

IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE NETWORK OF NORWEGIAN FOOD BANKS AND PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



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INTRODUCTION

The Norwegian Food Banks are non-profit organizations that redistribute surplus food with the goal of alleviating poverty and reducing food waste. They function as an intermediary that collects surplus food from the food industry and makes it available to front line organizations that offer food assistance to people in need. The traditional model of Food Banks, as started in the US in the late 1960s, depended on food donations from either businesses or individuals. In the last few years, as levels of food waste started to go up globally, Food Banks around the world made their way into the food system as an actor that could safely rescue surplus food from going to waste, and responsibly redistribute this food among non-profit organizations helping people in need. Thus, food banks could now contribute to both poverty and food waste reduction.

This position in between food waste and need for food, gave the food banks a unique point of view in the midst of the recent Covid-19 pandemic, where both the food system and poverty were dramatically affected. In this report, Food Banks Norway offers a glimpse into the status of both food waste and poverty during the COVID-19 outbreak in Norway. The report is based on internal data on volumes of food redistributed and results from a survey sent to our partner organizations.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN NORWAY

The COVID-19 pandemic in Norway is part of the worldwide pandemic that spread around the world the first half of 2020 and is still ongoing. The virus arrived in the country on February 26th, 2020 (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020a). The number of cases increased rapidly, thereby necessitating a number of safety measures aiming to achieve physical distancing introduced on March 12th. The main rationale behind the measures was that COVID-19, in the absence of social distancing, threatens to overwhelm the healthcare system. Hence, one of the objectives of the measures was to “flatten the curve”, and spread the number of cases out over time.

PREVENTION MEASURES

Some of the prevention measures introduced by The Norwegian Institute of Public Health included:

- Closing all educational institutions and discontinuation of organized sports activities.
- Closing and cancelling cultural events, sports events, gyms and swimming pools.
- Closing all establishments in the hospitality industry such as bars, pubs and clubs other than those serving food. Any establishment serving food had to ensure that visitors could stay at least 1 meter apart.
- Everyone who had returned from trips outside Norway were to be quarantined, regardless of whether they showed symptoms or not.
- The Directorate discouraged travelling to work unless strictly necessary and encouraged avoiding public transport if possible, as well as avoiding crowded places.
- People were requested not to visit others in institutions with vulnerable groups (the elderly, psychiatry, prison etc.) and generally encouraged to limit close contact with others.
- The public transport schedule was to run as normal, but with limited capacity to ensure that passengers could stay at least 1 meter apart. A few routes were reduced or discontinued.
- Non-residents were banned from entering Norway.
- Leisure travel was strongly discouraged. Residents were prohibited from staying in cabins outside their home municipalities as well, in order to avoid putting strain on rural medical infrastructure.

(Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020b)



Photo: NewsinEnglish.no

OUTBREAK

As of August 30th, 2020, more than 10 000 people had tested positive and 264 people have died as a result of the virus (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020a). A study by the Norwegian School of Economics reveals that lockdown measures strongly reduced the number of hospitalizations and intensive care patients per capita (Juranek & Zoutman, 2020). Furthermore, the counterfactual analysis affirmed



Photo: NPR.org

that following the (more relaxed) Swedish approach would have resulted in more than twice as many hospitalizations and intensive care patients at the peak, potentially bringing Norway close to their maximum capacity (Juranek & Zoutman, 2020).

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Social distancing helped control the spread of the virus, but it came with the risk of severe economic costs. Therefore, the Norwegian Government introduced significant measures to secure jobs, help businesses and people, and strengthen health services. The first measures focused on limiting negative consequences for businesses and households that were severely affected by the virus outbreak and the related infection control measures. Later proposals focused on increasing economic activity and helping unemployed return to work (Norwegian Government, Ministry of Finance, 2020).



Photo: Nationen

Nevertheless, due to the Coronavirus outbreak, the Norwegian economy contracted 1.9 percent in the first quarter, the biggest drop since the 2008 financial crisis (Statistics Norway, 2020). As of April 2020 about 84 percent of Norwegian companies stated that they have experienced lower demand and/or cancellations (Statista, 2020). Furthermore, 19 percent of enterprises reported experiencing a

substantial risk of bankruptcy and 23 percent stated that they lack money to pay bills that are due shortly (Statista, 2020).

