworks in the food policy realm, such as the UN Food Systems Summit (Canfield et al., 2021; Nisbett et al., 2021).

In this context, our research addresses two critical gaps in current discourse, literature, and practice on urban food insecurity in Europe: the limited integration of food insecurity into European urban policy agendas and the scarcity of studies analysing the reach, diversity, and impact of existing urban food security initiatives (FSIs). We therefore ask: What types of FSI exist in European cities, how do diverse FSIs address the six multidimensional aspects of urban food insecurity, and what are the implications of these results for integrated urban food policy making? To answer these questions, this study mapped and analysed the range, characteristics, and strategies of FSIs currently operating in Barcelona, developing a novel analytical framework based on the six dimensions of food security: availability, access, utilisation, stability, sustainability, and agency (HLPE, 2020). By systematically examining these initiatives, the research aims to understand how urban actors address food insecurity on the ground despite limited policy attention and data. The findings contribute to informing the development of more integrated and equitable urban food policies and governance models that align food security with broader sustainability and social justice goals.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the case study and methodology. Section 3 details the FSIs identified in Barcelona. Section 4 analyses these initiatives using the HLPE framework and reflects on their policy implications. Finally, Section 5 outlines our contributions to understanding and addressing urban food insecurity in European cities.

2. Methodology

2.1. Barcelona Case Study

Food insecurity is a structural issue in Spain, affecting 13.3% of households, that is, nearly 6.2 million people (Moragues-Faus & Magaña-González, 2022). In 2023, the percentage of the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion rose to 26.5%, impacting 12.7 million people. In Barcelona, approximately 1.6 million residents (97.4%) live where unhealthy food options, such as fast-food outlets and convenience stores, are more prevalent than healthier alternatives, like grocery stores or fresh food markets. These areas, known as "food swamps," disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including 106,000 people (6.6%) at risk of poverty (García-Sierra et al., 2024). Moreover, 8.6% of households in the city experience some form of food insecurity, with single-parent families (14.6%) and lower socioeconomic classes (24.8%) being the most affected (Bartoll et al., 2018). Food insecurity affects 23% of the population in neighbourhoods with higher levels of deprivation, while in more affluent areas, it is lower than 2% (Bartoll et al., 2018). These figures underscore persistent structural barriers to accessing adequate food, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Moragues-Faus et al., 2022). Malnutrition remains a pressing concern, with overweight rates reaching 65.2% among individuals with very low incomes and 70.2% among women without higher education (Moragues-Faus et al., 2022).

While Barcelona's situation reflects national and global trends, particularly those of European urban contexts, it also presents unique challenges. The city's high influx of tourists, and high-skilled migrants (Elorrieta et al., 2022) have contributed to rising housing costs (Comissions Obreres de Catalunya, 2023), pushing many residents into poverty (Blanco-Romero et al., 2018; Forte-Campos et al., 2021). Environmentally, Barcelona's food system remains highly dependent on external supply chains, faces continued loss of agricultural land (Padró et al., 2020), and generates significant food waste (Binimelis & Roca, 2021), hindering climate change mitigation efforts. Although local administrations actively promote sustainability, encourage local food

sourcing, and reduce reliance on long-distance transportation (Pla Estratègic Metropolità de Barcelona, 2021), access to organic and locally produced food remains uneven across the city. Socioeconomic factors shape distinct food environments, with wealthier neighbourhoods enjoying better access to healthy, organic options while lower-income areas face more limited choices (García et al., 2020). This stark divide has been described as a "tale of two cities" regarding food access (Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021), highlighting the urgent need for equitable distribution policies. These challenges are compounded by barriers to accurate food information, a lack of coordination among food system actors, gender disparities, the concentration of power in food distribution, and declining local production capacity (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2025).

Barcelona also showcases a unique blend of historical governance, innovative policy frameworks, global collaborations, and active local initiatives around urban food systems (Herrero & Moragues-Faus, 2025). For instance, in 2021, the city was designated as the World Capital of Sustainable Food, with significant changes in food governance dynamics across various scales, prompting the city to become actively involved in Spanish and international food networks (Zerbian et al., 2024). In 2022, Barcelona launched the 2030 Strategy for Healthy and Sustainable Food, developed through a participatory process involving more than 100 local stakeholders and an online citizen consultation. The strategy aims to enhance the food system by promoting sustainability and equity through several key objectives. These include increasing the production and consumption of seasonal, local, and organic foods, supporting fair supply chains, protecting urban agricultural spaces, advocating for healthy eating for all, and strengthening food system resilience. Additionally, it seeks to tackle food insecurity by ensuring the right to healthy and sustainable food for everyone, preventing food waste, and addressing climate change and biodiversity loss. To facilitate these goals, the strategy established two governance structures: the Food Policy Council and a joint office on sustainable food between the Barcelona City Council and the Catalan government, promoting collaborative, multi-level food policies and interventions (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2022).

Additionally, the city's engagement in global initiatives like the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact and the C40 Good Food Cities Declaration reflects its commitment to collaborative efforts addressing food system challenges. Barcelona also has a vibrant foodscape of community-led initiatives endorsing an agroecological food system vision and sustainability goals, and working on furthering the right to food. This diversity of social dynamics, policy processes, and initiatives positions Barcelona as a particularly relevant setting for exploring responses to food insecurity, enabling a comprehensive analysis of initiatives that address food availability and access, sustainability, agency, and resilience.

