CULTiVATE

COSTS AND BENEFITS OF FOOD SHARING IN UTRECHT

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1. TECHNICAL REFERENCES

Project Acronym	CULTIVATE
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1.3. ABBREVIATIONS

CSA – community supported agriculture

EU – European Union

FAO – Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations

FSI – food sharing initiative

GA – grant agreement

LVVN – Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality

MRL – mobile research lab

MUFPP - Milan Urban Food Policy Pact

NGO – non-governmental organisation

NVWA - the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority

OFF - Operation Food Freedom

SDGs - UN Sustainable Development Goals

SLAs - Service Level Agreements

SROI - social return on investment

UPU – urban and peri-urban food systems

VWS – Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport

WP – work package

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2.1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY IN ENGLISH

This report presents findings from a case study on food sharing in Utrecht conducted within the CULTIVATE project (Co-designing Food Sharing Innovation for Resilience, https://cultivate-project.eu/), funded by the EU Horizon Research and Innovation Programme (GA#101083377). It contributes to Task 3.1 in Work Package (WP) 3, examining the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of food sharing initiatives (FSIs) in European cities. The study, spanning December 2024 to June 2025, defines food sharing as collective acts across the food system, including growing or composting together, cooking and eating together, redistributing surplus food, and sharing seeds, tools, spaces, and knowledge. Utrecht serves as one of three hub cities in the project, alongside Milan (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17101884) and Barcelona (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15873345), highlighting its potential for resilient UPU food systems amid challenges like food waste, insecurity, and climate vulnerability.

Utrecht, with a population of 367 947 in 2023 and a projected growth to 400 000 by 2029, is a young, diverse and affluent city in the Randstad region. Its food system emphasises sustainability, with policies like the Utrecht Food Agenda promoting healthy, accessible food through circular chains and edible green spaces. The policy landscape is decentralised, lacking a unified food strategy but benefiting from flexible national, regional and municipal frameworks, including *gedoogbeleid* (tolerance policy), which enables bottom-up innovation and experimentation. Mapping of the food sharing landscape (WP2 in the CULTIVATE project) identified 92 FSIs, dominated by multifunctional (36%) and growing initiatives (32%), with food and knowledge as primary shared resources. Selling modes prevail, often symbolic to cover costs, reflecting limited subsidies compared to other hubs.

The research employed a Mobile Research Lab (MRL) approach, involving desktop analysis, online interviews, fieldwork (site visits, observations, workshops), and thematic data analysis. The MRL team from Lund University engaged with diverse actors, for example, FSIs Stadstuin Food for Good (growing/composting), Restaurant Nula (cooking/eating), and BuurtBuik (food redistribution and cooking/eating), alongside municipal, academic, and grassroots stakeholders.

The study shows a hybrid landscape where non-profits lead, supplemented by social enterprises such as Oscar Circular and CSA schemes. FSIs evolve through experimentation, delivering social cohesion, health improvements, and waste reduction. Costs include operational expenses mitigated by volunteers and diverse funding (subsidies, grants, donations). Benefits encompass community building, dignity restoration, and environmental education, viewed as distributed welfare. Challenges involve financial viability and fragmentation, with risks like safety liabilities. Drivers include relational governance, labour inclusion, and hybrid models linking ecological and social value. Most actors' motivations converge on food as a medium for wellbeing, participation, and resilience.

In conclusion, Utrecht's general model demonstrates how strategic ambiguity fosters inclusive, sustainable food systems, offering insights for the EU-wide replication.

2.2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY IN DUTCH

Dit rapport presenteert bevindingen uit de casestudy over voedsel delen in de stad Utrecht, Nederland, uitgevoerd binnen het CULTIVATE-project: Co-designing Food Sharing Innovation for Resilience (https://cultivate-project.eu/), gefinancierd door het EU Horizon-programma voor Onderzoek en Innovatie, dat streeft naar veerkrachtige en gezonde stedelijke en peri-urbane (UPU; urban and peri-urban) voedselsystemen (GA#101083377). Het draagt bij aan Taak 3.1 binnen Werkpakket (WP) 3, waarin de economische, sociale en milieudimensies van voedseldeelinitiatieven (FSI's) in Europese steden worden onderzocht. De studie, uitgevoerd tussen december 2024 en juni 2025, definieert voedsel delen als collectieve activiteiten in het voedselsysteem, zoals samen

telen of composteren, samen koken en eten, het herverdelen van voedseloverschotten en het delen van zaden, gereedschap, ruimtes en kennis. Utrecht is een van de drie hubsteden in het project, naast Milaan (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17101884) en Barcelona (https://doi.org/10.5281/-zenodo.15873345), en laat zien hoe veerkrachtige UPU-voedselsystemen kunnen ontstaan ondanks uitdagingen zoals voedselverspilling, voedselonzekerheid en klimaatkwetsbaarheid.