In the first two weeks of Corona measures, Norway went from having 164 000 to 314 000 unemployed. The peak of unemployment was reached in April with 420 000 people, the highest unemployment rate in Norway since World War II (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2020). This represents more than 15 percent of the labor force in the country. As a comparison, the unemployment rate before the outbreak was 2.3 percent (Norwegian Government, 2020). As of August 31st there are still 212 700 fully unemployed, partially unemployed or job seekers in Norway, that is equivalent to 7,5 percent of the labour force (Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2020)

IMPACT ON THE FOOD SYSTEM

The COVID-19 pandemic affected the local and global food system in different ways. Border restrictions created a lot of uncertainty and limitations around the arrival of agricultural foreign workers (Dagsavisen, 2020a), affecting local agricultural production (Dagligvare-handelen, 2020a). The abrupt closure of hotels, restaurants, canteens and schools, plus the cancellation of almost all conferences and physical meetings in companies, affected local producers and wholesalers, who found themselves stuck with food they could not send to these channels anymore. For example, while the schools were closed, the norwegian dairy company Tine lost deliveries of 90,000 liters of milk destined to school daily (Dagligvarehandelen, 2020b).

Furthermore, changes in consumer behaviour also affected food supply and demand. Corona fear among Norwegians led to hoarding, which resulted in both turnover records in the retail sector (7.2 percent growth) (Norwegian Federation of Service Industries and Retail Trade, 2020) and empty store



Photo: Dagbladet

shelves at supermarkets (Nettavisen, 2020 and NRK, 2020a). The closing of the borders meant that Norwegians could no longer cross the border to buy cheaper groceries in Sweden, and did all their grocery shopping in Norway instead. Yet, they reduced their visits to the supermarket, which meant that they focused on

food with longer shelf life (Dagsavisen, 2020b). Furthermore, most Norwegians spent their summer holidays at home, instead of traveling abroad as they usually do, which increased the domestic demand for food. The number of Norwegian overnight stays increased by as much as 39 per cent, while foreign overnight stays fell by 79 per cent (Statistics Norway, 2020). With more cooking at home, food waste also experienced changes. A survey by Opinion shows that 52 per cent of people have increased awareness of throwing less food, while 42 per cent state that they throw less food now than before (Q-meieriet, 2020).

With the indication to stay at home in order to flatten the curve of spreading, take-away and food-delivery services became more popular, especially for those isolated (E24, 2020). Nevertheless, not all home-delivery was successful. A study by the Research Institute Nofima reports that the success of home delivery of food boxes was less popular during the Corona closure than expected. Only 7 per cent of participants stated that they now shop for food online more often than before, while five per cent said they shopped less. One explanation for this may be that food purchases eventually became a "sanctuary" where one could escape from the four walls of the home for a while (Forskning.no, 2020), while those with home-office also have more time to plan their meals.

These are some of the many factors that affected the supply and demand in the food system, and resulted in more availability of surplus food of certain types, and less availability of other types of food.

TOWARDS A NEW NORMAL?

As the number of COVID-19 cases started to decline towards the end of the spring, restrictions started to ease. With strict public health protocols, schools, sports activities, hospitality businesses and transport gradually went back to activity by the end of May (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020c). From June and July, several travel restrictions were also lifted, allowing Norwegians to safely travel to certain countries (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020d). The economic situation of the majority of companies in Norway seemed to be steadily recovering, although many sectors were still expecting the aftermath of a tough summer season (Aftenposten, 2020 and VårtOslo, 2020).

Towards the end of the summer, the combination of several incidents where prevention measures were not followed and people going back to school and work, led to a new increase in COVID-19 cases. Yet, towards the end of August, monitoring data and modelling showed that transmission was still at a (relatively) low level and occurring mainly in connection with local outbreaks and people infected abroad. Therefore, upon the threat of a second wave of infection, the Norwegian Government re-

established travel restrictions. As of August 30th, the number of weekly hospital admissions and admissions to an intensive care unit continues to be low (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020e). So far in the epidemic, it is estimated that about 0.7 percent of the population has been infected with COVID-19 (Norwegian Institute of Public Health, 2020e).