2.2. Food Security Analytical Framework

The article adopts the definition of food security proposed by the HLPE (2020), recognising that food security is a complex issue beyond mere food supply shortages (Committee on World Food Security, 2012). This definition outlines six interconnected dimensions, providing a comprehensive framework that addresses the multifaceted nature of food insecurity, emphasising a range of challenges that prevent individuals and communities from accessing, utilising, and enjoying sufficient, safe, and nutritious food necessary for an active and healthy life: Availability; Access; Stability; Utilisation; and, more recently, the dimensions Agency and Sustainability highlight the importance of empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their food, while ensuring that food systems are resilient and can endure over time (Table 1).

Table 1. The six dimensions of food security (defined by HLPE, 2020) and proposed criteria for evaluating FSIs.

Dimension	Definition (HLPE, 2020, p.28)	Criteria for assessment	Description
Availability	Having a quantity and quality of food sufficient to meet the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances and acceptable within a given culture, supplied through domestic production or imports.	Diversity of food items	The variety of food available includes fresh, non-perishable, and prepared items. An example is a food program offering fruits, vegetables, grains, meat and canned food.
		Frequency and reliability of food distribution	How regularly and consistently food is distributed for example, weekly food donations vs occasional donations.
		Coverage and reach of the initiative	The number of people or areas the initiative serves. Example: A program serving an entire city or just a neighbourhood.
		Source of food supply	Whether food comes from local or non-local sources. Example: Food donations from nearby farms.
Access	Having the personal or household financial means to acquire food for an adequate diet at a level that ensures other basic needs are not threatened or compromised, and that adequate food is accessible to everyone, including vulnerable individuals and groups.	Affordability of food	Whether food is free or low-cost for recipients. Example: Free meals provided by a community kitchen.
		Geographic accessibility	How easily can people reach the food distribution centres? An example is a food bank within walking distance of homes or different city areas.
		Equity of access	Whether all vulnerable groups have equal access to food, an example is initiatives prioritising support to the senior and child populations during a crisis.
Stability	Having the ability to ensure food security in the event of sudden shocks (e.g., an economic, health, conflict or climatic crisis) or cyclical events (e.g., seasonal food insecurity).	Continuity of food supply	The stability of the food supply over time. Example: A food pantry that operates year-round.
		Resilience to shocks and capacity for emergency response	The initiative's ability to continue providing service during crises or emergencies. An example is a food bank that increases services during a natural disaster.
		Seasonal stability	The ability to provide food consistently despite seasonal changes. Example: Fresh produce is available even in winter or summer breaks.
		Funding stability	How reliable and long-term the funding for the initiative is. Example: A program supported by government grants for multiple years.

Table 1. (Cont.) The six dimensions of food security (defined by HLPE, 2020) and proposed criteria for evaluating FSIs.

Dimension	Definition (HLPE, 2020, p.28)	Criteria for assessment	Description
Utilisation	Having an adequate diet, clean water, sanitation, and healthcare to achieve a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met.	Nutritional adequacy of food provided	Whether the food meets nutritional standards. Example: Offering balanced meals with proteins, fruits, and vegetables.
		Food safety standards	Adhering to safety regulations in food handling and distribution. Example: Storing perishable items at safe temperatures.
		Health and nutrition education	Providing education on healthy eating habits. Example: Cooking classes on preparing nutritious meals.
		Healthcare linkages	Connecting people to healthcare services through the initiative. Example: Referrals to local health clinics during food distributions.
Agency	Having the capacity to act independently to make choices about what we eat, the foods we produce, how that food is produced, processed, and distributed, and to engage in policy processes that shape food systems.	Participation in decision-making	The extent to which beneficiaries or participants are involved in making decisions about the initiative. Example: Community members decide what types of food are provided.
		Cultural appropriateness of food provided flexibility and choice in food access	Ensuring the food aligns with the recipients' cultural practices, or the ability for recipients to choose the types of food they receive. Example: Offering halal meals in Muslim communities or letting people select items from various foods at a pantry.
		Access to information and education	Providing access to information on sustainable, equitable, and democratic food systems. Example: Workshops and training programmes on agroecology and food sovereignty, empowering communities to make informed food choices and advocate for fairer food policies.
		Opportunities for engagement in food production and distribution	The involvement of recipients in growing or distributing food. Example: A community garden where participants grow their vegetables.
		Flexibility and choice in food access	The ability for recipients to choose the types of food they receive. Example: Letting people select items from various foods at a pantry.

Table 1. (Cont.) The six dimensions of food security (defined by HLPE, 2020) and proposed criteria for evaluating FSIs.

Dimension	Definition (HLPE, 2020, p.28)	Criteria for assessment	Description
Sustainability	Adopting food system practices that contribute to the long-term regeneration of natural, social, and economic systems, ensuring the food needs of the present generation are met without compromising the needs of future generations.	Environmental impact of food types and sourcing	The ecological effects of where and how food is sourced, as well as the types of foods and their impacts (e.g., animal protein). Example: Choosing plant-based proteins instead of industrially produced animal protein can significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions, land use, and water consumption.
		Support for local food systems	Whether the initiative supports local farmers and producers. Example: Purchasing food directly from nearby farms.
		Reduction of food waste	Efforts to minimise the waste of surplus food. Example: Distributing excess food from restaurants.
		Economic viability and long-term funding	The financial sustainability of the initiative over time. Example: A program funded through consistent community donations.
		Strengthening of social cohesion and community networks	Creating spaces for social interaction and promoting supportive networks that facilitate access to resources, information, and opportunities. Example: Organising weekly cooking classes alongside meal service to encourage community members to participate.

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Clapp et al. (2022), Llobet-Estany (2014), Loopstra (2018), Monsivais et al. (2021), Oldroyd et al. (2022), and Walters et al. (2021).

