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Income generation as the problem but not the solution
Problematising food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania

Author: Emile Stragyte
Supervisor: Torsten Krause

Abstract

This study aims to problematise food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania in response to rising food insecurity, challenging the prevailing discourse surrounding food (in)security. Using interviews and document analysis within a case study methodology, the research addresses three main questions: How is food insecurity problematised in the Lithuanian state and charity discourse? How does this problematisation influence responses to food insecurity challenges? Do food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania align with the Human Right to Food standards? Integrating Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' approach with the Human Right to Food framework, the study aims to politicise the issue of food insecurity. The findings reveal a tendency within food assistance mechanisms to overlook underlying structural factors contributing to food insecurity, resulting in interventions that fall short of the right to food principles. Through this research, I am to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of food insecurity dynamics in Lithuania beyond poverty and food waste discourse. Moreover, I advocate for adopting transformative approaches that challenge the predominant focus on economic growth and consider alternative food frameworks.

Key words: food insecurity, the human right to food, food assistance, Lithuania, WPR approach

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List of acronyms

AFN	Alternative Food Network
ESFA	The European Social Fund Agency
ESF+	The European Social Fund Plus
EU	The European Union
FAO	The Food and Agriculture Organisation
FEAD	The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived
FIES	Food Insecurity Experience Scale
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RTF	The Right to Food
WPR	What's the Problem Represented to Be

1. Introduction

I sit in the back of a spacious room. It is just past 1 pm and the lunch time is almost over. In front of me, a diverse group of individuals are finishing their lunch. Some engage in lively conversations amongst groups of friends, while others prefer a quiet corner by themselves. Many hurry to end their meals, eager to depart. Amid the hustle, a few find refuge in their phones, enjoying the warmth of the room amidst the chill of winter months.

Here, in a charity canteen located in Vilnius, Lithuania, I bear witness to a poignant reality. Each day, around 200 people come in for a free hot meal, likely the only hot food they will have that day. Although it is commonly assumed that people in high-income countries enjoy food security (Richards et al., 2016: 61), both statistics and people's experiences show a more complex reality. The prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity – “a condition that occurs when individuals and households do not have regular access to a supply of healthy and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs” (Long et al., 2020: 1) – in Europe increased from 6.9 % in 2019 to 8.2 % in 2022 (FAOSTAT, 2023).

Rising food insecurity in Europe is further evidenced by the growth of food aid or food charity, and in particular food bank use (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020). Despite the important efforts to provide food for the food insecure, there is limited evidence that food assistance through charity is the appropriate solution to food insecurity (Middleton et al., 2018). Food charity fails to find a meaningful way to address poverty, especially as it is unable to address structural factors influencing food insecurity (Poppendieck, 1998: 5). In addition, food charity contributes to the depoliticisation of hunger, removing the state's responsibility to address food insecurity (Long et al., 2020). Against this backdrop, the growing reliance on food charity underscores the inadequacy of conventional approaches to address food insecurity and secure justice for food insecure populations.

1.1 Research aim and purpose

In light of the persistent prevalence of food insecurity within ostensibly ‘developed’ and ‘rich’ societies, and the limited effectiveness of traditional food assistance measures in offering a long-term solution to food insecurity eradication, I delved into the case of Lithuania to conduct a critical examination of food assistance mechanisms. The overarching purpose of my research is to interrogate prevalent discourse and interventions surrounding food assistance in Lithuania, seeking to problematise the prevailing understanding of food insecurity. The reason behind the aim is to recognise the role of framing in shaping policymaking (Pollard and Booth, 2019): how you define and frame food insecurity shapes the response of food assistance mechanisms. Therefore, I aim to explore how food assistance mechanisms conceptualise and address the issues of food insecurity and how this understanding affects the experiences of food insecure populations.

To do so, I use the “What’s the problem represented to be?” (WPR) approach by Bacchi (2009) which helps to politicise the issue of food insecurity, unpacking the food insecurity discourse to unveil what framings are used in understanding food insecurity, what aspects of food insecurity remain unproblematized as well as discuss the consequent effects on the food insecurity landscape. In particular, I seek to challenge the narrow focus of food insecurity interventions and explore transformative frameworks such as the right to food, food justice, and food sovereignty to broaden perspectives on food insecurity.

Furthermore, this research aims to contribute to the study of food insecurity experiences specific to Lithuania. Using ‘food (in)security’ and ‘Lithuania’ keywords while excluding studies focused on food security in the European region, I found only two relevant studies: one pertaining to the Lithuanian context (Makutėnas, 2013) and the other to the Baltic context (Makutėnas et al., 2024). The lack of academic discourse on this issue serves as a catalyst for this study, underscoring the importance of filling this gap in scholarly research.

1.2 Research questions

The following research questions will guide my study:

RQ1. How is food insecurity problematised in the Lithuanian state and charity discourse?

RQ2. How does the problematisation of food insecurity affect the responses to food insecurity challenges?

RQ3. Do food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania meet the standards set out by the Human Right to Food?

To address the research questions, I will adopt the following structure. In the background section (Section 2), I will explore food (in)security in Lithuania, contextualised within the broader framework of poverty and welfare. Following that, a literature review (Section 3) will present key themes: food insecurity in Europe, drivers of food insecurity, food aid as well as moving on beyond food insecurity with a discussion of the human right to food and food justice. Next, Section 4 will offer a theoretical foundation drawing on the WPR approach and the human right to food. Methodological choices will be explained in Section 5. In the analysis section (Section 6), I will focus on problem representations, their framings, and their effects. Finally, Section 7 will summarise research findings, offering insights and potential implications for future studies.

2. Background

2.1 Food (in)security definition

The concept of food security has evolved substantially since its inception in the 1970s, transitioning from a focus solely on food availability to a more comprehensive understanding that encompasses multiple dimensions. Initially, food security was primarily concerned with ensuring adequate food production (UN, 1975). However, this view was challenged in the 1980s with the work of Sen (1981), who introduced the

notion of 'entitlement failure', contributing to the perspective that food security is a question of distribution rather than availability.

A commonly used definition today was established at the World Food Summit (FAO, 1996) where it was defined as the condition in which "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". This definition broadened the scope of food security by emphasising individual and household levels in the analysis, and it identified four key dimensions: availability, access, utilisation, and stability. Food availability refers to food production, stock levels and net trade. Food access includes economic and physical access to food determined by income, expenditure, markets, and prices. Utilisation is concerned with sufficient energy and nutrient intake. Finally, stability of all three dimensions over time is necessary for food security (ibid.).

Despite the adoption of the World Food Summit definition, food security consists of various interpretations in practice, reflecting the complex interplay of different factors. Burchi and De Muro (2016: 11) delineate five approaches historically used to understand food security, including food availability, income-based, basic needs, entitlement, and sustainable livelihoods. These approaches vary in their emphasis, ranging from considerations of food supply to shifting analysis from a macro- to a micro-level assessment of personal incomes and a broader framework centred on food access.

In this research, I will be referring primarily to food insecurity instead of food security. Despite the two concepts being closely related, I find food insecurity to be a more useful term operationally as it describes the experience of being food insecure which is the main focus of this study. The Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES), developed by FAO Statistics (2018), is an experience-based measure for food insecurity, capturing experiences ranging from mild to severe food insecurity. Mild food insecurity may manifest as worrying about running out of food or compromises on food quality and

variety, while severe food insecurity encompasses more significant outcomes such as reducing meal quantities or skipping meals.

Similar to food security, food insecurity cannot be understood without an interplay of different factors. Loopstra (2018: 270-271) identifies four dimensions of food insecurity: quantitative, qualitative, psychological, and social. The quantitative dimension refers to insufficient food quantities, while the qualitative dimension is concerned with changes in diets such as food variety and nutritional balance. The psychological dimension describes feelings related to uncertainty, anxiety, lack of choice, as well as deprivation. Finally, the social dimension encompasses changes in food-related practices such as food sourcing, food eating habits and social food practices.

It is important to consider the multifaceted dimensions of food insecurity to highlight the diverse ways in which individuals and communities experience and cope with inadequate access to food. In this study, I will aim to relate to different dimensions of food (in)security discussed in this section to capture the complexity of this phenomenon.

2.2 Poverty and social inequality in Lithuania

Before delving into food insecurity in Lithuania, it is important to provide context on poverty and the welfare-state regime in the country. When I discuss poverty in this study, I refer to multidimensional poverty. Multidimensional poverty is concerned with more than material poverty or the lack of income but rather an experience of “multiple, interlocking dimensions ... [that] combine to create and sustain powerlessness, a lack of freedom of choice and action” (Narayan et al., 2000: 2). These dimensions are context-based and may include health, education, livelihoods, social inclusion, or environmental sustainability. Food security can be an aspect of multidimensional poverty as adequate food is considered a basic human need (ibid.).

To contextualise Lithuania’s socio-economic landscape, I will turn to the concept of welfare-state regime, which Esping-Andersen (1990) categorises into three distinct models: liberal, conservative, and social democratic. Guogis and Koht (2009: 4) explain

the difference between the models: the liberal model is associated with “the dominance of the market” with the state offering minimal support under strict entitlement rules to encourage self-reliance. The conservative model sees the state as “the main sponsor” providing welfare when families cannot offer sufficient support, emphasising traditional family values. In contrast, in the social-democratic model, the state is responsible “for the provision of welfare to every individual”. This model aims to pursue “equality of the highest standards, not an equality of minimal needs as was pursued elsewhere” (Esping-Andersen, 1990).

The Lithuanian welfare regime has been attributed to diverse categories: between conservative and liberal (Guogis and Koht, 2009), neoliberal (Sommers et al., 2014) or a unique post-Soviet model that does not follow the dominant typologies (Aidukaite, 2009). Examining Lithuanian welfare system changes since the independence, Aidukaite (2019: 316) contends that it has strongly adhered to neoliberal ideology, arguing that “social policy has been seen more as a burden to the state and an obstacle to economic growth”. Neoliberalism is an ideology that promotes economic policy focused on free markets with minimal role of the state (Carolan, 2013). Other features of neoliberalism include privatisation, deregulation and austerity (Harvey, 2005).

