

A SOCIAL MODEL FOR FOOD ASSISTENCE TO THE NEEDY IN BULGARIA: CHARITY FOR FOOD SECURITY

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Summary

Programs for food and basic material support 2021-2027 from European and National funding focus on support through food products and hygiene materials to the vulnerable groups in Bulgaria. The food security in Bulgaria also includes food assistance to the indigent people implemented through charitable actions on volunteering bases as well as food waste reducing. Food banking is an effective tool for combating hunger by providing assistance to vulnerable groups, using mainly the food waste elimination via donation of the unused food. Volunteering is essential for food-saving initiatives in relation to food security. The food banking model creates sustainability in the long-term support, especially important during extreme circumstances such as economic crises and pandemics. Food banking regulations are imposed by the Food Act and VAT Act to exempt the donated short-term food from VAT. Bulgarian Red Cross established several food banks, delivering durable food by the work of volunteers. Bulgarian Food Bank is a main operator of certified by quality and origin food, saved from waste or recycling in animal food, and provided to the social sector. Internet platforms for food saving in Bulgaria were created recently.

A social innovative initiative is establishing of a food patronage by volunteers to collect freshly prepared food from the food chains before closing, and redistribute by express delivery to the needy. Social innovation initiatives include food security activities expressed by nonprofit assistance via public support, NGOs, social enterprises and provided by food banks, churches, community centers, and other local sites. This study aims to describe the social model for food assistance to those in need in Bulgaria, expressed through charitable organizations focused on food security.

Keywords: social sector, food banking, regulations, volunteering, vulnerable groups, food security

Abbreviations: Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC); Bulgarian Food Bank Foundation (BFB); The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD); European Food Banks Federation (FEBA); European Social Fund Plus (ESF+)

I. Introduction

The goal of the food assistance programs, accomplished predominantly by the government food assistance, is to diminish the food insecurity and hunger in the society (Fong et al. 2016). The nonprofit food assistance is also an important part of the social security, providing food directly to the needy.

Social innovation initiatives can be stimulated by the public support, NGOs and social enterprises (Cattivelli, 2022), that also could be extended to the food security activities. The nonprofit assistance includes local food pantries provided by the food banks, churches, community centers, and other local sites.

As reported by the World Bank, 733 million people suffered from malnutrition in 2023, an increase of 152 million since 2019, and all the factors affecting food insecurity have worsened the situation

in 2024. While the focus is on the developing nations, the rise in food hardship extends into developed countries as well.

1. Food security

Food security exists when people have access to enough safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development for an active and healthy life (Anthem, 2025).

The 1996 World Food Summit focused on four main dimensions of food security that must be fulfilled simultaneously: Physical availability of food; Economic and physical access to food; Food utilization; Stability of the other three dimensions over time. Adverse weather conditions, political instability, or economic factors (unemployment, rising food prices) may have an impact on the food security status (World Bank Group, 2025).

Food insecurity, as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), is a situation of limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe meal or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable provisions in socially acceptable ways (Bickel et al. 2000).

2. Social volunteering or welfare volunteering

In some European countries government and non-government organizations, provide auxiliary positions for a certain period in institutions like hospitals, schools, memorial sites and welfare institutions. Volunteerism is the act of contributing free labor to conduct community service or support a non-profit organization.

Volunteers signing up with a non-profit organization engage in formal volunteering, while those who help in their community on an ad hoc basis or with special purpose participate in informal volunteering. Most informal volunteer work is based on relationships between individuals rather than a desire to work with a specific cause (Bloomerang, 2025).

3. Volunteering in the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC)

The *volunteering in the Bulgarian Red Cross* could be characterized by:

- motivated by the free will and desire of the individual, and not by the pursuit of material or financial benefits or external (social, economic or political) pressure;
- aims to benefit vulnerable people and their communities, in accordance with the fundamental principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent;
- organized by official representatives of the Bulgarian Red Cross.