We are yet to see if Norway manages to avoid a second wave of infection or if further restrictions need to come back in place. It would also be interesting to see if the “Corona consumer behaviours” and routines settle back into normal, or if some of the new behaviours adopted during the pandemic, are here to stay. Last, but not least, although many are back to work, many are still unemployed, and we are yet to see the long-term effects of this situation. These are factors that can have an impact in both volumes of surplus food available and demand for food assistance, so while the most challenging time for both Food Banks and partner organizations seems to be over, organizations working to both reduce food waste and feed people in need, must stay alert and ready for the upcoming months.

IMPACT ON FOOD BANKS NORWAY



Photo: Food Banks Norway

The network of Norwegian Food Banks with its seven food banks strategically located around the country from north to south, found itself in a key position in between two big challenges of the pandemic: food waste and need for food. Never before was the work of the network of food banks as relevant as during this time. While the COVID-19 situation put extra pressure on the Norwegian Food Banks, innovation and collaboration made it possible to keep up with both the offer of surplus food available and the demand for food assistance.

RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Food Banks in Norway adapted and responded quickly and efficiently to the COVID-19 outbreak. From the week the national social distance measures were put in place (week 12) until end of May, when restrictions started loosening up (week 20), the Norwegian Food Banks rescued and redistributed record amounts of surplus food.

As soon as the first national restrictions on social distancing were in place, the



Photo: Food Banks Norway

Norwegian Food Banks announced measures to reduce the risk of spreading the virus at their storage facilities. These are some of the measures put in place at the Norwegian Food Banks from March 12th and throughout the Corona outbreak:

- Mandatory disinfection of hands upon entrance.
- Creation of a schedule with “time slots” for picking up food.
- Max. 2 representatives per organization per visit.
- Because of risk of exposure for vulnerable groups, the social supermarket run by the food bank in Tromsø closed, and the redistribution of food was done through home deliveries and through the help of local churches instead.
- All volunteers were sent home and only employees worked at the food banks during the outbreak, to reduce the potential risk of exposure to the virus.

VOLUME OF FOOD RESCUED AND REDISTRIBUTED DURING THE PANDEMIC

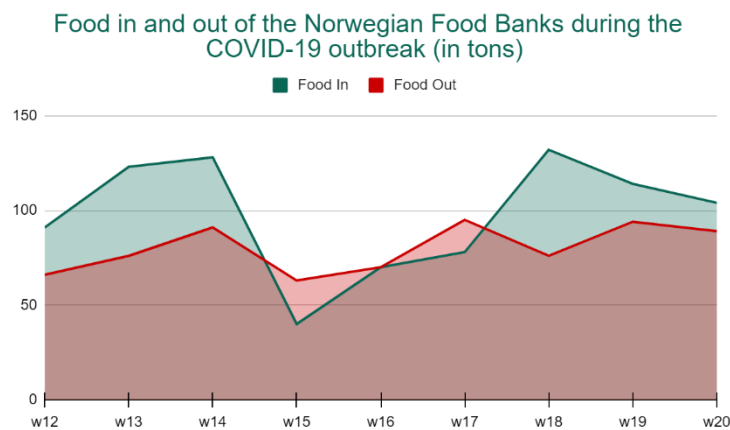


Figure 1

Internal data from the Food Banks shows that from week 12 to week 20, the Norwegian Food Banks rescued over 880 tons of surplus food from going to waste, while 720 tons of food were redistributed further to people in need.

With the exceptions of week 15 and 18, the amount of food in was always

higher than the amount of food out, which guaranteed the stability of the operations of the Food Banks during the crisis (Fig. 1). These exceptions took place during the public holidays of Easter and The International Workers' Day respectively, which are weeks of less general activity and therefore, there are less volumes of surplus food available for redistribution. In addition, the Food Bank in Trondheim was not able to receive food during the weeks 14, 15 and 16 because they were in the process of moving to a new location, and the Food Bank in Grimstad had limited operations while relocating to Kristiansand, with the new location not opening until June. In spite of more food coming-out than coming-in during those weeks though, efficient storage routines and facilities allowed the Food Banks to continue covering the demand for food from their partner organizations.

