Food Insecurity in a "Welfare Paradise"

A case study on the role of food banks on food security in Sweden

Alva Lindberg & Lena Castellanos

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

The global food system faces a critical paradox, rising food insecurity alongside large-scale food waste. A sustainable food system should ensure food security for all. In Sweden, despite its strong welfare reputation, inequality has contributed to growing food insecurity, while significant food waste persists. Food banks have emerged as a potential solution to both issues, yet their role on food security, especially from the perspective of users, remains underexplored in Sweden. Therefore aim of this study is to critically assess the role of food banks in enhancing food security through the perspectives of their users. Thus, this study addresses the research gap, offering new insights into their role in addressing food insecurity within a sustainable food system.

The methodology included a systematised literature review of 10 articles and 15 semi-structured interviews with food bank users and workers. Findings revealed consistent themes across both studies, particularly the emotional dimensions of food bank use, such as stigma, shame, and strategies to manage these feelings.

This study shows that while food banks offer crucial support, partially relieving food insecurity, they remain unstable and uneven solutions due to logistical, regulatory, and structural limitations, acting only as "band-aid" solutions.. The study highlights the need for future research on government policy and sustainable food redistribution. Aligning food systems with the food waste hierarchy, prioritising prevention and ensuring surplus food is redirected to those in need is essential for long-term food security.

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Introduction

This chapter explores the intersection of food security, food waste, and the growing role of food banks in addressing both issues. While global and Swedish data show rising food insecurity, large amounts of edible food are still wasted. Food banks have emerged as a response to this paradox, redistributing surplus food to vulnerable groups, while mitigating food waste. However, their effectiveness, limitations, and impact on users' experience raise questions about whether they alleviate food insecurity or reinforce systemic inequalities.

1.1 Empirical problem

In an ideal world, the food system is one that feeds the population while not degrading the environmental, economic, and social dimensions behind food. However, the current global food system is facing increasing challenges as food insecurity continues to rise while vast amounts of food are wasted (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 2011; Garrat, 2020; Niles, 2020). The human right to food implies a commitment to combat hunger and includes aspects such as having secure access to nutritious food, adapted to individual needs such as cultural norms, etc. (High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), 2020). Thus, for the food system to be sustainable it must ensure food security for all.

Moreover, food insecurity is a pressing issue worldwide and is explicitly addressed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 2, which aims to eradicate hunger (United Nations, n.d.). Likewise, the issue of food insecurity is also connected to SDG 1: no poverty, SDG 3: good health and wellbeing, and SDG 10: reduced inequalities.

Although commonly associated with developing nations, food insecurity is a growing concern in high-income countries, where Sweden is no exception. Despite its reputation as an egalitarian welfare state, Sweden has experienced rising inequality, leading to an increasing number of people suffering from moderate to severe food insecurity (Bäckman & Nelson, 2017; Gentilini, 2013; FAO et al., 2024). At the same time, food waste remains a significant challenge and is addressed as part of SDG 12, focusing on responsible production and consumption (UN, n.d.). Addressing food waste is essential for sustainability.

As a relatively new way to mitigate food waste while tackling food insecurity, food redistribution initiatives, such as food banks, have emerged as a strategy in Sweden (Ätbart, 2024; Rost & Lunälv, 2021). Food banks are known to support vulnerable groups, but how they actually affect food security, especially from the perspective of users in Sweden remains underexplored and deserves more attention.

The paradox of food waste and food security highlights the contradiction between the vast amounts of food wasted globally and the millions of people facing hunger. This showcases that an unsustainable food system not only has environmental consequences but carries social implications as well, not to mention the economic negative outcomes associated with food waste (Seberini, 2019). This intricacy further reinforces the urgency of addressing both challenges and their undeniable connection.

Despite growing attention to food waste and food insecurity, research on their intersection within a Swedish context remains scarce. Existing studies have primarily examined food waste from an environmental perspective (Eriksson et al., 2015; Bergström et al., 2020; Eriksson et al., 2023). When food insecurity *is* addressed in literature, it often lacks an exploration of the lived experiences of those affected (Rost & Lundälv, 2021). This gap in research highlights the need to analyse the perspectives of food bank users through their own perceptions and experiences. By analysing the perspectives of food bank recipients through their own experiences, crucial insights are gained into the role of food banks, not just as a means of reducing waste, but as a fundamental component in addressing food insecurity within the broader food system.

The key question is not just whether food banks address food insecurity, but how they do so from the standpoint of those they serve, as this is a point of view that is lacking in previous research. Without incorporating the perspective of those who rely on food banks, our understanding remains incomplete as we risk missing essential factors like whether recipients can prepare the food, whether it aligns with their cultural norms, and ultimately, how well food banks are meeting their needs. Including this viewpoint is critical for fully grasping the role food banks play in addressing food insecurity.

1.2 Aim and research questions

This study aims to critically examine the role of food banks in addressing food insecurity in Sweden by exploring the experiences and perceptions of their users. By focusing on user perspectives across different food bank models, this study seeks to deepen understanding of the broader social impact of food banks beyond surplus food redistribution.

Research questions

-   How do food bank users experience and perceive their utilisation of food banks?
-   What are the key challenges and benefits of different food bank models in addressing food insecurity in Sweden?
-   How do food bank models in Sweden contribute to food security?

To answer these questions, this thesis will have a twofold approach. Firstly, a systematized literature review will address the first question by assessing what has been said from the perspective of food bank users in general. Secondly, interviews will be conducted to understand all three questions and provide a country-specific focus which is needed. The interviews will primarily focus on the food bank users, yet to gain deeper understanding of the impact of food banks, the food bank workers will also be questioned.

The following sections will present the theoretical framework, describe the materials and methods used, and outline the results. Finally, these results will be discussed in relation to the theoretical framework to evaluate the food banks' impact on food security of food bank users.

1.3   Problem background

This section introduces and critically examines key concepts, food security, food waste, and food banks, to better contextualize the empirical problem addressed in the thesis. By defining these terms and exploring their interconnected roles within the broader food system, the discussion aims to clarify the underlying issues and dynamics contributing to the problem under investigation.

1.3.1 Food security

In this study, one of the most widely accepted definitions of food security is used, originally established at the 1996 World Food Summit, which has been refined over time (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO 2009); *"all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life."*. A sustainable food system is one that delivers food security for all and ensures availability, access, utilisation, and stability (ibid.). This must occur while meeting economic, social, and environmental bases to generate food security, without compromising the ability to ensure these needs for future generations (FAO, 2018).

The fact that food security is a SDG goal emphasizes the pressing need to combat food insecurity and ensure global food availability. Globally, it was estimated that 2.33 billion people, 28.9% of the global population, experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2023 (FAO et al., 2024). Typically, hunger may be a topic associated strictly with developing countries and not a term used to describe European countries, however, food insecurity *is* a global phenomenon (Garratt, 2020; Niles et al. 2020).

Furthermore, world hunger is not a new issue, but it has been exasperated by crises such as the global financial recession of 2008 (Garratt, 2020). Global food insecurity has also increased due

to recent emergencies such as Covid-19 which halted three decades of global progress in poverty reduction, pushing approximately 90 million people to hunger in only one year (FAO et al. 2023: Niles et al. 2020). This challenge has also been worsened by the war in Ukraine which had a major impact on agricultural commodities around the world, greatly disrupting the global food system and food security, and leading to an increase in food commodity prices (ibid.). The combination of all these factors has perpetuated the negative trend of decreased food security worldwide (FAO et al. 2023).

Sweden is no exception to these challenges. Despite being one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, and seen as a egalitarian paradise, it has shifted from the second lowest level of inequality in the Nordics to the highest in the last two decades (Bäckman & Nelson, 2017; Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020). Even though Sweden is a country that may not typically be associated with food insecurity, there is an increasing population suffering from moderate to severe food insecurity, indicating a rise in overall inequality (FAO, et al., 2024). Data from FAO et al. (2024) shows that there has been an increase in levels of moderate-to-severe food insecurity of the total population in Sweden, rising from 4.5 per cent in 2014 to 6 per cent in 2022 (FAO, et al., 2024). Despite being a low percentage increase, this showcases that there is a need to address the challenges of food insecurity, as it does not take away from its relevance.

1.3.2 Food waste

The current food system poses many challenges concerning the lack of circularity of its functioning. Food waste stands out as a particularly pressing concern as it has economic, environmental and social implications, making it both an important and complex subject (Eriksson et. al., 2015; Sundin et al., 2023). Food waste involves the disposal or alternative use of food that was suitable for consumption and is a part of the total food loss across the supply chain (FAO, 2015). Food loss refers to the reduction in the quantity or quality of food products intended for human consumption that ultimately remain uneaten because of improper handling or storage or imperfections, etc. (ibid.).

One third of the total food produced globally goes to waste, accounting for 1.3 billion tonnes annually (FAO et al., 2024: FAO 2011). Out of this global loss the retail sector was responsible for approximately 12 per cent of losses in developed countries (UNEP, 2024).. These alarmingly high numbers in combination with rising food insecurity rates call for urgent action against this dual challenge.

In Sweden, 1.3 million tonnes of food waste are discarded yearly throughout the food chain (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2024). Retail level food waste amounts to 100,000 tonnes a year, taking second place in genereating food waste after private households (Hultén et al., 2022; Swedish environmental protection agency, 2025). Out of this food waste only a fraction is donated (Sundin et al. 2023). In its efforts to address the issue of food waste, Sweden adheres to

Sustainable Development Goal 12, specifically clause 12.3, which aims to halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels by 2030, and has implemented its own national action plan to support this objective (UN, n.d.). The government has decided that Sweden's food waste will be reduced according to these goals, with an ambition to progress even faster than the international targets suggest (Livsmedelsverket, 2024).

In the pursuit of a circular society where food waste is managed, several measures have been introduced, including repurposing food surplus into biogas, animal feed, and compost, etc. (Swedish Board of Agriculture, n.d). However, effective food waste management follows the Food Waste Hierarchy that arranges waste management options in order of environmental priority, where preventing food waste at the source should be the highest priority, as shown in *Figure* 1 (Eriksson, et al., 2015; Sundin et al., 2023, Sanchez Lopez, et al., 2020). It has been questioned why practices such as biogas production, and not food donation has been a Swedish political priority for food waste management, focusing on the environmental and economic perspective, excluding the social dimension (Johansson, 2021).

Following the prevention of food waste, stemming from the distribution phase, donating surplus food for human consumption should take precedence over alternatives such as converting it into energy or animal feed (Brancoli, et al 2020). A clear example of an area for improvement concerns current waste management practices related to packaging. At present, if a single item within a multi-pack is damaged or spoiled, the entire package is often discarded, despite the remaining items being safe for consumption and therefore suitable for donation. This practice highlights a significant inefficiency in food systems (Mattson & Williams, 2022). This can be influenced in part by the European Union's many food safety regulations on the requirements of edible food, such as The Food Act 2006:804 which aims to ensure a high level of protection for human health and for the interests of consumers with regard to food.

In alignment with a sustainable food system that ensures food security for all, the waste management methods should put human consumption of surplus food before any other mitigation method. However, these methods of repurposing food waste can serve as temporary solutions, but they raise important questions about the country's food system's priorities. Does the current food system prioritize food security or is it only trying to mitigate food waste?
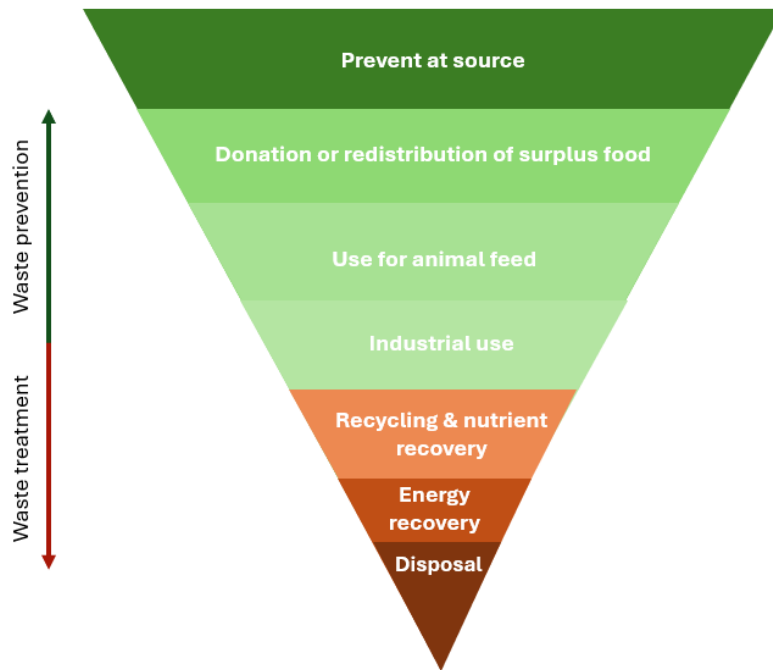
Figure 1. Food waste hierarchy adapted from Sanchez Lopez et al. (2020) with modifications.

1.3.3 Food banks

International context

Food redistribution has gained somewhat recent attention for its role in reducing food waste and tackling food insecurity internationally as well as a rise in research concerning the perspective of their users (Spring and Biddulph, 2020; Gentilini, 2013). Food aid in general is not a new phenomenon, as people have relied on it in times of crisis or vulnerability for decades.

The online Cambridge dictionary defines a food bank as *"a place where food is given to people who do not have enough money to buy it, for example by a charity* (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). However, food banks encompass much more than food distribution alone, they are complex systems made up of store networks, transportation logistics, distribution centres, volunteers, agencies, and organizations, supported by a broader network of donors, public support, and government backing that together contribute to the resilience of the food aid system (Dekkinga et al., 2022). Moreover, there are different types of food banks, such as soup kitchens, food pantries, social supermarkets, etc. (Loopstra & Lambie-Mumford, 2023). However, the most commonly used food bank model is the once where people receive free bags of groceries (ibid.).

Globally, both positive and negative outcomes of receiving food assistance through food banks have been highlighted (Loopstra & Lambie-Mumford, 2023). On one hand, it has been found that food banks can serve as an important resource for economically vulnerable groups, enabling for example, increased purchasing power and varying food security in everyday life (Andriessen et al., 2022.). On the other hand, there are well-documented social and psychological challenges associated with receiving food from charities, including stigma, shame, and feelings of dependency (Middleton et al., 2018; Andriessen et al., 2022).

One of the most discussed and prominent aspects of the experiences of food bank users is the stigma accompanying being dependent on charity and the effects on one's dignity (De Souza, 2019; Andriessen et al., 2022). Having to receive food rather than being able to choose and buy it for themselves can contribute to a sense of lost autonomy and dignity (Andriessen et al., 2022). Moreover, food bank recipients face a dilemma: while they are provided with food, it is often food that would otherwise go to waste and might not be their first choice. This situation can lead to feelings of not only a lack of choice in what they eat but also being treated as "lesser" citizens (Andriessen et al., 2022).

A clear pattern in previous research is the appearance of power dynamics in food charity in general. Since food banks are spaces shared by both users and workers, they naturally create power hierarchies. These hierarchies have been expressed to put the giver in a superior position while causing the user to feel marginalized as being identified only as a food receiver (Komter, 2007; Andriessen et al., 2022). For example, receiving free food can make users feel excluded, as they are unable to uphold social norms of reciprocity (Andriessen et al., 2022). That said, literature undermines the fact that food banks and food poverty are imbedded in uncertainty and marginalization (Thompson et al., 2018).

While food banks may reinforce negative feelings, research has also shown that many users not only express gratitude for the help they receive, but there is an increase in their food security after receiving food from food banks (Loopstra & Lambie-Mumford, 2023, Mousa & Freeland-Graves, 2019). Literature also clearly identifies that food banks may improve users' purchasing power and nutrition, leading to increased food security which is essential (Sundin, 2023; Andriessen et al., 2022).

Additionally, literature highlights the importance of the type of layout in which a food bank is designed, emphasizing that this plays a vital role in how the users experience it (Andriessen et al., 2022). Food bank models such as social supermarkets, which serve as the closest alternative to a convential supermarket, offer more freedom of choice, therefore reducing feelings of stigma and dependency. In contrast, food banks that distribute pre-determined food packages tend to reinforce feelings of powerlessness and loss of dignity since there is no element of choice, as was mentioned (ibid.).

Lastly, a prevalent discourse among literature on the topic of food banks is simply that while food banks provide temporary relief and alleviation to food insecurity for the users, it is not tackling the root causes (Tompsson et al., 2018; Middleton et al., 2018; Sundin, 2022; Dekkinga et al., 2022). Ultimately, if the underlying causes of food insecurity are not addressed, an overreliance on food banks may undermine societal resilience by weakening efforts to ensure equitable and dignified access to adequate food (Dekkinga et al., 2022). Thompson et al., (2018), for example highlight that food banks risk perpetuating the overproduction of food and fail to challenge food insecurity in the first place. It has also been found that there is a desire for independence from these services and a need for sustainable and stable food systems (ibid.).