A volunteer of the Bulgarian Red Cross can be anyone, regardless of race, gender, religion, social status and political views, who acts in accordance with the basic principles of the Red Cross.

The BRC volunteers work sporadically or permanently for the organization.

Volunteers in the Bulgarian Red Cross can be volunteers providing various social services, leader, expert or advisor, administrator, fundraiser and advocate (Bulgarian Red Cross).

4. Social innovation

Social innovation is defined as a dynamic process of strategically developing and implementing inventive ideas, strategies, or interventions aimed at proactively addressing prevalent social issues and instigating positive, transformative change. Social innovation aim creating meaningful and lasting social change. The corresponding activities include engaging in the creation and application

of innovative methods, models, and approaches, targeting complex societal challenges including poverty, inequality, environmental sustainability, healthcare access, education, and more.

Social innovation uses integrated and holistic approaches to complex societal challenges, concentrating on enhancing social outcomes, fostering inclusion, and advancing sustainable innovation.

Social innovation could aim to empower marginalized and vulnerable populations, ensuring their active participation in the innovation process and the benefits of its outcomes.

These characteristics collectively define the essence of social innovation, guiding its approach and mindset toward creating meaningful and lasting social change (Jain, 2023).

Social Innovation refers to the creation of new solutions—ideas, services, or models—that meet pressing social needs and improve the quality of life of individual people and communities. In 2023, the United Nations General Assembly formally recognized Social Innovation’s contributions to sustainable development, underscoring its relevance in today’s interconnected world (EZASSI, 2024).

“**Social innovation** is the process of developing and deploying effective solutions to challenging and often systemic social and environmental issues in support of social progress. Social innovations are new social practices that aim to meet social needs in a better way than the existing solutions, resulting from working conditions, education, community development or health. These ideas are created with the goal of extending and strengthening civil society. Social entrepreneurship brings "new patterns and possibilities for innovation" and are willing to do things that existing organizations are not willing to do (Soule et al. 2025).

Social innovation addresses pressing social, economic and environment challenges, whilst supporting improved well-being.

Social innovation has gained significant attention in the early 21st century with the rise of social entrepreneurship and the growing recognition of the role of innovation in addressing social issues. Social innovation refers to the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services, and models) that simultaneously meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations (OECD, 2025).

5. Wasted food

The initial statistical assessment of the amount of wasted food showed that 670 000 000 kilograms of food are destroyed in Bulgaria. In 2022, the European Commission showed a waste of 400 000 000 kilograms of food per year by the food industry in Bulgaria. These foods, worth more than 1 000 000 000 EUR could be a significant contribution to the social assistance budget, as they are sufficient to provide food security for all people in need or at risk of poverty in Bulgaria.

6. The Food Act

In 2017, the Food Act was updated with food banking. Donated food could be exempt from VAT if provided to a food bank operator. The threshold for VAT exempt donated food reaches 1% of the annual turnover. General requirements for food storage and provision facilities have been introduced (The Food Act, 2020). A list of foods subject to food banking has been approved, as well as the periods in which they can be offered free of charge. Thus, all administrative obstacles and requirements for the food industry to donate excess food to a food bank operator have been removed on 01.07.2022.

II. Materials and Methods

The information about the Operators to save food in Bulgaria was published on the corresponding websites, including Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) and Bulgarian food bank foundation (BFB).

The data from the financial statements of BFB for 2016 – 2023 were used for estimation of alteration of the financial results within these years. The data are collected from the official financial reports. The analysis of data as well the Figures are created using Excel 2016.

The internet platform sites were used for data and information about their business models.

III. Results and Discussion

1. The model of Food banking

Food banks are created as temporary and emergency food measures. They often substitute for government interventions on food poverty, where such help is missing (Pickering and Wood, 2024).

A successful business model for food assistance to the people in need in Bulgaria is the Food banking. The Food bank is a tool for combating hunger via providing food assistance to the vulnerable people. Food banks create conditions for providing humanitarian assistance in order to meet the short-time as well the long-term needs of vulnerable groups.