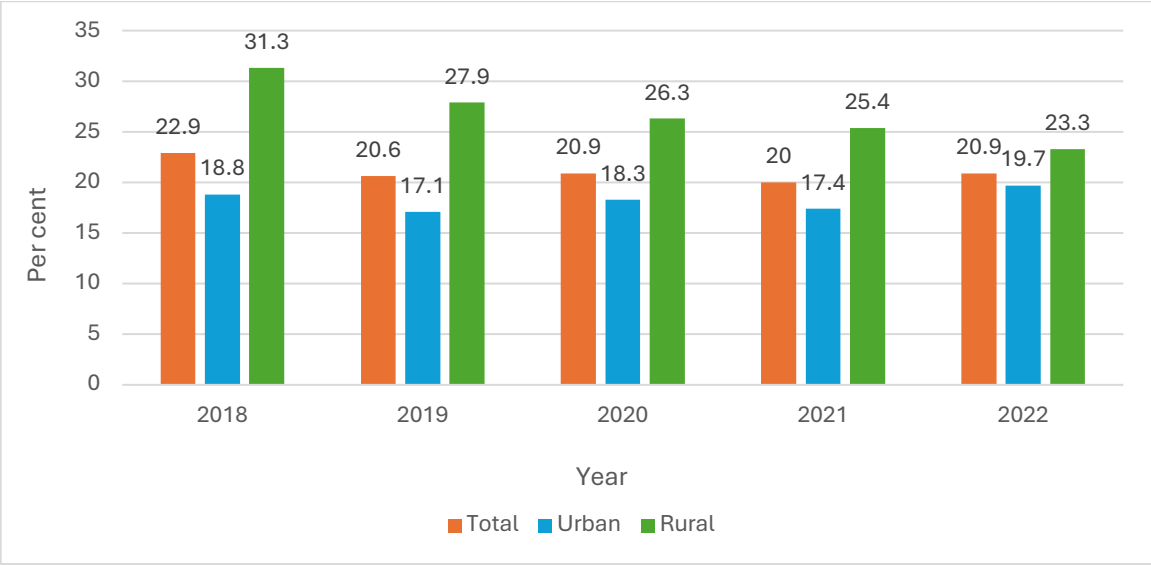
According to Aidukaite (2019), Lithuanian social policy objectives align with neoliberal principles, as the social policy is viewed as a support tool for the most vulnerable while leaving others reliant on the labour market and private insurance. This raises concerns about whether the state adequately supports populations not categorised as the most vulnerable, but who still may experience food insecurity. Lithuania's social expenditure, at 13.5% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), falls below the European Union (EU) average of 19.5% (EUROSTAT, 2024).

In addition, Guogis and Koht (2009) propose that post-Soviet Lithuania adopted a corporative model akin to the conservative welfare type: this model relies on labour market contribution to state social insurance. However, they also observe a shift to more neoliberal welfare provision with the introduction of voluntary private pension funds

and newly increasing dependency on the market. Atas (2018) notes that neoliberalism’s influence in Lithuania is found not only in policymaking but also in policymaking outcomes. In particular, Lithuanian social indicators reveal concerns about disparities in income distribution and vulnerability to poverty.

The national at-risk-of-poverty threshold is calculated based on 60% of the median disposable income below which individuals with lower incomes are considered impoverished. According to Statistics Lithuania (2023a), in 2022, Lithuania's national at-risk-of-poverty threshold stood at EUR 510 per month for a single person and EUR 1,071 for a family of two adults and two children under 14. The country's total at-risk-of-poverty rate was 20.9, with urban areas experiencing a slightly lower rate (19.7%) than rural regions (23.3%). Figure 1 below provides an overview of the trends between 2018 and 2022, demonstrating a downward trend for rural poverty and a slightly upward trend for urban poverty.

Figure 1: At-risk-of-poverty rate by place of residence, 2018–2022
 (Source: Statistics Lithuania, 2023)



Notably, statistics reveal that the most vulnerable to poverty group in Lithuania was the elderly who faced the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate at 39.5 % (Statistics Lithuania,

2023a). The average old-age pension of EUR 413.4 was lower than the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Other individuals at-risk-of-poverty include children (17.8 %), unemployed (51 %), and single person households (43 %). Importantly, even employment sometimes fails to provide a sufficient safeguard against poverty, as after-tax disposable income from minimum wage only is lower than the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.

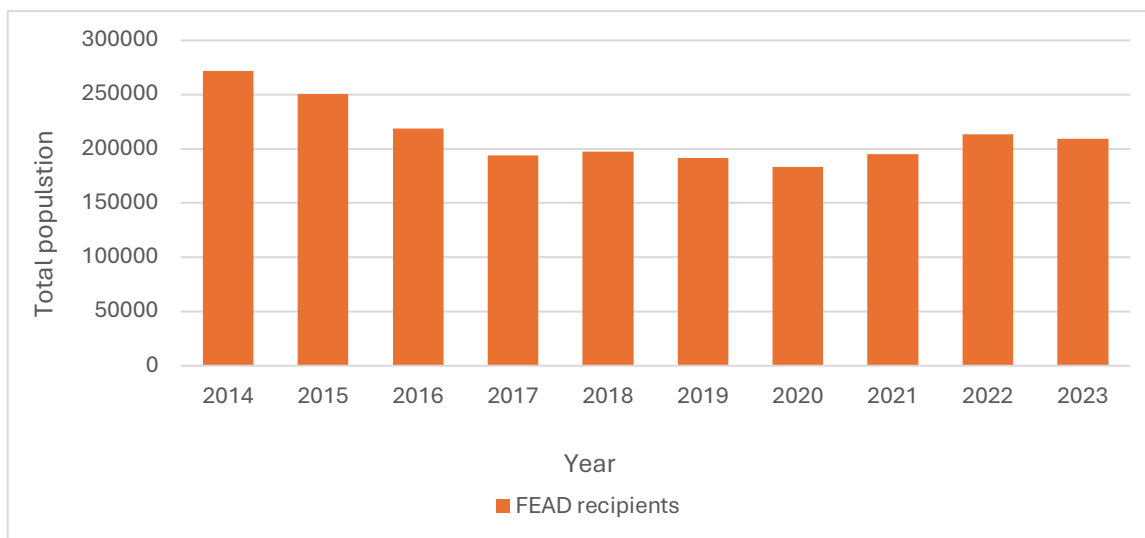
Despite modest declines, Lithuania's at-risk-of-poverty rate remains among the highest in the EU, reflecting persistent income inequality. The stark contrast in income levels is evident, with the income of the richest 20% of the population surpassing that of the poorest 20% by over sixfold in 2021 (European Commission, 2023b). The statistics reveal that not only does Lithuania have low social protection spending but also that this translates to high poverty and inequality rates. While the next section will dive more specifically into food insecurity indicators, poverty and social protection are closely linked to food security status. For instance, high social protection spending protects the population from food insecurity during rising unemployment (Loopstra et al., 2016).

2.3 Food insecurity in Lithuania

Based on the latest FIES data (FAOSTAT, 2023), in 2021, 2.1 % of the Lithuanian population was severely food insecure, while 8.5 % of the population experienced moderate or severe food insecurity. In addition, an average of 200,000 people per year have received EU food aid between 2014 and 2023, Figure 2 below shows the trend over the years. In 2023, 210,000 people received food aid (LRT, 2023), amounting to nearly 8 % of the Lithuanian population, a similar figure to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimation of moderate food insecurity rates.

Figure 2: Recipients of the EU food assistance in Lithuania (2014-2023)

Source: (ESFA, 2022; LRT, 2023)



Based on a survey with food aid recipients (PPMi, 2020), the demographic profile predominantly comprises of individuals from rural areas, accounting for 62.9% of recipients, compared to 37.1% from urban settings. Among these food aid recipients 54% are unemployed. The largest age group is household members under the age of 17, representing 35.1% of aid recipients.

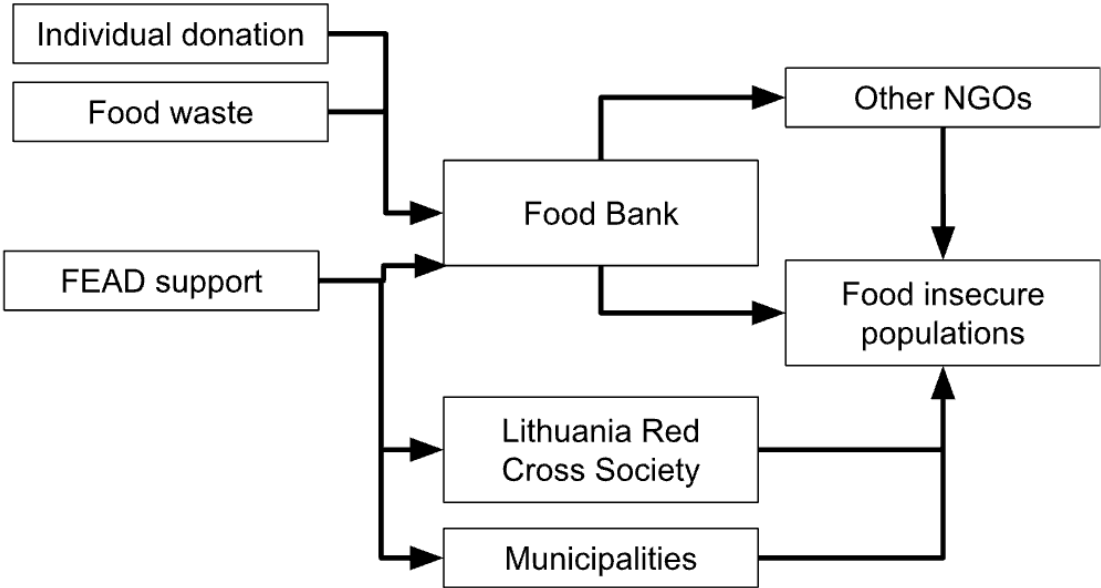
Considering specific food insecurity challenges, increasing difficulties related to economic access stand out. Recent data (Yanatma, 2023) underscores this issue, revealing a surge in real food inflation to its highest levels in four decades, presenting significant affordability barriers for households. Consequently, this places economic constraints on household budgets. The Lithuanian Food Basket – last assessed in 2015 (European Commission, 2015) - calculates the required monthly budget for a healthy diet which for a single person stood at 120 EUR. In 2022, 20.4 % of the Lithuanian household consumption expenditure was spent on food and non-alcoholic beverages, one of the highest rates in Europe (EUROSTAT, 2023). Additionally, findings from the Lithuanian National Anti-Poverty Network (2023a) indicate a concerning trend: in 2023 14.3 % of the Lithuanian population reported lacking funds for food, an increase from 11.9 % in 2022. For individuals earning less than 500 EUR, the rate increases to 29.9 %.