Looking at a longer period of time, between March and July 2020, the Norwegian Food Banks received 24 percent more food compared to the same period last year, with a peak of 77 percent more food received in March 2020 compared to the same month in 2019 (Fig. 2). This is again, in spite of the temporary closure of the Food Bank in

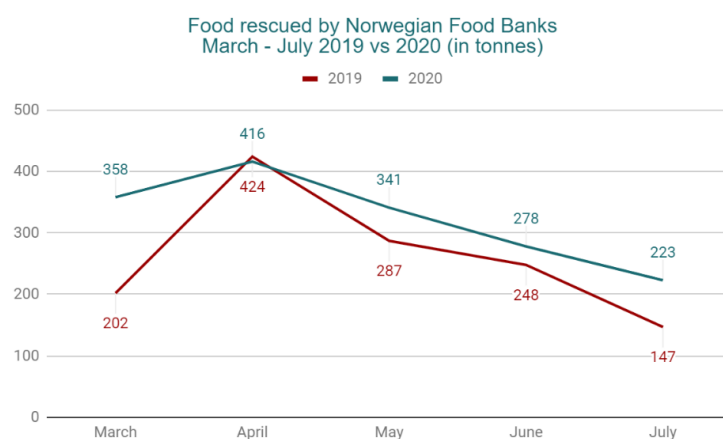


Figure 2

Trondheim and the limited operations of the Food Bank in Kristiansand during the spring months mentioned before.

The gradual decline in food in that happens before and during the summer months is a normal trend that responds to the dynamics of the food system and that, as the figure shows, also happened in 2019. This decline should not be an indication of access to surplus food declining.

The volume of food out represents the amount of food that organizations collect from the Food Banks to distribute to people in need through food assistance services. While volumes of food rescued by the Food Banks can be pretty unstable from month-to-month (because they depend on availability of surplus food based on season, eventualities, weather, etc) the volumes of food that organizations collect from the Food Banks every week is usually rather stable. This is a result of a stable economy in Norway and the consequent slow growth of the poverty rate from year-to-year. Therefore, this indicator can give us a valuable hint on the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we can see in figure 3, there was a 40 percent increase in demand for food between March and July 2020, with a peak of 72 percent in April, compared to the same period last year. Nevertheless, as the situation with the pandemic is more and more under control, we can see that the demand for food has been going down since the peak in April, which should indicate that those that were struggling during the peak of the crisis, are slowly able to make ends meet.

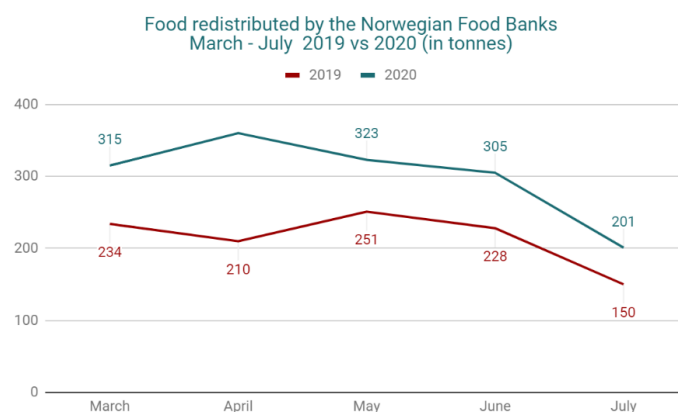


Figure 3

VISITOR'S EXPERIENCES

In order to evaluate the response of the Food Banks during the COVID-19 outbreak, Food Banks Norway sent a survey to more than 300 organizations that visit and collect food from their local Food Bank. In the survey, over 82 percent of the organizations that collected food during the COVID-19 outbreak report that the amount of food

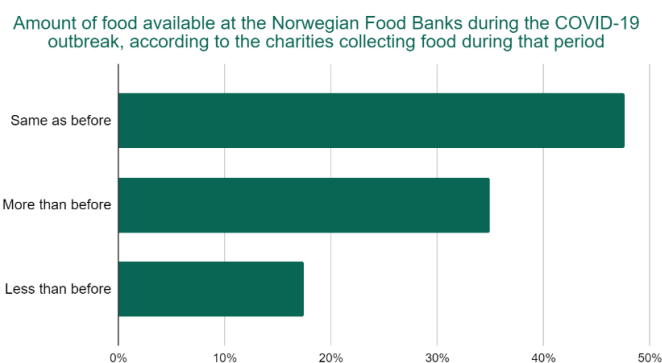


Figure 4

available at the Food Banks during this time was the same or larger, compared to before the pandemic (Fig. 4).