The model for helping the needy in Bulgaria as means of fighting hunger includes the creation of food banks, which generate sustainability and long-term support of the vulnerable groups. Food banks are especially important to help those in need in times of economic crises and other extreme circumstances such as pandemics. Thus, the surplus food could be donated by farmers, the processing sector, producers, traders and distributors of food. Food banks engage local businesses and the public to donate food and funds. Anymore, the food producers and food chains start the initiative to invest in food banking and donation, and this trend tends to constant grow in all the country.

2. Resources mobilised by FEAD

The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) benefited all Member States, supporting on average 12.7 million persons per year between 2014 and 2017. About 3.8 billion EUR were complemented by a minimum of 15 % in matching funding allocated by the Member States, bringing the total value of the Fund to approximately 4.5 billion EUR (FEAD, 2019).

3. Food and Basic Material Assistance Program 2021 - 2027

European Social Fund Plus Operation BG05SFPR003-1.004 "Support"

The Food and Basic Material Assistance Program (2021 – 2027) is focused on several Directions and accompanying measures: "Food and hygiene packages"; "Hot lunch" with indicative budget of 81 400 000 EUR; "Packages for newborn children; "Children's kitchen" with indicative budget of 2 220 444 EUR (Food Program, 2022). Thus, charitable initiatives for "hot lunch" for people in need are launched on a voluntary basis in various cities in the country.

The Budget of the Program comprised contributions of the European Social Fund (189 450 000 EUR) and National funding (21 050 001 EUR), resulting in Total of 210 500 001 EUR (Food Program, 2022).

The Objective of the Program is focused on the overcoming the main deprivations of food and hygiene materials, thus contributing to poverty reduction and social inclusion of the most

vulnerable groups of the population. The provided measures could help overcome the social exclusion, including a target group of 500 000 people on average per year on a territorial approach for the purpose of their reintegration.

4. Rate of volunteering in Bulgaria

The volunteering work is important from a social practice perspective as well as to consider the growth and diversification of food banks and food assistance, especially during a time of crisis. The present data point to the severe poverty experienced by many people in countries where food banks exist (Lee et al. 2023).

In Bulgaria, the volunteering is not regulated, official statistics on volunteering are missing as well as measuring the social impact within organisations, including that engaged with the food donation and distribution. Thus, Bulgaria was at the bottom of the CAF World Giving Index 2017 (Sadowski et al. 2018). A new law on volunteering was presented to the National Parliament in December 2017, with the involvement of civil organisations.

General draft law was adopted on 17.04.2025 on the first vote draft law on the Promotion of volunteering, prepared based on Art. 78, para. 2 of the Rules of Procedure for the organization and activities of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria (NARB, 2025).

5. Food Insecurity During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Food banks often substitute for government interventions on food poverty, increasing the part of the non-governmental food aid and extending their help beyond the food provision. The Covid-19 Pandemic presented challenges for the food banks, increasing their role in providing food support. Their welfare function was extended via voluntary aid in the post-pandemic period (Pickering and Wood, 2024). Food insecurity increased sharply during the COVID - 19 pandemic, mainly between the people in quarantine and jobless. Voluntary organisations, including food banks, collected food from stores, restaurants, supermarkets and redistributed it to the needy (Cattivelli, 2022). These initiatives could be considered as social innovation, responding to the social challenges and providing emergent benefits for the society.

In relation to the emergency reaction to the Covid-19 Pandemic in cooperation with the municipalities in 2020 was provided food to 4 200 retired people and ill persons under forced isolation that could not order provisions at home in different locations in Bulgaria.

In 2022, the quantity of the donated food increased with 65% compared to 2021, the most affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic. Thus, the operated food donated to the Bulgarian Food Bank (BFB) for distribution to different social programs, increased three times by value from 618 153 BGN in 2021 to 1 854 242 BGN in 2022.