In addition to the access issues, food insecurity reveals itself in the statistics of nutritional outcomes. In 2022, 10.4 % of the Lithuanian population could not afford to eat meat, fish or plant-based equivalent at least every other day, limiting their required nutritional intake (Statistics Lithuania, 2023b). Additionally, increasing trends of obesity demonstrates potential limited access to healthy food. In 2019, 57 % of the adult population was overweight (EUROSTAT, 2019).

2.4 Food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania

Food assistance mechanisms are operated by different stakeholders including the state and non-governmental organisations (NGO), in addition to the support food insecure population might receive from state welfare benefits. In this section, I will explain the different food assistance mechanisms available to food insecure populations as well as the different stakeholders involved. A simplified map of food assistance mechanisms discussed in this study is displayed in the Figure 3 below, outlining food sources and food distribution pathways to food insecure populations.

Figure 3: Map of food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania (Source: Author)



Evident in the Figure 3, food assistance mechanisms involve an intricate network of stakeholders. The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania (MoSSL) is the lead authority responsible for the management of these funds, overseeing the work of the European Social Fund Agency (ESFA) which is responsible for the delivery and administration of food aid purchased with the support of the EU funds. From 2014 to 2023, Lithuanian food aid was supported by the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), the fund source changing to European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) from 2024. *See Appendix A for a summary of names and responsibilities for the state and EU actors.*

The food distribution to beneficiaries is achieved by the implementing partners: the Lithuanian Food Bank, the Lithuanian Red Cross Society and municipalities. The Lithuanian Food Bank is the main NGO stakeholder within food assistance landscape, its support reaching more beneficiaries than the EU-funded food aid. For instance, in 2022, 213,636 individuals received in-kind food assistance from FEAD (ESFA, 2022). According to the Lithuanian Food Bank annual report (Maisto Bankas, 2022), in 2022, its support reached 230,237 individuals.

2.4.1 FEAD: In-kind Food Donation

Support under the FEAD program consisted of in-kind food donation and accompanying measures, with the latter representing only 5% of the FEAD program's yearly budget. Accompanying measures included activities related to advice on food preparation and storage (more than half of the activities) as well as budgeting tips, personal hygiene advice, and psychological help. The in-kind food donation consisted of long-lasting food packages and was distributed six times a year. Importantly, the distribution was done by NGO partners or municipalities. The main eligibility criteria to receive this assistance was income: a person's average monthly income could not exceed 1.5 times the amount of state-supported income per month approved by the government (in 2024, 264 EUR per household member (Priimk.lt, 2024)), with exceptions determined individually in each municipality.

2.4.2 Change to ESF+: Introduction of the Social Card

From 2024, the government launched a new ‘Material Deprivation Reduction’ program, which included financial support from a different EU fund: ESF+. With the change of funding to ESF+, instead of a bi-monthly in-kind food distribution, the food assistance took the shape of social cards. A social card acts as a payment card in designated food retailers to purchase all foodstuffs as well as other necessities including personal hygiene items, cleaning products, clothing, baby items, etc., except for alcohol, tobacco and lottery tickets. 25 EUR are transferred to the social cards 4 times a year. In addition to the social card, people can still request in-kind food donations, but this food aid no longer consists of long-lasting products but rather products close to their expiry date, mostly sourced through food waste reduction initiatives. The eligibility criteria for income and exceptions remain the same as the FEAD programmes. 73.2 % of survey respondents who included representatives from municipalities and NGOs viewed electronic cards as a better alternative for food assistance, citing reasons such as better choice, meeting demands of people more efficiently, reduced administrative costs and increased independence of aid recipients (PPMi, 2020).

2.4.3 Lithuanian Food Bank

Maisto Bankas (henceforth Food Bank) is the largest Lithuanian NGO tackling food poverty and has three main sources of food to distribute to food insecure populations. First, the Food Bank formerly distributed the FEAD food items. Second, twice a year, the Food Bank organises in-store donation drives, asking individuals to donate long-lasting food items. Moreover, the Food Bank aims to tackle food waste by collecting ‘surplus’ food from farmers, producers, traders, caterers, and individuals. The ‘surplus’ food is redistributed to NGOs who target vulnerable populations or directly to food insecure populations. The Food Bank offers one-off support for people in crisis situations. In addition, weekly support is offered to populations referred by social workers. The main criterion for referral is income.

In 2023, the Food Bank launched a new initiative called ‘Maisto Atiduotuve’ (in English food giveaway shop) which provides weekly assistance and operates like a grocery store where people do not need to pay. The food in the shop mainly consists of food surplus saved from waste. Each person is allowed to take 5 kg of food, selecting from different food categories. Each food category may have a limit, depending on how much food is available that day.

2.4.4 Other food assistance efforts

It is important to note other efforts in the ecosystem of food assistance mechanisms, especially run by NGOs other than the Food Bank. For instance, charity canteens provide important support to food insecure populations as they create a space to receive a hot meal. Charity canteens decide on their own rules for providing food assistance: some are open to everyone, some cooperate with municipalities and create a list of eligible recipients, some religious ones focus on providing food aid to their community members. Most of the time, the eligibility criteria are more relaxed, attracting vulnerable groups who are food insecure and experience social exclusion such as people experiencing homelessness or individuals who were formerly incarcerated.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Food insecurity: academic discourse in Europe

As the issue of food insecurity in high-income countries has grown, so too has academic research on the subject (Davis and Geiger, 2017). However, Davis and Geiger (2017) note that data on food insecurity in Europe is still limited due to the lack of systemic evidence. Pollard and Booth (2019) also suggest that the paper “No Data, No Problem, No Action” by Friel et al. (2011) demonstrates how food insecurity is defined – as long as it is not well measured, it is not understood as a problem.

Looking at the analysis of existing academic discourse on food insecurity in Europe by Borch and Kjærnes (2016: 146) reveal that “the current scientific knowledge about food

in/security in Europe is limited and highly diverse, offering no shared views on the status of the problem, its causes and solutions”. Most academic discourse is focused on food production and agricultural systems, with others focused on consumption patterns between different risk groups, as well as food policymaking. Borch and Kjærnes (2016) give the following explanations for the lack of academic interest in food insecurity: taking for granted that people in Europe have enough food, viewing food insecurity as a component of larger social issues such as poverty or agriculture policy rather than a phenomenon on its own, as well as tendency to individualise the problem of food access by seeing food insecurity as an individual issue rather than a societal one.

Garratt (2020: 785) argues that “the existence of food insecurity across welfare regimes is a visible and immediate demonstration of extreme poverty and social exclusion in Europe.” The author also adds to the tendency to individualise the problem analysis of Borch and Kjærnes (2016) by explaining the lack of attention to food (in)security as a matter of perceiving food as individual responsibility and private choice, therefore undermining structural and economic influences to food consumption.

3.2 Drivers of food insecurity

Food insecurity is complex and operates at different levels including individual, household, national and global. When it comes to drivers of food insecurity, the European Commission (2023a) identifies 7 categories with 25 individual drivers. The seven categories include: biophysical and environmental; research innovation and technology; economic and market; food supply chain performance; political and institutional; socio-cultural as well as demographic drivers. This study is interested in household food insecurity. As such, it will consider the drivers that are most relevant for the individual and household level.

A literature review by Gorton et al. (2010) on the physical, economic, sociocultural, and political environmental influences behind household food insecurity in high-income countries reveal a wealth of factors linked to food insecurity. It is worth listing all of them to underscore the intricate web of factors contributing to food insecurity, highlighting the complexity of the issue: income, wealth, employment, living expenses,

housing, health, household facilities, home gardens, transport, rural/urban location, government policy, welfare support, knowledge related to cooking, financial skills and nutrition, cultural obligations, education level, household composition, immigration, social networks, media as well as pride preventing people from asking help. Similarly, in her research on economic and demographic risk factors of food insecurity in Europe, Garratt (2020: 81) identified the following groups are more likely to experience food insecurity: “economically disadvantaged groups (whether measured by income, housing tenure, education, or employment status), women, older people, one-person households, lone-parent households, and people with disabilities”.

In high-income countries, income generation has been the most frequently identified factor associated with food insecurity causes (Gorton et al., 2010). Penne and Goedemé (2021) argue that income is also an important driver behind food utilisation, as insufficient income becomes the key obstacle to access a healthy diet. Having observed the diverse array of factors contributing to food insecurity, it is important to avoid overemphasizing income generation and also consider various structural factors. Indeed, Lambie-Mumford (2017) considers the ‘problem’ of food insecurity as an issue of structure first. This view is supported by Riches (2011: 770) who describes household food insecurity in rich countries as:

“Rooted not so much in the failure of food supply but in unacceptable levels of poverty and social inequality, and in particular in the failure of public policy: weak systems of food and income distribution; underfunded social welfare; and the lack of affordable public housing to reach those most in need.”

