



Food surplus and the development of food banks in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Food banks have developed across the world to reduce food insecurity and food waste. In Africa, thirty-five countries have food bank systems in operation. As food banks increase across the continent, more research is needed to analyze the development of food banks in African contexts. It is in many of these lower-income regions with underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of a strong formalized corporate food industry, weak or corrupt government institutions, and extreme poverty where food banks may be less likely to succeed. To this end, this paper examines case studies of food bank systems in Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Uganda to understand the logics of African food banking and the rationale for food bank development across the continent. Findings in this research suggest global food banking networks are central players in the development of African food banks as they guide the structure and growth of local food banks. Even with this assistance, most African food banks collect food in an ad hoc manner, rather than a systematic approach to food recovery. In addition, most African food banks have weak or non-existent connections with government or retailers. African food banks are also overdependent on global food banking networks for funding and technical support. In all, these data point to a relatively uneven food banking landscape, as the food bank model based on corporate surplus may be limited in the African context. Although there is discussion of an emerging African food banking network, the African food bank model remains unclear at this point.

1. Introduction

Food insecurity is high globally, with 2.3 billion people or 28.9% of the world's population moderately or severely food insecure (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024).

As measured by the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), individual or household food insecurity is defined as the lack of food access due to resource constraints (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025b). In Africa, this number is even higher, with 823.9 million people or 57.7% of the continent's population food insecure (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024).

Food waste also remains elevated globally. As noted by the United Nations Environment Programme (2024), 19% of food is wasted at the retail, service, and household levels, and 13% of food is lost at harvest, transportation, storage, and processing earlier in the supply chain. In Africa, food waste and loss are difficult to measure, although food waste is estimated to be approximately 37% (Sheahan and Barrett, 2017).

In response to the food insecurity and food waste crises, food banks have developed across many of the world's regions (Riches and Silvasti, 2014). Food banks operate by collecting surplus food from farmers, food retailers, manufacturers, governments, and other donors and then

redistributing this surplus food to beneficiary organizations in communities (Poppendieck, 1998). Although food banks first developed in the wealthier parts of the world, they are now present in over one-hundred countries on six continents (Warshawsky, 2023).

Most recently, international attention has focused on food banks in Africa (BBC News, 2023), as more than 35 countries now have food banks on the continent. Most African food banks are connected to transnational food bank networks. This includes the FoodBanking Regional Network (FBRN) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Global FoodBanking Network (GFN) in the USA (FoodBanking Regional Network, 2025; The Global FoodBanking Network, 2025). The first food banks on the continent were the Egyptian Food Bank (EFB), founded in 2006, and Food-Forward SA (FFSA), founded in 2009. They both remain key prototypes for the two methods of food banking on the Africa continent.

As promoted by the FBRN, the EFB redistributes surplus food from the retail and tourism sectors, and a significant portion of the food is purchased (Egyptian Food Bank, 2025). In addition, the FBRN helps to support food banks, but does not focus on training or certification. The FBRN's engagement in Africa is not part of a strategic plan to develop food banks in Africa. Rather, the FBRN aims to support food banks across Africa to meet the moral and religious inspiration of its leadership to

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reduce food insecurity where it is possible (FoodBanking Regional Network, 2025).

In contrast to the EFB, the FFSA redistributes surplus food from farmers, retailers, manufacturers, and other donors to local beneficiary organizations (FoodForward, 2025). In this way, the FFSA promotes the North American model of food banking, in line with the GFN and Feeding America, the place where food banking originated in 1960s. Unlike the FBRN, the GFN has a strategic plan to develop, train, and certify African food banks as part of its global network of food banks (Kitchen, 2022). In 2019, the GFN leadership created the Food Bank Incubator Program to promote the development of food banks in Sub-Saharan Africa where food insecurity is among the highest in the world (Lutz, 2021a).

In many contexts, the FBRN and GFN maintain strong connections with the food industry as many of their food donations and financial resources come from food companies (Cohen et al., 2023). However, in Africa, these dynamics play out differently as the food system's structure is unique (Moseley, 2001). The informal sector is more significant in Africa, and the food industry is often more localized (Battersby and Peyton, 2014). GFN affiliated food corporations are often not present at the same scale, if at all, in many African countries (Crush and Frayne, 2011). For this reason, African food banks may be different in size, structure, and form than those in North America and Europe given that they cannot depend on the redistribution of corporate food surpluses to function.

As food banks expand across Africa, more research is needed to understand how and why food banks develop across the continent. Most scholarship on food banks focuses on North America and Europe, with almost no attention to the rapidly growing food bank systems in Africa. Yet, it is in many of these lower-income regions with underdeveloped infrastructure, lack of a strong formalized corporate food industry, weak or corrupt government institutions, and extreme poverty where food banks may not operate well (Warshawsky, 2023). Given that urban food systems in the Global South are a collection of formal and informal food institutions (Battersby and Peyton, 2014), scholars need to analyze how formalized food bank institutions operate with or alongside the vast network of informal food networks. Moreover, as productivist approaches to food system transformation promote increases in system level food yields and agricultural profits, they also produce uneven amounts of food waste and create a challenging landscape for some farmers in Sub-Saharan Africa (Smaldone, et al., 2025). In this context, it is unclear how food banks navigate these broader food system dynamics.