6. Motivations for Volunteering in Food Insecurity and Food Savings

Faith-based organisations are engaged in welfare provision and continue to play vital role in response to the hunger (Denning, 2021), but they need more resources to engage volunteers. The social activities of food bank volunteering are sometimes accompanied also by faith-based practice (Lee et al. 2023).

Reducing food insecurity and environmental impact of the waste removal are values to volunteer in provision upcycling activities, including participation in social enterprises developing similar projects (Rondeau et al. 2020). To rescue food in food insecurity programming is an important

moral issue for volunteers, while some of them participate in a new type of social enterprise volunteering being young, skilled and focused in self-development.

A greater appreciation is needed to volunteer contributions to the health and well-being of the local communities and total society (Stukas and Cowling, 2005).

Activities engaged in ending the hunger are focused on the needs of food bank users, here and now, including support of a stocked and organized warehouse, emergency food parcels, meeting and greeting people. Activities considered ending hunger forever are focused on the poverty drivers such as coordinating financial inclusion, additional funds; identify local need (Trussell Trust). Thus, the volunteer management develops strategic volunteering within the food bank expressed in attracting, recruitment, induction, training and support of skilled people, sense of community and belonging; work with volunteers as trustees to provide guidance and support.

7. Food insecurity at European level

Since 1986, the European Food Banks Federation (FEBA) has united national food bank organisations across Europe. FEBA works to enhance social inclusion and food security across Europe by strengthening a network of national food banks, including The EaSI Operating Grant to coordinate, connect, and grow impact across Europe. In 2024, FEBA mobilised over 2.7 million EUR in passthrough funding to national food banks. In 2024, around 38.2 million people, correlating to 8.5% of the EU-27 population, were unable to afford a meal with fish, meat or vegetarian equivalent every second day. In 2024, food inflation has been at an average of 2%, while the high price has contributed an additional increase of the demand for food aid.

According to Eurostat, 9.5% of the EU-27 population were not capable of accessing a proper meal a day in 2023 compared to 8.3% in 2022. Over the same period, the share of Europeans at risk of poverty climbed from 19.7 percent to 22.3 percent. Eurostat reported that food inflation reached an average of 19% in 2023, including sharper spikes in some FEBA member countries.

About 100 000 volunteers shared values and propel work forward. In 2024, FEBA worked in collaboration with 25 Full Members and five Associate Members in 30 European countries. FEBA Members also redistributed food from the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), the REACT-EU initiative, and the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+), the EU Fruits and Vegetables withdrawal scheme, as well as from individual and corporate food collections (FEBA, 2024, 2025).

7.1. Paradox of Food Banking: Hunger Against Surplus

Every year, over 59 million tonnes of food are wasted across the European Union – equivalent to 131 kg per person. Much of the food thrown out is still safe and edible. Food waste happens at every stage: from production and processing, through distribution and retail, and finally in households. Beyond the social impact, reducing food waste is also critical for climate action, as it accounts for 6% of total EU greenhouse gas emissions. FEBA works with food businesses to recover surplus before it becomes waste, turning excess into essential aid. In 2023 alone, the FEBA network saved nearly 840 000 tonnes of food from waste and redirected it to those in need.

7.1.1. Food System Crisis, Food Security and Sustainability

Key articles and expert insights shed light on the systemic challenges affecting food security, sustainability, and waste.

Everyone deserves access to nutritious food. FEBA combats food insecurity while minimizing food waste across Europe, connecting surplus food with those in need.

8. Operators to Save Food in Bulgaria

Important is the fight against food waste, which in Bulgaria annually is over 1 billion EUR, expressed in immense food losses in the supply chain.

Several Organizations to save food operate in Bulgaria, constantly increasing by number, and vary by type and business plans: classical food banks, innovative internet platforms to donate and save food, foundations, food stores, food producers, and thus engaging in their activities volunteers, businessmen and citizens as well as religious denominations.