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis

In the first step of data collection and analysis, we mapped the initiatives addressing food insecurity in Barcelona. Initiatives constitute a type of intervention defined as an organised effort to mitigate household food insecurity (Loopstra, 2018). This mapping drew on online research, previous exercises (Davies et al., 2025), Barcelona City Council listings, and consultations with local experts. In the second step, each initiative was characterised and classified using secondary information across seven key variables: the nature of the entity (public, private, third sector, or mixed); funding sources (public, private, donation-based, or self-funded); food resource origin (food donations, public procurement, food waste recovery, self-production, or market-based access); staffing (paid or volunteer); type of aid provided (e.g., food, cash, referrals, or educational); and response type (emergency or long-term).

Information to complete this task was gathered through a collaborative process, including reviewing organisational websites, reports, and direct communications, and conducting additional interviews with key personnel from the city council's social services department.

The third step involved analysing each type of initiative through the lens of the six dimensions of food security (HLPE, 2020), culminating in the identification of the strengths and limitations associated with each FSI typology. Criteria for evaluating the initiatives were identified through a literature review and consultation with the research team, which consisted of local food systems experts, ensuring these were appropriate to a Global North urban context. Each dimension was analysed using specific criteria (Table 1).

3. Results

3.1. Types and Diversity of Initiatives

Barcelona has at least 309 initiatives addressing food insecurity (Figure 1 and Table 2). The majority (166) belong to the third sector, followed by public sector initiatives (65), and community initiatives (52), which include grassroots organisations such as neighbourhood food networks and community gardens that are not legally classified as third- or private-sector entities. Additionally, there are 21 mixed public–third sector partnerships and five multi-sector partnerships focused on food justice, democracy, and sustainability, such as the Network for the Right to Adequate Food and Agròpolis.

While most initiatives originate in the third sector, public–third sector partnerships play a critical role in Barcelona's food security response. Many municipal soup kitchens and food pantries are operated by charities and other third-sector organisations, often collaborating with public institutions. Some initiatives' hybrid nature and multifunctionality necessitated creating mixed categories to classify specific initiatives accurately.

For instance, public–private partnerships like Foodback—a project that manages surplus food from Mercabarna wholesale market companies by redistributing it for reuse, prioritising donations to social organisations or repurposing it—bring together the public sector (e.g., Barcelona City Council and Mercabarna), the private sector (e.g., Mercabarna food companies), and third-sector organisations (e.g., the Food Bank Foundation and the Red Cross). Public–third sector initiatives include municipal and community soup kitchens, such as Espais Alimenta, which are funded and overseen by the city's social services and operated by third-sector organisations. Additionally, public–community initiatives such as Agròpolis, led by the Barcelona City Council, serve as collaborative spaces for dialogue, action, and policy development among civil society, the economic sector, academia, and local government. These actors share a common goal: to transform Barcelona's food system based on the values of food sovereignty and agroecology. Food sovereignty involves not only addressing food security principles such as access and availability, but also advancing the right of people to define their own food and agriculture systems, prioritising local, culturally appropriate, and ecologically sound production (Patel, 2009).

The initiatives in Barcelona that support individuals experiencing food insecurity and poverty primarily provide financial assistance (2%) and food aid (96%), including groceries, fresh food, and prepared meals (Figure 2). However, these types of assistance are not mutually exclusive. For example, many initiatives distribute food

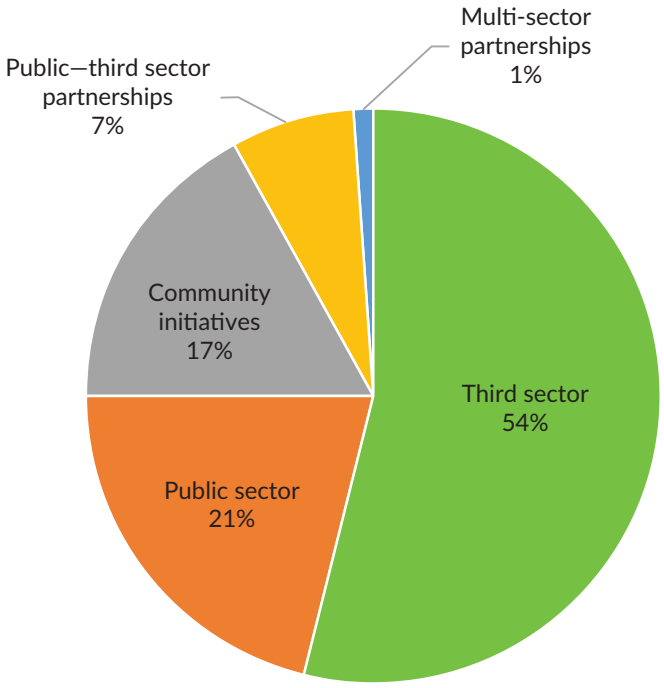

Figure 1. Distribution of initiatives by sector.

parcels while serving prepared meals in soup kitchens. Additionally, many initiatives focus on advocacy and education to promote a fairer and more sustainable food system in the city, even though they do not directly provide money or food.

Regarding funding type (Figure 2), half of the initiatives receive a mix of donations, grants, and public funds, while one-third rely exclusively on public sources. In total, twenty-eight percent of the initiatives rely on public funds, with government-funded programs (e.g., the Spanish Agricultural Guarantee Fund) supporting social dining programs in the city and meals offered by the municipal government. Public support could also be in-kind, offering operating spaces, rental payments, and subsidising public services such as water, electricity, and other utilities for some initiatives. As for the food supply sources for initiatives (Figure 3), the Food Bank Foundation, a long-established second-level non-profit organisation dedicated to recovering food through various programs, redistributes food to nearly 70% of first-level initiatives such as food pantries, food banks, and soup kitchens. Similarly, organisations are increasingly involved in reducing food waste from wholesale centres, supermarkets, and restaurants within neighbourhoods, supplying food to approximately 35% of the initiatives. Municipal and community gardens rely 100% on self-produced food. However, it is important to note that these sources are not exclusive, and initiatives usually leverage various resources to remain operational. Therefore, the nature of the initiatives found in Barcelona is hybrid. At the same time, most are constituted as third-sector initiatives; they rely on a myriad of funding and provisioning sources and collaborate through different partnerships to ensure their sustainability (e.g., Espais Alimenta).