Swedish context

Although food redistribution has a longer history in Sweden, the practice of utilizing surplus or wasted food for this purpose is relatively recent, with a notable increase beginning around 2013 (Ätbart 2024). Today the food redistribution system takes varying forms, including the distribution of food bags, meal services, social supermarkets, and solidarity fridges (ibid.). The leading organizations in charge of food redistribution in the country are the Church of Sweden, other NGOs, and Hela Människan, as well as City missions (Stadsmissionen) (Ätbart, 2024). In Sweden, food banks are primarily used by socioeconomically vulnerable groups with limited purchasing power, including refugees, individuals struggling with addiction, retirees, the unemployed, and people experiencing homelessness, among others (Ätbart, 2024).

Moreover, the non-profit organization known as Ätbart intended to primarily reduce food waste in general, but in light of the country's increase in food insecurity, it has expanded to supporting vulnerable groups of people through food redistribution (Ätbart, 2024). In March of 2023, the Swedish Food Bank Network was founded, an organization aimed at mapping the existing different types of food banks in Sweden. Their research found over 200 small- and large-scale food banks across the country and predicts that this number will continue to grow. The food that is redistributed in these various food banks comes mainly from grocery stores, but also from wholesalers, producers, and sometimes directly from warehouses. It has been estimated that approximately 9,500 tonnes of surplus food, which would otherwise have become food waste, is donated annually in Sweden (ibid.).

However, there is limited data surrounding the development and results of food banks in Sweden. Stadmissionen is the main aid organization keeping public comprehensive records of their food redistribution efforts in the form of reports and is the oldest and most widespread in both charity and food aid in Sweden. The information provided by Stadmissionen states that from 2022 to 2023, there was an increase of about one third of redistributed food in the country (Sveriges stadmissioner, 2024). Stadmissionen alone redistributed over 4.5 million kilos of food across the country in 2023, equalling to 7,000 tons of CO_2 in terms of climate impact (ibid.). This highlights that the impact of food banks in Sweden is incomplete, indicating a substantial gap.

Furthermore, there is a notable lack of research focusing on the exploration of the experiences of food bank users in Sweden as well as food bank's contribution to food security (Rost and Lundälv, 2021). When food security *is* addressed, it is often within broader contexts rather than as a primary focus. For instance, Andersson et al. (2018) examined undocumented migrants' mental health and, in doing so, identified food insecurity as a concern. Additionally, food security in Sweden appeared to be explored through a futuristic lens, particularly in relation to climate change and environmental aspects (Sundin et al., 2022; Sundin et al, 2023). However, one Swedish study showed that food banks have the potential to alleviate food insecurity among users, yet results proved that they did not eradicate it (Sundin et al., 2023).

1.3.4 The role of food banks in the food system

When food systems and waste management strategies fail to function effectively, alternative food systems emerge, such as food aid systems. Food banks have become key actors in addressing food insecurity while simultaneously redistributing surplus food, thus avoiding food waste (European Commission, 2017; Sundin et al., 2023). Operating in the later stages of the food system, food banks serve as an alternative to conventional retailers in the consumption phase for those living with food insecurity. These food aid services manifest in different forms, which all aim to bridge the food security gap present when a food system is not sustainable (Bazerghi et al., 2016). The functioning of the surplus food donation can be questioned: to what extent has the distribution of surplus food become integrated into companies' business models?

It may seem that the redistribution of surplus food is a win-win solution to food waste and provision of food security to vulnerable people. However, it does not tackle the root problem of avoiding food waste in the first place, nor entirely solve food insecurity in vulnerable populations (Midgley, 2020). Ethical dilemmas are raised when it comes to questioning why only the food that is discarded and deemed as waste for the general population is what will be given to those in need (ibid.). One key aspect of food aid is the power dimensions accompanying them, such as the complexity of users waiting in line to receive food aid (Herz, 2022). Herz (2022) leans on Bourdieu who argues that waiting is permeated in power (Bourdieu, 2000, see in Herz, 2022).

Returning to the aforementioned paradox, while one is supplied with food they may not be able to obtain otherwise, it can be questioned how their needs are fulfilled in terms of food security. One must also face the uncomfortable reality that some people have to consume food that has been discarded and the feelings that accompany this notion. With this in mind, it is evident that food waste and hunger today share a common solution, redistributing surplus food.

Theoretical framework

This chapter establishes a conceptual framework for understanding the topic, offering a critical and nuanced analysis of the role of Swedish food banks in contributing to food security from the perspective of their users. The research adopts a combined approach, integrating the definition of food security with practice theory, particularly Bourdieu's concepts of *Habitus*, *Capital, and Field*. This foundation enables a deeper analysis of food bank users' experiences and perceptions, uncovering how surplus food redistribution shapes their lived experiences and whether it effectively enhances food security.

1.4   Food security approach

In accordance to the definition of food security, the primary outcome of any food system *should* be that all people have reliable access to enough safe, nutritious, and appropriate food (FAO, 2009). In order to evaluate the role of food banks in addressing food security in Sweden, all dimensions of food security according to FAO (2009) were considered as a guiding framework, see *Figure* 2. Previous research has focused on food banks for understanding their practices of ensuring food security for people in poverty, highlighting the interconnectivity of food banks and food security (Dekkinga et al., 2022; Bazerghi et al., 2016). By using food security as a theoretical framework, it can be evaluated how well food banks as a part of the food system activities contribute to the different dimensions of food security, as well as their total or partial alignment to these dimensions (*Figure* 2). The four dimensions of food security encompass *availability, access, utilisation and stability* (FAO, 2009). Therefore, achieving food security requires the simultaneous fulfilment of all four dimensions (FAO, 1996; HLPE, 2020; Ericksen, 2008), see Table 1.

Availability refers to the presence of sufficient food within the system (Ericksen, 2008; HLPE, 2020). It concerns the quantity and adequacy of food while ensuring it aligns with cultural norms to meet individual dietary needs (ibid.).

Access (economic, social, and physical) to food refers to having the means to obtain food, meaning that people can access an adequate diet that ensures satisfaction (Ericksen, 2008; HLPE, 2020). The accessibility of food can be described through affordability, allocation, and preference. Affordability refers to the purchasing power relative to food prices. Allocation refers to the determinants of when, where and how food is accessed. Moreover, preference is influenced by social and cultural norms that shapes food choices and consumption patterns (ibid.).

Utilisation refers to the ability to obtain an adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care in order to obtain well-being (Ericksen, 2008; HLPE, 2020). Food must meet daily dietary needs, be culturally appropriate, socially accepted, and safe for consumption (ibid.).

Finally, the *stability and/or sustainability* surrounding food security is crucial and it must be maintained over time, even in the face of shocks such as economic or climate crises (Ericksen, 2008; HLPE, 2020). This means ensuring that current food needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to access food sustainably is the final pillar of food security (ibid.).

The interaction of these pillars can be exemplified as such, in order for food to be accessible, it must first be available, but availability alone does not guarantee access. Individuals and groups must have the ability to exercise the agency that enables them to acquire the foods they need and align with their preferences and familiarity. Hence, if any dimension of food security is not met, the long-term food security is compromised, and one is food insecure.

Table 1. The four dimensions of food security (HLPE, 2020 p 10)

Dimension	Definition
Availability	Having a quantity and quality of food sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances and acceptable within a given culture, supplied through domestic production or imports.
Access **(economic, social, and physical)**	Having personal or household financial means to acquire food for an adequate diet at a level to ensure that satisfaction of other basic needs are not threatened or compromised; and that adequate food is accessible to everyone, including vulnerable individuals and groups
Utilisation	Having an adequate diet, clean water, sanitation and health care to reach a state of nutritional well-being where all physiological needs are met
Stability/ sustainability	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).

Furthermore, one cannot separate food systems from food security, and the study of food security is not a new field globally. Ericksen (2008) exemplifies this by examining the interaction between food systems and global environmental change, highlighting the societal outcomes shaped by these interactions. Her work underscores that food extends beyond what ends up on the plate, emphasizing the complexity of food systems and the trade-offs they involve (ibid.). Trade-offs further confirm food system paradoxes, such as the paradox of food waste and food security

illustrated in this study. *Figure* 2 shows how food system activities contribute to the four dimensions of food security through the usage of food banks.
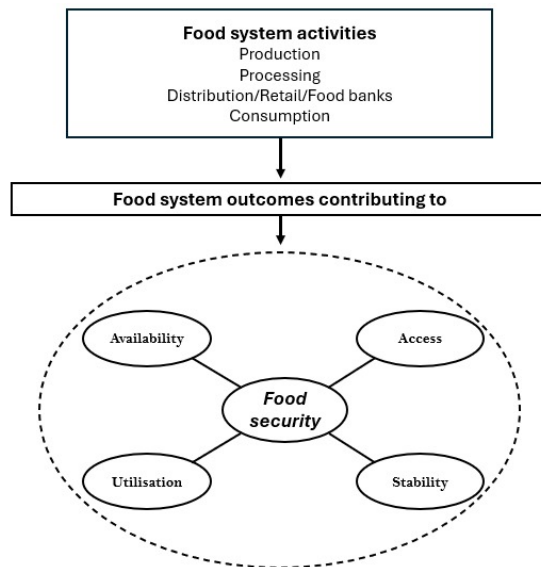
Figure 2. Food system drivers to food security

1.5 Practice theory

The human act of eating is a complex topic, since it encompasses extensive systems of communication, values, rules and symbols (Sato et al., 2016). Therefore, studying eating and its related aspects must recognize the social dimensions of food, only then can a comprehensive understanding be achieved (ibid.). One of the most influential sociologists of our time was Pierre Bourdieu, who's work and theories have been applied in various areas. This analysis of the food bank user's perspective will be further investigated through a combined lens with the practice theory using Bourdieu's concepts of *Habitus*, *Capital*, and *Field.* This is necessary to understand societal structures, as he proposes a way of understanding eating and the symbolic and material codes related to it (Sato et al. 2016). Practice theory will therefore be used to understand how food bank users navigate in the food bank system, in terms of their actions and their feelings.

For this thesis, food banks are identified as a field in Bourdieu's terms. A *Field* according to Bourdeu, is often described as a socially structured arena in which individuals and groups compete for resources and status (Bourdeu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016). Each field has its own rules, practices and power relations, and the individual's position in the field is determined by their *Habitus* and *Capital* (ibid.).

Bourdieu describes *Habitus* as internalized, embodied social structures that predispose an individual to certain actions in relation to their social context (1989, see Houston, 2002; Bourdieu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016). It is a system of deeply learned dispositions, habits and taste preferences that develop through socialization. Habitus influences how we think, feel and act, and functions as a link between the individual's agency and the social structures that shape society. However, habitus is not deterministic, but it sets the framework for our thinking and acting. It also changes over time, based on our experiences (ibid.).

Moreover, Bourdieu uses *Capital* as a way to understand social class (Bourdeu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016; Bourdieu, 1979 see Houston, 2002). He identifies four main forms which affect individuals' opportunities and position in society (Bourdieu, 1979 see Houston, 2002; Bourdeu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016): Economic capital (e.g. financial assets such as money and property), Cultural capital (e.g. education, knowledge), Social capital (e.g. social networks, relationships), Symbolic capital (prestige and recognition) which will not be a focus of this study. Thus, individuals with greater access to capital generally have better opportunities for social mobility and advantages in society. These forms of capital also affect how individuals navigate in different social fields (ibid.). Hence, the way users act and feel within food bank context is shaped by their background, social environment, and the resources they have access to.

Because of the interplay of the habitus, field and capital, practices are continually shaped and adapted to the conditions from which they emerge (Bourdieu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016) as illustrated in *Figure* 3. In examining food security and food bank users' experiences and perceptions of food aid, we focus on their habitus and capital. Thus, through their interaction with the field, offer comprehensive insights into how food banks contribute to the food security of vulnerable groups.
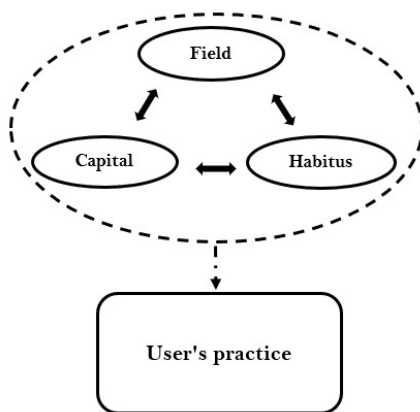
Figure 3. Illustrates how Habitus, Capital and Field impact the user's "practice".

1.6 The role of perception and experiences

Building on Bourdieu's concepts, it becomes evident that to understand how food banks contribute to food security, an understanding of social dimensions of food practices is required. Typically, in developed countries, individuals use conventional supermarkets where they are presented with a significant freedom of food choice and adaptability to their needs, allowing them to purchase items based on personal preference, dietary needs, and cultural habits, impacting their overall experience and their consumer behaviour. These factors are explained by many different food choice models that take into consideration different aspects (Shepherd 1999; Furst et al. 1996; Brunsø et al. 2002; Fernqvist, et al 2024), that determine how one behaves in relation to food and how that impacts the perception and experience.

For those that cannot count on conventional supermarkets to fulfill their needs, reliance on food banks alters the dynamic of choice and limits the fulfilment of their preferences. Thus impacting the perception and experience of the user, by restricting or even removing factorss such as consumer choice entirely, depending on the food bank system (Vardhan-Sharma & Leonard et al. 2024).

Furthermore, as Fernqvist et al. (2024) suggests, perception influences experience, and vice versa. These authors discuss the importance of experience in shaping food behaviour. Within experience itself, there are many social components that come into play, such as culture, norms, attitudes and values (Fernqvist et al., 2024; Enriquez & Archila-Godinez, 2022). In this context, by analysing the experience of the food bank users, we gain an understanding beyond the number of kilos of food waste rescued or food bags handed out. Middleton et al., (2018) shows that perceptions about the quality of food received, the necessity of using the service, the social norms surrounding charity, and finally one's own social standing directly shape their emotional, psychological, and social experieces while utilising food banks.

That said, to assess how food banks influence all pillars of food security, it is crucial to understand food bank user's experiences and perceptions of their interaction within food bank environment, see *Figure* 4. By taking on this angle, a deeper understanding of food banks' role on food security can be revealed.
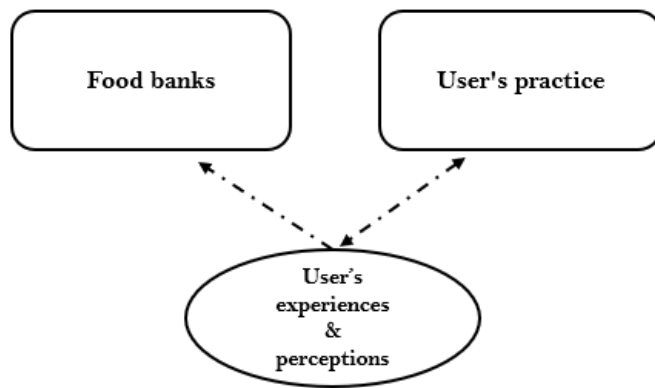
Figure 4. illustrates how user's perceptions and experiences influence the view on food banks, as well as the user's "practice" and vice versa.

1.7   Analytical framework

The complexity of the topic of food banks needs to be viewed from a holistic perspective where it is recognized that food security goes beyond food itself. Therefore, this study proposes a conceptual framework that guides both data collection and analysis (*Figure* 5). This framework influenced the analysis of the interviews conducted as well as the literature review which will provide the needed insights into the perspectives of food bank users and workers. Furthermore, to answer the aim and research questions we propose a conceptual model where we use practice theory and the users' experiences and perceptions to understand the role of food banks on food security (*Figure* 5).

The conceptual model explores how food banks receive surplus food that is provided for the food bank users. The users then engage in a "practice", influenced by their capital, habitus and the field, which could lead to an impact on food security. These factors might be impacted by the usage of the food bank. Users' experiences and perceptions might occur alongside these practices and may actively shape them over time, where each new experience informs future behaviour within the field. This is illustrated by the double ended arrow, showing how these factors might be mutual. By integrating the practice theory with the dimensions of food security, this study offers a more holistic analysis that goes beyond structural indicators to include the lived realities of those relying on food aid.