8.1. Food Banks

8.1.1. Bulgarian Red Cross

Food banks established by the Bulgarian Red Cross represent a reliable mechanism for attracting local businesses and the public, who donate and distribute food products and financial resources, with the active participation of volunteers.

The first food banks were established under a program with the participation of the American Red Cross and the Bulgarian Red Cross, funded by the US Department of Agriculture, in Dobrich, Pazardzhik, Stara Zagora and Shumen. In result, 200 people in each district received a free package of basic food products every month. Over four years, a total of 19 988 representatives of the elderly, children and socially disadvantaged families have received 33 246 food packages, 31 905 hot lunches in the dining room or 116 543 bread coupons at reduced prices. More than 15 200 hours of voluntary work was provided by 610 people, collecting and delivering 188 tons of durable food, 11 000 liters of oil and 52.4 tons of wheat, with a total amount of financial support of 143 000 BGN, and 20 000 people assisted (Bulgarian Red Cross).

8.1.2. Bulgarian Food Bank Foundation

The Bulgarian Food Bank Foundation was established on 31.01.2012 as an operator of food, accompanied by documents certifying its quality and origin that provided to the social sector provisions saved from destruction.

Thus, in 2022 BFB has supported more than 112 organizations throughout the country with donated food, more than 64 thousand people in need or at risk of poverty with 212 tons of provisions for 1.854 million BGN.

In 2023, over 130 organizations across the country have been supported with donated food and the living conditions of 60 957 people in need or at risk of poverty have been improved.

In 2025, about 10 million BGN equivalent to the worth of food has been saved from waste and provided to the social sector (Bulgarian Food Bank).

The financial reports of BFB are published regularly, showing an increasing activity in the field of the nutrition security, engaging many companies, volunteers and stores as well as private donors of funds. The financial results of BFB summarized for years 2016 – 2023, show predominantly an increase in providing food and the corresponding value in currency to the needy (Figures 1-4).

Thus, compared to 2021, 2022 resulted in a 65% increase in the amount of donated products from 128 933 kg to 212 511 kg. The value of provisions donated, as declared by the donor companies

and provided to BFB for distribution to various social programs, increased from 618 153 BGN in 2021 to 1 854 242 BGN, which represents a 300% increase (Bulgarian Food Bank).

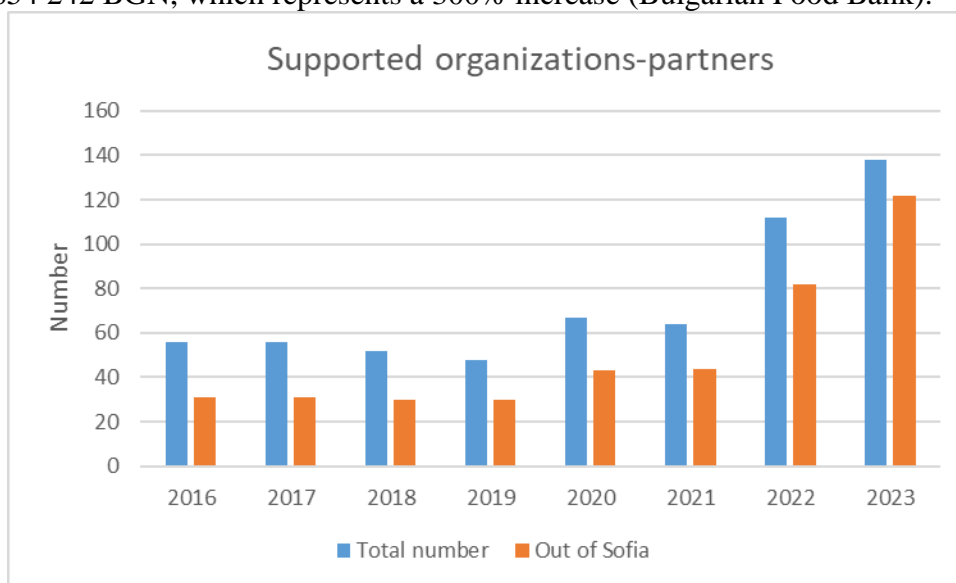


Figure 1. Supported organizations-partners of BFB: total number and out of Sofia during 2016 – 2023. Data from the Annual reports BFB.

