

Zero Hunger: A Comparative Review of Food Banks in the UK and India

Ankit Suresh Nambiar

A Level Student (2020-2022), King Edward VI School
Wilton Road, Southampton, SO15 5UQ, UK

Anandavalli Thangam

Department of Commerce and Management
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India

ABSTRACT

Food banks form an essential aspect of providing food to the underprivileged and those unable to ensure adequate nutrition. Over time, food banks have evolved in many ways, including methods of collection and distribution of food items. This comparative review highlights the significant differences in the organisation and running of food banks in the UK and India. The total food waste in India is larger than in the UK, but comparatively less per head. With over 200 million in India needing support from food banks there is an ever-increasing need to further develop and model food distribution. While the concept of food banks is not new in India, the recruitment of volunteers and attraction of further suitable donors would aid in strengthening the system. Robust data to support this will help countries like India improve the delivery and organisation of their already existing food bank network.

Key words: food banks, hunger, food insecurity, food waste, volunteer, donations.

INTRODUCTION

As part of an initiative to tackle the economic, political and environmental issues facing humanity, in 2015 the UN set in place 17 goals to reach in 2030. One of these Sustainable Development Goals is 'Zero Hunger', or the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 2. It aims to eliminate world hunger by 2030. This figure lies at 828 million as of 2021 and the goal remains a challenge. In the aftermath of many recent overlapping crises including the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine, the number of those in hunger has risen by 46 million since 2020 and 150 million since 2019 [1]. Food banks play a key role in tackling hunger in society. There is no strict definition for a food bank, however its role is to store and distribute food to those in a time of crisis, be it temporary or in the long term. Use of food banks is often due to financial insecurities, prioritising housing and paying rents, and issues regarding timely social support. Food banks are often used by those in 'food insecurity'. Food insecurity has two distinct levels and may be defined by 'insecurity with hunger' i.e. disrupted feeding patterns and reduced consumption; or 'insecurity without hunger' i.e. reduced quality of food and inability to access desired foods, but negligible reduced food consumption. In 2020-2021, 4.2 million people in the UK (6%) were in some form of food insecurity [2]. In India, 189.4 million were estimated to have insufficient food to sustain good health (13.7%) in 2020 [3].

Food banks collect food through philanthropic donations, potential waste or food in excess of requirements. These are stored at a central location and then distributed directly or through third parties. The earliest report of a formal foodbank originated in the US in the 1960s (St. Mary's Food Bank est. 1967 Arizona), with food banks only taking their modern form in the UK at the turn of the millennium [4]. Since the inception of the first food bank in the year 2000 in Salisbury, a small city in the South of England, there are approximately 2,600 food banks currently registered. Nearly 1,400 of these food banks are under the auspices of the Trussell Trust, a non-governmental organisation whose primary aim is to end UK hunger and poverty. The use of Trussell Trust food banks has increased over time seeing an average 33% increase in usage year on year. These data are heavily skewed by 2012-2013 numbers (a 200% increase) and the consequences of COVID-19, seeing a 36.8% increase during 2019-20. The Trussell Trust's three-day emergency food supply parcels saw its largest distribution growth from 2012-2013 from 300,000 to 900,000 parcels and 1,900,000 to 2,600,000 parcels in 2020-2021. During 2020-21 there was a 15.3% fall in the food parcel distribution. The emergency food parcels distribution saw a fall from the 2,600,000 parcels to 2,200,000 [5]. This fall may be attributed to the period of transient economic recovery following the aftermath of COVID-19, though this is expected to be short lived as current trends predict a rise in usage in 2022-23.

Food banks in developing nations have seen growth in recent years. India is 68th out of 113, on par with Algeria, in countries surveyed on the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) in 2022. For reference, India is less food secure than Azerbaijan and the Philippines, but more food secure than Ukraine and Paraguay. This evaluation considers affordability (purchasing costs and susceptibility/support through price shocks), availability (supply line reliability and quality), quality and safety (nutritional value and safety of food) and sustainability & adaptation (adaptation to and risk due to climate change and other natural events) [6]. In India, in 2020, 16% of the population was undernourished and 22.0% [7] of children under 5 suffered from stunted growth [8]. Hence, the UN's Technical Cooperation Programmes and various trust funding agencies aim to alleviate these deficits.

The first food bank in India traces its roots to 1991 in Delhi. The Agya Wanti Bhalla collected excess food from hotels and served it to those in need [9]. Since then, many more have been introduced, with organisations such as the India Food Banking Network now serving over 40 major Indian cities. It aims to serve every district by 2030 [10]. Although the idea of a food bank is a novel one, community kitchens have been a staple in neighbourhoods across India for centuries. The 'Langar' is a gurdwara community kitchen, where all may eat free of cost and has been in existence since the late 1400s and early 1500s after being founded by Guru Nanak [11]. Although not a food bank, it carries a similar premise- with hot meals ready to be served to those who need it.

Food wastage is a huge issue and is not only confined to the developed countries. With a population of 1.38 billion, and around 200 million hungry mouths to be fed, India aims to reduce wastage drastically. In India, 50 kg of food per person per annum is estimated to be wasted, with the total value of the food summing to £9.9 billion. This is a significant difference when compared with the UK where 141 kg per person per annum is wasted, equating to £19 billion. However, due to the bigger population the total amount of food wasted is greater in India in comparison to the UK [12].

