

The Impacts of COVID-19 on Dutch Food Banks: A Call on Government to Guarantee the Right-to-Food

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The COVID-19 crisis has had a major impact on the provisioning of food aid to the poor, deepening within-country inequality across the world, including in the Netherlands. Over a million people in the Netherlands live below the poverty line (out of a population of approximately 17 million), of whom 272,000 are children aged 0 to 12. To assist this vulnerable group in meeting their basic needs, the Netherlands has an extensive network of food banks, comprising 170 local branches, which are entirely run by more than 12,000 volunteers. Mostly depending on redistributing food leftovers from supermarkets and donations from the private sector, the food banks aid about 150,000 of the most deprived people in the country. The current COVID crisis is seriously threatening the survival of this vital relief institution, crucially exposing the fragility of the system while simultaneously giving rise to private initiatives showing solidarity and resilience.

Four major challenges to the present-day and future functioning of Dutch food banks can be observed. Firstly, many food bank volunteers belong to COVID-19 risk groups and are therefore forced to stay at home. Secondly, the logistical operation—distributing food to the food banks and, subsequently, to clients—is severely constrained because of social distancing measures. Thirdly, widespread hoarding behavior of Dutch consumers—similar to that in most other affected high-income countries—has significantly reduced the supply of food. Finally, and most importantly, the economic repercussions of the crisis are expected to include a large influx of new clients becoming dependent on food assistance. In response to these adversities, food banks are calling for financial support to buy foodstuffs themselves, even though this runs counter to their mission to rely on excess food instead of monetary assistance. Some local branches, for example those in Amsterdam, have even had to switch to coupons,

to be spent in supermarkets, instead of direct food aid. The Dutch government has offered a one-time financial contribution of 4 million euros, but this covers less than half of the emergency fund that food banks have called for.

Due to their high degree of autonomy and differences, there is a wide range in local food bank responses. Whereas seventeen food banks have had to close their doors, others have managed to maintain a business-as-usual mode of functioning. To release pressure on local food banks and volunteers, the Dutch army has offered support in composing food parcels in regional distribution centers. Local branches have reorganized their logistical processes to allow for a 1.5-meter-distance operation, for example by bringing the food parcels to their clients instead of the normal practice of food collection from central distribution points.

Fortunately, individual and collective responses in society are shoring up the food bank system. Following an appeal by the Dutch minister of social affairs, many new volunteers, from younger age groups in particular, have offered their help, allowing most food banks to continue operating and even resulting in a surplus of volunteers in several localities. Overall, a large degree of resilience can be observed through ad hoc initiatives, such as hospitals serving meals for the food banks; fundraising by supermarkets, NGOs, and groups of citizens; and people offering to deliver food parcels. For example, supermarket chain Jumbo, in cooperation with suppliers, has donated hundreds of thousands of foodstuffs as well as initiated a “Stay Safe and Give” campaign, which asks customers to donate their bottle deposit to the food bank, aiming to raise a minimum of 10 million euros. On a smaller scale, supermarket chain Dirk van der Broek has raised over 55,000 euros from selling bunches of tulips, thereby providing 2,750 families with food for one month. A caterer in Amsterdam is currently making a thousand fresh meals per week to provide all households

in their quarter with an important addition to the meager food parcels and coupons.

Notwithstanding the efforts to keep the food bank system functioning, the COVID-19 crisis has magnified the vulnerability of the most deprived in Dutch society, which have seen their food access reduced, particularly to healthy and nutritious foods. This is the most extreme in cases where food banks had to close. As such, the COVID-19 crisis further aggravates social inequalities in Dutch society, both in the short and longer term, particularly when younger children are involved.

A similar observation has recently been made by the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA), Feeding America, and the Global FoodBanking Network. In a joint statement they have called on “private sector supporters, corporations, foundations, and agri-food donor partners to stand with us in solidarity at this critical time [while also] calling upon multi-lateral institutions and governments to support the work of Food Banks as an indispensable response of civil society to address rising food insecurity accompanying this pandemic”

(Vandenschrik et al. 2020). We would go one step further. Despite societal resilience and overwhelming goodwill, the COVID-19 crisis once more shows that the privatization of food aid comes at the cost of the well-being of the most vulnerable in society. This might be the right time for states to accept their responsibility and finally embed the right-to-food in their constitutions. Contrary to the stipulations of the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, signed by 170 parties, few states have codified the right-to-food into formal law so far. This crisis may provide a window of opportunity for making such structural improvements to reduce inequalities and food insecurity. 

REFERENCE

- Vandenschrik, Jacques, Claire Babineaux-Fontenot, and Lisa Moon. 2020. “The COVID-19 Pandemic Is Deepening the Hunger Crisis. Food Banks Can’t Do It Alone.” Open letter, April 14, European Food Banks Federation, Feeding America, and the Global FoodBanking Network. www.foodbanking.org/international-call-to-action-food-banks-cant-do-it-alone/.