As part of its overall strategic plan, the GFN actively promotes food policies which facilitate food donations in its member food bank contexts, including in Africa (Kitchen, 2022). These laws are designed to promote food donation liability protection, food safety, food expiration labeling, and tax benefits for the food industry (The Global FoodBanking Network and Harvard Law and Policy Clinic, 2025). As noted by Cohen et al. (2023), these policies help the food industry donate surplus food in contexts where they operate. Although these laws are designed to increase the scale of corporate food redistribution, Riches (2018) notes that food bank systems work within the existing corporate food system and alongside food system inequality and do not engage in social movements to promote the right to food. The role of the state is also uneven across the GFN network, as some governments support the right to food, whereas others have facilitated the growth of corporate food aid with neoliberal policies that privatize, decentralize, or reduce the size of pro-poor food policies (Spring, et al., 2022). For Lohnes and Pine (2023), this neoliberal embeddedness of food banks shapes how food banks are structured and their potential impacts in local communities. As noted by Leek and Bellows (2025), food banks are limited in their role as charities, as the institutional goals of food banks are to meet their donation metrics, not reduce the causes of food insecurity and food waste. Moreover, even though food banks aim to reduce food waste, food banks depend on continuous flows of surplus food to operate (Mourad, 2016).

For these reasons, it is critical that researchers examine the

implications of expanding the North American and European food banking model to the African continent. As stated, food banks are designed to work within the global corporate food structure to mitigate food surpluses (Garrone, et al., 2014). In this way, food banks are positioned to increase market efficiencies and streamline food flows rather than support the right to food or reduce food insecurity in a systematic way (Cohen et al., 2023). Global food bank networks are driving this corporate driven food bank model in large part because they believe it can be effective in reducing food waste and food insecurity in Africa (Kitchen, 2022). However, the impacts of food bank development are not clear. More research is needed to understand how and why local stakeholders work with or against food bank development, as food banks have the potential to reshape how food systems are structured.

To explore how these dynamics play out in the African context, this paper examines the case studies of four food bank systems. This includes Food Banking Kenya in Kenya, It Rains Food Bank of Ethiopia in Ethiopia, Food for All Africa in Ghana, and Haba Na Haba Food Bank in Uganda. The first three food banks are members of the GFN, while the latter food bank is a member of the FBRN. Although these case studies are not positioned to represent all food banks in Africa, they were chosen for their connections to transnational food bank networks, varied approaches towards food banking, and their overall development as food banks. In this research, in-depth interviews were conducted in 2024 with the managers and staff members at these four food bank systems. Two research questions drive this research. First, how are food banks structured in African contexts, and what is their impact on food insecurity and food waste? Second, is there a new model of food banks which fits the African context? This paper examines the logics of food banking in Africa to examine how and why food banking developed across the continent.

Findings in this research suggest that African food banks utilize a range of financial and food resources to operate their programs. In Kenya, the food bank uses agricultural sources and virtual food banking, whereas informal market food sources are utilized in Uganda's food bank. In Ethiopia, farm food recovery is used when available, whereas the food bank system in Ghana leverages the notoriety of their celebrity chef executive to connect with retail companies. While these food sources are wide ranging, they are ad hoc rather than a systematic approach to food redistribution. In most contexts, African food banks have little to no relationship with government or retailers. Problematically, food banks in Africa are overly reliant on global food banking networks, especially the GFN for funding and technical support. In all, these dynamics point to an uneven food banking landscape as the future of food banks in Africa may be uncertain. Although there is discussion of an emerging independent African food banking network, it is still undeveloped at this point.

In what follows, this paper analyzes the literature on food banks in Africa, examines the methods utilized in this study, discusses the four case studies, and ends by exploring the possibility of an African food banking model.

2. Conceptualizing the food bank: Where is Africa?

Food banks are a relatively new mode of food relief globally when put in a long-term historical context, as they emerged initially to offset changes in welfare state protection and economic recessions in North America and Europe in the 1970s and 1980s (Poppendieck, 1998; Riches and Silvasti, 2014). Since the 1990s, the role of food banks has changed as they have become institutionalized into the fabric of emergency food systems (Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2015; Mook et al., 2020). This has occurred as some food companies have financially supported food banks as part of their corporate social investment initiatives (Lougheed and Spring 2020). In this reciprocal relationship, food banks often provide food and money while food companies gain brand recognition, institutional legitimacy, tax benefits, legal protection for donations, and roles on food bank boards (Fisher, 2017). In this way, food banks are often

reliant on the food industry for resources but also limited by their institutional power. As noted by Henderson (2004), this has given the food industry an opportunity to influence the discourse around food insecurity and food waste as technical problems to be solved in the market.

As food banks have expanded across the globe during the last few decades, scholars have critically analyzed their mission, structure, and impacts to understand how and why food banks have developed (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014). Although food waste is the result of weaknesses in the global food production system and food insecurity is the consequence of poverty, Riches (2018) has noted that food banks aim to combine these two separate crises into one issue to promote their mission to redistribute surplus food. Building on this critique, Lohnes (2021) and May et al. (2020) have articulated how food banks effectively define the parameters of food scarcity and limit who should receive food aid and how it should be delivered.

For some scholars, food bank development reflects a broader shift to neoliberal governance where food charity contributes to the devolution of food aid to local non-governmental organizations (Lindenbaum, 2016). For these scholars, the growth of food banks needs to be observed with some caution as they provide governments an opportunity to avoid their responsibility towards social safety net protection. As noted by researchers critically analyzing the governmentality of food bank expansion (Möller, 2021), food banks increasingly shape how food systems are structured and how people access food. In a similar vein, scholars have explored how the growth of new food charity bureaucracies and labor market procedures can limit the understanding and integration of the poor into food systems (Middleton, et al., 2018), stigmatize those who receive food (de Souza, 2019), and produce new methods of control over food recipients (Dickinson, 2019). Regardless of how food banks are conceptualized, they are clearly important institutions in many local food systems.