DELIVERY

British food banks all tend to follow a similar delivery structure in terms of organising collections. Individuals may donate directly to the food bank, or at a community centre such as a school or a church. Commonly donated foods include tinned vegetables, pulses and soups; carbohydrates such as rice and pasta; as well as condiments and sauces. These are widely accepted as they have a long shelf life that may be extended for a further period and form the staple food for most individuals. At collection points, goods are gathered before a pickup is scheduled by the food bank. On a corporate scale, supermarkets and grocers will also donate food and drinks. These donations often include goods with damaged packaging and food that is past its 'best before' date. As food is fit for consumption for a period after the 'best before' date, these donations are welcomed. Examples include not only the aforementioned items, but also freshly baked goods and bottled drinks as well. In recent times, food banks have diversified their distribution to not only that of food, but pet food and sanitary materials also. Therefore, such goods are often welcomed in donations.

Indian food banks face the struggle of a larger population in food insecurity who may need the assistance of food banks, yet less facilities to aid them. Although operating in a similar fashion to UK food banks; around the world, the most donated food items will exhibit a slight change due to cultural differences and seasonal availability. This leads to the introduction of lentils and dairy products being more frequently donated in India than at their British counterparts. Rice is the carbohydrate of choice to donate as opposed to pasta in the UK. Despite being relatively novel in India, awareness of the positive externalities of food banks continues to rise, thus catalysing the creation of more food banks.

DISTRIBUTION

British food banks may act as a reserve of food, but also as a distribution centre. Food bank vouchers are a reliable method to get emergency food parcels out to those that require it. Food banks work with professionals such as doctors and social workers, who then refer their clients to these centres to obtain a voucher. This is then used to gather necessary information about the user to offer advice, reasons for support and to identify the right food for the user e.g. baby food, dietary requirements etc [13]. This leads on to another role of food banks: acting as a reserve of food for smaller, community led teams to dispense food. Independently run community kitchens and community pantries may pick up food from food banks and in turn feed those who require so in their locality.

In India, food banking organisations such as Delhi Food Banking, India Food Banking, Zomato Feeding India and No Food Waste have the joint aim of reducing food wastage whilst nourishing the population. As over one third of food produced in India is wasted and over 200 million are undernourished, there is a discord between those who have sufficient access to food and those who do not. With India Food Banking's aim to 'eliminate hunger in India by 2030', they have increased their number of food banks from 14 in 2020 to 44 in 2022. Having fed 150,000 adults and 75,000 children cooked meals in the calendar year 2020, they have increased output to 64,841 'Ration Kits' (similar to an emergency parcel in the UK) including 555,310 kg of oil, pulses and grains; and 952,000 kg of packaged food. Furthermore 150,000 recipients from underprivileged areas and the healthcare sector were fed with greater quantity and quality of food [15]. The Zomato Feeding India initiative is another large provider of food- in 2020 it fed over 2.45 million people through its 104 foodbanks, providing more than 12 million meals in

total. No Food Waste reports over 9,000,000 meals served in total since inception and 5000 meals served daily [16]. It must be highlighted that Indian food banks tend to have a stronger emphasis on providing hot meals to those in need in comparison to food banks in the UK. The British soup kitchens and community kitchens have a separate role to food banks, whilst in India there is more of a grey area between the two.

WORKFORCE

The estimated number of volunteers at UK food banks is around 40,000 [17]. Of these, 28,000 operate in the Trussell Trust network of food banks, showing the scale of the trust in comparison to other organisations and independent food banks in the UK [18]. Using 2017 data, when the minimum wage of £7.50 for over 25s was applied, the value of volunteer work equated to £21.8 million a year for distributing food alone. This increased to £30.8 million in total when including additional tasks undertaken such as fundraising, collecting and delivering food, and inventory management [19]. Although there are paid roles across the sector, the vast majority of positions are voluntary with varying hours. Some volunteers may choose to give their time for a couple of hours per week, and some may offer their services for hours close to a typical '9 to 5' job.

Although there is no definitive number for the total number of volunteers in Indian food banks, some of the largest food banks have published data on the matter. The Zomato Feeding India initiative had over 26,700 volunteers alone in 2020 [20]. This is a similar number to the total Trussell Trust volunteers in 2022 (~28,000). Although a sizable number of volunteers, it must be noted that the initiative caters to many more than any counterpart in the UK and so this is a comparatively smaller number.

CONCLUSION

Indian food banks have grown rapidly in not only volume distributed but also in standards of their facilities, as well as quality of food and volunteering. These improvements of Indian food banks are easily visible but difficult to support empirically due to lack of data, perhaps as the industry is fledgling in nature. This contrasts with the UK, where clear data is widely accessible in the public domain. This has been the case for at least the last 10 years. The Trussell Trust has monitored volume distribution per annum (arguably the predominant element in food banking data) since 2014 [21] and has been monitoring 'Emergency Parcel' deliveries per annum since 2008 [22]. The variety and quality of statistics collected have significantly improved year on year with more effective measurements and sampling techniques. When considering that the UK has had a 'head-start' on food banking, there is no doubt that quality data from India will be collected in the years to come. This should be expected as the sector is growing briskly and is such a necessity for the populace. Food banks are a key facilitator in achieving Zero Hunger and although meeting the goal by 2030 is a qualm, increased awareness will undoubtedly aid in remedying world hunger.

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