Through this approach, the study seeks to better understand how food banks influence not only the material conditions of food security, but also the social and lived experiences of their users. The empirical findings will provide insights that will refine and develop the understanding of the impact of food banks on food security of their users, possibly leading to a developed conceptual model.
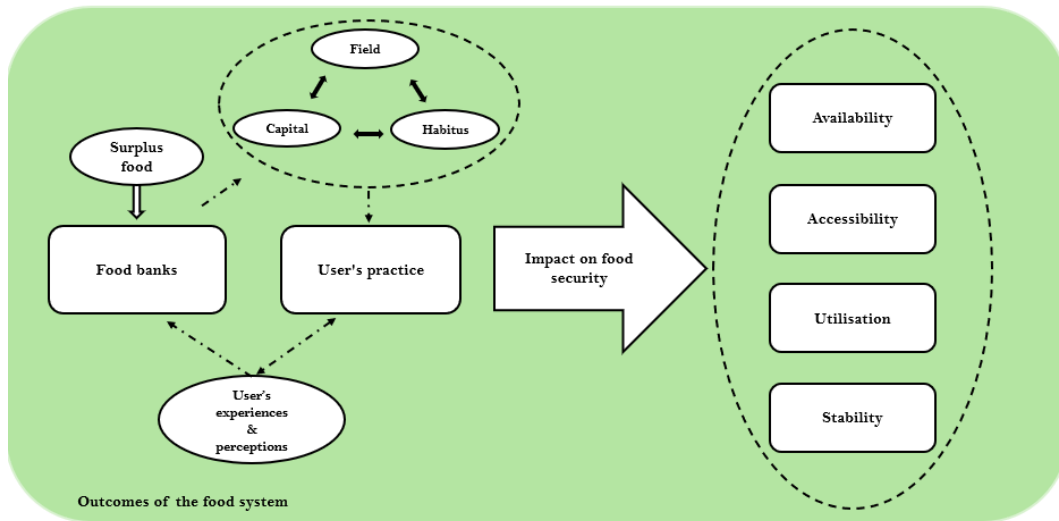
Figure 5. Conceptual model illustrating food banks' impact on food security of users in Sweden

3. Methods

The following section outlines the methodological approach adopted to address the research questions and fulfil the study's aim. A qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate for exploring the role of surplus food redistribution from the perspective of food bank users. A systematized literature review was undertaken to examine existing research on the topic and to situate the study within the broader academic discourse. Following the review, semi-structured interviews were conducted, to gain in-depth insights into users' lived experiences, supplemented by the perspectives of food bank workers to provide contextual depth. This approach was chosen due to the nature of qualitative studies in which the perspective of those being studied provides the point of orientation of the study, as presented by Bryman (2016).

Qualitative research aims to address questions concerned with developing an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions of humans' lives and social worlds (Fossey et al., 2002), and it places emphasis on how individuals interpret their social world, reflecting the view that social reality is continuously shaped by people's actions and interactions (Bryman, 2016). Moreover, qualitative research approaches have previously been used to assess similar phenomena, for example Andriessen (2022) on the topic of food banks in Belgium and Thompson et al., (2018) in the UK.

This study takes on a primarily deductive approach as it first identified a conceptual framework that was used as a lens to interpret the results obtained (Bryman, 2016). However, as Bryman (2016) also highlights, induction is undoubtably part of deduction, where during the last step of the deduction process, the researcher infers the implications of their findings for the theory that prompted the whole study (ibid.). Inductive reasoning was reflected in this study in the sense that we aimed to arrive at new theoretical knowledge based on the food bank workers and users that was not incorporated in the conceptual framework initially prompted. Due to the scarcity of existing research, a flexible and adaptive approach allowed the process to be adjusted in response to new insights and relevance to the aim.

The chosen methods allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences while also providing a structured way to analyze existing research, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the topic. These methods will be explained in detail in the following sections.

3.1 Systematized literature review

Bryman (2016) suggests that a literature review is the first step in any research, providing a foundation for understanding existing knowledge and avoiding duplication. It highlights gaps, trends, and questions in the field while establishing the research's significance. Ultimately, it offers

a clear context for positioning new research and is an essential, expected part of academic work (ibid.).

For the literature search in this study, a systematized approach was used since this method employs a systematic and transparent process to select and critically assess all relevant research (Grant and Booth, 2009). By following this structured approach, it enabled an extraction of a focused and applicable body of literature that aligned with our study's objectives. However, this study is not a full systematic literature review due to constraints in timeframe and scope. Instead, it is a systematized literature review, meaning the elements of a systematic review were incorporated while recognizing that it does not meet all its rigorous standards.This was deemed a pertinent search strategy since it is intended to be replicable in efforts to aid future research but had to align to a limited timeframe and scope.

Throughout the process, it was intended that the review have comprehensiveness, transparency, reproducibility, and minimisation of bias as is the goal of a systematic review (Grant and Booth, 2009; Bryman, 2016).

2.1.1 Systematized literature review process

An outline of the search process inspired by Rost and Lundälv (2021) goes as follows:

1. Research question established.
2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria determined.
3. Web of Science and SCOPUS were chosen as databases for the search.
4. A group of food bank users and food bank words and synonyms was gathered for the purpose of searching said databases.
5. Search strategy developed of which years to be searched (2008–2025), region (Europe), and which source manager to file the results in, which was decided to be Zotero.
6. Testing of searches for consistency and reliability.
7. Searches ran using operators OR among the synonyms with AND added to include the condition of food bank users, experiences, and food banks themselves being included.
8. Searches catalogued in Zotero and then duplicates removed manually.
9. Articles' titles and abstracts searched for relevance, adhering to the inclusion and exclusion criteria and aim.

The first task of the systematised literature review process was to establish a research question, to which then inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as which databases would be used were decided upon. SCOPUS and Web of Science were selected as the databases to explore literature on the chosen topic. These databases were chosen due to the overlapping nature of the topic at hand, and they cover a broad range of literature across various academic disciplines. The documents found were collected and exported into the citation manager Zotero, where they could be further filtered to remove duplicates and irrelevant papers.

The following list of synonyms was used to refer to food bank users: "user*", "receiver*", "recipient*". The synonyms for food bank were: "food bank*" and "food pantr*". The synonyms for the experience were "experience*" and "perception*". The focus of the literature search adhered to the experiences and perceptions of food bank recipients, as was needed to address the literature gap and adhere to the aim of the study. The period from 2008 to 2025 was selected in efforts to capture multiple crises that have influenced food bank usage, such as the financial crisis in 2008, COVID-19 and ongoing conflicts, as well as the rise in food waste and its need for mitigation.

Since literature encompassing the experience and perceptions of food bank users in Sweden was scarce, the geographical scope of this literature review focused on research written about Europe in general. It was decided that Europe was an appropriate choice as it is more comparable to Sweden than studies from developing countries or regions with more distinct social, economic, and cultural contexts. The search was conducted strictly in English and is shown in detail in Appendix 1.

In order to remove irrelevant papers, an exploration of the title and abstract was conducted for each article as a first level of filtering the results for relevance. The flow diagram of the literature search can be seen in Figure 6. Furthermore, an important detail to mention is that in efforts to reduce bias and align with the exploratory approach of our study, the literature was not further analysed until after the interviews were conducted. What is meant by this is that only the search process and decision of which studies to include were conducted but the material was not read until after all interviews were completed.

2.1.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The specifications used to extract the pertinent literature were seen as filters which can be observed in following table (Table 2). Once these criteria were applied for both databases and duplicates had already been removed, it became clear that some papers despite appearing to fall under the necessary specifications, were actually not relevant or not accessible. This was the case for papers that focused on the religion or housing situation of food bank users and not their experience using the food bank, for example. In some cases papers were out of scope because they were from countries outside of Europe, therefore they were removed altogether.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for both databases

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Years 2008-2025	Years before 2008
European countries	Non-European countries

One of the two researchers of this study focused on collecting data from each research paper, working independently yet with continual communication and revision with the other researcher to ensure full agreement on the content. Alignment with the research question was kept throughout the reading process to ensure relevance. No automation tools were used to collect data, nor was any software used, no translation was necessary either.

2.1.2 Data analysis

Following the initial search and filtering process, 13 papers were selected for even further analysis to assess their relevance for inclusion in the systematized review. As this is systematized rather than systematic review, only the criteria relevant to this process were applied. Nonetheless, the review was consistently aligned with the study's objectives and the research question pertaining to the experience of food bank users. The selected literature was then examined to identify recurring and contrasting themes, research gaps, and connections to the study's question regarding the experience of the users through the conceptual framework's lens.

A detailed reading of the 14 selected papers took place as the following step. Then, three more papers were removed after proving to be out of scope, these pertained to a paper that focused on food banks' portrayal in Finnish media, one that focused on ill health at a UK food bank, and one that set out to determine the level of low food security among Dutch food bank users. One more article was removed because it was unavailable. Once the papers that would be included in the review were concretised, coding and thematization began, see flow chart (*Figure* 6).

In the process of coding and thematizing the 10 selected research papers, it was essential to consistently refer to the research question in order to identify and highlight content relevant for theme development. The guiding research question "How do food bank users experience and perceive their utilisation of food banks?" served as a focal point throughout the analysis. Maintaining this question at the forefront facilitated a focused reading of the material, enabling the identification of insights that directly contributed to addressing the overall aim of the study through codification.
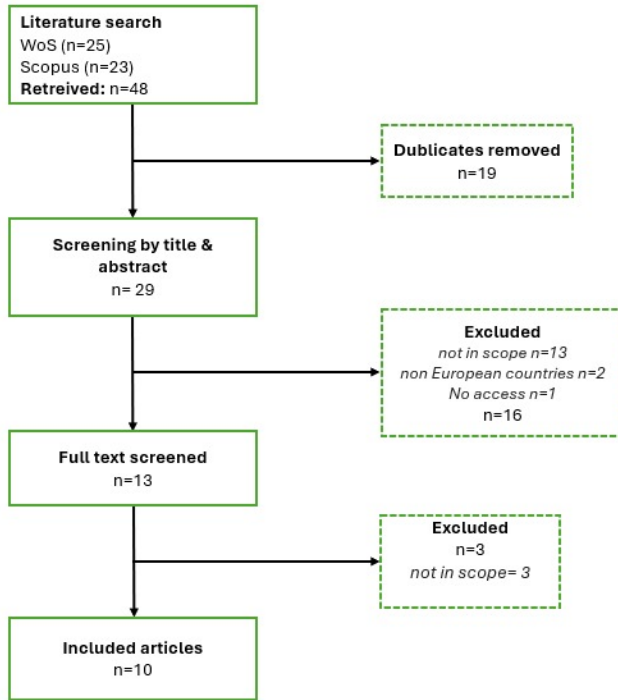
Figure 6. Flow diagram of the literature search

3.2 Interview study

3.2.1 Data collection method

For this qualitative study semi-structured interviews were conducted with both food bank workers and food bank users. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, ethical considerations were contemplated throughout the study and participants were completely anonymous and consenting. Although the main focus of this study is on food bank users, their workers were also interviewed to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how different food banks operate and their impact on food security. This broader perspective was necessary to address our research questions and overall aim more effectively.

According to Bryman (2016) a qualitative method enables the researcher to capture the interviewees' perspectives which was the purpose with the study. Semi-structured interviewing reflects an ontological position focused on how people construct knowledge, interpret experiences, and engage with the world through their understandings and interactions (ibid.). Moreover, when using semi-structured interviews, the researcher uses an interview guide with partially pre-formulated questions.

However, the researcher is not completely bound by the interview guide, allowing the interviews to remain focused while giving the researcher a flexability and therby enhancing the depth of understanding (Bryman, 2016; Dengel et al., 2023). Semi-structured interviews permit discussions to be guided while also allowing for a more exploratory approach, exploring the topics that emerge during the interviews (Dengel et al., 2023). This can further deepen the insight of the phenomena studied.

To ensure accuracy and facilitate analysis, the interviews were primarily recorded. Recording allowed for a more thorough interpretation of responses while minimizing the risk of missing important details. However, in some instances, notes were also taken, particularly when participants preferred not to be recorded.

3.2.2 Interview guides

Two different interview guides were developed for this study, one for the workers of the food banks, and one for the food bank users. The questions were designed based on the theoretical framework to generate data relevant to addressing the study's research questions. The interview guide for the food bank users was intentionally concise, containing only a limited number of questions, as they were primarily at the food bank to collect their provisions. The aim was to minimize any inconvenience and avoid making the process feel overwhelming. In contrast, the interview guide for the food bank staff was more comprehensive and detailed, allowing for a deeper exploration of their experiences and perspectives and a depend overall understanding for the researchers.

Both interview guides consisted open-ended questions, formulated in a comprehensible and relevant language for the interviewees at hand, see Appendix 2. One example of questions asked was *"Can you describe how you feel about coming to the food bank?".* According to Bryman (2016), open ended questions allow the interviewee a great deal of leeway in how to reply, offering advantages such as allowing respondents to provide in-depth answers which could offer insights that closed-ended questions might miss. Moreover, by doing this the researcher can also discover new perspectives and develop the researchers understanding (ibid.).

3.2.3 Sampling

In this study, purposive sampling was applied as the aim was to reach a specific target group which is common within qualitative research (Bryman, 2016). Three food banks in small to medium-sized cities in Sweden ranging from 20,000 to 100,000 inhabitants were selected in the study to recruit participants. The selected food banks for this study were located in three municipalities in central-eastern Sweden, to ensure that visits could be carried out in a timely and cost-effective manner. The selection of participants consisted of individuals utilising the food bank as well as the workers within the food banks. Participants responsible for the food banks were recruited via email, where they initially received an introduction email containing

information about the study and an invitation to participate. A total of 13 requests were sent out, of which five responded. Ultimately, three food banks agreed to partake in the study and were thus visited. Table 3 presents an overview of the included food banks, which will be kept anonymous.

Furthermore, food bank users were recruited by putting up an informative poster either before arrival or on the same day of the visit, ensuring that users were aware of the presence of the researchers of this study, and its purpose. Participants were then recruited spontaneously, either by being approached by the research team or themselves approaching the researchers directly. At two of the food banks the participants were recruited in the waiting areas, while in one they were approached all around the store, this varied depending on the food bank model. Moreover, according to Bryman (2016), researchers often strive for diversity in sampling to ensure variation among participants. However, due to the sensitive nature of this study, the sampling of users was conducted spontaneously with ethical considerations throughout the process. In total, 4 interviews were conducted with people working within the food bank, and 11 interviews were held with food bank users. For an overview of the sampling see Table 3.

Table 3. Comparative overview of the three Swedish food banks

	Food bank 1	Food bank 2	Food bank 3
Type of food redistribution	Social supermarket	Food bags: Semi-personal knowledge-based distribution	Food bags: Non-personalized (2 per person)
Distribution method	Store layout with price tags, rebuilt daily	Food allocated by manager with user input	Pre-packed bags (1 bread, 1 mixed)
Workers at food bank	7 workers, 2 volonteers, 6 work traning (n=1)*	1 worker and 2 rotating volunteers (n=1)*	4 workers and 7 volunteers (n=2)*
Number of users per day on average	120	35-35	127
Food Source	Supermarkets	Supermarkets, private individuals	Supermarkets
Facilities	Large fridge/freezer, loading dock, store-style setup	Small room, 2 freezers, 5 fridges, shelves	Largest fridge/freezer, produce section
Personal registry/records	Yes	No	No
Placed	Near centrum	Outside centrum	Near centrum
Usage of food bank	3 time slots a week and drop in every day	3 times a week	Once every other week
Freedom of choice	High	Medium	Very low
Respondents in the study	Worker 1, User 1	Worker 2 User 2, 3, 4 & 7	Worker 3 & 4 User 5 & 6

*n indicates the number of participants interviewed in the study

3.2.4 Data analysis of the interviews

To analyse the collected primary data, thematic analysis was chosen as the data analysis method. This method was chosen because thematic analyses are used to identify, analyse and find themes in terms of repeated patterns in the data that captures important information (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, within qualitative research thematic analyses are commonly used, without any clear agreement on the process.

Furthermore, to answer our research questions, the interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six phases of thematic analysis: Familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

Following Braun and Clark, Phase 1 involves familiarizing yourself with your data by transcribing the collected material and then repeated and active reading to identify patterns and meaning contexts that are noted over time. Phase 2 involves generating initial codes by identifying interesting aspects in the material that are important for the phenomenon being investigated. Phase 3 centres on identifying and organizing themes based on the initial codes. This involves grouping codes to form overarching themes and subthemes, where relationships between different codes and themes are explored. Phase 4 involves reviewing and refining the identified themes. Some themes may be merged, split, or removed if they are not supported by sufficient data. Phase 5 involves defining, refining, and naming themes. The core of each theme and its relationship to the analysis are clarified, and any subthemes are identified. The themes should be well-defined, can be summarized, and have clear, impactful names.