In terms of assortment of food available at the Food Banks during the outbreak, the survey shows that 48 percent of organizations report that the Food Banks were able to maintain a stable assortment

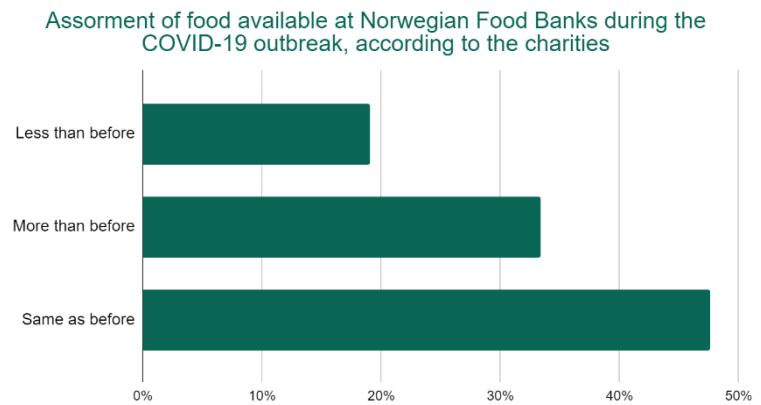


Figure 5

of food. Furthermore, 33 percent report that during the pandemic, the Food Banks offered an even larger variety of types of food, compared to before the outbreak (Fig. 5).

In regards to quality, 82 percent of the organizations report that the food at the Food Banks during the outbreak was of the same or even better quality, compared to before the pandemic (Fig. 6).

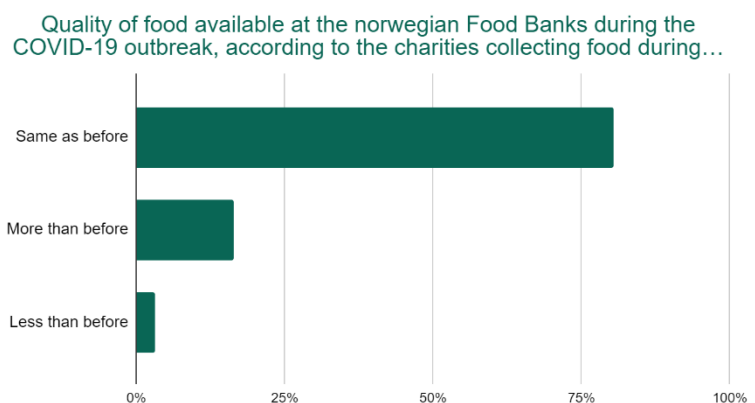


Figure 6

The survey also collected the following anonymous comments from partner organizations, in regards to the new routines at the Food Banks:

“During the outbreak we had to reserve a time slot to collect food from the Food Bank. We experience this has worked very well. Food collection was predictable and calm”

“Good customer service. Easier to pick up food now than before the Corona outbreak due to the set-up of pick-up times and good lists”

“We really liked time allocations; it made it much easier to collect food from the Food Bank”

“We are happy with all the food we get from the Food Bank. It would have been difficult to run our organization without it”

CHALLENGES AS OPPORTUNITIES

Although the pandemic brought with it many limitations, it also opened the door to opportunities. Larger volumes of surplus food and social distance restrictions that affected how organizations could continue on offering food assistance services, inspired creative solutions. These contributed not only to the Food Banks' goal of reducing food waste and poverty, but also provided an opportunity to people that had lost their jobs or students that were not able to continue with their regular programs due to the pandemic.

The Food Banks in Oslo and Bergen, for example took advantage of the larger volumes of surplus food originally destined to commercial kitchens, and partnered with local kitchens that helped them turn these ingredients into ready-meals to be redistributed through the Food Banks. This way, Food Banks were able to rescue more food from becoming food waste, while charities were able to safely continue on offering meals to people in need, even if it was through a window,



Portions of the project "Matsentralen Kitchen"

In Oslo, the project "Matsentralen Kitchen" was done in cooperation with the organization Unikum, which works with creating inclusive employment opportunities. The pilot project took place between the end of April and the beginning of July and engaged seven people from the organization's program who picked up, cooked, packed and delivered the food

back to the Food Bank. As a result, 4000 kg of surplus food turned into more than 7500 healthy and delicious meals of different portion sizes (single, family, etc) that were redistributed to partner organizations through the Food Bank in Oslo.