In recent years, food banks have played larger roles to offset reductions in government programs, support corporate initiatives, or provide emergency relief during health crises such as covid (Gentilini, 2013; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020). However, as noted by Spring et al. (2022), increased growth in food banks has not necessarily led to lower food insecurity or food waste levels, as the neoliberal embeddedness of food bank systems limits their overall impact. Building on these perspectives, Lohnes and Pine (2023) note that this neoliberal institutional configuration inhibits the potential for broader right to food social movements.

Importantly, as noted by Riches (2018), no scholarship exists which shows that food banks reduce food insecurity. Hunger is impacted by a range of variables, such government support programs and economic indicators. While food banks showcase the numbers of people served and food delivered, these numbers speak to their growth more than their impact on food insecurity (Riches and Silvasti, 2014). As noted by Poppendieck (1998), food charity may feel good for those who volunteer, but its impact in communities is less clear. Also, given that surplus food is more about offloading waste more than redistributing quality food, scholars have critically reviewed the nutrition of food delivered (Simmet et al., 2017).

The connection between food banks and food waste is also not evident, as multiple conceptualizations of food waste, food surplus, and food loss exist. The United Nations Environment Programme (2024) differentiates between food loss at production and processing and food waste at retail and consumption. Within this framework, food banks operate primarily to redistribute surplus food waste at retail and consumption (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005). According to estimates produced by Riches (2018) based on FAO food balance sheets (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025a) and years of annual reports from the Canadian, European, and American national food bank networks, food bank associations repurpose 1–3% of overall food loss and waste in food systems. This is not surprising, given that food banks only focus on one type of food lost or wasted in the overall food system (Garrone, et al.,

2014).

As food banks expand across the world's regions, researchers need to analyze the development and impacts of food banks in food systems, especially where informal food pathways are so critical to food security (Frayne 2010). In Africa, residents access food through the growing of food in cities and rural areas, purchasing food in the cash economy through formal retailers and street vendors, and sharing and gifting food (Moseley, 2001). Additionally, government and non-governmental institutions provide supplemental food support for those small segments of the population that are eligible for assistance.

In addition, food waste and food loss are represented differently in Africa than other regions of the world. Household food waste is estimated at 93 kg of food per capita in Sub-Saharan Africa, with about one-third food wasted (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). This is about average as compared to the global average of 79 kg of food per capita. Studies have suggested that food loss likely is proportionately higher in Sub-Saharan African contexts due to farming inefficiencies and inadequate transportation and storage facilities (Chomba, 2022).

Given that food banks originally started in North America and spread to Europe and other wealthy regions of the world first, most academic scholarship on food banks is geographically focused on the Global North. In Africa, most studies on food banks have focused on South Africa's FFSA model of food banking (Hendriks and McIntyre, 2014; Warshawsky, 2023). This is because FFSA is the largest food banking system on the continent (Lutz, 2021b). Although FFSA has grown significantly since its 2009 inception, it has not been without its own political, financial, and logistical challenges (FoodForward, 2024b). Yet, its influence cannot be understated, as it has hosted African food banks and provided a model of what food banks can be on the continent (FoodForward, 2024c). However, even though FFSA's model has grown in South Africa, the South African model of food banking may not work in other African contexts, as the number and scale of supermarkets, manufacturers, and formal food retailers are higher in South Africa than elsewhere across the continent (Battersby and Peyton, 2014).

In order to critically analyze their development across the continent, the following sections analyze the structure and impacts of food banks in four African contexts.

3. Methods

This paper examines twenty-eight in-person interviews of staff at African food banks in 2024 in Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Ghana (see Fig. 1). In this study, I conducted eleven interviews with food bank leadership, five interviews with warehouse managers, and twelve interviews with administrative and warehouse staff. Six interviews were conducted in Kenya. Nine interviews were completed in Ethiopia. Six interviews were conducted in Uganda, and seven interviews were completed in Ghana.

During these interviews, I spoke with people about their food bank's structure, programs, mission, history, impacts, funding, state-civil society relations, and challenges. Although a list of questions structured the discussions, these interviews were unstructured and gave interviewees an opportunity to explain why they felt a particular way about food bank policy. In this research, I asked interviewees similar questions to understand whether perspectives could be confirmed by a range of different stakeholders. If multiple sources expressed similar points of view, this suggested the interview data were valid.

Although recipient agencies and food recipients are important parts of the food relief system, this research focused primarily on the perspectives of food bank staff and warehouse managers to understand why food banks emerged, the details of food bank structure, and how food bank staff interact with the state, food companies, informal markets, and other key food system actors. To fully understand the impact of food banks on communities, this research should be combined with grounded studies of recipient agencies and food recipients in the places that they operate. In addition, given that the food bank staff interviewed have a