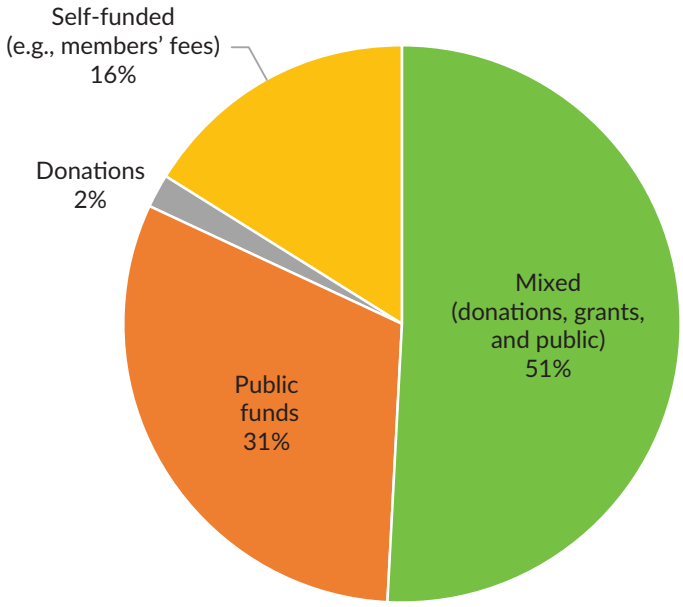

Figure 2. Distribution of initiatives by funding type.

Table 2. Distribution of initiatives by type of aid provided.

		Type of aid	
Category	Total count of initiatives	Subcategory	Subcategory count of initiatives
Financial	6	Transfer	1
		Cards	5
Food	296	Groceries and fresh	190
		Cooked food	86
		Cooked food, groceries and fresh	20
Other	7	Advocacy and policy	7

Nine categories of FSIs emerged from our categorisation: (a) food banks, (b) food pantries, (c) soup kitchens, (d) government food distribution programs, (e) cash transfer programs, (f) prepaid credit card programs, (g) urban gardens, (h) food recovery and redistribution programs, and (i) food justice, democracy, and sustainability initiatives (Table 3). It is worth noting that many of the 309 initiatives operate under multiple FSI models. For instance, an initiative can provide food baskets (food pantries) and cooked meals in soup kitchens (e.g., Fundación Jovent).

Food bank initiatives are the most common model of food-aid distribution, followed by soup kitchens, food pantries, food recovery and redistribution programs, prepaid credit card programs, government food distribution programs, and cash transfer programs. Other categories of initiatives working for food security in the city but that do not directly involve food assistance for the food-insecure group are urban gardens (municipal and community-managed) and food justice, democracy, and sustainability initiatives (Table 3). Although these last two are essential initiatives addressing food security in Barcelona, these efforts do not directly involve food assistance for food-insecure groups. Specifically, in the case of Barcelona, urban gardens have yet to play a significant role in the city's food sovereignty (Langemeyer et al., 2018).

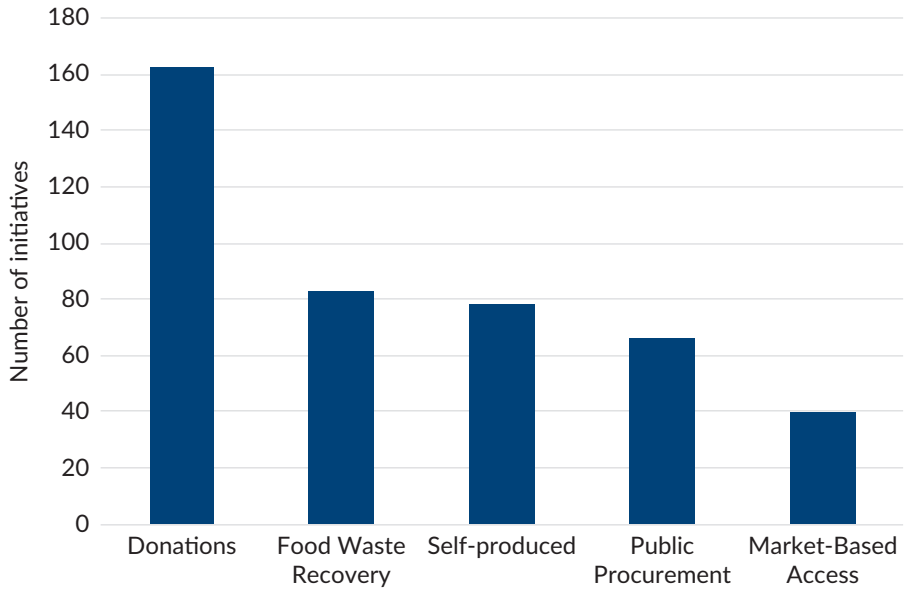

Figure 3. Primary food sourcing strategies used by initiatives (number of initiatives by type).

Table 3. Definition of FSIs found in Barcelona. The number of initiatives identified is provided in parentheses.