Moreover, the study employs an abductive approach, which facilitates an interplay between theory-driven and data-driven insights (Bryman, 2016). The initial thematization was primarily guided by a deductive process, as the theoretical framework was actively considered throughout the analysis in order to address the research aim and questions. Simultaneously, the process incorporated an inductive perspective, allowing for the emergence of new, potentially significant themes beyond the initial theoretical scope. Moreover, since the majority of the interviews were held in Swedish, the citations were directly translated into English.

3.2.5 Observations

As part of the methodology, in addition to conducting interviews, observations of the various operations were conducted to gain insight into the practical functioning of the food banks in question. These observations allowed us not only to obtain a better understanding of the overall structure of the services provided but also gain an in-depth overview of the types of food offered and the interactions taking place. Additionally, detailed notes were taken during each visit to document our insights. Therefore, a minimal participatory observer approach was adopted, which

according to Bryman (2016) means that while the primary source of data were interviews, observations and limited participation also occurred.

Furthermore, at one food bank that distributed food bags, the researchers had the opportunity to volunteer in order to gain an even deeper understanding of how the entire behind-the-scenes redistribution process operated. This experience involved tasks such as pre-packing food items, including fruits, vegetables, and bread. This approach enabled the researchers to experience certain aspects of the workflow firsthand. By doing so, the researchers were able to collect enriched qualitative data sorrowing the daily operations of one organization.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were integrated throughout this study, particularly in relation to the interviews due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the vulnerable situation of the interviewees. Therefore, certain issues of harm to participants, lack of informed consent, invasion of privacy and wheher deception has been involved have been contemplated throughout the study according to Bryman (2016).

The study has therefore adhered to the four fundamental research ethics principles outlined by Bryman (2018): *the information requirement, the consent requirement, the confidentiality requirement, and the use requirement.*

To fulfil the *information requirement,* participants were provided with clear and sufficient information about the study before data collection. This included details about the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, their right to withdraw at any time without providing a reason, and the assurance that the collected data would only be used for this study. Additionally, they were informed that the interviews would remain anonymous and confidential throughout the research process.

Prior to participation, informants provided their consent, in alignment with ethical research practices (Bryman, 2018). The confidentiality requirement was upheld by ensuring that participants remained anonymous throughout the study, with access to the interview recordings restricted to the researchers. These recordings were securely stored and deleted upon the study's completion. Lastly, the use requirement was fulfilled by ensuring that the collected information was solely used for the purposes of this research.

There was no need for ethical vetting due to the exception for student theses' according to the Swedish ethics act (2003:460) on ethical review of research involving humans, and since no personal data was recorded and associated with any participant in the study. Moreover, all participants provided their informed consent before the interviews and were only recorded if they agreed to be, with the explicit right to withdraw at any time.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study in two parts. It begins with an overview of the results from the literature review resulting in six themes. The second part details the empirical findings from the interviews and is divided into two subsections: the first focuses on insights from food bank workers, resulting in three key themes. The second explores the perspectives of food bank users, from which four major themes emerged.

4.1 Systematised literature review

A total of 10 papers were included in the literature review. The compiled articles, originating from different European countries, span over 17 years. They explore the lived experiences of food bank users and generally reveal closely interconnected findings. The details surrounding the results of the literature search will unfold in the upcoming sections.

4.1.1 Overview of included studies

The literature review resulted in an intricate combined summary of food banks and the experience of their users from England, Italy, Germany, Netherlands, and Finland. It became evident that most research on food banks included in this study stems from England, since nearly half of the total selected focusing on different cities in the country.

The general content and structure of the papers revolved around a question regarding the lived experience of food bank users, whether it be in efforts to discover something specific, such as Brennan-Tovey et al. (2023) where strategies utilised by food bank users and food banks against stigma were the focus; or a more general and exploratory focus aimed at understanding the users' experience and interactions without any presumptions, as is the case in Rombach et al. (2018b). All included studies involved qualitative methodology, typically explored in the form of interviews and ethnographies with continuous observation, mostly participatory to at least some degree. Likewise, all studies dealt with adults of all ages, besides Slocombe (2023) that specifically focused on the elderly's use of food banks.

In Table 4, an overview of the key features and content from all ten articles can be found where the aim, country, methods, and results are observed, as well as the overlaying themes in each piece.

4.1.2 Thematic findings

Several recurring themes emerged that encapsulate users' experiences and perceptions with food banks. These themes reflect both practical and emotional dimensions of food bank usage, such as feelings of gratitude and relief, but also experiences of stigma, shame, and systemic dependency.

This review resulted in the condensed information categorized into 6 themes, these are *emotions among food bank users, stigma avoidance techniques utlised by users, gratefulness vs. guilt, users' interactions with workers, access to food banks, and experiences and perceptions of the received food*, these will unfold below and are briefly summarised in Table 4.

Table 4. Overview of the themes that emerged from the litterature

Theme	Description	References
Emotions among food bank users	Shame and stigma were the most prevalent emotions, often deterring food bank use. These feelings sometimes led to anger or dissatisfaction, especially when food quality or access was inadequate.	Ranta et al., (2024); Slocombe (2023); Brennan-Tovey et al., (2023); Rombach et al., (2017); Rombach et al., (2018)a; Rombach et al., (2018)b; Purdam et al., (2016); Salonen, (2023); Van der Horst et al., (2014); Neter et al., (2020)
Stigma avoidance techniques utilised by users	Users employed strategies like delaying aid, befriending volunteers, seeking anonymity, using positive self-talk, and emphasizing gratitude to reduce feelings of shame and stigma.	Brennan-Tovey et al., (2023); Purdam et al., (2016)
Gratefulness vs. guilt	Users often felt conflicted, grateful for receiving aid, but guilty or ashamed due to unmet needs and perceived expectations to show gratitude, which sometimes deepened emotional distress.	Brennan-Tovey et al., (2023); Neter et al., (2020); Rombach et al., (2017) Van der Horst et al., (2014)
Users' interactions with workers	Interactions often involved emotional tension and power imbalances, with users feeling patronized or obligated to express gratitude. These dynamics could reinforce shame and affect dignity.	Brennan-Tovey et al., (2023); Van der Horst et al., (2014); Rombach et al., (2017); Rombach et al., (2018)a; Rombach et al., (2018)b; Ranta et al., (2024);

Access to food banks	Eligibility requirements and restrictive policies can deter or exclude users, reinforcing stigma. More inclusive models like social supermarkets offer greater dignity and choice.	Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023; Ranta et al., 2024; Rombach et al., (2017)
Experiences and perceptions of the received food	Users often reported dissatisfaction with food parcels, citing poor quality, limited variety, and inadequate nutrition. These issues affected users' dignity and reinforced feelings of poverty.	Salonen, (2017); Neter et al., (2020); Van der Horst, et al., (2014)

4.1.3 Emotions among food bank users

This theme focuses on the emotions that were perceived to be most present in using food banks among their users. The most widely mentioned theme among the literature was the simultaneous existence of shame and stigma which permeated across nine of the ten reviewed papers. Studies that mentioned shame and stigma explicitly shared the notion that food banks have long been associated with these feelings, and that they are closely linked with embarrassment and a negative effect on users' dignity.

Van der Horst et al. (2014) revealed that even once a user is accustomed to attending a food bank, shame continues to play a role. Neter et al. (2020) found that food bank users often experience social exclusion, as food is fundamentally embedded in social practices. This exclusion deepens feelings of shame and stigma when individuals lack access to food and must rely on food aid, reducing eating to a matter of survival and diminishing the pleasure of eating due to the insufficient variety and quality of available food (ibid.). Salonen (2017) discussed the particular shame and stigma of queuing to receive food aid and pointed out that the act of waiting in a line at a food bank can make users feel excluded and monitored by others. Purdam et al. (2016) found that food bank users experienced feelings of being a failure within their community when asking for a food parcel, and Brennan-Tovey et al. (2023) found that when food banks required some sort of proof or eligibility to access food aid was considered as a barrier and as deepening stigma and shame, according to users.

This shame and stigma can affect users to such a degree that using a food bank is seen as a last resort for some of these users (Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). Brennan-Tovey et al. (2023) observed that some users prefer to skip meals or eat below their daily fulfilment to make food last, in order to not have to go to a food bank or to postpone it for as long as possible. Slocombe (2023) similarly showed that elders in particular avoid food banks because of generational dynamics and experiences, making use of a food bank shameful and stigmatising for them. Furthermore, feelings

of shame were steadily described as an impediment to greater food bank use and were well documented among the literature selection (Slocombe 2023; Ranta et al. 2024, Neter et al. 2020).

Anger and dissatisfaction

Generally, when discussing shame and stigma, the literature shows that these emotions can lead to other feelings, for example anger (Van der Horst et al. 2014). They studied the possible "dark side" of food banks which results in the finding that shame, above all else, was the most prominent feeling and can lead to anger when not expressed (ibid.). On a similar note, Rombach et al. (2018a) stated that the mixture of feelings such as shame, gratitude, anger, and disappointment cause tension in interactions in food banks in Germany and Italy.

Regarding dissatisfaction, Rombach et al. (2018a) report that food bank users sometimes expressed disappointment with the food parcels they received, although they did not reject the aid. Some recipients even turned to social media to voice their dissatisfaction (ibid.). Similarly, participants in the study by Neter et al. (2020) raised concerns about the quantity, quality, and variety of the food provided, describing it as insufficient. Neter et al (2020) observed that these findings are consistent with other research on food aid, indicating that while dissatisfaction among users is common, they often continue to accept the assistance despite their unmet needs.

Rombach et al. 2017 chose to shed light on the motivation of volunteers to serve at the German Food Bank and the interactions between food bank users and workers. They found emotional interactions between food bank users and workers but did not mention shame or stigma, or any related emotions. Users mentioned that they were happy with the service and products provided and did not explicitly mention feelings of shame or humiliation, workers said they did not observe any adverse reactions from the users either. The remarks made by interviewees were so positive that the paper points out the fact that their statements contradict previous research where interactions between food pantry users and volunteers were described as negative, and dependency and helplessness of food pantry users and unfriendliness or reservedness of volunteers were criticized (ibid.).

4.1.4 Stigma avoidance techniques utilised by food bank users

Food aid users utilised several techniques to limit the shame, guilt, and embarrassment associated with stigma and shame. The previous example of refusing to access a food aid charity until it became a last resort was only one example of these stigma avoidance techniques (Brennan-Tovey et al. 2023; Purdam et al. 2016). Other techniques include befriending volunteers at food banks, which in some cases enabled users to feel more comfortable, as they may prefer to receive food from someone they know and trust, which in turn makes the exchange less intimidating and less shameful, thus ultimately less stigmatizing (Brennan-Tovey et al. 2023). However, some users felt that asking for food aid from someone they knew actually deepened the stigma and shame they felt because they thought if someone familiar was aware that they could not feed themselves or

their family, they would be more judgmental. In this sense, a level of anonymity provided another stigma avoiding technique (ibid.).

Another stigma-reducing technique reported by food aid users was positive self-talk (Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). Through this technique, users reminded themselves that they were deserving of the food aid in question, telling themselves that they were not "greedy" or "begging", but rather that they deserved to get help to eat. This positive self-talk was reported to enhance feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem, in turn decreasing feelings of stigma and shame. It was also reported that users might "swallow their pride" or try to ignore stigma when asking for help. There was also an emphasis among food aid users to remind themselves to be "grateful" for the help that they had received (ibid.).

4.1.5 Gratefulness vs. Guilt

Building upon the notion regarding gratefulness, there is also an emphasis among food bank users to remind themselves to be grateful for the help they receive as part of the positive self-talk mentioned in Brennan-Tovey et al. (2023). Among food bank users, feelings of gratitude are often complicated by guilt, as recipients may feel obliged to express appreciation for food that does not satisfy their needs or expectations, resulting in a tension between gratitude and dissatisfaction, as posed in Neter et al. (2020).

Despite few users saying that they were completely satisfied with the content of their food parcel, they generally stated that they were very grateful for receiving it (Neter et al. 2020). This gratitude was further investigated by Rombach et al. (2017), who highlighted that expected gratefulness can create negative emotional reactions from food bank users, since they feel that volunteers expect them to act gratefully. Hence, gratitude is not just felt, it is *expected*, and that expectation creates tension (ibid.). The expected gratitude resulted in feelings of shame and distress for food bank users, reinforcing the experiences of shame highlighted in earlier studies (Rombach et al 2017; Von der Horst et al. 2014). Similarly, users in Van der Horst et al. (2014) study expressed that the compulsory gratitude feels degrading and that in showing gratitude, users feel they admit to being the cause of the situation they are in. However, some users in this study reported they feel all users should be grateful and express it, or should not be receiving food aid, proving replies varied greatly among users (ibid.).

4.1.6 Users' interactions with workers

Van der Horst et al. (2014) suggest that an emphasis on interactions is essential to grasp both the processes underlying charitable giving and the ways in which emotional impacts may arise or be avoided by various actors within these encounters. Rombach et al. (2018)b state that knowing a food bank personnel's perception of the interaction with users will contribute to developing targeted training measures for their improvement.

Van der Horst et al. (2014) showcaseses that interactions among food bank users and workers evoke strong emotions and the particular notion among users that some feelings are appropriate for a food bank, such as gratitude and shame (ibid.). This study also found that there are clear asymmetrical power relationships in these interactions, coinciding with Ranta et al. (2024) who state that the power imbalance between volunteers and members is evident. Similarly, Brennan-Tovey et al. (2023) focus on how stigma-power is used as a form of control over food aid users, finding that stigma itself could be used as a form of power, further deepening the power dynamics inside food banks.

Rombach et al. (2017) specifically researched interactions in Dutch food banks and found that interactions between food pantry users and volunteers or workers were not always positive. They describe the negative interactions as tense, mostly due to the expected gratefulness mentioned above, since they created feelings of shame and distress for users. The tension described in these interactions was perceived by both users and volunteers/workers since they were forced interaction with both parties obligatorily interacting with each other.

4.1.7 Access to food banks

Access to and within food banks is not commonly straight-forward, several authors have addressed the issue of access to food banks, highlighting various barriers that hinder food bank users from receiving assistance (Ranta et al., 2024; Rombach et al., 2017; Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). Ranta et al., (2024) emphasize that traditional food aid systems often impose access restrictions, such as requiring proof of eligibility, which can further contribute to stigma and exclusion for users. They advocate for the adoption of social supermarket models, which they argue are more inclusive. In such models, the act of seeking help is itself taken as an indicator of need, and users are offered greater autonomy, including the ability to choose their food. Similarly, Brennan-Tovey et al. (2023) identify the eligibility requirement as a key barrier. Rombach et al. (2017) point to another obstacle, individuals may be denied food aid if they do not seek assistance frequently enough, and are thus perceived as not sufficiently in need.

4.1.8 Experiences and perceptions of the received food

The results show that going to a food bank creates many emotions and reactions altogether. From waiting in line, as posed in Salonen (2017), to what is thought of about the quantity, quality, and variety of the food received (Neter, et al., 2020) among others. Rarely, the users were completely satisfied with the contents of their food parcel, nor does it offer a truly balanced, nutritiously complete content. When it comes to what users think of the content, there are mixed opinions among the literature in this review.

The perception of and satisfaction with the content of food parcels among participants was generally low (Van der Horst et al., 2014; Neter et al., 2020). Specific concerns were raised regarding several aspects, including the nutritional adequacy of the parcels, the variety of foods offered, and the acceptability of the foods in terms of quality and personal preference. Regarding nutritional adequacy, food bank users highlighted that the amount of food provided had decreased over time and was often insufficient to meet the needs of all household members. Food bank users also noted an imbalance in the types of foods included, making it difficult to prepare complete meals, for example, parcels might contain sauce and vegetables for a pasta dish but do not include the pasta itself. In addition, users emphasized that much of the food provided was not particularly healthy. Concerns about food quality were also prevalent, with many users reporting that they needed to check expiration dates carefully, as items were often close to or even past their expiry (ibid.).

As an example of the dissastifaction displayed by users, Van der Horst et al. (2014) reveal that tensions often arise between food bank volunteers and recipients over the content of food parcels. Food bank workers were proven to expect recipients to appreciate all items provided and sometimes questioned their need if they expressed dissatisfaction. Furthermore, many users reported that receiving expired or spoiled products reinforced feelings of poverty and undermined their self-worth. Although volunteers acknowledge concerns about expiration dates, they shift responsibility onto recipients to judge food safety. Furthermore, food banks attempt to reframe expiration norms, expecting recipients to overcome ingrained taboos around consuming expired food. The high proportion of unhealthy, high-fat, and sugary products further contributes to users' dissatisfaction, particularly as they wish to fulfil responsibilities for healthy family meals (ibid.). Even appreciative users express frustration with the poor nutritional quality, aligning with Neter et al. (2020), while volunteers maintain that the parcels are merely supplementary and not intended to meet full dietary needs (Van der Horst det al. 2014).