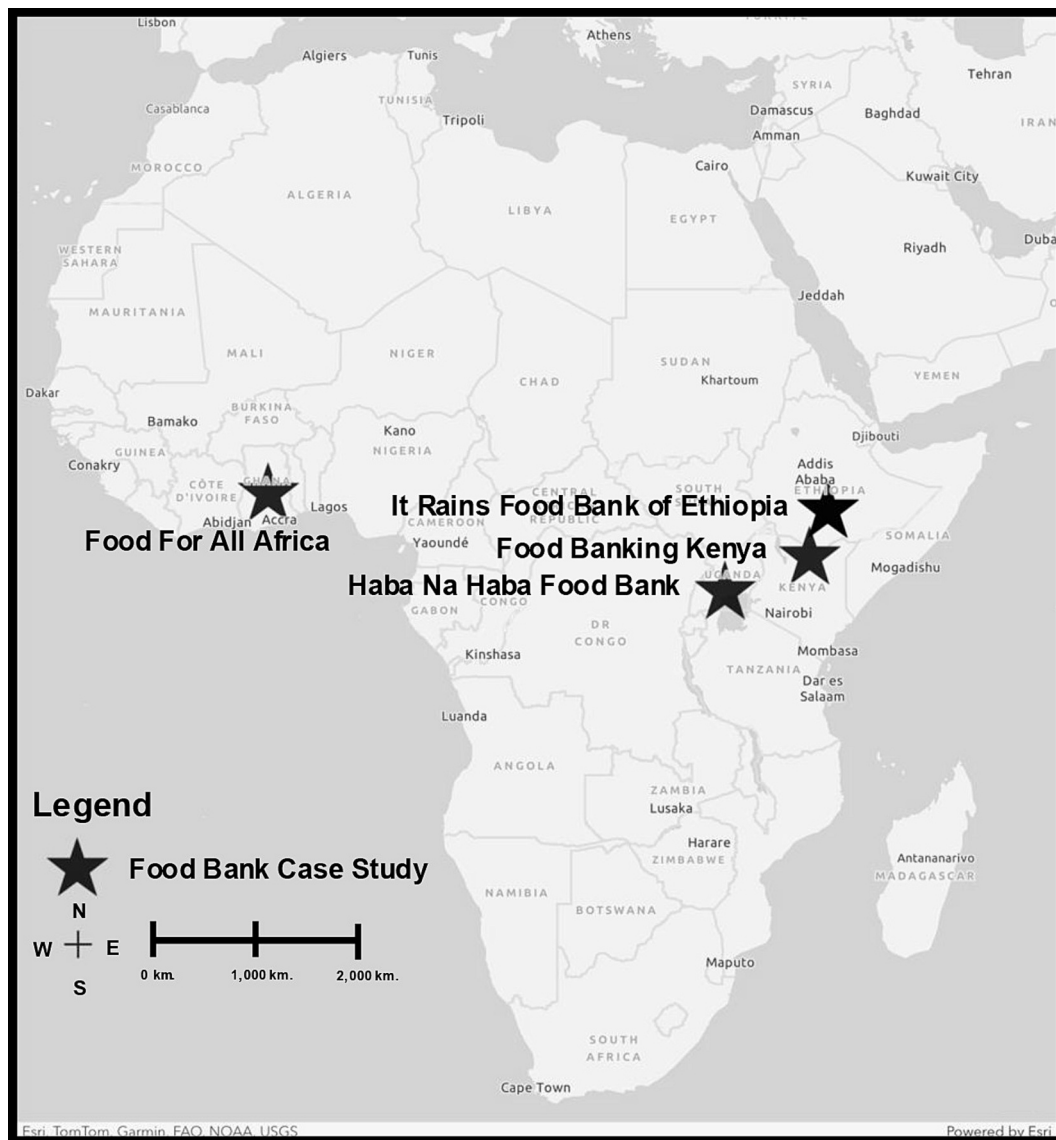


Fig. 1. Locations of the Food Bank Case Studies.

vested interest in the continued existence of food banks for livelihood survival, it is important their perspectives are critically analyzed in context.

These four case studies were chosen because they are relatively well-developed, connected to transnational food bank networks, and unique for their approach to food banking. Rather than being seen as representative of all contexts, these case studies provide important perspectives on the ways food banking is being practiced in Africa.

4. Results

4.1. Case study 1: Food banks in Kenya

Food insecurity is relatively high in Kenya. As noted by the [Food and Agriculture Organization \(2024\)](#), the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Kenya was 72.8% in 2021–2023, with severe food insecurity at 28.0% in 2021–2023. To mitigate food insecurity, Kenya spends between approximately 1.5 and 2.6% of GDP on social assistance programs, which is about average as compared to other Sub-Saharan countries ([Bhorat, et al., 2019](#); [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017](#)). Overall, the eligibility for Kenyan governmental programs is limited, as less than 6% of Kenyans receive

social assistance ([World Bank, 2018](#)). Although Kenya has institutionalized the right to food as a basic human right in its constitution and signed numerous international agreements on the right to food ([Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025c](#)), researchers have explored the limitations with Kenya's current social protection programs ([Künzler, 2016](#)) and the neoliberal shift towards approaches which promote non-governmental institutions and de-prioritize human-centered approaches to food relief ([Singh, 2023](#)).

In Kenya, household food waste is estimated at 81 kg of food per capita, with about one-third food wasted ([United Nations Environment Programme, 2024](#)). This is about average as compared to the global average and slightly below average for Sub-Saharan Africa. In recognition of these challenges, the Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development developed a food loss and waste mitigation strategy in 2024 ([Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development, 2024](#)); however, it is unclear how much impact this policy has had on food waste reduction.

To confront the challenges related to food insecurity and food waste, Food Banking Kenya (FBK) started operations in Nairobi in 2017. It is a member of the GFN and FBRN ([Food Banking Kenya, 2025](#)). FBK serves 15,000 people daily through its one hundred beneficiary organizations. It has one central warehouse on the outskirts of Nairobi ([Food Banking](#)

Kenya, 2025). In 2024, FBK implemented its virtual food banking program to connect food donors with food recipients without having to transport food to and from the food bank (Woods, 2025). This has allowed the FBK to have a broader reach beyond the Nairobi region; however, it has also the possibility to sidestep the food bank as donors connect directly with food recipients.