Type of Initiative	Definition	Nature and Implementation	References
Food Banks (103)	Non-profit, first-level initiatives that distribute food packages directly to individuals in need, typically in the form of food baskets or parcels.	Operate as large-scale intermediaries sourcing food from donations, surplus recovery, and public programs to supply other FSIs.	Loopstra (2018), Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)
Food Pantries (40)	Initiatives that collect and distribute surplus food locally, promoting mutual aid and empowering participants through low-cost or symbolic pricing.	Community-driven, often linked to food banks and local food recovery networks, offering flexible and localised support.	Loopstra (2018), Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)
Soup Kitchens (78)	Programs that provide free or low-cost meals to individuals facing severe economic hardship. Often involve community participation and offer additional services like cooking and nutrition education.	Typically run by NGOs, religious groups, or municipalities, serving prepared meals daily while fostering social support.	Llobet-Estany (2014), Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)
Government Food Distribution Programs (3)	Publicly funded initiatives providing meals through schools, senior centres, and shelters (e.g., municipal soup kitchens, meals-on-wheels).	State-run or subsidised programs targeting specific vulnerable groups with structured food provision.	Llobet-Estany (2014), Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)

Table 3. (Cont.) Definition of FSIs found in Barcelona. The number of initiatives identified is provided in parentheses.

Type of Initiative	Definition	Nature and Implementation	References
Cash Transfer Programs (1)	Government-led financial support systems provide funds for food purchases.	Direct monetary assistance allows recipients flexibility in their food choices.	Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)
Prepaid Cards (5)	Cards provided by authorities or charities to purchase food at selected retailers, promoting autonomy in food acquisition.	A controlled financial aid mechanism offering dignity and flexibility to beneficiaries.	Llobet-Estany (2014), Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)
Urban Gardens (78)	Shared plots managed by the city or citizens to grow fresh produce, supporting food self-sufficiency and sustainability.	Community-led or municipal projects promoting local food production, education, and environmental engagement.	Llobet-Estany (2014), Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)
Food Recovery and Redistribution Programs (13)	Initiatives that recover surplus food from supply chains and redistribute it to those in need or food security organisations.	Partner with supermarkets, markets, and restaurants to reduce waste and improve food access.	Llobet-Estany (2014), Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)
Food Justice, Democracy, and Sustainability Initiatives (7)	Community and agroecological projects promoting food sovereignty, equitable access to local products, and social justice.	Focus on advocacy, systemic change, and alternative food networks rather than direct food aid.	Moragues-Faus et al. (2022)

3.2. Analysis of FSIs Through the HLPE's Framework

Drawing on the HLPE framework (see Table S1 in the Supplementary File), eight FSIs form a spectrum ranging from short-term relief to systemic transformation. At one end, food banks and soup kitchens efficiently mitigate acute scarcity by boosting availability and lowering economic barriers. However, their impact on dietary quality and user autonomy remains limited: They rely on variable donations and do not tackle underlying causes, resulting in unstable operations and minimal beneficiary agency.

Mid-spectrum, solidarity pantries and food recovery programs blend redistribution with community engagement. By offering cooking classes and choice-based distribution, they enhance nutritional utilisation and spur modest gains in agency. However, both models inherit instability from fluctuating surplus streams and volunteer capacity, which constrains long-term sustainability.

Government distribution schemes deliver the highest stability, underpinned by public procurement and nutrition standards, and integrate environmental objectives through local, seasonal sourcing. Their structured reach, though crucial for the most vulnerable, can restrict agency when food baskets lack flexibility.

Shifting toward empowerment, prepaid food cards and urban gardens prioritise dignity and choice. Cards dismantle stigma and bolster agency by letting recipients select foods aligned with their needs, although funding dependencies and retail concentration pose sustainability challenges. Urban gardens foster

agroecological practices and participant control over production, yet their small scale and limited land access hinder their broader impact.

Finally, food justice, democracy, and sustainability initiatives pursue a transformative agenda: democratising system governance, fostering equitable access to local, organic produce, and integrating agroecology. While their collaborative models hold promise for durable, systemic change, they demand sustained policy support and cross-sector coordination to scale.

In sum, while redistribution remains vital for immediate relief, the most significant long-term resilience emerges when programs simultaneously bolster autonomy, community agency, and ecological sustainability.

4. Discussion

4.1. Narrow and Specialised vs. Comprehensive and Territorialised Approaches

The assessment of FSIs in Barcelona through the lens of the HLPE's six dimensions reveals the coexistence of two dominant approaches: narrow-focused and comprehensive initiatives. Initiatives that adopt a narrow or specialised approach primarily focus on the immediate provision of food to vulnerable populations, prioritising access and distribution. While these efforts are essential, they often overlook the underlying causes of food insecurity, such as poverty (Pollard & Booth, 2019), social inequities (Penne & Goedemé, 2021), and environmental degradation (Gomiero, 2016; Subramaniam & Masron, 2021). Furthermore, these models (such as food banks or municipal soup kitchens) tend to maintain the status quo and reinforce social isolation (Warshawsky, 2010). Notwithstanding, these initiatives have also been identified as spaces of care with the potential to incubate political and ethical values, practices, and subjectivities that challenge the status quo (Cloke et al., 2017). Well-established charitable institutions and government assistance programmes primarily run them. This limited scope typically results in short-term solutions that ensure adequate food intake but fail to address critical issues like nutritional quality, sustainability, agency, and long-term resilience.

In contrast, comprehensive initiatives adopt a holistic and transformative approach by integrating elements of agency, such as empowerment and community participation, with traditional aspects of food security: availability, access, utilisation, and stability. Initiatives like the El Gregal community soup kitchen in Barcelona go beyond merely providing food; they aim to strengthen social networks and empower individuals by involving beneficiaries in decision-making. Many of these programs promote personal development, local and agroecological food production, and supportive community networks through cooking classes and job training. Ultimately, they seek to create a lasting impact by addressing the root causes of food insecurity and recognising the deep interconnections between food systems, social justice, ecological sustainability, community resilience, and public health.