Table 5. Key features and content of articles found

Title & Author	Aim of Study	Country	Method	Results	Theme
Ranta et al., (2024) Access, dignity, and choice: social supermarkets and the end of the food bank model in the UK?	Examine social supermarkets as a novel approach to alleviating food insecurity and providing food support in the UK	England	Mixed-method participatory approach: questionnaires (n=111) and interviews (n=25)	Social supermarkets offer a dignified, inclusive approach to food support by addressing the root causes of food insecurity. Emphasizing choice and reducing access barriers helps lower stigma and promote long-term solutions.	Emotions among food bank users, Users' interactions among food bank users, Access to food banks
Slocombe (2023) Aged spaces in an era of austerity: Food bank use by older people.	To explore the use of food banks by older people in the context of austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic	England	Semi-structured interviews with food bank staff and volunteers (n=17)	Bereavement and traditional gender roles lead older men to food banks, often struggling with food management. Generational pride heightens shame, but food banks offer vital social support, disrupted by COVID-19 measures.	Emotions among food bank users
Brennan-Tovey et al., (2023) Counteracting Stigma-Power: An Ethnographic Case Study of an Independent Community Food Hub	Explore food aid users' experiences of stigma-power and anti-stigma strategies utilized by food aid users and volunteers at an Independent Community Food Hub	England	An ethnographic case study involving semi-structured interviews and participant observation. (n=22)	Stigma-power and the negative dominant narrative negatively impacted food aid users. The Independent Community Food Hub (ICFH) implemented various anti-stigma strategies, which food aid users and volunteers perceived as reducing stigma compared to formal food banks.	Emotions among food bank users, Stigma avoidance techniques, Gratitude vs. guilt; Users' interactions with workers, Access to food banks
Rombach et al., (2018)a Comparing German and Italian food banks: Actors' knowledge on food insecurity and their perception of the interaction with food bank users.	To investigate and compare the knowledge of food bank actors in Germany and Italy regarding food insecurity and to explore their perceptions of interactions with food bank users	Germany and Italy	In-depth interviews (n=22)	Actors possessed at least situational knowledge regarding food insecurity. Interactions between food bank personnel and users in both countries were influenced by feelings such as gratitude, shame, anger, and disappointment, as well as a mismatch in perceptions.	Interactions with workers, shame, anger, gratitude, disappointment, Emotions among food bank users, Users' interactions with workers

Rombach et al., (2018)b Food recovery and food redistribution in Italy	Investigate the operation of the Italian food bank and the perspectives of managers and volunteers regarding the social aspects of food redistribution and examine volunteer-beneficiary interactions in cooperating charitable organizations	Italy	In-depth interview and qualitative content analysis (n=12)	Volunteer-beneficiary interactions are shaped by feelings of shame and gratitude among beneficiaries, but volunteers generally demonstrate understanding and do not expect thankfulness	Emotions among food bank users, Users' interactions with workers
Rombach et al .,(2017) Good deeds revisited: motivation and boundary spanning in formal volunteering	Investigate the motivation of volunteers and understand their interactions with food donors, pantry managers, and users By using social exchange theory and the concept of boundary spanning, the research seeks to analyze how these interactions affect the services provided by the organization.	Germany	In-depth interviews and qualitative content analysis (n=20)	While interactions between volunteers and food pantry users appear superficially positive, tensions exist regarding the understanding of neediness and the potential for unequal treatment.	Gratitude vs. guilt, Users' interactions with users, Access to food banks
Purdam et al., (2016) Hungry? Food Insecurity, Social Stigma and Embarrassment in the UK	Understand the extent of malnutrition and food poverty, explore the experiences and concerns of food bank users, and question the sustainability of relying on voluntary food aid. The study also examines the public discourse surrounding food aid and poverty	England	Survey, case study, observations, interviews (n=34)	Food bank users often sought help due to benefit problems, low income, and unemployment, and they experienced social stigma and embarrassment. The research suggests food aid is often a last resort and a temporary fix, highlighting the wider issue of financial vulnerability.	Emotions among food bank users, Stigma avoidances techniques
Salonen (2017) Lining up for charity: A study of the social organization and communal qualities of breadlines in a Finnish city	Explores how the social organization of breadlines in a Finnish city contributes to the social relationships between food recipients and their experiences of these places as communities, and what qualities these communities develop.	Finland	Ethnographic: participant observation and in-depth interviews (n=25)	The social organization of breadlines in a Finnish city shapes the experiences of food recipients as communities with multiple facets. These breadlines function as communities of mutual surveillance, demanding communities requiring skills and resources, and socially significant communities providing social interaction and meaning for many participants.	Emotions among food bank users, Experiences and perceptions of the received food

Van der Horst et al., (2014) The "dark side" of food banks? Exploring emotional responses of food bank receivers in the Netherlands	Explore emotional responses of food bank users, focusing on how the food is provided, interactions at the food bank, and the social status associated with being a receiver. Seeks to investigate the potential "dark side" of food banks by examining whether the experience of receiving food aid can be harmful to the user's self-esteem.	Netherlands	In-depth interviews, observations (n=26)	The most prominent emotional response among food bank receivers in the Netherlands was shame, which arose from the content of the food parcels (often expired or unhealthy), interactions at the food bank where gratitude is expected, and the negative social status associated with being a receiver. Receivers often felt undervalued by the quality of food and stigmatized by their reliance on food aid, leading some to challenge societal views on poverty and personal responsibility	Emotions among food bank users, Gratitude vs. guilt, Users' interactions with workers, Experiences and perceptions of the received food
Neter et al., (2020) The role of food parcel use on dietary intake: perception of Dutch food bank recipients, focus group study	To understand Dutch food bank recipients' perceptions of the content of food parcels. The research sought insights into the recipients' experiences regarding the amount, quality, variation, and types of food received and their impact on their eating habits.	Netherlands	Interviews in focus groups. (n=44)	Food banks are not meeting food bank recipients' needs. Provides directions for improving the content of the food parcels by increasing the quantity, quality, and variation in the foods supplied.	Dissatisfaction with food parcels gratitude, Emotions among food bank users, Gratitude vs. guilt, Experiences and perceptions of the received food

4. 2 Interview results

The following section presents the results derived from the 15 intervies conducted. The section starts with the workers to provide an overview of the food banks, followed by the users to gain their perpectives. Table 6 presents an overview of the 7 emerged themes from the food bank workers and users'.

Table 6. Overview of the themes emerged from the interviews

Theme	Description
1. *Organizational structures of the food banks*	This theme explores how the three studied food banks vary in model, scale, personalisation, and access policies.
2. Main challenges for the food banks	This theme explains the overall challenges of the different food banks studied, where uncertain food flow is the most prominent.
3. Experienced emotional responses among food bank users	This theme explores how food bank workers observe users expressing both gratitude and frustration, while also navigating feelings such as shame and stigma associated with receiving food aid.
4. Patterns and barriers of use	This theme highlights how users' food bank visits are shaped by institutional rules, practical needs, and emotional barriers such as guilt and perceived unworthiness, despite generally easy physical access.
5. Food banks impact on the daily life	This theme explains the role of food banks in users' daily lives by reducing financial stress and improving well-being, with impact ranging from enhanced quality of life to essential survival support, depending on individual dependency levels.
6. Emotions and social aspects of receiving food aid	This theme explores the mixed feelings related to food bank usage. It further describes the generally positive experienced interaction with food bank workers.
7. Experiences and perceptions of the received food	This theme explores the food bank users' varying perceptions and experiences about the received food, revealing differing levels of satisfaction.

4.2.1 Food bank workers

The following section presents the results derived from the interview data from four food bank workers which resulted in three main themes. These themes are: *organisational structures of the food banks, the main challenges for the food banks and experienced emotional responses among food bank users.*

4.2.2 Organisational structures of the food banks

Across the three food redistribution initiatives visited there is a shared passionate commitment to making use of food waste and redistributing it to people in need. However, each location, embodies different kinds of food bank models, ranging from a retail environment as seen in the social supermarket, to a closer interaction between users and workers through the delivery of hand-picked food parcels (Table 4). Each food bank, mainly relies on the donation of surplus food from retailers, which fluctuates highly. Food bank 1 operates in the style of a social supermarket, where users pay reduced prices for food and goods in a store-like setting. In contrast, Food Bank 2 is built on personal relationships where the manager knows each visitor by face and curates their bag based on individual needs and conversations. Food Bank 3 on the other hand, offers a systemized bag distribution model, with less personalization but a more structured and replicable format where the users always get one bag of bread and one with varying food items. All the workers stated that the food banks should be seen as a compliment since they can only provide the users with the food that has been donated, which is limited.

Infrastructure and scale

Food bank 1 and Food bank 3 have the largest infrastructures, equipped with industrial fridges, freezers and large storage. In contrast, Food bank 2's site operates in a much smaller space with just a handful of cold storage units and a few shelves. The results show that these differences in scale have a greater impact beyond how food can be stored. The scale also influences how flexible each site can be in managing variety, how many people they can provide for, and what kind of user experience they can offer (see Table 3). The larger-scale food banks tend to be more impersonal, while the smallest one is deeply dependent on local knowledge and daily relational labour. For instance, Food Bank 2 offered a more personalized food bag based on needs, Worker 2 described:

> *"They get to bring their own bags and when they come, we try to see if it's a family with children, then they get an extra one. If it's a single household person, they maybe get two meals plus breakfast so they can make it until next time."* (Worker 2)

At the same time, even at the less personalized food banks such as Food bank 3 where users receive two pre-packed bag where they can choose between one including pork or not, the staff occasionally receive requests for other specific items as Worker 4 stated:

"They can ask for stuff like shampoo, conditioner, stuff like that, or toilet paper or diapers or stuff like that which we sometimes can provide, but they get a bread bag and they get to choose between a bag with or without pork because pork is a sensitive part" (Worker 4)

Those kinds of requests could often be accommodated, showing some kind of limited freedom of choice for their needs.

The fragility of the food flow and its uncertainties

All three sites collect surplus food and other items, such as shampoo and soap, primarily from nearby supermarkets. However, the way these items are handled and distributed varies, even between Food Bank 2 and 3, both of which distribute food bags, as previously described. The food itself is largely dependent on donation flows where certain patterns emerge. Bread appears to be the most commonly donated item at all the food banks, for example. Food Bank 3, with its dedicated packaging areas, offers the widest range and amount of food, including fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, and dairy. While Food Bank 1 system more closely mimics a conventional supermarket, including clearly marked reduced prices and comparisons to retail value and a perceived freedom of limited choice. However, it was evident that Food Bank 2 had the greatest problems with getting enough food for their users, Worker 2 recalled: "*So some days we have a lot of food, so it's enough for everyone, some days we have maybe enough for 10 people. Here it's like surprise surprise, do we get something or not today?"*. She also mentioned that on one occasion, the site had to close because no food arrived at all, highlighting the expressed uncertainty of the system.

However, due to the uncertainty and variability of the food supply, food banks were consistently described as a complement rather than a full substitute for conventional food shopping. As Worker 1 at the social supermarket explained:

"And we are also saying like see our store as a compliment, the money you save here. If you can find like let's say pasta, ketchup and maybe, tomatoes. The money you have saved by those items here, you can go to like let's say store X or store Y and buy the meat instead. You still get a whole meal"
(Worker 1)

This perspective was emphasised by all workers, showing that the food received was not sufficient on its own.

Access to the food banks

How people access food banks also varies between the models. For the social supermarket there is a requirement of membership, proof of eligibility, which you only can get if you are a low or no income earner. In contrast, Food Bank 2 and 3 allows open access with no registration and no requirements, besides coming in sober from drugs and alcohol.

Moreover, how often the users are allowed to visit the food banks also varied. While Food Bank 1 and 2 allows them to visit three times a week, the users of Food Bank 3 are limited to visit the food bank only every other week. Food Bank 1 was the only one that also offered drop-in hours each day. All three food banks are located in or near the city center with accessible transport routes such as buses stopping directly outside the facilities.

4.2.3 The main challenges for the food banks

All food banks highlighted the daily uncertainty regarding both the type and quantity of food received as a significant challenge. They expressed that there is often a lack of variety and sufficient quantity of food, which affects their ability to provide for everyone. At the same time, they occasionally receive large quantities of a single item, often beverages and seasonal edition items.

For the food banks handling food bags, this insufficiency had a greater impact on how many people they could provide with food, something that the manager of Food Bank 2 emphasized as its most pressing concern since it means that some users will not be provided with anything. Worker 2 said: "*So some days we have a lot of food so it's enough for everyone, some days we have maybe enough for 10 people. So then I have to go out and choose who gets it.*"

However, the perceptions of the biggest challenges for the food banks differed. Worker 3 experienced organizational challenges and said: "*The three main challenges, which I think are the main reasons for my work is about getting more volunteers, getting more money, and securing the food.*". In contrast, the worker 1 at Food Bank 1 identified the biggest challenges related to the unawareness of their existence and getting people to realize that the food often is still good after the expiration date.

> "*It's like two different parts of it. For the stores there is like get to the customer to know that we are existing. And the other part is like. To get people to realize*

is like I said, like we talked about it. It's more of smell and taste. A lot of people are like checking the date." (Worker 1)

Together, these insights illustrate that while all food banks face the shared struggle of uncertain supply, the perceived challenges vary depending on organizational structure, resources, and context.

4.2.4 Experienced emotional responses among food bank users

Feelings of gratitude and frustration

All workers pointed out that most who used the food banks expressed gratitude, Worker 4 shared one example of how the users show their gratitude: *"oh, you're like angels, can I give you a hug, or taps your hand"*. Despite this general sense of appreciation, staff also acknowledged that negative emotional reactions occasionally occur.

Although rare, strong emotional outbursts were typically linked to moments when the food supply was insufficient. Worker 2 recalled:

> *"In all these years, we've had two people who have kind of reacted harshly. You may have heard swear words and both this and that and the fourth, but otherwise it's like people are grateful."* (Worker 2)

These situations were often associated with frustration over receiving an insufficient food bag or not receiving one at all. Staff expressed understanding for these reactions, recognizing that unmet expectations in already vulnerable circumstances can provoke distress. Worker 4 recalled a response she had received that underscored the frustration:

> *"What am I supposed to do? I'll have to go steal stuff because I don't have any food at home. Or they might say, 'that person got more than me.' But we just pack what we get – it's a bit like the lottery. You get what you get."* (Worker 4)

These emotional responses ranging from gratitude to frustration reflect underscore how the unpredictability of food aid can impact not only physical nourishment but also dignity and emotional wellbeing of the users'.

4.2.5 Stigma and the embodied experience of shame

All workers were aware of and mentioned the stigma associated with receiving food aid. Some of the workers mentioned that they were trying to have good communication and to always give a smile to the users when coming to the food banks to reduce the stigma. Worker 3 recalled:

> *"I think everything is about communication. The way we are meeting them, I think we are always trying to meet them with a positive greeting, welcome. Of course we can't like start a five minute conversation with each and every person but we are always trying to have a happy face and a positive attitude."* (Worker 3)

Moreover, the embodied nature of food aid stigma was clearly described by Worker 4, who highlighted how users' behaviour in relation to queuing reflects varying degrees of shame and social discomfort.

> "*When it comes to the stigma, we call it the line of shame, but it is not official, it's just inside of these walls. [...] They need to stand in line, and I think that thing is of course something that is very difficult to do but they need to do it. There are some people that come one hour early to wait in the line and don't mind being seen standing there, others come and go very quickly."* (Worker 4)

According to the workers, some users also appeared to express feelings of shame associated with using the food bank. This acted as a barrier to accessing support despite an obvious need for some users. While some conveyed this through subtle body language, others were more explicit in articulating their discomfort. Worker 2 said:

> *"When a new one comes, the first thing they say is that they feel this shame. So they are ashamed to come here and they may have been on their way here several times. But that there is this shame, that oh, there are other people there and so."* (Worker 2)

These reflections highlight how stigma remains a powerful barrier to food bank access, shaping both how users experience aid and how staff work to preserve dignity through everyday acts of care and communication.