Other structural reasons for food insecurity include employment (Coleman-Jensen, 2011; Loopstra et al., 2016), housing (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2011), social networks (Verthein, 2018), transport infrastructure (Baek, 2016), among others. As food insecurity is also tied to lack of healthy diets (Penne and Goedemé, 2021), drivers of food choice become important influencers of food security outcomes. In particular, they are influenced by cultural and social pressures (Leng et al., 2017), as well as food literacy and food marketing (Bublitz et al., 2019).

3.3 Food aid

Food assistance in high-income countries usually takes two forms: “measures to respond to poverty including welfare entitlements and food relief” (Pollard and Booth, 2019: 1). Food relief programmes have long been recognised as vital mechanisms for addressing food insecurity and come in many forms of support such as food stamps, vouchers, onsite food provision, as well as offsite food distribution (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014: iv).

Food aid programmes come with their own challenges. In particular, the concerns are related to limited good quality support Middleton et al. (2018), limited capacity to target root drivers of food insecurity (Pollard and Booth, 2019) as well as transfer of food assistance responsibilities from the state to the NGOs (Riches, 2011). Pfeiffer et al. (2011: 423) observe that “food security seems to be no longer regarded as a function of the state” and instead is delegated to volunteers and the private sector. Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti (2020: 1) link this discussion back to types of welfare capitalism, suggesting that that “the recent rise of food charity has occurred in the context of increased conditionality and reductions to entitlements in social security across the continent.”

This study will consider the role of food banks, as they have become the dominant response to food security challenges in high income countries (Middleton et al., 2018). Food banks are important and provide the necessary assistance for subsistence, but they do not offer “a route out of poverty” (De Schutter, 2014), in particular as they cannot address structural drivers and social inequality. In fact, food banks are associated with shame and embarrassment (Garthwaite, 2016) and may lead to stigmatisation effects, discouraging people in need to seek assistance in the first place (Greiss et al., 2021).

3.4 Beyond food security: food justice the human right to food

3.4.1 Food justice

The concept of food security embodies a constrained notion of justice and rights claims (Noll and Murdock, 2020). Therefore, in this section I will present food justice, in accordance with Fraser's (2009) multidimensional theory of social justice, encompassing redistribution, recognition and representation. Redistribution is concerned with distribution of economic resources; recognition refers to acknowledgment and respect of identities and cultural differences; while representation relates to the inclusion and participation of diverse voices and perspectives in decision-making. Fraser's justice dimensions allow for a more nuanced understanding of the underlying issues of justice and rights claims.

Aligning with the principles of justice, food justice emerged as a response to social inequalities within the food system (Sandra et al., 2023). Alkon (2014) writes that food justice is a call for a food system that responds to exploitation and oppression, including racial, economic, gender and any other forms of disparities. Gottlieb and Joshi (2013: 6) broadly define food justice as “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly”. In their scoping of food justice conceptualisations, Sandra et al. (2023) identify five themes for food justice debates: social equity, food security, food systems transformation, community participation and agency as well as environmental sustainability. Food justice is closely linked with neoliberalism critique, opposing market-based solutions and the decreasing responsibility of the state in addressing food challenges (Alkon, 2014).

3.4.2 The human right to food

The human right to adequate food (RTF) was originally recognised in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights as part of the right to an adequate standard of living, making it an older concept than food security. RTF was later enshrined in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESR) (OHCHR, 2010). RTF is defined under international law as the following:

“The right to adequate food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.” (CESR, 1999)

In addition to access, adequacy, agency, cultural traditions and dignity are important parts of RTF (Ziegler et al., 2011: 15). Overall RTF seeks to achieve an environment where all people can feed themselves, through production, income or, in the case of being unable to care for themselves, direct support from the state (FAO, 2009).

RTF is similar to food security and its dimensions as they both stress availability, accessibility, nutrition, and cultural acceptability. In fact, food security can be interpreted as minimum necessary standards or prerequisite to the progressive realisation of RTF (Riches, 1999; Mechlem, 2004; Ziegler et al., 2011; Lambie-Mumford, 2017). RTF consists of broader goals than food security as it is:

“a social ethic, it represents a commitment to the right to food for all as a social good, and it establishes responsibility and a framework (as parent of law and action and in the form of ‘progressive realisation’) for the continual improvements of societies towards the realisation of the right for all.” (Lambie-Mumford, 2017: 55)

What is unique about RTF is that it also adds accountability, as it “places legal obligations on States to overcome hunger and malnutrition and realise food security for all” (OHCHR, 2010). Lithuania has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1991, as a result recognising RTF and is legally obliged to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food. Not only is Lithuania obligated not to restrict people from achieving RTF but also to take action by drafting policies that encourage everyone’s access to food (Lambie-Mumford, 2017). Additionally, RTF is unique in being a human rights-based approach, allowing it “the potential to address the impact of government action or inaction, including the structural causes, not just the symptoms, of social inequities” (Pollard and Booth, 2019: 2).

4. Theoretical grounding

4.1 WPR approach

Carol Bacchi formulated the initial shape of the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to Be?’ (WPR) approach in 1999. In her book *Women, Policy and Politics*, Bacchi (1999: 2) writes that policies contain “interpretations or representations of political issues” – in other words, ‘problems’. According to Bacchi (1999), it is therefore important to study policies not simply as solutions but also as processes of problematisation, or ways of producing ‘problems’. In a later elaboration of the approach, Bacchi (2009) explains that proposed solutions within policies contain meanings about what policymakers think needs to change, also what she calls as the implied ‘problems’ or problem representations.

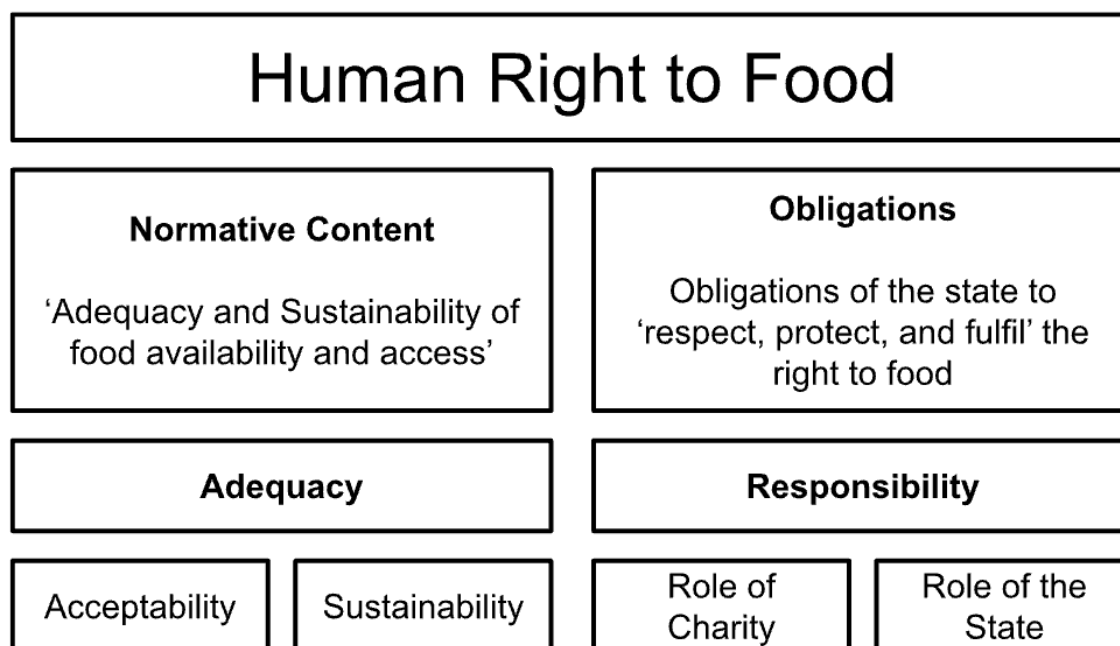
Bacchi and Goodwin (2016: 14) outline that the key goal of WPR is to “make the politics involved in these productive practices visible”. If the problem of food insecurity is not seen as a political issue in high income countries, then this approach is an important tool to consider the invisibilised politics behind the food assistance programmes. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) further position that we need to study not simply ‘problems’ but problematisations which takes two meanings. First, problematisation refers to putting something to question; second, it looks at how issues are problematised by governmental practices. This study aims to do both by problematising food assistance in Lithuania and by analysis of how food insecurity is problematised by food assistance policies.

4.2 Human right to food

This study will also rely on the human right to food theoretical framework developed by Lambie-Mumford (2017) and based on the conceptualisations of food insecurity and the right to food. Lambie-Mumford (2017: 88) argues that the RTF standards are not met “as long as people cannot access as much food as they need, for as long as they need, when they need it, and as long as they do not have any rights or way of holding organisations to account within these systems”. In particular, the proposed framework

is concerned with adequacy and responsibility, based on Comment 12 of the CESR (1999). Four specific questions guide the themes related to acceptability, sustainability, the role of charity as well as the role of the state. Figure 5 below provides the summary of the framework.

Figure 5: RTF theoretical framework (adapted from Lambie-Mumford, 2017)



4.2.1 Acceptability

When it comes to food assistance, acceptability refers to whether the process of acquiring food is acceptable based on the social justice standards of the RTF. Lambie-Mumford (2017) argues that social injustice takes place when emergency food recipients are excluded from social food 'norms', resulting in the experience of 'otherness'. This 'otherness' can be created by material otherness, stigmatisation, language, and disempowerment. 'Othering' as a concept is explained by Cohen et al. (2017) as subtle acts of discourse and behaviour that lead to discrimination, exclusion and manifestation of 'inferiority' by distinguishing between those deemed as 'us' and 'others'.