The number of the supported organizations by BFB (Figure 1) increased regularly with years, both in total number and situated out of Sofia: the number of supported organizations stay about regularly from 2016 to 2019, and increased from 2020 to 2023, that was related to the covid-19 crisis.

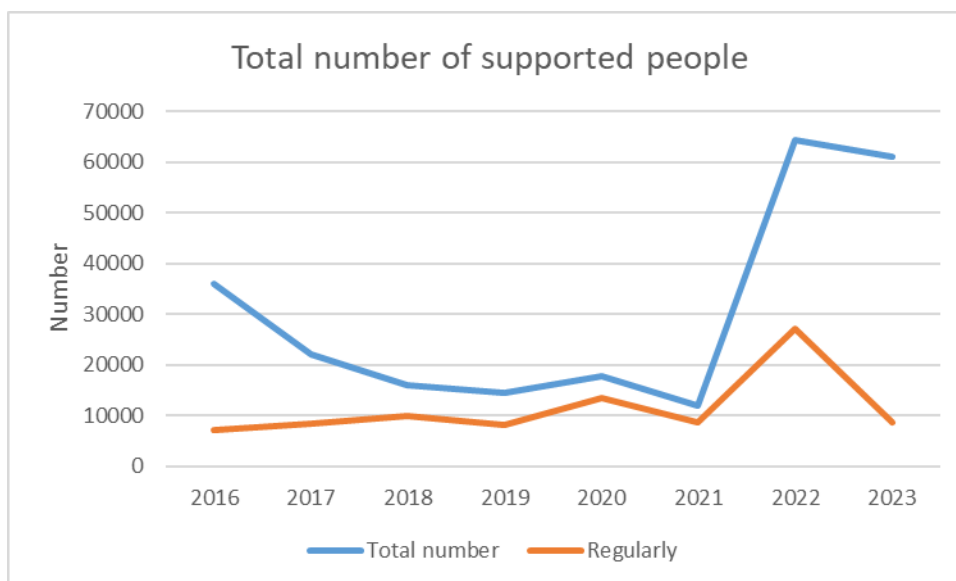


Figure 2. Total number of supported people from BFB: total number and regularly supported for 2016 - 2023. Data from the Annual reports of BFB.

The total number of the supported people by BFB changes during 2016 – 2023 (Figure 2), decreasing from 2016 to 2021, and increased about three times during 2022 – 2023. The number

of regularly supported people stay about unchanged during all period, and with a triple increasing during 2022. Both peaks during 2022 could be related to COVID-19 pandemic and the increased needs for support.