4.3 Users

The following section highlights the results from 11 interviews with food bank users, resulting in the emergence of four themes. The four themes are: *patterns and barriers of use, food banks impact on the daily life, emotions and social aspects of receiving food aid and experiences and perceptions of the received food.*

4.3.1 Patterns and barriers of use

Frequency of use

The results show that food bank use varies in frequency among participants. This variation is partly explained by the differing policies on how often users are permitted to visit, which varies between food banks. However, there were different factors impacting the frequency of usage. Several users stated that they adapt their visits to what is permitted, while some stated that actual visits also were shaped by needs, accessibility in everyday life and proximity to the food bank. For instance, a user of the social supermarket (Food bank 1) described her visits as flexible and often spontaneous:

> *"I can book three times a week, but I usually drop in when I am passing by if I have been exercising or if I have been to the library, then I always take the opportunity to drop in because it is not possible to know what goods are inside."* (User 1)

In contrast, User 2 utilising Food bank 2 expressed challenges in aligning his schedule with the food bank´s opening hours. Despite these contrasts, all users expressed that the location of the food bank was not a barrier to accessing the food bank. On the contrary, many described them as conveniently located, often with nearby bus stops and accessible by public transport.

Emotional barriers

In addition, to mentioned factors impacting the usage, some of the users stated that they had emotional considerations that played a role in shaping food bank use. Some users described feelings of guilt and discomfort associated with perceiving food aid. These emotions were often tied to a perception that others might be in greater need, which created an internal moral conflict. As result, some individuals reported limiting their visits although that they were in hardship. User 2 reflected: *"I feel bad about using it sometimes because I feel like others might need it more. Otherwise, I might have come more often."*. This highlights how moral

considerations can lead individuals to self-limit their access to food aid, even when in genuine need.

4.3.2 Food banks' impact on the daily life

Participants consistently highlighted the significant role food bank use plays in their everyday lives. While the primary function is access to food, its broader impact was generally described in terms of financial relief and improved quality of life, contributing to an improved sense of well-being. User one described how food bank use had enabled a greater sense of financial flexibility and quality of life:

> *"It gives a golden edge in another way. Because you get money for things that I wouldn't have otherwise. And that makes a big difference for quality of life too. I mean, you don't have to be rich to feel rich."* (User 1)

Although all participants were experiencing financial hardship where the food bank provided crucial support their daily life, it was evident that the dependency varied. A few expressed that they were not using the food banks as much as they were allowed to, since they also bought things themselves. On the other hand, for some this food aid was described as vital for their survival: *"It has a big impact, it's 'worth gold', you get food in your stomach. Otherwise I wouldn't even have had noodles, we count every penny at home."* (User 3)

These results illustrate how food aid, beyond satisfying immediate nutritional needs, can reduce everyday financial stress and contribute well-being.

4.3.3 Emotions and social aspects of receiving food aid

Feelings towards the food bank usage

Although the majority of the users expressed their gratefulness for the possibility to utilize the food banks, feelings of shame, exclusion and ambivalence towards receiving food in this form also emerged. For instance, some of the users expressed a paradox with the feeling of gratitude but a negative feeling of taking someone else's place. User 4 recalled:

> *"It helps a lot and so, I'm so grateful to be able to come here and get food. As long as I get something, because I know that sometimes they don't let anyone in, that is, then, I kind of get a pain in my heart in some way, but it is what it is." (User 4)*

Furthermore, when asked to describe how they feel about coming to the food bank, several participants expressed feelings of shame in connection with starting to use the food bank. For many, this was combined with a new and unfamiliar

situation, which meant openly admitting financial vulnerability, which was experienced as both embarrassing and stigmatizing. Some of the users expressed feelings about standing in line outside food banks as something negative. User 5 described his experience of standing in the que as "*a bit odd, like standing in the poor man's line.*". Another one, user 2 expressed that receiving this help clashed with the feeling of wanting to cope on his own and that others might have it worse:

> "*At first it was very embarrassing. I've never had to do that before. You want to cope with yourself, and then you think that there are people who are worse off than me, with family and children, so they need this help more. That's why it felt a little embarrassing at first.*" (User 2)

Furthermore, the experience of shame was reinforced in some cases by a concern about the opinions of those around you and that there was a feeling of signalling that you don't have much money. User 1 said, *"There is a huge awareness around, because food is also status."*. Another participant described it as being exposed to a kind of silent judgment: "*At first it was embarrassing, you feel ashamed and look at how people look at you and so on. People have opinions about a lot of things you should and shouldn't do.*" (User 3). It turned out that such or similar feelings prevented people from seeking help, even when the need is real and that they did not have a choice than to get food aid.

In addition, there were mixed feelings among the users of getting redistributed food that would otherwise go to waste. Some viewed it as a positive thing and considered it a good solution to the food waste problem, even describing it as a source of pride. However, User 4 expressed that, in the beginning, it was difficult to understand why people with less financial means should be the ones eating food waste: *"Why would they give people food that's already expired or something?"*. This contrast in perspective shows the complexity and contrast of users' perception and their mixed feelings upon use.

Users' interactions with workers

All participants expressed a clearly positive attitude towards the staff. Several described feeling safe asking for help and always being treated kindly and respectfully. Some even felt that they had developed a kind of relationship with the workers, something that was also noticeable on site through the warmth and consideration that characterized their interactions. User 6 showed her gratitude for their work by saying *"They are so cute. Yes, and what a job they do and they don't get one crown for it either. Yes, they are great. You start to believe in humanity."*.

However, it was evident that workers held a degree of authority, as they were responsible for deciding when users could enter the food bank, and in some cases, who received food and what type of food was distributed.

4.2.4 Experiences and perceptions of the received food

Despite a general appreciation for the food offered by the food banks, several participants expressed that the food parcels and the social food supermarket mainly functions as a complement rather than a full alternative to shopping yourself. As User 5 stated: *"You can't make dinner out of flour, salt, etc. But it works as a complement."*

There was also a clear understanding that the contents of the food bags and in the store vary, as the goods often consist of surplus or food close to or past its expiration date. User 4 reflected: *"But they don't have... they don't get fresh stuff, I understand that. But it's still something."*.

The majority stated that they were able to eat most of the food that was distributed, but that the quality of the food could be a problem, especially when it came to fruits and vegetables. User 5 stated: *"I'm able to eat all but the problem is that the vegetables could be a bit dodgy even though you get them right away. But otherwise I eat everything."*. Since the quality of some items was bad, it was mentioned that it often forced them to consume the food as quickly as possible. Many also pointed out that they used different strategies, such as cutting out bad parts or freezing the food, to make the most of it.

A recurring thought was that the food bags sometimes lacked certain basic items that are required to be able to cook complete meals. User 3 said:*"There are a lot of different things in the bag. But it would have been easier if it was half dairy and half meat, to be able to make a meal,"*. Others pointed out that they often needed to supplement with, for example, oil, cheese or onions, items that are rarely included but are often needed in cooking.

At the same time, there was a clear acceptance of these shortcomings even though they expressed that they often wished for more food. User 5 expressed: *"I don't feel like you can just come here and demand that everything be there... but of course you would be happy if there was a little more."*.

A few also highlighted difficulties to make use of all the food, especially when large quantities of a food, such as bread, were distributed. User 7 recalled*: "Sometimes you get a lot of bread, you don't always have time to eat it but you don't want to throw it away."* In addition, some foods were not appreciated by everyone in the household, which created additional challenges. User 7 continued

to explain: *"Sometimes you get food that the children don't eat, for example tofu and vegetarian stuff. Then I usually Google the recipes, but it often doesn't turn out so good.".* This illustrates that while the food support is appreciated , it often falls short of fully meeting dietary needs or preferences, requiring recipients to adapt and make additional purchases to ensure balanced and acceptable meals.

Finally, based on the qualitative data from both food bank workers and users, several key insights can be drawn regarding the food bank structure, challenges, emotions evoked, and the impact of food bank usage.

5. Discussion

The following chapter reviews new refined themes and describes how they interact with the analytical framework. This section also includes a deeper discussion and covers the methodological limitations in detail.

5.1 Final themes

Despite the interview study and literature review focusing on the same topic, the results reached similar, yet not exactly the same conclusions. The differences were slight but important which led to a further analysis of the results to create a comprehensive understanding of the results. This synthesis highlighted how each study addressed the same themes from different perspectives, demonstrating both their interconnectedness and their complementary nature. As a result, a holistic understanding of the topic was developed.

Thus, this further analysis resulted in the development of six final themes, as is seen in Table 7. The following six themes unfold: *emotions upon using food banks, experiences and perceptions of received food, users' interactions with workers, access and barriers for food bank usage, stigma avoidance techniques,* and *food banks' impact on daily life* (see Table 7). This table is composed of the results of both parts of the study to identify similarities and highlight differences in a comprehensive manner. Even though the themes appear to stand alone, they are closely interlinked and part of the whole perception of a food bank from the user's perspective. This highlights the complexity and paradoxes of food in general within food systems (Ericksen, 2008).

As for the first theme, emotions upon using food banks, this theme was centred surrounding the different feelings evoked when attending a food bank. The common feelings observed were feeling stigmatized, embarrassed, ashamed, grateful and dissatisfied. Secondly, experiences and perceptions of received food showcased that users' opinion relating to received food was insufficient. Thirdly, users'

interaction with workers led to emotional and social aspects of receiving food aid and the actual interactions within a food bank. The fourth theme, organisational structures and challenges focused on differences among food bank models, and patterns and barriers of use. The fifth, stigma avoidance techniques focused how users and workers avoid stigma. Finally, the sixth theme, food banks' impact on daily life captured how interviewees frame their impact of food banks in their day to day. According to the theoretical framework, the impact of food banks on food security is influenced by various factors. Our empirical findings are therefore in line with the theoretical framework proposed.

Table 7. Theme revisions of literature review & interview results

Final themes	Description	Derived from the review	Derived from the interview study
Emotions upon using food banks	Mixed emotions are evoked and expressed when using and working at a food bank.	Emotions among food bank users Gratefulness vs. dissatisfaction	Emotions and social aspects of receiving food aid Experienced emotional responses among food bank users
Experiences and perceptions of received food	Different perceptions and emotions to the perceived food.	Experiences and perceptions of received food	Experiences and perceptions of the received food
Users' interactions with workers	Interactions were positive in the interview study and described as tense in the literature, often shaped by underlying power imbalances.	User's interactions with workers	Emotions and social aspects of receiving food aid Sub-theme: Users' interaction with workers
Organisational structures and challenges	Different food bank models, policies, and scale highlight differences between the selected food banks, which posed certain challenges.	Access within the food bank	Organisational structures of the food bank Sub-themes: Access to the food bank The Fragility of the Food Flow and its Uncertainties Patterns and barriers of use Sub-theme: Frequency of use & emotional barriers
Stigma avoidance techniques	Avoidance techniques were explicitly used to reduce stigma.	Stigma avoidance techniques utilised by users	Stigma and the Embodied Experience of Shame
Food Banks' Impact on Daily Life	The food banks played a significant role in users' everyday lives, impacting their overall wellbeing.		The Food Banks Impact on the Daily Life

5.2 Discussion of themes

Emotions upon using food banks

As per the first finalised theme in the results, coinciding with previous literature, *Emotions upon using food banks*, point out that shame and stigma are the most consistently reported emotions (Middleton et al., 2018; Andriessen et al., 2022). This was displayed in the results as users explained having felt these emotions even before using the food bank thus serving as a barrier for usage, thus impacting *access* to food. This underscores that users can have a perception of the food bank before having an experience of using it, indicating that people's opinions are shaped by beliefs or expectations prior to using them. This can further indicate that these preconceived views stem from social constructs.

Through the exemplification of power structures and emotional tensions between users and workers, food banks are revealed to be social arenas. Which in line with Practice Theory can be understood as fields, spaces characterized by power dynamics, as conceptualized by Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, see Houston, 2002). This is explicitly demonstrated through instances such as the mentioned "poor man's line" where users must wait in line to receive their food. This act of waiting, as per Bourdieu is in itself an act of power, as posed by Herz (2022). Furthermore, the feelings evoked when receiving food aid can be connected to users' *Habitus*, shaping how they feel and act within this field (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002).

Shame can be viewed as social emotion evoked based on social structures and interactions within society. Since *Habitus* is influenced by what we think, feel, and how we act, through deeply learned dispositions shaped through socialisation (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002), what we perceive as shameful and not relies entirely on how we view social structures. Inherently, in the context of the studied food banks, the experience and perception of the user are heavily shaped by their capital when entering the *Field*. Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1979, see Houston, 2002; Bourdeu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016) sees capital as a way to understand social class which becomes evident in the case of food banks because one is attending in the first place due to a lack of economic capital.

However, *Habitus* is not deterministic, it is the result of a continuous individual process which evolves over time, which was evident in how the stigma associated with food banks can diminish through repeated use (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002; Bourdeu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016). As individuals become more familiar

with how food banks operate, their perception of the food bank as a social field can shift, leading to greater comfort and reduced shame.

Furthermore, the different forms of *capital* also affect how individuals navigate in different social fields, in this case the food banks (Bourdieu, 1979, see Houston, 2002). Likewise, the amount of *capital* among users varies due to their different backgrounds and *Habitus,* impacting their ability to navigate in this *Field*. The shame and stigma that one feels in these situations can illustrate a form of social exclusion and feelings of inferiority which may indicate a lack of social *capital* as well.

However, some users demonstrate the building of social *capital* through relationships with food bank workers and other users. It was also shown that through the support gained from a food bank, users gained greater financial flexibility which indicates differences in *capital* being present before and after the practice of food banks. With these emotions it is possible that users felt they had greater or lesser *access, availability,* and *utilisation* of food. In the case that users perceived higher *access, availability*, and *utilisation* it could be attributed to the increase in comfortability in using food banks, impacting their overall food security (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009). When users felt *less access, availability*, and *utilisation* it could be due to their perceptions of what they felt upon using the food bank and how they valued what they received.

Experiences and perceptions of received food

In the second finalised theme, *Experiences and perceptions of received food,* the dissatisfaction with the quantity, quality, and variety of the food received by users which aligns with previous research (Neter et al., 2020). This can be interpreted to be an indication of the misalignment with their *Habitus*. As for example, the receiving of food that does not align with their preferences, which are closely tied to cultural background, economic resources, upbringing, and social identity, thus connected to their *Habitus* (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002). Returning to the power dynamics present in the *Field*, and proven by this combined study, when one receives food there is interplay between gratitude and dissatisfaction which evoked feelings such as frustration and furthered stigmatisation. Despite the interview results showing that the overall user experience was positive, one cannot ignore that all feelings evoked play a role in the users' experience, as presented in previous literature (e.g. Van der Horst et al., 2014; Neter et al., 2020).

Moreover, the results showed that *availability* is clearly not a constant in food banks. What is meant by this is highlighted when in the interview study it was noted that the biggest challenge was the unpredictability of the quantity and content of

surplus food donated mainly from retailers. This may serve as one of the most compelling indications of the challenges in relying on food banks to ensure food security, as the findings highlight a high degree of uncertainty regarding the type and quantity of food available (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009). This can be further demonstrated by the lack of variety and quality of the food received, not to mention that personal preferences are rarely met. Moreover, when the content is not complete to make a full meal it is not truly available, which comes back to the users' *Habitus*. When food is not sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, food security cannot be achieved, this does not strictly refer to physical needs but includes preferences in their food habits and user satisfaction (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009).

It can then be argued that dissatisfaction regarding the content received is connected to the uncertainties of the food flow of the food bank, which was stated by the workers. Thus, impacting the availability and the possibilities of achieving utilisation through using food banks. This was further exemplified when users mentioned the hardship regarding the content of food parcels in relation to being able to make complete meals.

When evaluating *utilisation*, it is tightly connected to *availability* and its uncertainties, when content and quality are lacking it is nearly impossible to have an adequate diet (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009). On the other hand, if it were not for this provided food, one's physical needs would not be met at all, thus their overall wellbeing would possibly be in an even worse state. The findings indicate that the support provided helped alleviate the impact of limited economic *Capital* by offering greater financial flexibility and enhancing social *Capital*. As a result, general wellbeing improved. This suggests that even if optimal *utilisation* was not fully achieved, the intervention still had significant positive outcomes. However, it is important to question the fact that if these dimensions are lacking, this means that the overall *stability* is impacted and one's food security is under threat.

Users' interactions with workers

The third theme, *Users' interactions with workers,* comes back to *Field*. The results highlight the importance of focusing on the interactions between workers and users, as these encounters deeply affect emotional experiences and perceptions, reflecting underlying power dynamics. Furthermore, it was also pointed out that tensions exist between both sides of a food bank which returns to the expected gratitude which makes users feel inferior, as highlighted by previous research (Komter, 2007; Van der Horst et al., 2014; Rombach et al., 2017; Neter et al., 2020; Andriessen et al. 2022; Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). Understanding these dynamics has been stated to be a key to improving training and fostering more respectful

relationships in food aid settings and reducing stigma (Von der Horst et al., 2014; Rombach et al., 2017). Despite the literature stating that some interactions in food banks hold tension, the interviews showed that users consistently described their interactions with food bank staff as positive. Their interactions held kindness and respect, where many users felt a personal connection with the workers and expressed deep gratitude for their dedication and compassion, pointing to an overall positive experience and perception of their food bank use.