A similar project called «Lunch Box» took place in Bergen, through a cooperation between the Food Bank Vestland, and the organizations The Salvation Army, The Robin Hood House and The Blue Cross. The project's focus was helping the disadvantaged in isolation or quarantine due to COVID-19. The restaurant



Markus, Mathias and Ira delivering the ready-meals at Food Bank Vestland

Colonialen Litteraturhuset contributed with their kitchen and a group of apprentices who were in risk of not getting their degree, as the restaurant had to close due to the pandemic. The apprentices themselves picked up the food from the Food Bank and returned it to the same place as ready-made single-packed dinner portions made with surplus ingredients from commercial kitchens that would have otherwise not had such a good turnover at the Food Bank. In total 176 food boxes, to 48 unique recipients, were driven out by volunteers from the Red Cross from week 13 through week 26. The boxes were to cover a week's food needs for the recipients and were supplemented with purchases made with funds from Bergen Municipality, in order to cover essential nutritional needs. Both the students and the Food Bank also applied to grants in order to cover the necessary costs of the project.

Another project that took off during the pandemic was the strengthening of internal transport between the Food Banks in the network. Different Food Banks have always received different types of food, depending on their geographical location and closeness to particular food industries. This means that, for example, the Food Bank in Oslo receives 70 percent of all ambient surplus food available for all the Food Banks in Norway. While the need to exchange food types has always been obvious, the Norwegian Food Banks' tight budget had made it challenging to make it happen, with only a few exchanges taking place every year, which were paid by either suppliers or other sponsors. With the arrival of COVID-19 and consequently both the Food Banks receiving larger volumes of surplus food and the demand for food assistance increasing throughout the country, the need for internal transport was more relevant than ever. While the Food Banks had always been mindful to not rescue more food than they could redistribute (to avoid simply moving food waste from one actor to another), the project of internal transport allowed them to rescue larger volumes, even if the volumes were too large for the

local demand, because the system of internal transport would allow the Food Bank to share the rescued food with other Food Banks in the network. In addition to larger volumes of surplus food available, COVID-19 brought with it also a wave of generosity that through economic contributions from actors in the food industry and foundations, made the project of internal transport possible, resulting in more than 85 tons of surplus food exchanged between the Food Banks since the outbreak of the pandemic.

All in all, not only were the Norwegian Food Banks able to keep up with the increasing levels of surplus food supply and demand as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, through innovation and cooperation, they were also able to explore and develop creative ways to continue supporting charities struggling to reach out to people in need in these difficult times.

IMPACT ON PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



Photo: Salvation Army

The Norwegian Food Banks collaborate with almost 400 non-profit organizations to make sure that the food rescued reaches those that need it the most. These organizations are in the front line and offer different kinds of food assistance to people in need. Many of the organizations are part of umbrella organizations such as The Salvation Army, The Blue Cross, or The Church City Mission. The network of Norwegian Food Banks also collaborates with smaller, local players such as the Care Café in Trondheim, Open Hands for You in Rogaland and Osterøyhjelpen in Bergen. In addition to a warm meal or a bag of groceries, the organizations offer a variety of activities and/or services to help people out of their difficult situation as for example, medical treatment, education or job guidance.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected these organizations dramatically. With many volunteers and/or beneficiaries in risk groups (elderly, addicts, sick people, etc) and restrictions in terms of serving food, 20 percent of the organizations that collect food from the Norwegian Food Banks, had to suspend their activities.

Charities that remained open quickly adopted new routines and activities to allow them to continue on reaching out to people in need, as illustrated in the following anonymous quote: “Before Corona, we served around 60-65. When we had to close, we made food that we gave people through a window”.

67 percent of the charities that remained open offered bags of groceries, 41 percent of them

offered food deliveries and 20 percent of them were able to continue on offering food serving (Fig. 7).