Material otherness is a result of being excluded from the socially acceptable ways of food acquisition experiences. Tarasuk and Eakin (2005: 184) discuss how food assistance recipients have different experiences from the mainstream food system customers. According to them, surplus food redistribution operates as a “secondary food system [which] functions outside the “rules” of the competitive food retail system”. Material otherness can also be created by ‘setting boundaries’ (Cohen et al., 2017) – such as boundaries set between staff and food assistance recipients. Pollard and Booth (2019: 8) suggest that it is important to consider what “non-charitable food-service settings” - such as restaurants or farmers markets - are available to food insecure populations which helps to conceptualise other types of social exclusion and othering.

Food assistance recipients are also ‘othered through language’ (Lister, 2004: 100) via construction of notions such as ‘needy’ and ‘hungry’. As a consequence, food assistance recipients are stripped of personal identity, ignoring personal preferences for food or individual agency (Cohen et al., 2017). Othering through language is closely connected to othering through stigmatisation. Garthwaite (2016) writes that stigma arises not from the treatment individuals receive at the food bank, but rather how individuals using the food bank are perceived by others as well as how they perceive themselves.

4.2.2 Sustainability

Comment 12 (CESR, 1999) interprets sustainability as the long-term availability and accessibility. In other words, sustainability here is concerned with the ability of food assistance organisations to maintain food availability as well as the ability of food insecure populations to access the food. Lambie-Mumford (2017) offers to discuss sustainability through the lens of power as agency or the “capacity for exercising agency” (Elder-Vass, 2010: 87).

In particular, for food assistance organisations agency is important for the ability to source food for food distribution. According to Lambie-Mumford (2017), the agency may be constricted by the structures of the food industry as organisations become dependent on corporate partnerships, retailers, and individual donations. On the other

hand, recipient agency is limited by eligibility requirements, limits to the size and duration of assistance, physical accessibility, and information barriers, as well as ability to hold food assistance organisations accountable.

4.2.3 Responsibility

The theme of responsibility is based on the obligations of the state “to respect, to protect, and to fulfil” (CESR, 1999) the human right to adequate food, just like other human rights. Lambie-Mumford (2017: 52) suggests that responsibility theme allows to assess the role of all stakeholders by exploring “who is assuming which responsibilities now, who should be assuming responsibilities, and how might they do that”. In this study, I will focus on the role of the state and the role of charity in food assistance provision.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research approach and design

In conducting my research on the problematisation of food security and its effects in Lithuania, I rely on a constructivist epistemological approach which recognises that knowledge is constructed by individuals and their subjective experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Moses and Knutsen, 2012). To design the research, I have chosen a qualitative case study research design with a combination of desk research and semi-structured interviews.

The case study design is particularly suited as it enables the in-depth examination of a “contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) ... within its real-world context” (Yin, 2018: 50). In this case, the focus is on food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania, allowing for a detailed exploration of the unique challenges and dynamics shaping responses to food insecurity within the country. In addition, case study methodology encourages the use of a mix of data collection techniques such as interviews, observation and document

analysis (Creswell and Poth, 2017). This study will lean on this to explore the diverse perspectives and narratives about food insecurity in Lithuania.

5.2 Research methods and data collection

The case study uses both primary and secondary data collection. The primary data collection relies on semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders of the food insecurity landscape in Lithuania. In total, I conducted 13 semi-structured interviews between January and March 2024 with three groups: state actors (3), non-state actors (1) and target beneficiaries of the food assistance programmes (9). 3 interviews were conducted with state actors: 1 with a representative from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour as well as 2 interviews with social workers from the Vilnius Municipality. Additionally, 1 interview was conducted with the head of a social centre in Vilnius that runs a charity canteen. Finally, 9 interviews were conducted with food assistance recipients - 8 visitors of the charity canteen as well as 1 recipient of food bank assistance.

Coming into this research, one of the biggest challenges was the lack of discourse available on food insecurity in Lithuania. As a result, I could not have expectations about what contributions the research participants might have or what perspectives are available. Brinkmann (2014) argues that semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to have flexibility to follow up on the interviewees' responses. Semi-structures interviews gave me the freedom to understand what is important for the interviewees and introduce relevant follow up questions.

The interviews were conducted in Lithuanian and lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. I have personally translated all the quotes used in this study. The interviewees were asked questions about food insecurity experiences as well as the process and effectiveness of food assistance mechanisms. Expert interview participants - which included state and NGO actors - were chosen using purposive sampling, a strategy reliant on key informers who are knowledgeable about the specific topic of interest (Moser and Korstjens, 2018). The criterion for the sampling was based on their experience working with food

insecurity issues or food insecure populations. Food assistance recipients were interviewed based on convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling refers to selecting research participants based on their immediate availability, while snowball sampling involves selected participants introducing additional participants to the study (ibid.). I conducted two half-day visits to the charity canteen, during which I engaged with the management team and food assistance recipients. First, I approached interviewees who were accessible as they were open to be interviewed based on the introductions helped by the staff. Then I requested the initial interviewees if they could introduce me to other visitors of the canteen. In addition to the interviews, online desktop research was used as a secondary data collection strategy. Figure 6 below demonstrates the summary of sources used.

Figure 6: Summary of sources for desktop research / document analysis (Author)

Type of source	Selected sources
Ministry of Social Security and Labour	Press releases Ministry website
Evaluation of food assistance reports	FEAD final evaluation (PPMi, 2021) Pre-assessment of possible material deprivation reduction programmes to be financed in the programming period 2021-2027 (PPMi, 2020)
NGO reports	Lithuanian Food Bank annual reports (2015-2022) Lithuanian Food Bank press releases Lithuanian National Anti-Poverty Network reports
Websites	Lithuanian Food Bank website: Maistobankas.lt ESFA food assistance website: Priimk.lt
News articles	22 text units were analysed from 4 Lithuanian media channels published in the 2019-2024 period. The texts were chosen based on key words “food assistance” and “food poverty”

5.3 Data analysis strategy

Data analysis strategy involved using thematic analysis as well as WPR as an analytical approach. First, codes were defined based on interviewees' understanding of food insecurity 'problems' and proposed solutions. The codes were categorised under different food security dimensions to allow for better understanding of food security problematisation.

The range of food assistance mechanisms were analysed using the WPR six question set. WPR approach takes shape through six questions found below (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016). In my analysis, I focus primarily on questions 1, 2, 4 and 5.

1. What's the 'problem' (for example, of 'problem gamblers', 'drug use/abuse', 'gender inequality', 'domestic violence', 'global warming', 'sexual harassment', etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Bacchi & Goodwin (2016) elaborate on the goals behind each step in the framework. The first step aims to pinpoint a problem representation. The subsequent step delves into uncovering the underlying meanings—presuppositions, assumptions, unexamined ways of thinking, and discourses—necessary for the problem representation to hold weight within policies and programmes. Following this, the framework seeks to explore the historical context of the problem representation, shedding light on potential alternative

narratives and challenging the assumption that the current representation is the only viable one. The framework also endeavours to identify the parts of the problem that have not been problematised and might have been silenced. Moving on, the next step seeks to analyse the effects of problem representations, encompassing discursive, subjectification, and lived impacts. Lastly, the framework aims to showcase the practices employed to legitimise the problem representation, while also considering forms of resistance.

5.4 Limitations

In this part, I would like to acknowledge the inherent limitations in my research design and analysis. A primary limitation arises from lack of food insecurity discourse in Lithuania. Expert interviewees displayed vague understanding of definitions; some were preoccupied with the issues of poverty rather than food insecurity on its own. One expert interviewee thought that food insecurity referred to food safety and hygiene issues. The limitation was also applicable to document analysis where food insecurity terms were either absent or undefined. Consequently, considerable interpretation was necessitated on my part, potentially introducing more bias into the study. The WPR approach and its focus on how the problem is understood through analysis of the programmes, in this case the food assistance mechanisms, helped to partly overcome this limitation. Given these challenges, I decided to focus part of my study towards examining how food insecurity is conceptualized.

Further limitations arose as research challenges, especially when it came to interview sampling. First, the transition from in-kind food donation to social cards was taking place during my data collection and the Lithuanian Food Bank was not responsive to my interview requests. Having this data would have allowed for important insights for a better interpretation of the Food Banks's document discourse analysis. Second, potential interviewees did not agree to participate in the research as they found they lacked expertise in the topic of food insecurity, despite their expertise being closely related to the challenges. Third, some of the interviewees were limited in their answers to my questions, as they thought they lacked knowledge or experience and could not provide me with a response. Fourth, getting in touch with the food insecure populations

and having their interest to participate in the study was more challenging than expected within the limited timeframe. These limitations collectively contributed to limited richness of primary data which would have benefitted qualitative analysis of food insecurity experiences. To mitigate these challenges, I chose to include a more comprehensive document analysis. Initially my plan was to have a study focused on interviews and the lived experiences of food insecurity. However, I realised there was value in understanding the landscape of food insecurity from problematisation and analysis of food security mechanisms.

5.5 Ethical considerations

Ethical concerns were a key consideration in the research preparation and process. Each participant was informed of the study's purpose, anonymity and confidentiality guarantees, as well as ability to withdraw from participation in the research at any time and asked for consent. For anonymity purposes, any personal details about the interviewees such as their names were removed from the transcripts. Expert interviewees, especially from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour as well as a manager at the charity canteen, were informed and agreed that their positions will not be fully anonymised - however, their other personal identification markers were removed. Confidentiality was a key principle for data processing and storage: voice recordings and transcripts were stored in a private folder and deleted after the study was finalised. To further anonymise the interviewees, I have attributed randomised IDs to interview quotes.