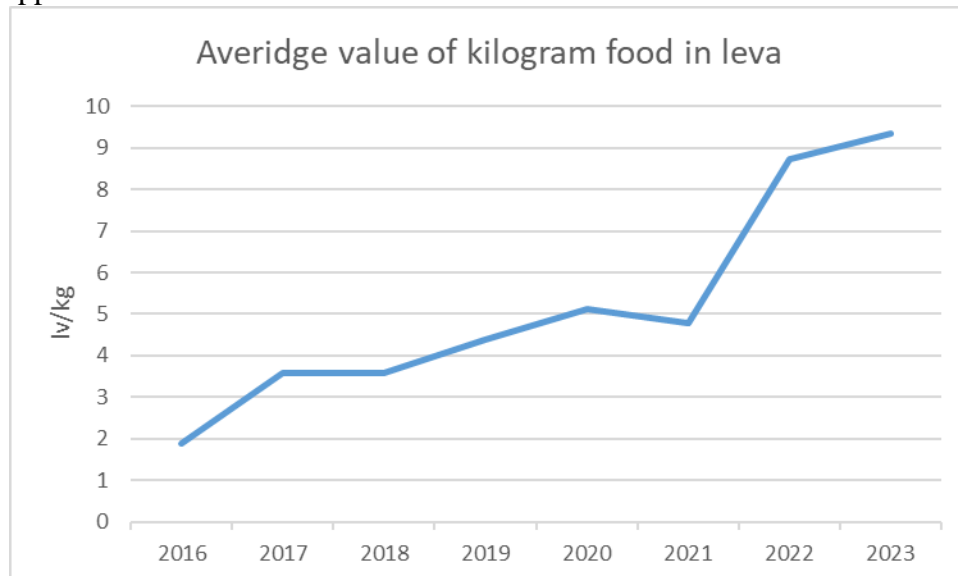


Figure 3. Average value of kilogram food in leva donated to BFB during 2016 – 2023. Data from the Annual reports of BFB.

The average value of kilogram provisions in BGN donated to BFB during 2016 – 2023 (Figure 3) increased regularly during the period with a peak more than double during 2022 that could be explained by the elevated price of the food.

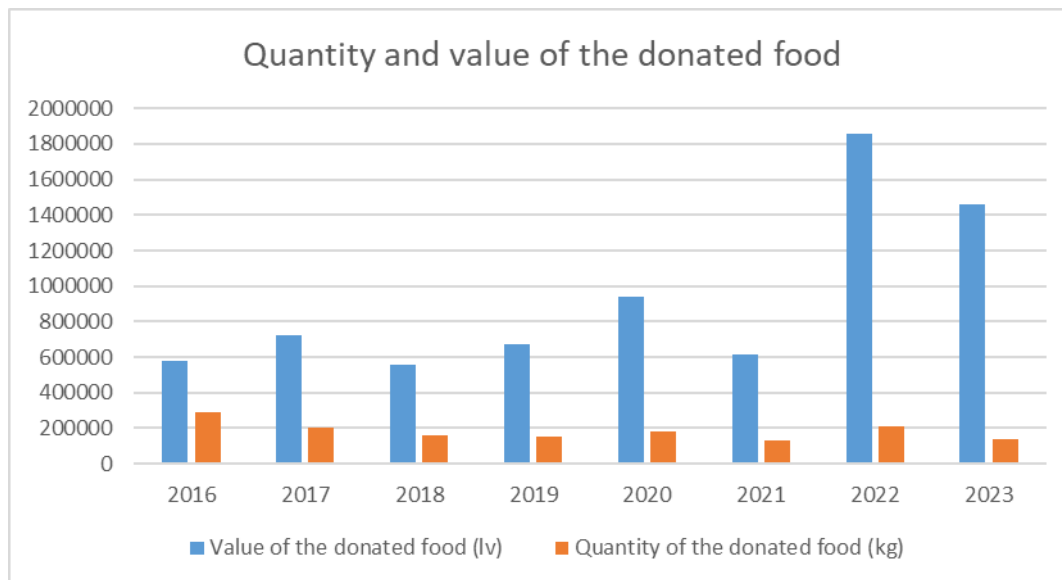


Figure 4. Quantity and value of the donated food to BFB during 2016 – 2023. Data from the Annual reports of BFB.

The quantity of the donated products to BFB during 2016 – 2023 (Figure 4) did not change with the years, while the value of the food increased about three times during 2022 and about two times during 2023, that could be related to the elevated prices of the food during 2022 – 2023, compared to the previous years.

The data show that the number of recipient organizations increased about twice during 2016 – 2023, while the number of supported people changed during the period. The same applies for the catered donated food in kg. The parameter that increases regularly during the period is the Value of the operatively donated food in BGN, an indicator of the highly increased prices of the food during 2022 – 2023, compared to the previous years.

8.2. Other organizations providing food assistance to the needy

8.2.1. Faith - based organizations

The orthodox church of Bulgaria engaged volunteers and assisted food collection, cooking and distribution to the needy in some locations, thus helping the needy, including homeless people, with hot lunch. The catholic denomination also participated in such charitable activities through its organization Caritas.