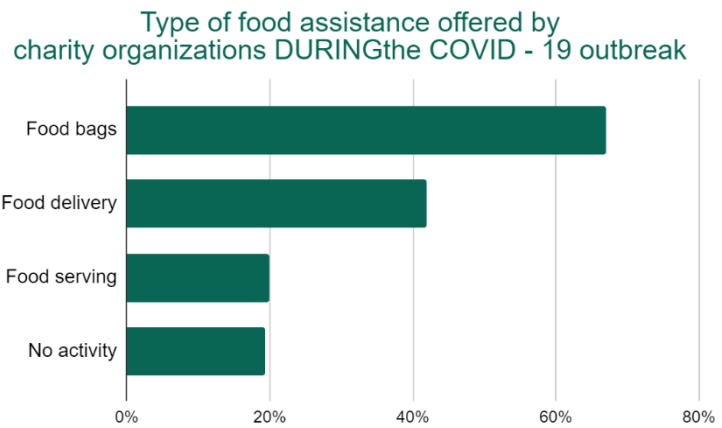


Figure 7

Type of food assistance offered by charity organizations AFTER the COVID - 19 outbreak

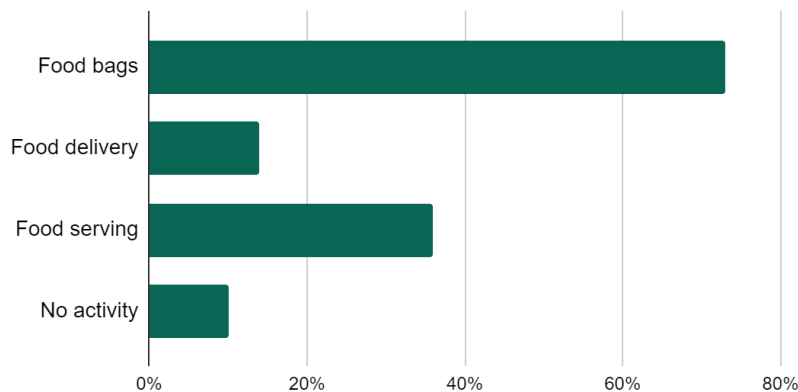


Figure 8

Demand for food at charity organizations during the COVID - 19 outbreak

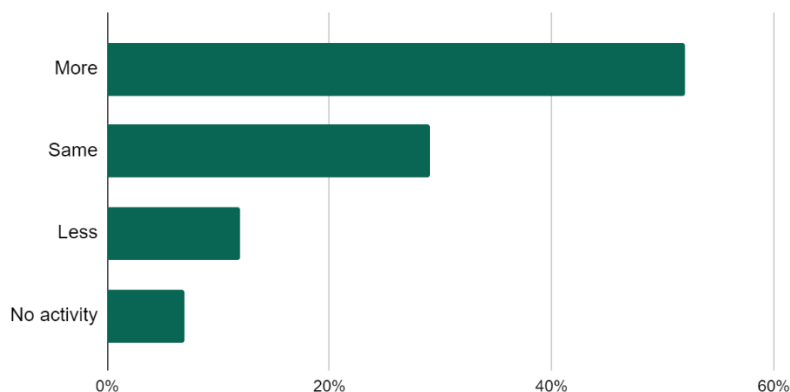


Figure 9

As of July 2020, the situation was already slowly coming back to normal. Although 10 percent of the organizations were still closed, almost 40 percent of those that were open, were able to serve food again, compared to 20 percent during the pandemic. While temporary solutions such as food delivery went down after the outbreak of the pandemic (From 42 percent to 14 percent), the amount of charities offering food assistance through food bags increased from 67 percent to 73 percent after the outbreak of the pandemic (Fig. 8)

In terms of demand for food, 52 percent of the organizations that completed the survey report an increase in demand for food assistance (Fig. 9) 40 percent of charities report also an increase in the amount of visitors to their food assistance services. Furthermore, 52 percent of the organizations report that they are now helping new types of beneficiaries.

Among the new groups of people needing food assistance from these organizations, low- income families, people on furlough and unemployed, are the biggest new groups reaching out for help (Fig. 10)