Beginning in 2019, the FBK has been part of the Food Bank Incubator Program (Lutz, 2021a). As part of this program, the FBK has participated in the GFN Global Summit and the Africa Food Banks Conference over the past few years. In these contexts, the FBK gains technical assistance, fundraising expertise, and resource sharing for itself and shares best practices with other aspiring African food banks. As the FBK has grown, it has increasingly looked toward South Africa and its FFSA as a model to replicate. However, there are limits to the South African model in Kenya, as Kenya has fewer global food companies in the country. This limits GFN's ability to connect the FBK with its food industry partners.

In the context of covid, FBK scaled up its operations to feed more than 8000% people during covid in 2020 as compared to 2019. This was achieved primarily through the development of the agricultural recovery program, which pays a lower rate for surplus food (The Global FoodBanking Network, 2022). With the expansion of large-scale productivist approaches to food system transformation, FBK has positioned itself to take advantage of the increased amounts of surplus food available for redistribution.

Since covid, agriculture has become our key project as more than 80% of our food is sourced from this project. It assisted in the growth of food banks in two ways. We were able to recover more and feed more people, and we were able to have new partners (Administrator, Food Banking Kenya, 12 November 2024).

In this way, covid was both a crisis but also an opportunity for the FBK to expand its operations and make new connections with farmers. Since then, the FBK has worked to expand its partnerships with government and the retail sector, but it has been difficult. Although the FBK has communicated with the Kenyan government to promote laws and policies that encourage food donations, it has yet to result in any policies or fund the food bank (The Global FoodBanking Network and Harvard Law and Policy Clinic, 2025).

Like many other smaller food banks, logistics are a problem for the FBK, especially in a country where significant distances, poor road quality, and lack of transport vehicles minimize the reach of the food bank network. Although the FBK would like to expand its operations to all corners of the country, rural poverty is a significant hurdle.

In Kenya, there is no other food bank that's doing what we are doing. So how do we keep this going? This will all depend on how people adapt with this model. We have started to have community leaders involved and the local administration involved so that it is owned by the community. Since the daily feeding and the distribution of food is a big challenge, food banking, especially virtual food banking, will grow in the rural areas. In the end of the day, we must evolve (Administrator, Food Banking Kenya, 12 November 2024).

The FBK has grown since it first started in 2017. However, its growth is limited by its overdependence on the GFN and its lack of consistent support from government and the formal food sector. The FBK looks to South Africa, but the model there may not be realistic in Kenya, given the lack of corporate food companies willing to partner with the FBK. Virtual food banking has potential, especially in rural areas, however, all these developments cannot overcome the scale of food insecurity and poverty across the country. The FBK may continue to operate, but it is unclear how its model of food banking can grow across Kenya.

4.2. Case study 2: Food banks in Uganda

Food insecurity remains elevated in Uganda, as the prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Uganda was 71.2% in 2021–2023,

with severe food insecurity at 23.0% in 2021–2023 (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024). In line with the continent's spending on social welfare, Uganda spends between approximately 1.0 and 3.5% of GDP on social assistance programs (Bhorat, et al., 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). Although food security is explicitly mentioned in the Ugandan constitution, and the government has signed onto multiple international agreements on the right to food (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025c), food aid programs in Uganda collectively cover less than 2% of the country's population (World Bank, 2018). Even though there is no consensus on how to characterize the social welfare state in Uganda, researchers have explored the limitations with current social protection programs (Bukuluki and Mubiru, 2014) and the transition towards neoliberal approaches which promote non-state actors (Nystrand and Tamm, 2018).

In Uganda, household food waste is estimated at 110 kg of food per capita, with about one-third food wasted (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). This is slightly above average as compared to both global levels and Sub-Saharan Africa levels. Uganda's wet tropical climate facilitates ample farming opportunities; however, food loss and food waste are as high as 40% in some contexts. Although there has been discussion of policy to mitigate food loss and food waste, no food waste policy exists in Uganda (Mutambuka and Male, 2024).

To attend to the food insecurity and food waste crises in Uganda, Haba Na Haba Food Bank (HNHFB) started operations in Kampala in 2015. It is a member of the FBRN network (FoodBanking Regional Network, 2025). HNHFB has served 1.25 million people through its 75 beneficiary organizations since 2015 (Haba Na Haba Food Bank, 2025). Even though the HNHFB has received some in-kind donations of food from FBRN (Zawya, 2021), most of its donations come directly from informal markets across Kampala. HNHFB's volunteers visit various markets across Kampala to collect food from vendors. The food is transported to a building to sort and give to community partners. HNHFB does not have a food bank warehouse where it can store food. Also, HNHFB transports food in an oversized van, rather than a truck suitable for the amount of food donated.

HNHFB is fundamentally an operation built on informal networks. HNHFB has developed relationships with people in communities to understand how people access food and how HNHFB can help reduce food insecurity.

We work with local leaders. They know their people, and they know the problems in their area. When we enter the communities, we're getting the opportunity to talk to the communities to get their contributions and their ideas on how we can help each other (Administrator, Haba Na Haba Food Bank, November 15, 2024).

HNHFB's network provides meaning for the donors as much as the food recipients. Given that HNHFB's donors are food vendors who often have little themselves, they see value in repurposing food to the food insecure. Donated food in this context is not necessarily surplus food, as food vendors often donate whatever food they can to help the HNHFB. They expect the HNHFB to come to the market regularly.