Another element defining comprehensive initiatives is their territorial component. "Territorial" refers to the specific geographic or community-based context in which initiatives operate (i.e., neighbourhood or district level), emphasising a focus on local identities, resources, needs, and dynamics. This concept highlights the importance of understanding the unique socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors that define a particular area, ensuring that solutions are tailored and effectively rooted in the local reality. Place-based or

territorial approaches to food security recognise the diversity of places and their distinct needs and capacities to address challenges (Cistulli et al., 2014; Sonnino et al., 2016). As noted by Moragues-Faus et al. (2020) and Turner and Hammelman (2024), such a territorial approach is crucial for addressing food insecurity in urban environments by enhancing the relevance and sustainability of interventions. The initiatives include community soup kitchens run by neighbours and solidarity food pantries organised by neighbourhood networks that distribute food to those in need (e.g., Rebosts Solidaris—solidarity food pantries—and Xarxa d'Aliments de Gràcia). In contrast, specialised or "narrow" initiatives often operate with models disconnected from their neighbourhoods' local processes and realities; these initiatives may include traditional food banks, frequently run by external volunteers, excluding an important element of building and strengthening local support networks.

A significant factor contributing to the abandonment of food assistance programs is the challenge of accessing them, particularly when these initiatives are not located within the community or have inadequate transportation infrastructure (Loopstra, 2018). Adopting a territorial approach can effectively address this physical access issue while enhancing other critical aspects, such as agency and participation, by strengthening social support networks (HLPE, 2024). Thus, a territorial approach is essential; without it, if only a small segment of the food-insecure population is willing or able to engage consistently with these programs, significant reductions in food insecurity will remain out of reach (Loopstra, 2018).

While specialised initiatives like food banks remain predominant in Barcelona, our analysis revealed a notable shift from these traditional food aid models towards a more comprehensive approach (i.e., the HLPE's six dimensions) and showcased a deeper understanding of the complexities of urban food insecurity dynamics. It is important to state that the aspiration to develop comprehensive and articulated urban food security strategies does not necessitate all initiatives adopting a broad approach. Instead, it creates a valuable opportunity to cultivate synergistic interactions among diverse programs and critically evaluate the current methodologies. Recognising that both comprehensive strategies and focused initiatives can coexist is essential for enhancing the overall effectiveness of urban food systems. Creating distributed place-based networks (Moragues-Faus et al., 2020) might endow the landscape of initiatives with distinct capabilities and enhance their resilience, responsiveness, and adaptability to changes (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016).

In this sense, coordination across different levels of governance and sectors is crucial for ensuring sustainable food security (HLPE, 2024). The initiatives identified in Barcelona demonstrate a high level of engagement from local actors, who are often overlooked yet play a fundamental role in addressing the needs of vulnerable populations. The initiatives' community-based and territorialised nature is a testament to the power of collaboration, particularly public–private–community partnerships, which complement local governments' efforts. These partnerships, as exemplified by the City Council's social services programme Alimenta in Barcelona, are crucial in helping to create a more comprehensive and resilient food security network from the grassroots level, supported by higher administrative tiers of the city.

A comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by various FSIs in urban settings such as Barcelona, as shown in Table S2 in the Supplementary File, underscores the strengths and limitations of each approach. This table synthesises the main features of seven types of FSIs—including food banks, solidarity pantries, community kitchens, and urban gardens—highlighting how each contributes differently to food availability, access, utilisation, and system sustainability. For example, while food banks can serve large populations in

crisis, they often struggle with inconsistent supply and limited user agency. In contrast, solidarity pantries and community kitchens promote dignity and social cohesion, yet face scale and policy integration issues.

It is clear from this comparative analysis that there is no singular solution to the complex issue of food insecurity. Instead, an effective strategy must involve a well-articulated combination of diverse initiatives and the synergies among them in order to build a more resilient and inclusive urban food system. However, transitioning toward sustainable food systems requires navigating key tensions and trade-offs, particularly when moving from narrow FSIs to more comprehensive, territorialised, and system-oriented approaches.

4.2. From Narrow to Comprehensive and Territorialised Approaches: Strengths, Limitations, and Tensions

Our analysis reveals complexities in transitioning towards comprehensive and territorialised approaches to addressing food insecurity. As shown in Table S2 in the Supplementary File, initiatives such as government food programs offer long-term stability but may exclude vulnerable groups due to bureaucratic barriers. Meanwhile, urban gardens and food justice projects reflect a more integrated and sustainable model, yet they face challenges in terms of scale and political support. These contrasts reveal the underlying tensions between short-term food insecurity relief and structural transformation. The first tension emerging from a comprehensive perspective concerns the balance between agency and initiatives' economic and social sustainability. Efforts to provide more than just food by engaging and empowering participants are often community-based organisations, driven by volunteers and limited staff, responsible for a wide range of activities. However, delivering personalised, dignified, and empowering assistance requires time, expertise, and a professional team capable of promoting agency, facilitating workshops, offering education and support, and fostering social networks. Limited human resources and often a lack of integration into municipal public policies undermine the long-term viability of these initiatives. As a result, their visibility and ability to influence policy processes are significantly hindered. Tension one thus raises the question: Can more empowering and dignified spaces for food-insecure populations be created when community initiatives face severe limitations in capacity and resources?