New beneficiaries at charity organizations during the outbreak of COVID - 19

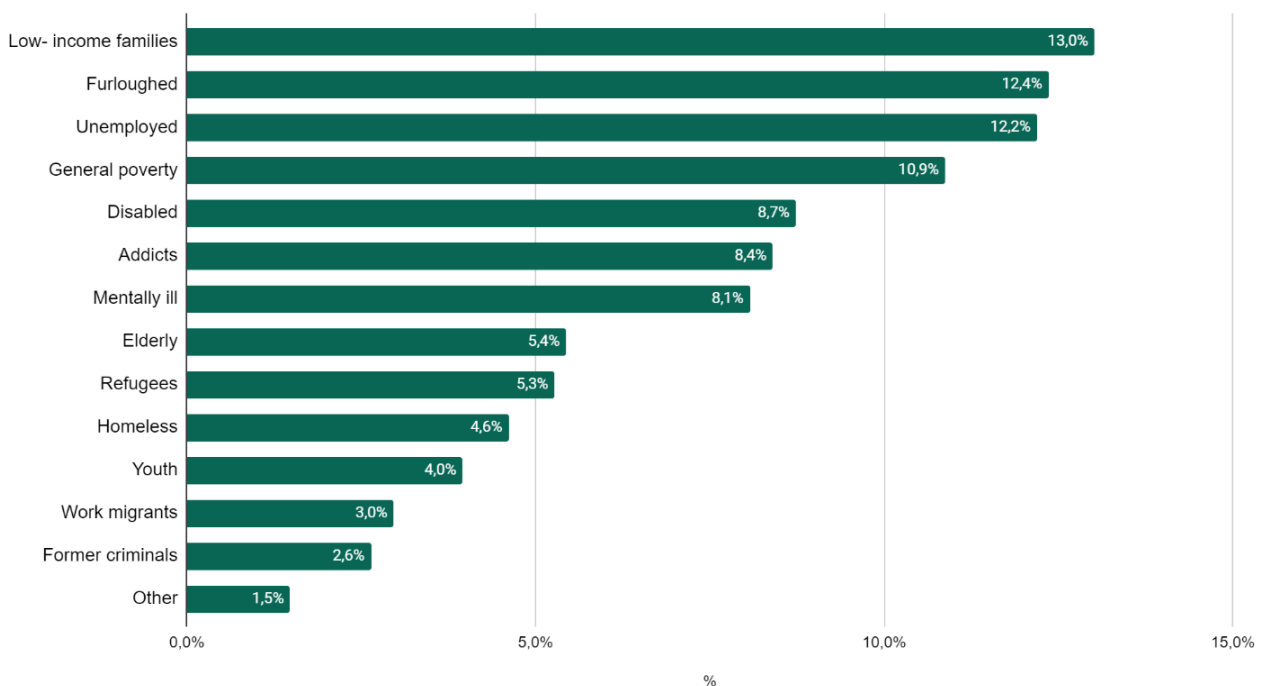


Figure 10

The survey collected also the following anonymous comments, which describe the situation of more and new users seeking food assistance:

“Lots of immigrants and asylum seekers are looking for food assistance during the Corona period. But also many ethnic Norwegians who have been laid off or lost their jobs”

“There are many more low-income families looking for food assistance. We used to give food to approx. 70- 90 families. Now it is about 160- 190 families”

In terms of food sources, the survey shows that before the pandemic, in addition to collecting food from the Food Banks, 43 percent of the organizations collected surplus food from local businesses also, such as supermarkets and bakeries. With the onset of the outbreak, this number went down to only 20 %.

Although the pandemic brought with it limitations in regards to availability of volunteers and food serving, it also opened the opportunity for collaboration. For example, some organizations collaborated with their local municipality or volunteer centres and others with local restaurants in order to prepare and distribute food more efficiently and reach people in need within the necessary safety measures in place.

CONCLUSIONS

The Norwegian Food Banks found themselves in a key position during the COVID-19 outbreak. Operating as a link between surplus food and organizations that help people in need, the analysis of the activity of the Food Banks during the pandemic offers a glimpse into both food waste and poverty in Norway, during the outbreak of the pandemic.

The increase of both volume of surplus food redistributed by the Norwegian Food Banks (24%), and the demand for food assistance at partner organizations (40%) illustrate the relevance of the activity of the Food Banks in difficult times. The Norwegian Food Banks were able to continue on supporting partner organizations during the outbreak and consequently contributing to alleviate the socio economical consequences of the arrival of COVID-19 in Norway, while acting as a safety net to rescue all the food in risk of becoming food waste. Through cooperation and innovation, the Norwegian Food Banks were able to adapt to the new situation, finding creative ways to continue supporting charities struggling to reach out to people in need.

Upon the possibility of a second wave of infections and further restrictions coming in place, the experience of the Food Banks during the first part of the year, including the adoption of new routines and projects, will be essential for a safe and efficient response, not only at the Food Banks but also at their partner organizations.

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