8.2.2. Internet platforms for food saving

Foodonate

The Foodonate is the first donation platform in Bulgaria through which could be donated food left in surplus to a home for people in need, providing care for logistics and full transparency of the processes. The platform was supported from the Norwegian Financial Mechanism (Norway Grants) during 2014-2021 by program "Business, Innovation and SME Development" (Foodonate).

FoodObox

The platform FoodObox "Together against food waste" is a Mobile application for "saving" food. FoodObox functions in Sofia, where are registered over 60 sites that have left over food, and in Plovdiv, where new sites are registered recently. Via the platform, consumers receive quality and delicious food at a big discount. For the business, the platform provides opportunity to reduce the costs of the resources used, prevent the generation of waste, acquire new customers as well as brand recognition as an ecological business (FoodObox).

Foody

In November 2020 was initiated the mission to save good food in the fight against food waste. Volunteers, advisors and supporters joined the team and the community of the food platform to over 11 000 people in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas and Stara Zagora. Thus, over 400 kg of food has been saved through the platform, equivalent to 1000 harmful carbon emissions, following the idea of sustainable eating, being ecofriendly. The food and grocery items offered on the platform is approaching their expiration date. The platform Foody.to received awards of the European Commission in the European Social Innovation Competition 2021, a grant from the Sustainable Lady Fund of FiBank & Mastercard as well as award in the competition "Access to good food 2021" (Foody).

9. Evaluation and comparative analysis of food saving

9.1. Evaluation of food saving

In result, the most effective in food donation and saving is the BFB because of well established business model, structure, organization, material bases as well as optimal ways and means to stimulate donors and volunteers. The different internet platforms provide a quick response to the local express foods in access to be distributed in real time. Thus, both ways to redistribute unnecessary food act independently but share a common goal to save unused supply and to help the people in need. In effect, all such initiatives in helping people by using volunteering, including multiple activities of the Christian church are helpful to overcome the food insecurity and should be stimulated in their social cause and functioning.

There is a need to adopt a law for volunteering in Bulgaria to provide a stable and sustainable framework for stimulation of the volunteers working in the field of food saving as well as food banking, and underline their dedication and role for the society.

9.2. The challenges facing food rescue activities

The importance of EU funding, including ESF+, is vital for food banks to continue their support to the needy. According to BFB, the fragmentation of the food industry and the lack of systematized databases on the structure and characteristics of companies represent big challenges to save food. Establishing a culture of donation, informing and engaging the food companies in donation activities could increase volumes of donated and reused food. The involvement of public figures and leaders from the food industry in the food banking is important for the success. Public information via official media about the food banking and engaging the society to invest the surplus of donated food directly into the social system could accelerate the process to minimize the food waste and help the people in need. A framework for volunteering in Bulgaria is mandatory for stimulation of food saving and redistribution initiatives of all kind of organizations working in the field.

IV. Conclusions

At present, different organizations by type and business plans, innovative or traditional, operate in Bulgaria to save food, and they increase regularly their activities and dedication to the cause, participating in donation of funds and food. Engaged in serving the poor are volunteers, businessmen and citizens. The final goal is to protect people from hunger and food insecurity. Thus, the access to non-governmental food aid increases and food banks became an important support for users, extending their social role.

A good initiative would be to create a food patronage of volunteers, which could collect in the evening the still good freshly prepared food from the food chains, redistribute and supply to the people in need on the principle of express delivery. This practice could be a social innovation in the process of distributing surplus food, every day, by volunteers.

The food bank initiative in Bulgaria follows a successful social and business model, providing food to those in need. Other organizations participate also in the collection and distribution of safe and unused food, such as recently founded online platforms, or the welfare Christian initiatives. All this suggests that the Bulgarian society is highly involved in the fight of hunger and support actively different ways to help the needy.

The work could help create a framework about volunteering in initiatives dedicated to the food saving and food banking as well as in establishing new innovative practices in the field.

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