5.6 Positionality

Considerations about my positionality are mostly related to doing research in my home country. Sultana (2007: 377) discusses the lack of distinction between the 'field' and 'home'. At first, I thought I will experience less ethical dilemmas in the 'field' as I was going home, as I both spoke the language and understood the socio-economic context. Nevertheless, as a researcher I have privileges that mostly stem from my education and class background. I have never experienced food insecurity due to my background which meant that in the 'field' I was still an 'outsider'. Sultana (2007: 378) writes that as a researcher you should not try to become an 'insider' or to assume equality between you

and the participants. Instead, you can rely on trust: “the important thing ... to be as faithful to the relations in that space and time, and to the stories that were shared and the knowledge that was produced through the research”.

In my efforts, I leaned on the principles of intimacy strategy which encourages fostering good relationships with research participants, creating a relaxed environment for the interviews and seeking an open dialogue (Funder, 2005). During the interviews inside the charity canteen, I did not use my recording devices, relying on a notebook to increase familiarity for the interviewees, making them more comfortable to share about their experiences with the sensitive topic of food insecurity. Funder (2005) explains that the intimacy strategy comes with inherent tensions, as the researcher uses intimate information in their academic analysis. I experienced this as interviewees confided in me with stories, covering their personal experiences including homelessness, incarceration, and poverty. I was trusted as a researcher with personal details which further demonstrated the importance for ethical conduct and confidentiality.

6. Analysis

6.1 Problem representations

Applying the WPR approach, I will start the analysis by seeking out implied ‘problems’ found in policies and programmes. Bacchi (2009: 3) argues that policies can “reveal how the issue is being thought about”. This part of the analysis will provide an overview of problem representations inherent in various food assistance mechanisms, showing how the ‘problem’ of food insecurity is perceived and understood in Lithuanian policymaking. In particular, the understandings of who is considered food insecure, the underlying drivers of food insecurity, and the dimensions of food security that are prioritised will be discussed to convey the problem representations in this study.

Through an examination of food assistance mechanisms based on document analysis and interviews, the centrality of income as a determinant of food insecurity in Lithuania becomes apparent. Income generation and its correlation with limited food purchasing

power are consistently emphasised as the primary factors contributing to food insecurity. Indeed, income level serves as the primary eligibility criterion for accessing food assistance programmes. Even when other vulnerabilities are acknowledged by interviewees, they are often framed in terms of their impact on income generation. For instance, a social worker interviewed underscored that vulnerabilities to food access for single retired individuals or people with disabilities stem from their lower monthly incomes (I2).

Moreover, each food assistance intervention offers its own unique problem representation based on its approach to addressing food insecurity. For example, the social card voucher mechanism interprets food insecurity as a 'problem' of choice, offering recipients the autonomy to select their preferred food as well as non-food items (Verpy et al., 2003; Dowler and O'Connor, 2012). Conversely, accompanying measures offered with food aid, such as cooking or budgeting workshops, view food insecurity as a 'problem' of knowledge, suggesting that individuals lack the necessary skills, knowledge, and time to improve their food security status effectively (Gorton et al., 2010). Meanwhile, food waste offers interpretation of the 'problem' as a food market failure, as food surplus needs to be 'saved' and redistributed (Midgley, 2014). Finally, the problem representations also reflect varying interpretations regarding the importance of food security dimensions. All interventions are primarily concerned with economic access to food, with limited attention paid to food utilisation and stability. Social workers and as well as the interviewee from the ministry stressed affordability challenges created by low income. Figure 7 below displays an overview of food assistance mechanisms and what implied 'problems' they include about who are food insecure, why they are food insecure and what food security dimension is deemed as important.

Figure 7: Problem representations within food assistance mechanisms (Source: Author)

Food assistance mechanism	Institution	Implied 'problem'		
		Who are the food insecure?	Why are they food insecure?	Food security dimension
<p>Social card: e-voucher for food as well as non-food items in food retail</p> <p>With limited in-kind food donation (food items close to expiry date)</p>	<p>ESFA with ESF+ funding</p> <p>Implemented by NGO partners</p>	<p>Low-income groups (income as the main criteria)</p> <p>Additional vulnerabilities considered: disability, retired persons living alone, single parent households, households with three or more children, asylum seekers, persons granted asylum</p>	<p>Lack of income to purchase food</p> <p>Some vulnerabilities create additional challenges to achieve food security</p>	<p>Access to food</p>
<p>In-kind food donation (long-lasting products)</p> <p>With accompanying measures on topics such as social care, financial planning and hygiene.</p>	<p>ESFA with FEAD funding</p> <p>Implemented by NGO partners</p>	<p>Low-income groups (income as the main criteria)</p> <p>Same vulnerabilities considered as with the social card</p>	<p>Lack of income to purchase food</p> <p>People lack skills and knowledge to plan budgets and cook healthy meals</p>	<p>Access to food</p> <p>Limited focus on food utilisation</p>
<p>Utilising food surplus to redistribute to people in need</p>	<p>Lithuanian Food Bank</p>	<p>Low-income groups, relying on system based on social worker referral</p>	<p>Lack of income to purchase food</p> <p>Food supply chains produce food waste that does not reach people in need of food</p>	<p>Access to food</p>
<p>Hot meals provided in a social centre where people also access a space to hang out, wash oneself, see a social worker</p>	<p>Charity canteen</p>	<p>Food assistance open to everyone</p> <p>Demographic groups most often visiting the charity canteen, reported by the management: unemployed, homeless, retired</p>	<p>Income, time, skill and space to prepare meals is lacking</p>	<p>Access to food</p> <p>Stability</p>

6.2 Framing food insecurity

The next step of the WPR analytical approach aims to examine knowledge and underlying assumptions necessary for the problem representations. In particular, this section will look at how stakeholders define and understand food insecurity as well as what assumptions are behind the problem representations.

6.2.1 Food insecurity and poverty: same or separate?

The discourse surrounding food security in Lithuania primarily centres around poverty and material deprivation, rather than addressing food insecurity as a distinct and nuanced concept. National food assistance interventions are framed as tools to “reduce material depravity and poverty” (PPMi, 2020) rather than specifically targeting food insecurity. Within the Ministry of Social Security and Labour, responsible for social policy implementation, food assistance programmes are categorised under 'material deprivation reduction programmes' (The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania, 2024). The new ESF+ food assistance program states its aim is to “mitigate material deprivation among the most vulnerable individuals, including children, by facilitating access to essential food items” (Priimk.lt, 2024). Consequently, food assistance is conceptualised as a method to address broader material deprivations rather than directly confronting the food insecurity itself. This also relates to the limited discourse surrounding food insecurity in Lithuania. As highlighted in the introduction, there is nearly no academic discourse on the subject, also evidenced by the hesitancy from the interviewees to engage in discussions pertaining to food insecurity.

Similarly, at the NGO level, the Lithuanian Food Bank adopts a poverty-focused discourse rather than explicitly addressing food insecurity. In their reports and website, food assistance recipients are called ‘the deprived’ or ‘the disadvantaged’ (in Lithuanian *nepasiturintys*), highlighting a terminology that aligns with poverty discourse rather than acknowledging populations being food insecure. Interviews with the food insecure populations further reinforce this narrative, as participants commonly describe food insecurity experiences through the lens of poverty, emphasising personal financial burdens. One interviewee noted that food assistance programmes are an important tool to “reduce the burden of personal expenses” (I5), while another interviewee explained how “all money goes to their housing, leaving no money for food” (I6). This shows there is no denying the link between food insecurity and income poverty despite the shortcomings of focussing solely on it might have.

The three stakeholder groups – the state, NGOs and the food assistance target groups – emphasise the primacy of poverty discourse in framing food insecurity. Indeed, food insecurity and poverty are deeply connected, as also explored in literature overview. On the other hand, this view may overlook the distinct experiences and complexities of food insecurity. Lambie-Mumford (2017: 36) writes that while food insecurity is closely linked to poverty, experiences of food insecurity should not be seen simply as a sign of poverty but rather “a site of analysis in their own right, as a set of experiences that both result from and contribute to social exclusion and injustice”.

Importantly, Powers (2015) has criticised food aid for framing food insecurity as “the problem of a lack of food (hunger), rather than a lack of income (poverty) and the solution as distribution, not structural change”. Despite recognising the problem of income and poverty in the language used by food assistance stakeholders in Lithuania, the predominant focus of policies remains on distribution mechanisms rather than systemic change. From food surplus utilisation to increasing access to food items by in-kind donation or the social card, the emphasis lies on addressing immediate hunger needs than addressing the root causes of food insecurity.

6.2.2 Food insecurity and food waste: a win-win?

In the case of the Food Bank, two moral imperatives (principles that compel the organisation to act) are part of the underlying assumptions for its activities, embedded in the organisation’s mission: “tackle food waste and help the deprived populations with food” (Maisto Bankas, 2024b). On the one hand, a moral imperative to feed people in need is found in the fundraising messages across the Food Bank’s website: “Lithuania celebrates World Food Day by doing a good deed - lending a helping hand to the less fortunate” (Maisto Bankas, 2023). On the other hand, the food waste moral imperative is emphasised as a primary focus for the organisation. While the organisation is widely recognised for its yearly in-store food donation drives and distribution of FEAD food items targeting the most deprived individuals, its website underscores that “the organisation's biggest concern is food waste”(Maisto Bankas, 2024a). This raises a question whether saving food is more important than saving people from experiencing

food insecurity. The Lithuanian Food Bank justifies its emphasis on food waste by highlighting its potential to not only feed the hungry but also to minimise the wastage of other valuable resources such as land, water, energy, and labour (ibid). Notably, more than half of the food distributed to food aid recipients in 2022 originated from food surplus utilisation, underscoring the significant role of food waste in the organisation's operations (Maisto Bankas, 2022).