Hence, this demonstrates that food banks facilitate the building of social *Capital* through relationships with food bank workers and other users. The study also illustrates that through the support provided, it increases users' financial flexibility which indicates differences in *Capital*, before and after engaging in the "practice" with the food bank.

Within this *Field*, users often face emotional dilemmas that evolve over time. As they become more familiar with the practices and norms of the food bank, their *Habitus* adapts. This since they learn how to navigate the space more confidently, which was described in the interview study. Although social tensions and hierarchies may persist, the accumulation of various forms of *Capital*, social, cultural, and economic can perhaps reduce feelings of stigma and contribute to a greater sense of belonging and empowerment within the *Field*.

Organisational structures and challenges to food bank use

The fourth theme, *Organisational structures and challenges to food bank use*, illustrates the differences between food bank models and likewise can serve to show how *Fields*, and consequently experiences and perceptions vary. The food bank itself is a form of provided *access* to food for people being food insecure. Yet, as observed in the results, *access* is not straightforward and differed between the food banks policies, thus also impacting *availability* of food and possibilities for *utilisation*. For instance, some food banks required proof of eligibility which proved to be a barrier to *access*, which could reinforce stigma. Although all food banks were located centrally, there were considerably less food banks compared to conventional supermarkets, thus making it less accessible to users.

Referring to frequency of usage, it varied among participants and was influenced by both institutional policies regarding frequency of use and personal circumstances such as need, daily routines, and accessibility. Similarly, their frequency of use pertained to how they felt about using food banks, which is another form of how *Habitus* is displayed, since it depends on the context where one finds themselves (Bourdieu, 1979, see Houston, 2002; Bourdeu, 1979, see Sato et al., 2016). While some users visited spontaneously when nearby, others faced challenges aligning visits with limited opening hours or feelings of worthiness, serving as a barrier

towards usage. Despite this, all interviewees found the food banks to be conveniently located.

This theme cannot exclude the unpredictability surrounding the quantity and quality of the donated food which is directly linked to all dimensions of food security (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009) and showed to directly influence the overall experience of the user. Challenges in the suppliance of food vary among food bank models and are particularly difficult for food banks that distribute pre-packed bags, especially regarding small-scale food banks. The limited food supply can force staff to decide who receives aid and who does not which demonstrates that food banks have differing impact on food security on an individual level not only based on *Habitus* and *Capital*. In our observations, the smallest food bank faced the most challenges regarding this inconsistency of food. In addition to food supply issues, some food banks struggle with lack of volunteers and funding, while others face low public awareness and misconceptions about food safety related to the items that past their expiration date, which aligns with challenges posed in the literature review (Van der Horst, 2014). These challenges highlight both logistical difficulties and social barriers that impact the effectiveness of food aid.

In the existing literature, social supermarkets have been viewed as a more inclusive approach to food banks (Andriessen et al., 2022; Ranta et al., 2024). This was observed to be the case in this study with food bank 1, where users' had a limited degree of freedom of choice within the social supermarket. In food banks 2 and 3 however, users relied on food parcels which offered minimal freedom of choice. Users could reject items or opt between alternatives, such as pork or no pork in their parcel, which can impact their dignity (Andriessen et al., 2022; Ranta et al., 2024). Therefore, the social supermarket model allowed higher freedom of choice for users, which aligns with previous research, though still not as it would be if they were shopping at a conventional supermarket (ibid.). It can be concluded that the users' *Habitus* will impact how a user perceives and values what is in the food bag, as personal preferences and background play a substantial role in the perception of the food they receive (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002). In the context of social supermarkets, users' *Habitus* may to some extent align with the choices available, allowing for a partial sense of agency and alignment with personal or cultural food practices.

However, this perceived inclusivity must be critically examined. *Access* to social supermarkets often requires a certain level of economic *Capital*, as the food is not distributed for free, and requires proof of eligibility. This raises questions about the extent to which such models are truly inclusive, potentially challenging prior literature that has portrays them as such (Andriessen et al., 2022; Ranta et al., 2024). These findings suggest that while the social supermarket model may offer improved user experience in terms of autonomy and dignity, as pointed out in literature (de

Souza 2019; Andriessen et al., 2022; Ranta et al., 2024), it simultaneously risks excluding individuals with the least financial and social *Capital*.

Stigma avoidance techniques

In the fifth theme, *Stigma avoidance techniques* it is demonstrated how users and workers act to reduce stigma. In the case of users, they employ techniques to avoid or reduce their own feelings of stigma, and in the case of the workers, what they do to reduce stigma for the users.

Stigma is ever-present in food banks and has been proven in the literature to not only be an emotion felt by users but also used as a form of power (Middleton et al., 2018; Andriessen et al., 2022; Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). According to the literature, stigma is also used, consciously or unconsciously, as a form of control, worsening the power imbalance and affecting the user's experience (Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). This showed in the literature review pertaining to an avoidance of the food bank entirely until it was their last resort, trying to befriend or limit contact with volunteers to minimise shame, and employing positive and reassuring self-talk surrounding the use of food banks (Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). This type of power imbalances was also noticed during the observations in the interview study, yet it was not explicitly expressed so they were deemed unconscious.

This further justifies how the food banks could be seen as a *Field*, where power imbalances and interactions come into play (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, see Houston 2002). This is the case in this theme because the actions taken to minimise stigma showcase how the users compete in the arena known as the *Field*. This further highlighting how in acting against stigma, there is a recognition of the power imbalances present, which were highlighted in this study.

Furthermore, as this theme centers around stigma, it was shown to be an emotion rooted in social structures and is thus tightly connected to *Habitus,* which determines what one views as shameful or stigmatising (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002). The avoidance techniques are a way to learn how to act within the *Field*, which then impacts the position one has which changes over time, since habitus is not deterministic (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002; Bourdieu 1979, see Sato et al., 2016). This is evident in how the stigma associated with food banks can diminish through repeated use. As individuals become more familiar with how food banks operate, their perception of the food bank as a social *Field* may shift or be perceived to have shifted, leading to greater comfort and reduced shame. This further reinstates how *Field* is affected not only by *Habitus* but also *Capital*, in the case of food banks, as both social and economic *Capital* can be gained (Bourdieu 1979, see Sato et al., 2016).

The avoidance techniques can either increase or hinder the users' food security. Their food security can be increased in the case that they use these techniques to get better use of the food banks. However, if their form of stigma avoidance is to avoid going to the food bank alltogether, their food securtiy will be further comprimised because all four dimensions of food security would be threatened (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009).

Food banks' impact on daily life

In the sixth and final theme, *Food banks' impact on daily life*, the general impact of the food bank on the users' life and overall experience is demonstrated. Through this study it is evident that that food banks have a significant impact on the users' daily life and overall well-being. For some, this aid was an essential part of their survival, while others relied on the food bank less often as they could afford to access food in other ways. This showed a difference in *Capital* among food bank users in Sweden and that food insecurity varies from user to user and food banks, which might be influenced by the differing models of each food bank as highlighted by Andriessen et al. (2022).

Although there is a positive impact on the users' daily life and food security since the food banks provide increased *access*, *availability* and possibility for *utilisation* for vulnerable individuals, these all depend on the food bank's *stability* (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009). When assessing the *stability* of food bank usage, it becomes clear that relying solely on food banks is not a sustainable long-term strategy for ensuring food security. This, as per the definition of the dimension, means that this food security should be resilient to events of sudden shock, to which the current food bank model may not be equipped to withstand (FAO, 1996; FAO, 2001; FAO, 2009). Furthermore, this being the last dimension also reinstates the importance of the other three dimensions. If *access*, *availability*, and *utilisation* are not met, *stability* is not achieved, and food bank users cannot be fully food secure.

The results showed how food banks are sensitive to change because of the heavy reliance on their unpredictable operation and due their dependence on consistent volunteer support and the unpredictable availability of surplus food. This dimension is also referred to as *sustainability*, emphasizing the importance of securing future access to food (HPLE, 2020). This raises critical questions about whether food banks can truly be considered a sustainable solution for addressing food insecurity for these individuals, particularly in the face of systemic shocks or even day-to-day disruptions, such as volunteer or food shortages.

Furthermore, food banks rely on surplus food which otherwise would go to waste. As per SDGs, reducing food waste is currently a sustainable development

goal (UN, n.d.). Hence, if successful policies and practices prevent food waste at the source, what will those who rely on the surplus food eat?

5. 3 Analytical framework breakdown

Altogether, the revision of themes has provided us with a new typology of factors describing the impact of food banks on food security, highlighting the applicability of the analytical framework. The provided model demonstrates patterns similar to previous models exploring determinants of one's behaviour in relation to food and how that impacts the perceptions and experiences of food bank users (Shepheard 1999; Furst et al. 1996; Brunsø et al. 2002; Fernqvist et al., 2024). Our model explicitly explains these factors and their interconnection with food bank usage. Moreover, even when separating the framework part by part, they are strongly interconnected.

The first part of the analytical framework focuses on the redistribution of the surplus food that feeds into food banks. The factors impacting food banks themselves are shown to be related to their central uncertainties. The uncertainties cover the actual food flow, concerning the quality, quantity, and variety, of food donated food, the type of food bank, the type of policies of each food bank and their scale and model, as shown in Figure 7.
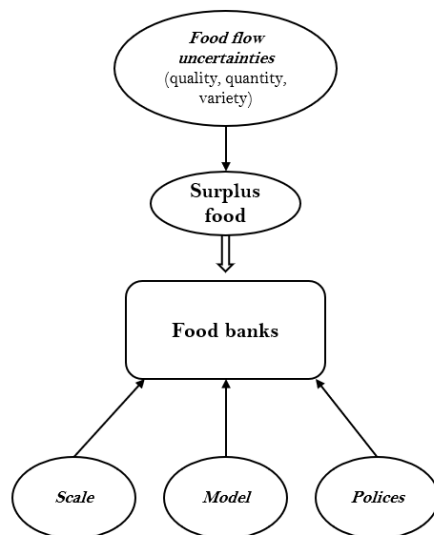
Figure 7. Part one of the analytical framework and its factors

As the thematic findings illustrate, initial negative preconceptions about food banks often acted as barriers to their use, thereby limiting access to food, thus impacting other dimensions of food security negatively. These preconceptions were shown to be rooted in shame and stigma (Middleton et al., 2018; Andriessen et al., 2022; Brennan-Tovey et al., 2023). However, the results also showed that these

perceptions frequently shifted after first-time use, as direct experience with the food banks altered users' views. This change in perception increased the likelihood of continued use, thereby improving access and contributing to greater food security.

Moreover, users' lived experiences with food banks significantly shaped their practices and mixed emotional responses, shown in Figure 8. These feelings were closely tied to individual experiences, revealing a range of emotional reactions from gratitude to shame, as presented in previous research (Middleton et al., 2018; Andriessen et al., 2022). Notably, shame and stigma were not only experienced by users but were also actively addressed by both users and workers through stigma-avoidance techniques. These stigma avoidance techniques may be a way forward to improve user experiences and perception.
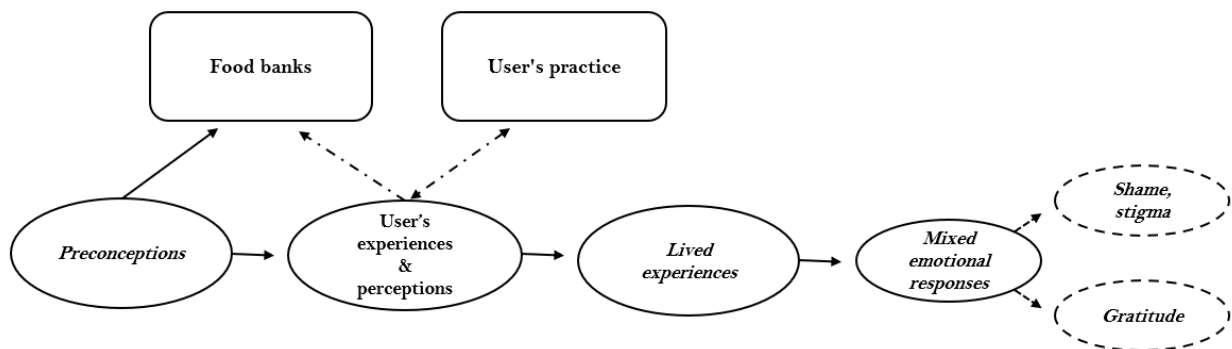

Figure 8. Part two of the analytical framework and its factors

Furthermore, the users' practice is affected by factors beyond their perception and experiences, shown in Figure 9. Results illustrate how the *field, capital* and *habitus* strongly impacted the user's practice, which is in line with Bourdieu's practice theory (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, see Houston, 2002; Bourdieu 1979, see Sato et al., 2016). This is exemplified in the case of the feelings evoked when receiving food aid, which is connected to their *habitus*. Economic and social *capital* showed to be improved by the usage of the food banks. When acknowledging food banks as a *field*, it is important to recognise how the emotions evoked change over time, thus impacting how the *field* is perceived and understood, as presented by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1989, see Houston, 2002; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, see Houston, 2002; Bourdieu 1979, see Sato et al., 2016).
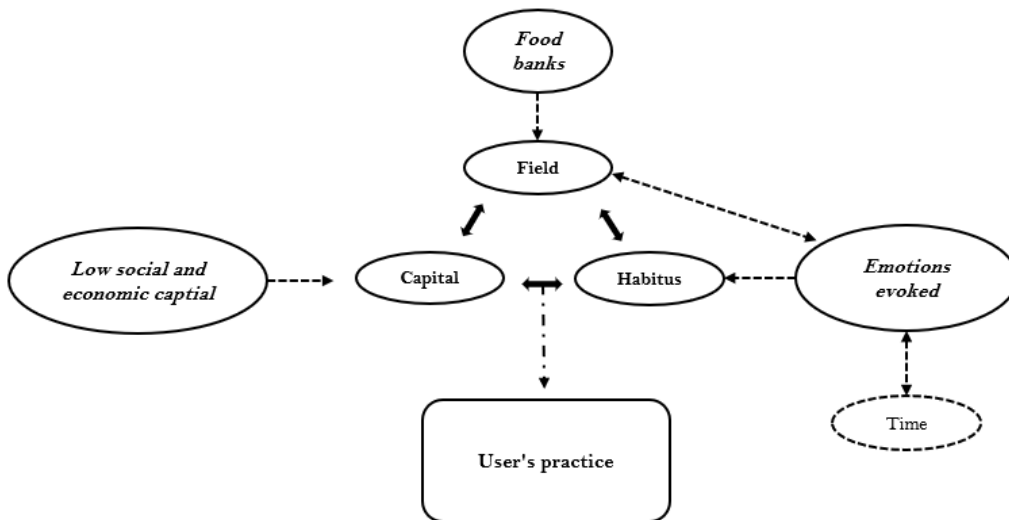
Figure 9. Part three of the analytical framework and its factors

The intricate combination of all the factors described show the interconnectivity of the impact of food security. The food bank itself not only contributes to food security by supplying actual food, but affects social factors as well. Thus impacting users' perceptions and experiences, as presented by Fernqvist et al., (2024) and Enriquez and Archila-Godinez (2022), see Figure 10 below. This in turn could impact the possibilities of reducing food insecurity.