The second tension centres on the trade-offs between enhancing individual agency and promoting sustainability versus managing the economic cost and reach of food aid initiatives. In Barcelona, prepaid cards for food assistance, redeemable at selected supermarket chains, have been praised for increasing beneficiary autonomy and reducing stigma. However, this model raises concerns among local experts and policy-makers, as it may undermine integrated urban food policies developed over the past 15 years. Specifically, it risks reinforcing unsustainable economic structures dominated by large retailers, limits support for local food systems, and has little impact on improving dietary quality. Moreover, compared to collective food purchasing, the higher per-person cost of prepaid cards reduces the number of beneficiaries reached, creating a direct tension between empowerment, sustainability, and equitable access. Tension two thus asks: Can food insecurity interventions enhance individual agency while contributing to sustainable food choices and supporting local food systems?

The third tension arises between the urgent need for rapid access to food, environmental sustainability (e.g., providing locally or organically produced foods wherever possible), and utilisation goals (e.g., providing nutritious and safe foods that are compatible with the household's cooking facilities and appliances, and

tailored to the individual's culinary skills and food preparation knowledge). In Barcelona, the combined food aid and monetary support provided by municipal social services, the leading food bank network, and key charities (such as Caritas and the Red Cross) assist only 46% of the population at risk of poverty (XDAA, 2021). With limited public and community resources, food assistance is critically needed. However, as most initiatives rely on food donations and surpluses, their control over the types (e.g., meat, fresh produce, high-calorie and highly-processed foods) and characteristics (e.g., organic, local) of food distributed is limited, affecting the food's sustainability, healthiness, and nutrition. A further example of this tension is evident in practices such as gleaning and surplus food recovery, which provide immediate access to food but may include conventional, high-input agricultural products or processed foods from distant locations. These practices may also inadvertently perpetuate stigmas surrounding the consumption of "rescued" foods. In this context, sustainability objectives, such as reducing food miles or promoting responsible meat consumption, and utilisation goals often take a back seat to the immediate need for food provision. Tension three posits the question: Can emergency food aid on a large scale incorporate sustainable and utilisation goals more effectively?

These tensions reveal that transitioning to sustainable urban food systems requires re-evaluating sourcing strategies, which may involve higher costs or longer lead times. These shifts risk undermining immediate food access for vulnerable populations and may challenge the economic viability of food system actors. While a detailed analysis of this tension lies beyond the scope of this article, it nonetheless underscores an urgent need to reconsider how resources are allocated. Moving from fragmented, narrow initiatives toward more comprehensive approaches that align social and economic viability is essential. Lessons from past efforts to strengthen food quality criteria in sustainable public procurement offer a valuable foundation for driving systemic change.

4.3. Lessons Learned for the EU Context: Towards Integrated and Sustainable Urban Food Policies

Six important lessons come from Barcelona's FSIs, offering valuable insights for EU cities aiming to develop more resilient urban food systems and transition towards integrated and sustainable urban food policies.

First, effectively balancing specialised and comprehensive approaches requires recognising their complementary roles. While narrow initiatives, such as food banks or prepaid card schemes, serve as crucial emergency responses, they must be embedded within a broader strategy that fosters agency, empowerment, and sustainability (Moragues-Faus & Morgan, 2015; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999). The shift towards comprehensive approaches in Barcelona, exemplified by initiatives like Rebosts Solidaris and the El Gregal community dining project, highlights the benefits of place-based solutions that strengthen community networks and enhance local food resilience. For EU cities, this underscores the need for policy frameworks that not only support emergency food aid but also create pathways for transformative food assistance models integrating education, employment, and local food production.

Second, the territorialisation of food assistance has proven critical in improving accessibility and participation, as physical access remains a major barrier to food security in urban areas (Loopstra, 2018). Barcelona's experience shows that embedding food assistance within neighbourhood-based networks enhances reach and participation, reducing stigma while fostering stronger social support systems. EU cities can build on this model by prioritising localised approaches in their urban food policies, ensuring that food

aid and community-based mechanisms are embedded within broader territorial planning strategies (Moragues-Faus et al., 2017).

Third, addressing the tensions between access, agency, and sustainability in European cities requires a multifaceted approach that establishes synergistic collaborations between community initiatives and public institutions while ensuring financial and organisational sustainability. To resolve the tension between sustainability and agency, cities can strengthen community-led models by providing hybrid funding (combining public funds with social enterprises and local philanthropy) while linking these initiatives into municipal frameworks to enhance stability without undermining grassroots engagement. This requires developing policy and regulatory instruments that facilitate these public–community partnerships. Professionalisation and capacity-building through training for social workers, nutritionists, and urban planners are also key to improving operational efficiency while ensuring dignified and empowering assistance.

Fourth, reconciling urgent food access with sustainability goals requires justice-oriented approaches beyond surplus recovery. Food assistance programmes must transition from reliance on food surplus recovery to justice-oriented models prioritising sustainability. Using examples such as the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, EU cities can implement frameworks that tackle food insecurity and promote sustainable food systems (Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, 2015). In this regard, EU cities can explore alternative procurement models and establish public–community partnerships that reduce dependency on food donations. Prominent examples include partnerships with agroecological producers or sustainable public food procurement schemes, enabling greater control over food quality while ensuring that food aid does not compromise sustainability goals (Barling et al., 2002).

Fifth, improving the design of food insecurity instruments, such as prepaid cards, can enhance sustainability, utilisation, and agency. For instance, prepaid food assistance cards could be redesigned to encourage sustainable consumption by offering fresh, local, and organic food incentives or creating municipal food vouchers redeemable within short supply chains (Dimitri et al., 2015; Freedman et al., 2014; Karpyn et al., 2022). Alternative food currencies could further support local producers and small retailers (Becot et al., 2018). However, some innovative solutions, such as increasing supermarkets in food-insecure areas to increase fruit and vegetable consumption, have proven low efficacy (Cohen, 2018). Therefore, changes must be co-produced with food-insecure groups to avoid increased stigmatisation and ensure feasibility. These measures must align with broader urban food policies prioritising resilience, such as urban agriculture, school meal reforms, and social dining spaces. This ensures that food aid is embedded in a long-term vision rather than treated as a short-term fix.