Utrecht, met 367.947 inwoners in 2023 en een verwachte groei naar 400.000 in 2029, is een jonge, diverse en welvarende stad in de Randstad. Het voedselsysteem legt nadruk op duurzaamheid, met beleid zoals de Utrechtse Voedselagenda vanuit de provincie Utrecht die gezond en toegankelijk voedsel stimuleert via circulaire ketens en eetbaar groen. Het beleidslandschap is gedecentraliseerd en kent geen geïntegreerde voedselstrategie, maar profiteert van flexibele nationale, regionale en gemeentelijke kaders, waaronder het gedoogbeleid, dat bottom-up innovatie mogelijk maakt. De mapping van het voedseldeel-landschap (WP2 binnen het CULTIVATE-project) identificeerde 92 FSI's, vooral multifunctionele (36%) en teeltgerichte initiatieven (32%), waarbij voedsel en kennis de belangrijkste gedeelde middelen zijn. Verkoop is de meest voorkomende vorm van uitwisseling, vaak symbolisch om kosten te dekken, wat wijst op relatief beperkte subsidies vergeleken met andere hubs.

Het onderzoek gebruikte een Mobile Research Lab (MRL)-aanpak, met deskresearch, online interviews, veldwerk (locatiebezoeken, observaties, workshops) en thematische analyse. Het MRL-team van Lund University werkte met uiteenlopende actoren, zoals FSI's Stadstuin Food for Good (telen/composteren), Restaurant Nula (koken/eten) en BuurtBuik (voedselherverdeling en koken/eten), evenals gemeentelijke, academische en grassroots-stakeholders.

De belangrijkste bevindingen laten een gevarieerd landschap zien waarin non-profitorganisatieseen enn grote rol spelen, aangevuld met sociale ondernemingen zoals Oscar Circular en CSA-modellen. FSI's ontwikkelen zich via experiment en leveren sociale cohesie, gezondheidsverbeteringen en afvalreductie. Kosten bestaan uit operationele uitgaven, deels opgevangen door vrijwilligers en diverse financieringsbronnen (subsidies,

fondsen, donaties). Voordelen omvatten gemeenschapsvorming, herstel van waardigheid en milieueducatie, gezien als een vorm van gedeeld welzijn. Uitdagingen betreffen financiële duurzaamheid en fragmentatie, met risico's zoals aansprakelijkheid rond (bijvoorbeeld voedsel-)veiligheid. Drijfveren zijn samenwerking in (ketens) arbeidsinclusie en het verbinden van ecologische en sociale waarden. Motivaties komen samen rond voedsel als middel voor welzijn, participatie en veerkracht.

Concluderend demonstreert het model van Utrecht hoe strategische ambiguïteit inclusieve, duurzame voedselsystemen bevordert, en biedt inzichten voor EU-brede replicatie.

3. INTRODUCTION

3.1. CULTIVATE PROJECT AND THIS REPORT

This report presents findings from a comprehensive case study on food sharing in the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands, conducted as part of the CULTIVATE project: Co-designing Food Sharing Innovation for Resilience: https://cultivate-project.eu/. The study was performed between December 2024 and June 2025, building on immersive fieldwork and stakeholder engagements to explore the dynamics of urban food sharing. CULTIVATE (2023-2027) is a collaborative, solution-oriented initiative funded under the European Union's Horizon Europe Research and Innovation Programme (GA#101083377). It aims to enhance public awareness and understanding of Food Sharing Initiatives (FSIs), identify drivers and barriers to their implementation, and promote sustainability, inclusion, and resilience in urban and peri-urban (UPU) food systems. By fostering innovative food sharing practices, the project supports EU goals on climate mitigation and adaptation. It addresses challenges such as food waste, estimated at 60 million tonnes annually in Europe and valued at over €130 billion, while promoting inclusive low-carbon urban transformations.