As demonstrated in the study, when one or more of the pillars are compromised, overall stability and thus food security itself is put at risk (FAO, 1996; FAO 2001; FAO, 2009; HPLE, 2020). Therefore, the impact of food banks on food security is highly context-dependent, shaped by the definition of food security and its personal social dimensions. Nonetheless, it is also significantly influenced by the organisational structure and its challenges identified in the study.
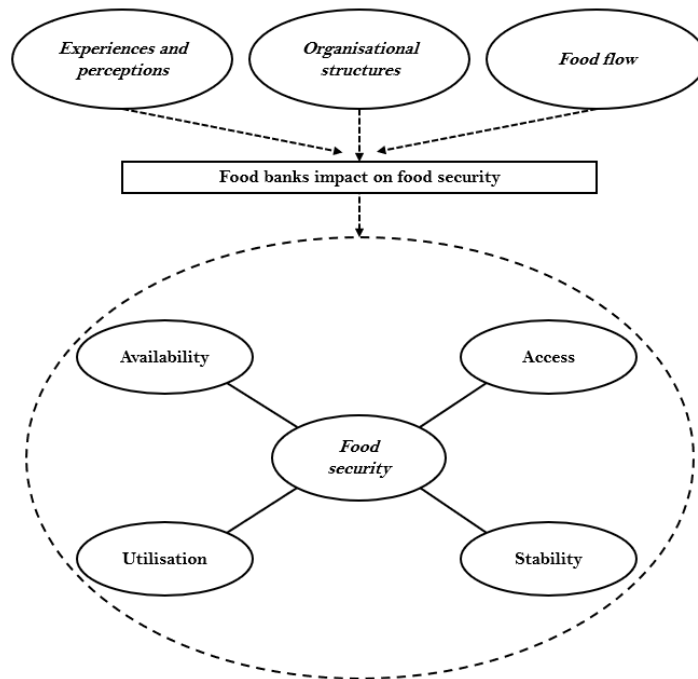
Figure 10. Part four of the analytical framework and its factors

The combined results section of this study demonstrates how the revised themes reflect the complexity and nuance of the initial individual themes. These results suggest that many of the themes identified in the literature came to life in the interviews, highlighting the interconnectivity and intricacy of the studies. This alignment shows that the interview study findings reinforce previous research from other countries, confirming that Sweden is part of a wider European trend. This indicates that although food bank systems may differ structurally between countries, the lived experiences of users often share common emotional and social characteristics. However, when differences are apparent, these may be attributed to variations in research objectives.

While the research included has largely focused on emotional and organisational aspects of food aid, our study specifically aimed to explore how food banks contribute to food security from the users' perspective. This study has thereby highlighted a dimension which has received limited attention in the existing literature. Through this focus, our research adds a new layer to the understanding of food bank use. It highlights not only the emotional and social dynamics, but also the practical role of food banks in alleviating food insecurity in Sweden. Therefore, further strengthening the connection to the theoretical framework and the overall relevance of this study.

The analytical framework proved to function as a tool to give new insights to the topic explored. By this it is understood that when applying the framework, the

complexity of the separate, yet connected factors behind the usage of food banks can be better understood. The framework also serves as a tool for further reflection and analysis regarding what aspects need further attention.

5.4 Implications for policy and practice

This study is a further indication that the current food system is an unsustainable one which does not guarantee food security for all, as per the definition of a sustainable food system (FAO, 2018). Our research further encourages the questioning about whether food banks are a sustainable solution, or merely serve as temporary alleviations that ignore deeper, structural issues, which require action.

While food banks have emerged as a symptom of inadequate waste management strategies, playing a dual role in alleviating food insecurity among vulnerable populations while redistributing surplus food from becoming waste (European Commission, 2017; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005; Bazerghi et al., 2016; Sundin et al., 2023) they are not sustainable solutions. This study shows that food banks offer vital support to vulnerable people, offering an alternative to traditional retailers. However, previous research has shown that while food banks reduce immediate hunger, they do little to challenge the root causes of poverty and food insecurity (Thompson 2018; Sundin 2022; Middleton et al., 2018). Hence, it can be described as a "band-aid solution".

In Sweden, regarded as an egalitarian welfare state, the existence and expansion of food banks raise critical questions (Bäckman & Nelson, 2017). Despite the country's wealth and food surplus, socioeconomic inequality is rising and so is moderate to severe food insecurity (Bäckman & Nelson, 2017; FAO et al., 2024). This paradox, how people can be food insecure in a welfare state where food waste is abundant, challenges the assumption that food *availability* alone guarantees food security. It underscores that *access*, not merely *availability*, is central, and without these factors, *utilisation* and *stability* are compromised. If food bank users never know what food they will receive, or if they are entirely dependent on food parcels with limited choice and limited alignment with their preferences, it becomes difficult to consider their situation as food secure. Especially since the provision is uncertain and obtained in a way that may threaten the users' dignity (De Souza 2019; Andriessen et al., 2022; Ranta et al., 2024).

There should be action taken regarding policy implications that enforce the prioritisation of the food waste hierarchy where policy measures should ensure that surplus food is first redistributed for human consumption before being directed to any other use (De Laurentiis, 2024, Jurgilevich et al., 2016). While some levels of food waste is unavoidable within any food system, what can, and must, be transformed is *how* this waste is managed to ensure long-term sustainability and

stability. In this context, food banks are likely to remain a vital component of the food system both for reducing waste as well as reducing the rising food insecurity. However, to maximize the potential of food banks, systemic improvements are necessary, as pointed out in previous literature (Gentilini, 2013; Ranta et al., 2024). This includes strengthening distribution channels, establishing more consistent organizational structures across food banks, and ensuring equitable access to surplus food, as highlighted by this study.

From a policy perspective, the growing institutional reliance on food banks highlights important concerns about long-term sustainability and social responsibility. If food banks become normalized permanent structures, they risk reinforcing structural inequalities by alleviating only the symptoms of food insecurity rather than addressing its causes. Additionally, as surplus food donation becomes a normalized and low-effort practice for retailers through their donations, it prompts questions on whether this is now embedded within corporate models, rather than stemming from altruism or genuine commitment to food waste prevention as prompted in the food waste hierarchy (Ericksson et al., 2015; Sanchez Lopez et al., 2020).

Achieving this requires shared responsibility, particularly from actors in the latter stages of the value chain, such as retailers and food service providers. These actors must move beyond symbolic commitments to food donation and instead engage in practices that are efficient, and above all consistent as this being the greatest challenge. Finally, all parties must align with the needs of food banks. Simply put, donating food should not be a passive act of offloading waste, but an active contribution to food security.

Moreover, government intervention is essential to support a coordinated and equitable redistribution system. In the absence of policy support, donations remain uneven and unpredictable, and logistical barriers continue to exist, ultimately undermining the food banks' ability to meet the stated growing needs of vulnerable populations (FAO, 2011). A proactive state role is therefore critical, not only to regulate and incentivise donations but also to ensure that food aid becomes a structured, fair, and stable support for those who need it.

Policies and previous research have focused on the environmental perspectives of food waste, excluding the socio-ethical dimensions (Johansson, 2021). Despite the rising existence of food banks due to a failing food system, their existence cannot be dismissed, as was proven they address urgent and ongoing needs. While addressing the root causes of food insecurity remains the ultimate goal, it is evident that doing so requires a holistic, multifaceted approach, one that is both complex and long-term in nature. However, food aid can become a social problem if it is

understood as a solution because it takes key focus away from the root causes (Johansson, 2021).

Finally, we return to the elephant in the room: waste as food and how this impacts those who eat it. We still cannot ignore the uncomfortable reality that some people have to consume food that has been discarded and the feelings that accompany this notion.

6. Limitations

Literature review

According to Bryman et al. (2016), a systematic literature review comes with certain limitations, particularly because it requires considerable time, resources, and experience. As mentioned, given the time constraints of this study, a systematized approach was adopted instead. However, due to said limited timeframe and narrow scope, it is important to acknowledge that some of the strengths typically associated with full systematic reviews may be compromised, such as the thoroughness of said review. Another limitation is the language selection of English which could have excluded relevant results from different countries in their pertaining language. Moreover, conducting a systematic review requires transparency in the search process, evaluation of the selected studies, and thorough keeping records of each step in order for the process to be truly replicable. Accordingly, detailed records were documented throughout the review process to uphold transparency and enable future replication of this study.

Interviews

Qualitative interviews are associated with some well-known limitations. They have often been criticised for being overly subjective, difficult to replicate, and having a lack of transparency (Bryman et al. 2016). Furthermore, the flexible and less standardized nature of qualitative research, makes exact replication challenging, as procedures often depend on the researcher's creativity and judgment (ibid.).

In addition, this study used a small non-random sample, which makes generalisation to the wider population problematic (Bryman et al. 2019). The observatory aspect of this study can be critisised since it relies on the researcher's unsystematic interpretations when determining what is important, as well as the close relationship between the researcher and the research subjects (Bryman et al. 2016).

Despite these limitations, this study has taken several steps to improve the quality and reliability of the research process to minimize the risk of personal influence and bias, although this is unavoidable (Bryman et al. 2016). To enhance credibility, all interviews are conducted using a semi-structured guide to ensure consistency, while allowing the flexibility needed to individually explore participants' experiences and perspectives. In addition, open-ended questions are used to minimize researcher influence on the results. The majority of interviews

were recorded and transcribed, which allowed for thorough and systematic analysis and reduced the risk of personal influence.

In terms of reliability and confirmability, the research process has been carefully documented and constantly revised for clarity. This includes detailed descriptions of the entire research and literature selection process to achieve transparency and a basis for potential future replication or review. Finally, since generalization in a statistical sense as for quantitative studies, it was not the purpose of this study. The goal was instead to make theoretical generalizations in developing the theory based on the results (Bryman et al. 2016).

Further limitations

Time and resource restraints limited the scope of this study. Similarly, due to the same reason, the literature review was systematized and not systematic. Moreover, due to the inconvenience of answering many questions for the food bank users, only the short interview guide was used for this study. Therefore, it is important to recognise that there is a risk of missing details about the users' experiences. When studying a vulnerable group of people, it is possible that those who agree to be interviewed may not reflect the entire reality. Likewise, because of the way people were recruited might not be an accurate representation of the experiences and perceptions of food bank users. Moreover, since the majority of the interviews were held in Swedish, translation of the citations might not capture the exact expression.

7. Conclusions

This study shows that while food banks play a crucial role in addressing immediate food insecurity and reducing food waste, they are not a sustainable solution to the systemic roots of food poverty. Often acting as temporary "band-aid" measures, food banks fall short in tackling the structural causes of food insecurity.

Our findings highlight the complexity of food banks as social fields, shaped by power relations, emotional dynamics, and organisational challenges, which significantly affect users' food security, perceptions, and experiences. Users often navigate a mix of gratitude, stigma, and frustration, reflecting the emotional toll of relying on food banks.

In Sweden, different food bank models contribute to food access in diverse ways by offering alternatives to conventional food retail. However, all models face the common challenge of unpredictable food flows, limiting their long-term reliability. While they provide essential short-term relief, food banks' effectiveness is constrained by broader societal forces and internal limitations and serve only as a compliment to users and not a primary source of food security.

A truly sustainable and just food system requires coordinated policy action, appropriate regulations, and a shift in responsibility toward retailers and food service providers. These actors must engage in consistent surplus food redistribution, not as waste management, but as a commitment to food security.

Despite their limitations, Swedish food banks have a meaningful impact on users' daily lives. Although experiences varied, the support they offered helped reduce food insecurity. This thesis adds to the limited literature on Swedish food banks by centering on user perspectives, offering insight into how food insecurity persists even within a welfare paradise.

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Popular science summary

Food insecurity in a "welfare paradise"

Ideally, a food system should feed everyone without compromising the future generations' possibility to have food. But today, we face a growing problem, while many people do not have enough to eat, large amounts of food are being thrown away. Food insecurity is a global issue and a rising problem in Sweden. Food security means always having enough safe and healthy food to eat, in a way that fits your needs, preferences, and culture. It means you do not have to worry about getting your next meal.

Food banks have become one way to reduce food waste and help people who do not have enough to eat. A food bank is a place where people can get free or reduced-price food if they do not have enough money to buy it themselves. While food banks support people in need, we still do not know enough about how they actually affect food security, especially from the users' point of view.

This study looked at how people who use food banks in Sweden experience and perceive them. The goal was to understand how food banks affect food security, not just by giving out surplus food, but by seeing how they help people who rely on them. The way this study understood this was by interviewing food bank users and workers, as well as studying previous literature on the topic. We looked at food banks by combining two perspectives: how well they help people get enough food (food security), and how people's backgrounds, like their social situation and personal experiences affected the experience of using a food bank.

The results showed that many users felt mixed feelings, such as feeling ashamed, yet thankful when receiving food. Likewise, the food offered often did not fully meet their needs in quality, quantity, or culturally. Some food banks helped more than others, depending on how they were organized and how often people could use them. Positive staff interactions helped reduce feelings of shame, but strict rules and unreliable food supplies were common problems.

Although food banks do reduce hunger, they are not a long-term solution. They depend on surplus food from stores and volunteers, which can be unstable. More research and governmental actions are needed to understand how to improve food banks, make food donations fairer, and reduce food waste in a way that helps people and supports a more sustainable food system.

Appendix 1

Database	Search within	Search	Search terms	Results
Scopus	Title, abstract, keywords	1	experience* OR perception*	4,602,241
		2	"food bank*" or "food pantr*"	1,817
		3	user* OR receiver* OR recipient*	2,794,490
		5	#1 AND #2 AND #3	85
Filter	Years 2008-2025, articles only, Europe only.			**23**
Web of science (all databases)	Topic (Title, abstract, keywords)	1	experience* OR perception*	6,857,507
		2	"food bank*" OR "food pantr*"	2,820
		3	user* OR receiver* OR recipient*	8,226,553
		5	#1 AND #2 AND #3	135 (136)
Filter	Years 2008-2024, articles only, Europe only			**25**

Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Food Bank Users

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. You will be anonymous throughout this study and you have the right to withdraw at any time during the interview. The information you provide will only be used for this study.

I thought I would briefly tell you some information about the study. Our study aims to understand the experience of using food banks in Sweden, focusing on the perspectives of those who rely on them. We want to explore how food banks, which distribute surplus food, impact food security. By hearing from users, we seek to assess the impact of these initiatives in Sweden.

Would you be comfortable being voice recorded, the material will be deleted/destroyed after the study is completed.

Do you give your consent to begin with the interview?

Questions

- Can you tell me a little about yourself and your background? (Gender, age, education, country, etc.)
- How does the food bank impact your daily life situation?
- How often do you use the food bank?

- What do you think about the food you receive?
- Are you able to eat the food you receive, and do you actually eat it? (why/why not)
- Do you usually understand how to cook and eat what you receive?

- Can you describe how you feel about coming to the food bank? (negative/positive/stands out)
- How would you describe the interactions with the workers/volunteers in the food bank?
- What could improve your experience if anything?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience?

Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Food Bank Workers

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. You will be anonymous and confidential you have the right to withdraw at any time during the study. The information will only be used for this study. Would you be comfortable being voice recorded the material will be deleted/destroyed after the study is completed.

1. Background

(Understanding the worker's role and perspective on food banks)

- Would you like to tell me about your background?
- Can you tell me about your role at the food bank and how long you've been working/volunteering here?
- What type of food bank is this, and how would you describe its main goals?
- Are you familiar with the concept of food security? If so, how do you define it?
- What kind of resources or training do you receive to support your role here?
- What challenges do you face in your work at the food bank? (E.g., lack of resources, emotional strain, high demand)
- What are your thoughts on food banks as a way to support people experiencing food insecurity?
- How do you perceive the role of food banks within the broader food system?

2. Observations of User Experience & Food Security

(Understanding workers' insights on food security and users' experiences)

- Are you aware of any challenges that food bank users face in accessing this food bank? If any, what are they?
- Do you believe the food bank provides enough variety and quality to meet users' needs? Why or why not?

- Have you noticed any gaps in the type of food available versus what users might need or prefer?
- How do you think food bank users feel about receiving food assistance?

3. Cultural & Dietary Considerations

(Examining how food banks accommodate different cultural and dietary needs)

- How does the food bank take into account users' cultural or dietary needs?
- Have you received feedback from users about the types of food offered? If so, what kind of feedback?
- Are there any efforts to source foods that align with different cultural preferences? If not, do you think this would be helpful?

4. The Food Bank Environment & Operations

(Exploring the organization and atmosphere of the food bank)

- How do you think the physical space of the food bank affects users' experiences?
- Do you think your current food distribution system (e.g., pre-packed bags, user choice) works well, or are there areas for improvement?
- How would you describe the interactions between staff/volunteers and food bank users?
- Do you feel that food bank users feel comfortable asking for help?

5. Social dynamics

(Understanding social dynamics within food banks)

- Have you observed users looking uncomfortable or hesitant when using the food bank? How does this typically manifest?
- What strategies does your food bank use (or could use) to make users feel more included/comfortable?
- Do you think food banks help integrate people into the community, or do they unintentionally create a divide?

6. Improving Food Banks & Their Impact

(Exploring long-term solutions, sustainability, and improvements)

- In your opinion, what are the biggest challenges food banks face in supporting food security?
- Are there any services or changes you think would improve the food bank experience for users?
- Do you believe food banks are a long-term solution to food insecurity, or should there be other approaches?

7. Closing and reflections

- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Publishing and archiving

☒ YES, I, Alva Lindberg, have read and agree to the agreement for publication and the personal data processing that takes place in connection with this

☒ YES, I, Lena Castellanos, have read and agree to the agreement for publication and the personal data processing that takes place in connection with this.

☐ NO, I/we do not give my/our permission to publish the full text of this work. However, the work will be uploaded for archiving and the metadata and summary will be visible and searchable.