Food insecurity and food waste are framed together as potential solutions to each other. This conflation is evident in statements made by the manager of the Lithuanian Food Bank, who expressed a desire for food insecurity and food waste to be perceived as interconnected rather than distinct challenges: "we hope and strive that food insecurity and food waste in Lithuania will not be seen as separate problems, but ones that can help to solve each other" (Macius, 2023). Indeed, surplus food redistribution and food insecurity have been framed as a "win-win" solution (Caplan, 2017).

However, the emphasis on combatting food waste may inadvertently divert attention away from addressing the root causes of food insecurity, and indeed food waste too. Riches (2018) argues that food waste and domestic hunger cannot be solutions to each other as they are "two critical but separate structural issues", with food waste resulting from an overproducing food system, whilst hunger derives from complexities such as income poverty and inequality as well as inadequate social safety nets. The focus on food waste may also have effects on the nutritional quality and quantity of food made available (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005). Additionally, concerns are raised whether it should be the responsibility of food banks to deal with the effects of food waste created by a food system that is incentivised to overproduce in the first place (Winnie, 2005).

6.2.3 Switch to the social card: the role of food retail

In 2024, the EU-funded food assistance mechanisms changed from the in-kind food distribution to the implementation of social cards, essentially e-vouchers. The adoption of social cards was justified by creating a solution to challenges in food distribution, alongside a widespread agreement among the partner organisations and the

beneficiaries. According to the food aid evaluation survey conducted by PPMi (2021), both a majority of organisational partners (86.8 %) and aid recipients (72.6 %) expressed favourable views towards the introduction of the social card. The latter group cited the following reasons: ability to choose, saving money when buying on discount, purchasing products at their own convenience. An interviewee from the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (I1) emphasised challenges associated with the in-kind food distribution, which formed reasons to switch to social cards: high administrative and human resources to store and distribute food items; legal challenges in public procurement; as well as stigmatisation resulting from waiting in queues, sometimes outside and in bad weather, to get food packages that might not meet the preferences or needs of the recipients.

Providing social cards to afford people spending power in food retail reflects assumptions based on neoliberalism that views participation in markets as the quintessential solution to social issues. As Rosenberg and Cohen (2018: 1094) suggest, within neoliberal politics food insecurity is “framed as a market failure”, necessitating public-private partnerships with food retailers. While social cards give food insecure populations more choice on their purchasing, this solution limits their purchasing to conventional food retailers, mainly the supermarkets.

Moreover, the focus on increasing people’s ability to purchase food frames the issue as an individual responsibility, ignoring the structural causes and reinforcing a neoliberal assumption (Bastian and Coveney, 2013). This can be linked back to the neoliberal welfare capitalism model which views people as responsible for their own food provision. Dowler and O’Connor (2012: 45) argue that “food policy is dominated by the individual choice model”, resulting in food assistance programmes that are concerned with expanding the choice but have little to no recognition of food as a fundamental right.

6.3 Problem representation effects

The goal of this section is to identify and assess the effects resulting from the problem representations discussed earlier. As outlined by Bacchi (2009: 15-17), effects produced by the problem representations can be put into three categories: lived, subjectification

and discursive. Lived effects include material impacts with direct effects on people's lives. Subjectification effects are a result of production of subjects within the discourse. Lastly, discursive effects are created by the limits imposed by the problem representations and discourses which restrict thinking differently and thus prevent social interventions different from the implied problems.

6.3.1 Lived effects

On one hand, food assistance plays an important role in alleviating the immediate burden of food insecurity by providing instant access to food to those in need. According to the final evaluation of FEAD in-kind food donations (PPMi, 2021), nearly all survey participants (92.6 %) reported an improvement in their situation due to the assistance received. This is also echoed by the food assistance recipients in the interviews: when asked what they would like to be improved about their food assistance, only one out of nine interviewees had expressed an opinion for desiring more food options. The majority were happy to get any help: "I am not picky, I am just grateful for what I get" (I7), expressed one of the interviewees.

However, the short-term relief has little effect to address the underlying structural causes of food insecurity. As a result, the food assistance mechanisms do little to contribute to long term poverty alleviation. The European Court of Auditors (2019) has highlighted that the food aid activities provides valuable support but their contribution to reducing poverty is not yet established. Upon closer examination of the daily lived effects on food insecure populations, this study identifies several challenges for the food insecure. First, despite receiving food assistance, many individuals still grapple with food insecurity, while not all food insecure populations have access to such assistance. Secondly, the food choice of food insecure populations is limited. Additionally, there is an inadequate access to nutritious food.

The interview participant from the Ministry of Social Security in Labour acknowledges the limited effect of the food assistance mechanisms as they describe them as only a supplementary aid tool "on top of all other national support, such as social assistance,

heating allowances, free school meals” (I1). In fact, the social card provides recipients with only 25 EUR per quarter. In the news, the minister justified the sum, quoting that the value of the previous in-kind food assistance was around €60 per year, hence the cards would bring greater benefits (Šilobritas, 2023). However, the Lithuanian Food Basket – last assessed in 2015 (European Commission, 2015) – calculated the required monthly budget for a healthy diet at 120 EUR for a single person. The yearly social card food assistance value does not reach the monthly healthy food budget, not taking into account high levels of food inflation since 2015. Given that the assistance is limited, food insecure populations find different coping mechanisms for the rest of their meals. Interview participants that receive food assistance report coping mechanisms such as skipping breakfast or only purchasing discounted foodstuffs at the supermarket.

What’s more, food insecurity is also experienced by people who are not eligible for the food assistance mechanisms, which in 2024 was given to persons with an average monthly income per family member not exceeding €264 per month (with exceptions for vulnerable groups). However, research by the Lithuanian Anti-Poverty Network (2023a) shows that people with higher incomes of €501 - €700 (who are not eligible to receive assistance) are still feeling the effects of rising food prices: 11.7% of people in this income group reported lacking money for food.

For some people outside of the social welfare system, charity canteens have become the food assistance of choice. Nearly half of the interview participants from the charity canteen mentioned that they do not seek national food assistance, quoting reasons related to the bureaucratic nature of state support such as lack of information, time or necessary documents. However, during the interviews, the social workers noted this is a minority group among the food insecure population.

The lived effects of food insecure populations also include limited food choices. The in-kind food donation of FEAD gives no choice for the food package. Social card aims to address this as people gain the ability to shop in food retailers for anything, including non-food items. However, in some way the social card still limits the food choices but constricting the food access only to food retail. The food assistance mechanisms fail to

problematise affordability challenges posed by the rising cost of food and the food retailers' power over price setting.

Food affordability in food retail is closely linked to monopolised market of food retail. One way to measure food retail market monopoly is using CR4 concentration ratio that looks at the market dominance of the top four firms in an industry. If CR4 is above 20%, then market is concentrated, 40% means the market is highly concentrated and above 60% shows a distorted market (Carolan, 2013). Lithuanian food retail industry consists of five main chains: Maxima, Lidl, IKI, Norfa and Rimi. In total, in 2022 the five food retailers represented 79.2 % of the market (Scoris, 2024). Looking only at the top four food retailers (excluding the 7.1% share of Rimi), the CR4 reaches 72.1 %, placing food retail industry in the distorted market category. This market concentration gives the firms oligopolistic powers, allowing food retailers to have control over price setting, while consumers are left with no choice but to accept the prices (Carolan, 2013). Rising food prices in food retail limits food choices for people. This is evidenced by people's quotes from meetings with individuals experiencing poverty by Lithuanian Anti-Poverty Network (2023b) who say "You can't always buy the products you want. I would like to have cured ham, but I cannot afford it" or "I choose cheaper products. Price is more important; quality is not so important".

Finally, nutritional adequacy is limited, contributed to by the factors of limited food assistance size and food choice. Social cards, in particular, do not encourage people to buy healthier food items which tend to be more expensive. Interviewees report usually buying ready-made high calorie but low nutritional intake meals such as traditional Lithuanian potato dishes. This is also supported in academic research as "healthy, well-varied and quality food products come at a higher cost compared to energy-dense and nutrient-poor food products" (Penne and Goedemé, 2021: 2). Highly processed and high in sodium food not only is cheaper but is linked to negative health effects such as increased risk of cardiovascular diseases (Otero et al., 2018).

6.3.2 Subjectification effects

Subjectification effects look at how the subjects – in this case, the food assistance recipients - are represented within the discourse. According to the problem representations identified in the first section of the analysis, the groups with the following vulnerabilities are mentioned as the ones who are entitled to more assistance or are more often found as food assistance recipients: disability, retirement, single parent households, households with three or more children, citizenship status, housing security, unemployment. However, the survey from the Lithuanian Anti-Poverty Network (2023a) reports that the group experiencing the most difficulties to access food are young, working age populations between ages 26 and 45. Technical workers, small entrepreneurs, the unemployed and people doing care work at home are among the groups that are identified by the survey as having most trouble to afford foodstuff. The latter category also includes single parents caring for children, carers of sick or old family members. While some of these categories overlap with the national food assistance, not all groups are paid attention to by state food assistance mechanisms.

A key issue within subjectification effects is the stigmatising language and attitude used by food assistance providers to describe food assistance recipients. Stigmatisation effects may create barriers to seek food assistance and harm recipients' dignity, leading to increased stress and anxiety as well as increased social isolation and discrimination. In their evaluation study of the FEAD program, Skučienė and Buividavičiūtė (2021) reported that key informants (from food assistance providers) show scepticisms for positive change to people's lives due to issues of "alcoholism, habit to live from social welfare benefits, laziness and lack of social skills". According to them, the unemployed are 'happy to live off benefits' and will not look for a job as long as they get social welfare benefits and food assistance. This gives evidence to the existence of stigmatisation of food assistance receivers by the providers of such programmes. Stigmatisation is also shaped by the language of the fund's target group: the most deprived, as individuals might not seek assistance because they don't want to identify with being deprived.