What really keeps us on our toes is that we cannot stop, because the market people are waiting for us...Should we miss a day in a week without going to the markets, they will call us and ask 'What is happening? Why are you not coming to collect the food?' These vendors give, because it is out of their heart to give food. They need support and connection with us. They have many problems too (Administrator, Haba Na Haba Food Bank, November 15, 2024).

The informal and voluntary nature of the HNHFB model has resulted in severe financial challenges for the organization. Although the Ugandan government is supportive of the HNHFB's existence, it does not fund the organization. The HNHFB is required to pay a license fee in order to operate.

There's no activity which can go on without financing. With anything you do, money must be there, but where do you get that money? Are we going to continue relying on donors? We have a vision of being self-reliant in the future. We want something in place that can sustain us. We must have income generating activities. What if we do not continue to get food from the informal vendors? (Administrator, Haba Na Haba Food Bank, November 15, 2024).

The HNHFB staff would like to formalize their operations into a model which is more like South Africa in structure; however, this would take more funding. In addition, the underdevelopment of the formal food retailers in Uganda and lack of basic transportation, facilities, and storage limit the potential of HNHFB to operate. The HNHFB model is quite different from the traditional food banking model which typically redistributes surplus food from producers, manufacturers, and retailers to beneficiary organizations. Given its relatively small impact and lack of financial sustainability, it remains unclear whether this type of feeding scheme is a viable model or is even a food bank at all.

4.3. Case study 3: Food banks in Ethiopia

Although lower than its peak in previous decades, food insecurity remains high in Ethiopia. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Ethiopia was 59.0% in 2021–2023, with severe food insecurity at 19.7% in 2021–2023 (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024). To reduce food insecurity, Ethiopia spends between approximately 1.1 and 3.2% of GDP on social assistance programs (Bhorat, et al., 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). This is about average in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa. Although food security is explicitly mentioned in the Ethiopian constitution, and the government has signed onto multiple international agreements on the right to food (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025c), food aid programs only cover approximately 8% of the country's population (World Bank, 2018). Researchers have explored the limitations with current social protection programs in Ethiopia (Berhane, et al., 2014) and noted its evolution towards neoliberal approaches which encourage non-state actors (Demissie, 2013).

In Ethiopia, household food waste is estimated at 69 kg of food per capita, with about one-third food wasted (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). This is lower than average as compared to both global levels and Sub-Saharan Africa levels. Although there is a policy on solid waste strategy (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, 2007), no food waste policy exists in Ethiopia.

To reduce food insecurity and food waste, It Rains Food Bank of Ethiopia (IRFBE) started operations in Addis Ababa in 2018. It is a member of the GFN and the FBRN (It Rains Food Bank of Ethiopia, 2025). IRFBE serves 20,000 people or 24,000 kg of food through its twelve beneficiary organizations each year (It Rains Food Bank of Ethiopia, 2025). It operates through a small warehouse office space in Addis Ababa. IRFBE primarily sources food from farms in the regions surrounding Addis Ababa.

GFN has been a central part of IRFBE's development. As a participant of the GFN's incubator program, the IRFBE has been able to leverage the GFN's technical expertise, corporate connections, start-up funding, and food banking best practices.

Seeing the food bank infrastructure and learning about the management of their daily operations and visiting their agricultural recovery program was incredibly useful for us... It helped create an even stronger space for African food bank leaders to exchange ideas about challenges and opportunities (Executive director, It Rains Food Bank of Ethiopia, 17 March 2023, as qtd. in Lutz, 2023).

However, even though the IRFBE has leveraged its connections to the GFN, IRFBE has struggled to expand its operations. In part, this is because many of GFN's corporate partners do not operate in Ethiopia. In addition, retailers do not receive any tax benefits or liability protection,

so they are less prone to work with the food bank.

For us, GFN couldn't create partnerships with food companies such as Nestle, Coke, and Kellogg, because they don't operate in Ethiopia. There is a huge amount of waste in the retail sector. The supermarket retailers have a lot of products that expires because of market overflow and low demand. But, the retailers have no choice but to keep the product until it gets expired. There is no tax deduction or protection from financial loss (Administrator, It Rains Food Bank of Ethiopia, 19 November 2024).

Similarly, the Ethiopian government is also unaware of food banking as a concept, so it has been hesitant to partner with the food bank.

No one has heard of food banking until recent times. The concept of food banking is a very new concept. It's challenging to get support from organizations. They don't really understand our roles... But, they're interested to learn about food bank. We are getting some support from some government offices, so I can see the lack of awareness has improved through time (Administrator, It Rains Food Bank of Ethiopia, 19 November 2024).

Without adequate support from food retailers or the government, IRFBE has struggled to expand its operations. This has reduced its overall impact, as it does not have a fully functioning warehouse facility where it can store food in a freezer or cold room. It also does not have adequate transportation to move food. This has forced the IRFBE to move food immediately when it comes into the warehouse office space. As of now, food comes from agricultural partners two to three times a week, but the shipments are erratic and the IRFBE staff must drive up to two hours each way to collect the food from the farms. Although the IRFBE administration is ramping up their fundraising efforts and partnerships with companies and government, it has been a challenge. Both covid and conflict zones in different regions of the country have limited the organization's ability to connect to rural areas where food insecurity is the highest.

In all, the IRFBE has struggled to operate due to perpetual financial concerns and lack of connections to donors. Given that GFN's corporate connections do not operate in Ethiopia and the IRFBE is overly dependent on the GFN for technical assistance and financing, the future of food banking in Ethiopia remains unclear.