Finally, strengthening multi-level governance and participatory mechanisms is essential to integrate food aid into broader food system transitions. Barcelona's experience underscores the importance of governance structures that facilitate coordination across different levels and sectors, from food policy councils to creating different forms of partnership. For EU cities, this calls for the broadening and deepening of multistakeholder governance mechanisms that connect municipal authorities, community organisations, and private actors in the co-development and management of urban food policies (Brunori et al., 2019). On the one hand, participatory governance is essential, ensuring that vulnerable communities are directly involved in co-designing food policies to balance agency with sustainability while avoiding exclusionary or inefficient interventions. This is particularly relevant in the context of increasing critiques over multistakeholderism

(McKeon, 2018; Slater et al., 2024) and the importance of considering the needs of most-affected actors, such as food-insecure groups, as primordial in front of other interests (Duncan & Claeys, 2018). For that purpose, it is necessary to embed more critical perspectives on participation based on justice definitions that ensure the inclusion of vulnerable groups in decision-making processes (Moragues-Faus, 2020). On the other hand, activating other governance mechanisms beyond multi-factor deliberation spaces, such as food policy councils, is paramount to supporting territorialised and multidimensional undertakings of food insecurity challenges. As seen in initiatives like Alimenta in Barcelona, public–community partnerships demonstrate how municipal administrations can leverage grassroots initiatives to build a more integrated and resilient food safety net (Sonnino & Spayde, 2014). Consequently, further exploration of what regulatory frameworks and policy instruments can be mobilised to ensure synergistic collaboration across urban communities and the city council is necessary to realise the right to food.

In summary, the transition towards sustainable and inclusive urban food systems in the EU hinges on six key lessons: (a) balancing narrow and comprehensive approaches; (b) prioritising territorialisation; (c) fostering synergies between grassroots and institutional actors; (d) aligning emergency food access with sustainability; (e) improving the design of food insecurity interventions; and (f) investing in diverse and rights-based participatory, multi-level governance structures. These insights highlight the need for holistic planning that works through existing tensions and aligns emergency responses with long-term strategies to build more resilient, equitable, and environmentally sustainable food systems.

5. Conclusions

This study has contributed to further our understanding of urban food insecurity in the European context, as where it often remains invisible in statistics, well as in, public and political discourses, and academic debates. First, our research shows that many initiatives, individuals, and resources are engaged in alleviating food insecurity. These initiatives highlight the ongoing challenges and gaps in effectively tackling food insecurity in urban areas, underscoring a pressing need to integrate poverty and food insecurity into European urban policy agendas.

Second, we have contributed to developing analytical tools that effectively capture the complex nature of food insecurity and provide practical application pointers. Based on the six dimensions of food security and the identification of specific criteria for evaluation, the proposed analytical framework applied to the Barcelona case study effectively bridges new concepts with current practices. It emphasises the framework's practical implications, extending beyond theoretical discussions. Our findings demonstrate that these dimensions should not be understood as abstract constructs but as fundamental components shaping the daily operations of food insecurity initiatives and the lived experiences of those affected.

Third, the analysis has provided a typology of food insecurity initiatives relevant to Global North contexts, expanding existing research (Llobet-Estany, 2014; Loopstra, 2018; Moragues-Faus et al., 2022). The analysis of this typology and its diversity has revealed two key elements that define comprehensive initiatives: their capacity to integrate all six dimensions of food security and their territorial component. Initiatives that tackle the multidimensional nature of food security and work within specific geographic or community contexts ensure that solutions are relevant and grounded locally. This notion is central to shaping effective responses to food insecurity, indicating that strategies should align with the unique needs of the territories (e.g., neighbourhoods or districts).

The research results also surface key tensions in the so-called integrated urban food policy world that must be acknowledged and addressed to build a sustainable food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all. Our analysis of food aid provision in Barcelona, particularly among initiatives employing a place-based and multidimensional approach, reveals tensions at the intersections of (a) agency (expressed through initiatives' goals of empowerment and dignified support) *and* initiatives' organizational sustainability; (b) individual agency (the ability of recipients to make autonomous, market-based food choices) *and* sustainability of monetized support models; and (c) rapid access to food *and* environmental sustainability and utilisation goals. These tensions are fundamental to food system governance, yet remain inadequately addressed in policy and practice. Future research should examine how integrated governance mechanisms can move beyond pursuing win-win solutions to confront trade-offs and conflicts. Key questions include: (a) How can community-led food initiatives balance economic sustainability with their mission to foster agency and empowerment? (b) What governance models best support the collaboration between grassroots food initiatives and municipal policies while preserving their autonomy and community-driven nature? (c) What role can urban agriculture and short food supply chains play in reducing reliance on food banks and donations while ensuring accessibility for vulnerable populations? A deeper examination of these interconnections could help develop more comprehensive and actionable policy solutions and help overcome integration challenges reported in European urban food policies.

Finally, the distinct strengths and limitations identified indicate that not all FSIs need to shift their focus towards comprehensive solutions. However, it is essential that they critically reflect on the different dimensions of food security and actively seek collaborations to ensure all six dimensions are addressed collectively, and tensions navigated. The development of networks and collaborations across initiatives, the inclusion of different types of actors, as well as strategic policies and plans anchored to a multidimensional approach to food security are critical to building resilient and sustainable food systems that are inclusive, equitable, and capable of addressing current and future challenges.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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