6.3.3 Revisiting the human right to food in food assistance mechanisms

Food assistance mechanisms and the resulting lived and subjectification experiences often fall short of meeting the social justice standards, outlined in the RTF framework. RTF requires “quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture” (CESR, 1999). In this section, I aim to revisit the human right to food, focusing on the principles of acceptability (othering) and sustainability (agency).

As discussed in the theoretical grounding, ‘othering’ emerges from material otherness, stigmatisation, language and disempowerment. Material otherness manifests itself during the process of in-kind food distribution. First, there is eligibility criteria that will exclude people from receiving assistance. Second, material otherness is evident during the distribution of food items, which often requires individuals to enter marked buildings or queue outside, visibly identifying them as recipients of food aid. The social card has attempted to target material otherness by allowing increased access to the mainstream food retails. However, social card recipients are still eligible for in-kind food assistance in Maisto Atiduotuve, a food aid distribution point that operates like a payless shop. Maisto Atiduotuve is located in a central square in Vilnius with a large and bright orange sign outside. Its bright orange sign serves as an information signal, drawing attention to its purpose. Consequently, those who step inside Maisto Atiduotuve's premises can be identified as recipients of food assistance.

Being labelled and known as receivers of food assistance might not be much of an issue, if it wasn't for stigmatisation effects. One way stigmatisation is experienced is through the constraints on food assistance recipients' agency. Stigmatised individuals may already face societal barriers to access opportunities such as employment, limiting their agency to increase their food security status. Receivers of in-kind food donations in Maisto Atiduotuve may find their agency inadvertently limited in the design of the food assistance mechanism. For instance, they face limits on food choice such as the amount of food items they can receive. There are also logistical barriers to exercise full agency as opening hours. Maisto Atiduotuve operates during weekdays from 9 am to 6 pm (during

workhours), contrary to conventional food retailers opening hours of 8 am to 10 pm. Food assistance mechanisms may inadvertently create additional time pressures for the food insecure populations as they require commuting and waiting in queues. While social cards offer more flexibility in food purchasing times, they also require individuals to invest time in hunting for promotions and discounts, a coping strategy mentioned by the majority of the interviewees. Finally, I have found no mechanisms for participation of food insecure populations within decision making of food assistance mechanism to increase their agency.

In light of the observed shortcomings in acceptability and sustainability based on othering and lack of agency, the need for the state to take a stronger role as the duty bearer becomes more evident. The Lithuanian state has ratified the international convention that obliges it to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food. However, it has shown little responsibility in taking that role. Instead, Greiss and Schoneville (2023) characterize Lithuanian government as a 'low spender', allowing the EU to fill in the gap in the social-safety expenditure. This is evident within the food assistance programmes as FEAD funds from the EU accounted for more than 10 % of the overall national expenditure on social welfare (ibid.). As a result, reliance on the EU funding contributes to food aid expansion and the shift of responsibilities away from the national level to the EU on the funding side and NGOs on the implementation side (Greiss et al., 2021). This argument is further developed by Silvasti and Tikka (2020) who argue that expansion of food aid where charitable actions play a more critical role contribute to the decrease of state responsibility to provide welfare to the most vulnerable. As such, this raises broader questions about the role of the state in taking new approaches to address food insecurity and the implications of neoliberal policies for social protection and the human right to food in Lithuania.

6.3.4 Discursive effects

In the analysis, I presented how food insecurity is framed as an issue of poverty, food waste and food retail access. Now I would like to turn to a discussion of what solutions

and interventions are missed by these conventional framings. Pollard and Booth (2019: 4) advocate for the potential positive impacts of reframing food insecurity, particularly through lenses of human rights and justice, suggesting that such a reframing could yield broader and more transformative outcomes. In this section, I will introduce two alternative perspectives on food systems: food sovereignty, and alternative food networks. I will conclude this section with a discussion of how these alternative perspectives relate to wider sustainable development issues.

Food sovereignty is the “ontological alternative to the neoliberal food regime” (Claeys et al., 2021: 238). Broadly defined as “the right of peoples and nations to control their own food and agricultural systems including their own markets, production modes, food cultures and environments” (Wittman et al., 2010: 2), food sovereignty emerged in 1996 from the La Vía Campesina (LVC) movement which rejected the absence of power and politics in the global food security debate (Claeys et al., 2021). At its core, food sovereignty recognises that food is more than a commodity – it is “intertwined with political action, culture, identity, and place” (Noll and Murdock, 2020: 4). Other features of food sovereignty include direct democratic participation, respect for the environment, and control over food production, distribution and consumption (Patel, 2009).

In the context of this study, food sovereignty offers a lens through which to examine and challenge the market-based approach to food access, identified in the current food assistance strategies such as the social card. Food sovereignty critiques market-based solutions and instead advocates for systemic changes to address the underlying structural drivers of food insecurity (Noll and Murdock, 2020). For instance, rather than relying on market forces, food sovereignty emphasises community-focused and participatory approaches (Patel, 2009). By engaging in community-focused activities such as creating neighbourhood gardens, food sovereignty seeks not only to address access issues but also to empower individuals and communities (Noll and Murdock, 2020). This perspective resonates with Fraser’s (1995) theory of justice, which emphasises that remedies for injustice should be transformative: they should be focused not only on unjust outcomes but also on the underlying structures and processes that

generate them. By focusing on increasing the power of individuals, food sovereignty strategies aim to transform food systems.

Complementing the principles of food sovereignty, Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) emerged as a response to the industrial food system which prioritises economic gain and is built on unequal power relations (Guibrunet et al., 2023). Instead, AFNs provide alternatives to food production distribution, and consumption, while staying committed to social justice and environmental principles. They encompass a diverse array of initiatives that seek to reimagine producer-consumer relations (Venn et al., 2006), including “community supported agriculture, farmers’ markets, fair trade, urban agriculture, specialised forms of organic agriculture, direct farm retail, and the slow food movement” (Edwards, 2016: 1). In contrast to approaches that prioritise economic growth and income generation as solutions to poverty and food insecurity, movements such as food sovereignty and AFNs centre human wellbeing and social justice. For instance, by prioritising fresh, locally sourced and nutritious produce, AFNs contribute to improved nutrition and overall health outcomes within communities (Goodman et al., 2011).

Food sovereignty and AFNs offer alternative visions to addressing food insecurity, emphasising the importance of human welfare and social justice rather than relying on income generation. This is relevant both for the case of Lithuania but also for broader approach to sustainable development challenges. Current food aid approaches are premised on increasing economic access, which exists firmly in the landscape of the imperative for economic growth. However, ‘rich’ nations continuing an endless growth strategy is incompatible with staying within planetary boundaries in the context of climate change and ecological breakdown (Hickel, 2019). Economic growth is further criticised for rising inequality and the overlooking of important standard of life indicators including food (Stiglitz, 2015). What is needed are solutions grounded in transformative change, aimed at addressing the underlying structures and power relations that perpetuate poverty and food insecurity.

7. Implications and conclusion

In this thesis, I aimed to investigate the problematisation of food insecurity in Lithuanian food assistance mechanisms, using a qualitative approach based on interviews and document analysis. To achieve this, I relied on a theoretical grounding based on Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach and the Human Right to Food framework. The study revealed that food insecurity in Lithuania is primarily framed as an issue of poverty as well as food waste rather than a distinct phenomenon (RQ1). As a result, food assistance mechanisms tend to overlook the underlying structural causes of food insecurity. The analysis further highlighted the effects of problem representations on food insecure populations (RQ2). Lived effects include limited food choices, inadequate access to nutritious food, and challenges in accessing food assistance for some food-insecure populations. Subjectification effects involve stigmatising language used to describe food assistance recipients and constraints on recipients' agency. The study's findings underscore the need for more comprehensive and transformational approaches to addressing food insecurity. Current food assistance mechanisms fall short of RTF standards, highlighted by examples of othering as well as limited agency and accountability (RQ3). Reframing food insecurity as a matter of human rights opens up addressing food insecurity to alternative approaches such as food sovereignty and alternative food networks. In conclusion, this research contributes to a critical examination of food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania and highlights the importance of reimagining responses to food insecurity in ways that prioritise human welfare, social justice and structural responses.

Reflecting on the implications of this study, I hope that this thesis can provide guidance for future investigations into food insecurity in Lithuania. Research that uses more comprehensive interviews and observations is important to strengthen the voice of the food-insecure populations, shedding light on their lived experiences and needs. Further research on the social card and Maisto Atiduotuve will be needed to evaluate the effects of the newest food assistance programmes. Looking ahead, there are many opportunities to better understand the underlying structural factors contributing to food

insecurity, not only in Lithuania but also globally. Continued research in this area is crucial for informing evidence-based interventions aimed at alleviating food insecurity.

In conclusion, this thesis represents more than an academic exercise; it serves as an advocacy tool. With this study, I advocate for a rights-based approach to social policymaking in Lithuania. By emphasising the need to recognise the multidimensional nature of food insecurity and the structural inequalities that underpin it, I conclude this thesis with a call for transformative change to achieve justice for all.

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Appendix

A: Food assistance state and EU stakeholders: a summary

Stakeholder	Abbreviation	Responsibilities
The Ministry of Social Security and Labour of the Republic of Lithuania	MoSSL	The lead authority responsible for the implementation of EU-funded assistance.
The European Social Fund Agency	ESFA	<p>Manages and implements EU-funded projects and programmes.</p> <p>The Agency's shareholders are the Ministry of Social Security and Labour and the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport.</p>
The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived	FEAD	<p>Finances EU countries' actions to provide food and/or basic material assistance to the most deprived.</p> <p>Financed in-kind food distribution in Lithuania from 2014 to 2023.</p>
The European Social Fund Plus	ESF+	<p>Supports the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, financing EU's employment, social, education and skills policies.</p> <p>Finances material deprivation reduction programme in Lithuania from 2024.</p>