4.4. Case study 4: Food banks in Ghana

Food insecurity in Ghana is high. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Ghana was 42.4% in 2021–2023, and severe food insecurity at 8.2% in 2021–2023 (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2024). To reduce food insecurity, Ghana spends between approximately 5.4% of GDP on social assistance programs, which is above average for Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Africa (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). Food security is not explicitly mentioned in the Ghanaian constitution, although the government has signed onto multiple international agreements on the right to food (Food and Agriculture Organization, 2025c). Food support programs in Ghana cover approximately 9% of the country's population (World Bank, 2018); however, academics have studied the country's structural transition towards neoliberal approaches which promote non-governmental actors and question the overall commitment of the state to poverty reduction (Addi and Ayambire, 2022).

In Ghana, household food waste is estimated at 84 kg of food per capita, with about one-third food wasted (United Nations Environment Programme, 2024). This is about average as compared to both global levels and Sub-Saharan Africa levels. Although there is a policy on environmental protection, inclusive of waste (Republic of Ghana, 2025), no food waste policy exists in Ghana.

To reduce food insecurity and food waste, Food for All Africa (FFAF) started operations in Accra in 2015 (Food For All Africa, 2025). The organization was founded by the charismatic Chef Elijah Amoo Addo.

He has increased its national and international profile through effective marketing and relationship building (Woods, 2024a). FFAF has served 15 million people to 70 beneficiary organizations. This is the equivalent of 1 million kilos food rescued (Food For All Africa, 2025). Although not as large as South Africa, FFAF has a larger warehouse footprint than Kenya, Ethiopia, or Uganda. FFAF operates traditional food surplus redistribution through its partnerships with Ghanaian food producers, manufacturers, retailers, and other donors (Food For All Africa, 2025).

Financial support for FFAF comes from the GFN, foundation grants, and online financial donations, especially from the Ghanaian diaspora in the England and the United States (Food For All Africa, 2022). The FFAF also has a strong connection with the five major food retailers in Ghana through its relationship with the country's main food and beverage umbrella organization (Administrator, Food For All Africa, 25 November 2024). In Ghana, there is no liability protection for food donations, although there are some limited tax incentives for food donations in the country (The Global FoodBanking Network and Harvard Law and Policy Clinic, 2025). The Ghanaian government is supportive of the FFAF in principle but has yet to support it with funding or policies.

Since 2019, the FFAF has been well-positioned to take advantage of the GFN's Africa Incubator Program.

The relationship with GFN gave us the opportunity to first and foremost get to understand, in practical terms, what a food bank should be, what structures a food bank should put in place, what operating models a food bank can adapt, and the feasibility studies necessary. From that onset, the relationship with GFN gave us knowledge on how to approach potential donors and partners in this part of the world (Executive Director, Food For All Africa, 8 February 2024, as qtd. in Woods, 2024b).

Although the GFN's corporate partners do not operate in Ghana, the FFAF has been able to strategically partner with donors who are interested in its mission.

However, administrators at the FFAF remain concerned about the future of food banks in Ghana, as more support is needed from the Ghanaian government, food industry, and society to continue providing food donations and funding. Additionally, logistical challenges pertaining to transportation remain an issue for the food bank.

In Ghana, let's face reality that food banking is not going anywhere as it's part of the fabric of our food supply chain. What is important now is for us to have a well-structured system that connects with our public sector and for us to be able to come up with a sustainable model that addresses hunger in our communities (Administrator, Food For All Africa, 25 November 2024).

According to the leadership of the FFAF, Africa needs a model of food banking for Africans. Although the GFN has been integral in launching food banks, FFAF administrators are worried that the African food banks are too dependent on the GFN.

We still haven't gotten our full-fledged model that works for Africa... There's a limit to what GFN can do for us. Let's build something bigger which we should be proud of. Food banking in Africa is still young. It's growing. We are now finding our feet, and our model that will work for our continent (Administrator, Food for All Africa, 25 November 2024).

Although the GFN incubator program helped Ghana and other countries to launch their food banks, African food banks cannot grow without country specific and continental level policies on food donations and food company collaborations. Even though FFAF and many other African food banks aim to emulate FFSA's model (FoodForward, 2024a), FFSA is more of an outlier. To this end, FFSA's leadership suggests that African food banks should partner with the African Union (AU) and individual countries to build a model for African food banks that works in local contexts.

I keep saying that the biggest challenge is getting people in authority to understand and appreciate the concept of food banking in Africa... For us to have sustainable change in food banking across the continent of Africa, we as the food banks on the continent will have to drive our story at the policy level at the AU level...I keep telling African food banks, let's leverage this opportunity to set up an African food banking network (Administrator, Food for All Africa, 25 November 2024).

These bold and sweeping goals for FFAF remain aspirational, as it is not clear how this African food banking model could develop. Although African food banks meet yearly during Africa Food Bank Conference (Kafarhire, 2024), the discussions for an African food banking network remain abstract for now. In Ghana, FFAF staff have continued to expand their operations, yet the scale of food insecurity is vast, and the geographical operations of the organization remain limited.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has analyzed the structure, impact, and long-term potential for food banks in Africa through case studies in Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Uganda. These food banks represent only four country contexts and cannot stand in for all experiences across the continent. Given that three out of four food banks studied in this paper reside in East Africa, it is expected that food banks in other regions across the continent may have a different structure or impact. Even with these study limitations, the four case studies provide useful insights to critically engage the logics of food bank developments in Africa and provide a platform for future research on African food banks.

Results illustrate that global food banking networks play a critical role in shaping African food banks across the continent. The GFN promotes food banking in Africa, because it believes food banking is effective in reducing food waste and food insecurity. However, this vision is not supported by data on the ground, as the impact of food banks is less clear. Although the range of foods collected is vast, most African food banks operate in an ad hoc manner whereby available resources are cobbled together. Very often, African food banks have inadequate support from the state or private sector and are over-dependent on the GFN network for financial and institutional support. Overall, African food banks struggle to reduce the overwhelming need for food aid and quantities of food waste in African contexts.

In Kenya, the FBK receives more than 80% of their food from agricultural food recovery. With the proliferation of large scale productivist oriented farming in Kenya, FBK has redistributed large volumes of surplus food available in the country's agricultural systems. The FBK has a strong connection to the GFN network for funding support, best practice sharing, and other program support. The FBK has attempted to replicate South Africa's FFSA model; however, the structure of the food system and society in Kenya does not match South Africa. Additionally, the FBK receives little support from food retailers and the Kenyan government, and it remains limited by logistical challenges pertaining to food storage and transportation. Although the FBK continues to innovate with virtual food banking to increase its operations, it is limited by its over-dependence on the GFN and lack of new food donors. In addition, as virtual food banking increases, it has the potential to sideline the food bank as donors opt to bypass the food bank altogether and connect with food recipients directly.

In Uganda, the HNHFB redistributes food primarily from the informal food sector. Unlike food banks in Kenya, Ethiopia, or Ghana, the HNHFB food bank does not receive financial or institutional support from the GFN. The HNHFB does not have a warehouse or a truck to redistribute food. In addition, without sufficient income generating activities or consistent fundraising, the HNHFB model operates at a smaller scale than food banks in Kenya or Ghana. Although the HNHFB sustains an innovative model based on informal networks of food redistribution, its future is uncertain given its lack of resources.

In Ethiopia, the IRFBE redistributes food from farms within two hours of its location. However, the amount and timing of food collected has been erratic as there are often days when the location has no food. The IRFBE has struggled to develop connections with the state or retailer sector, so its funding has been unstable. The IRFBE also does not have an operational warehouse space with a cold room or adequate transportation to pick up food donations. Although the IRFBE is part of the GFN's incubator program, it has struggled to expand its operations. For these reasons, the impact of the IRFBE is quite small in the country.

In Ghana, the FFAF redistributes food from retailers in the country. In comparison to Kenya, Uganda, or Ethiopia, the FFAF has the most funding, warehouse space, and connections to partners. Although the government is supportive of the FFAF, it does not provide funding. Led by its charismatic chef and executive director, the FFAF has developed a funding base through grants and donations from Ghana and abroad. Even though the FFAF is arguably the most successful of the GFN's incubator program, its impact is small compared to the scale of food insecurity.

All four food banks studied in this paper aim to replicate the South African model of food banking. However, as noted, South Africa's FFSA model has not been without its financial, political, and logistical challenges (FoodForward, 2024b). In addition, food banking is the largest in South Africa, precisely because it is different from other countries in Africa (Hendriks and McIntyre, 2014). FFSA redistributes food from the food industry, which is significantly more developed in South Africa than anywhere else on the continent. In most of Sub-Saharan Africa, GFN-connected global food companies do not exist. Moreover, food banking operates best where wealth accumulation and corporate waste is the greatest, and South Africa fits this mold (Warshawsky, 2023). For this reason, it may not be a good example for African food banks to follow.

In addition, food bank leaders in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Ghana all value their relationship with the GFN, while staff in Uganda aspire to connect with the GFN more formally. However, as noted by administrators at the FFAF in Ghana, African food banks are arguably too dependent on the GFN financially and politically. Staff at the FFAF hope to build on GFN support to develop an African network of food banks independent of the GFN. In its ideal form, FFAF staff propose that African food banks should work with the AU to build policies and laws to facilitate donations to food banks across Africa. Although there have been continental meetings with other African food banks organized by the GFN (Kafarhire, 2024), no African food bank has decided to lead this charge yet. Moreover, as noted by Cohen et al. (2023) and Riches (2018), corporate led food philanthropy does not necessarily result in lower food insecurity or food waste.

Food banking also struggles with the informal sector too, as it is designed to redistribute surplus food from the food industry. The informal economy necessitates deep connection to local communities and extensive staff and volunteer engagement (Frayne, 2010; Moseley, 2001). In addition, given that the informal sector does not fund the food bank, food banks connected to the informal economy need to find sources of income to support their facilities and overall operations. Without formal redistribution facilities, the Ugandan food bank may be a food bank of the future or not a food bank in form at all.

Moving forward, the future of the African food bank is uncertain. Even though GFN leadership believe that food banking can reduce food insecurity and food waste in Africa, it is unclear that a corporate based system that redistributes surplus can meaningfully meet these goals (Cohen et al., 2023). In part, this is because the food bank is dependent on global food excess to operate and designed to reduce system inefficiencies (Garrone et al., 2014), not realize the right to food or eliminate food insecurity (Lohnes and Pine, 2023).

Although the influence of the food industry is less significant than in many other GFN contexts, African food banks are overly dependent on transnational food bank networks, less connected to reliable surplus food sources, unevenly supported by local government, and mismatched with food systems in many contexts. Even when well structured, the potential impact of food banks may be relatively small in local communities and disconnected from right to food movements or food policies that could strengthen food access and reduce food waste. With the transformation of African food systems, it is important to understand how African food banks navigate the uneven outcomes of productivist approaches to agricultural production (Saldone, et al., 2025). As food banks are relatively new in Africa, researchers need to examine all of these dynamics as they continue to evolve in the future.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Daniel N. Warshawsky: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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