The CULTIVATE consortium comprises 20 partners, including research institutes, municipalities, FSIs, communication specialists, and art collectives, working across diverse European contexts. Key hub locations - Milan (Italy), Utrecht (the Netherlands), and Barcelona (Spain) - serve as primary testing grounds for developing and piloting innovative tools, while spoke locations - Lisbon, Brno, Freiburg, Dublin, Athens, and Brighton - facilitate replication and scaling of successful practices EU-wide. Utrecht's role as a hub emphasises its vibrant, community-driven food sharing ecosystem, characterised by hybrid models that integrate social, environmental, and economic benefits, making it an ideal site for examining resilience in fragmented governance landscapes.

The CULTIVATE project (Voytenko Palgan and Sadovska, 2023) defines *food sharing* as collective acts around food across the food system, namely:

- growing or composting together,
- cooking and eating together,
- redistributing surplus food,
- sharing seeds, tools, food space and knowledge.

This broad conceptualisation highlights food sharing's potential to reduce waste, build community bonds, and contribute to circular economies. The CULTIVATE project has produced key resources, such as the European Food Sharing Dictionary (released November 2023), which provides a standardised framework for categorising FSIs, and policy briefs like the one on urban and peri-urban food sharing governance (Davies et al., 2024). Additionally, the Food Sharing Compass - a digital platform with five interactive tools - supports stakeholders in navigating food sharing landscapes, from mapping initiatives to assessing governance practices. CULTIVATE tools including the Food Sharing Map (https://www.sharingsolutions.eu/food-sharing-map/), the Food Sharing Calculator (https://cultivatecalculator.eu/), the Menu of Good Governance (https://www.menuofgoodgovernance.eu/) and the Library of Citizen Engagement (https://libraryofcitizenengagement.softr.app/) offer repositories of best practices of food sharing across Europe.

This report specifically contributes to Task 3.1 in Work Package (WP) 3 of the CULTIVATE project, which investigates the costs, investments, challenges, drivers, success factors, and motivations for establishing and maintaining urban and peri-urban FSIs. Drawing on a conceptual framework derived from a systematic literature review on food sharing (Sadovska et al., 2026; Voytenko Palgan and Sadovska, 2023)exacerbating environmental and socio-economic challenges. With 80 % of food consumed in cities, transforming urban food systems is vital. Urban food sharing initiatives (FSIs, enriched with insights from institutional theory, sustainability transitions, and urban governance, the analysis builds on prior project deliverables. These include mapping of food sharing landscapes (D2.2) and governance analyses (D4.1), providing a robust foundation for the Utrecht case. By

focusing on local actors' experiences, the report illuminates how food sharing in Utrecht fosters relational welfare, combats social exclusion, and enhances ecological participation, offering actionable insights for scaling innovations across Europe. These findings support CULTIVATE's ongoing impact in co-creating resilient food systems amid rising urban challenges of food insecurity and climate vulnerability.

3.2. OVERVIEW OF UTRECHT AND ITS FOOD SHARING PROFILE

Utrecht, the fourth largest city in the Netherlands and the capital of Utrecht Province, is centrally located in the Randstad region - an urban agglomeration comprising 16 municipalities across four provinces (Zuid-Holland, North Holland, Utrecht, and Flevoland) that houses 41% of the Dutch population (Medema et al., 2024). The city spans nearly 100 km^2, divided into 10 districts with over 110 neighbourhoods, many of which have sub-neighbourhoods. Utrecht's historic city centre, including canals such as the Oudegracht dating back to the 12th century, is a hub for shopping, culture and restaurants. Neighbourhoods further from the centre, such as Vleuten and De Meern (formerly separate villages merged into Utrecht), maintain distinct characters with their own smaller centres. The urban form prioritises sustainability, with many car-free streets and extensive cycling and public transport networks centred on Utrecht Central Station, which serves 216 000 travellers daily. This connectivity makes Utrecht a major national and international rail hub. In recognition of its efforts to reclaim green spaces and promote a car-free centre, Utrecht received the European Prize for Public Space in 2022 and was ranked the third greenest city in the world in 2023 (Medema et al., 2024).

Demographically, Utrecht had a population of 367 947 in 2023, with a density of 3 924 persons per km^2, projected to reach 400 000 between 2024 and 2029 due to rapid growth (Medema et al., 2024). The metropolitan area population is estimated at 576 000 in 2025 (MacroTrends, n.d.). The city is notably young, with over 31 000 students at Utrecht University - one of Europe's largest universities, contributing to a median age lower than the Dutch average. Education levels are high: 53% of residents hold a university diploma, and 28% have secondary education, including vocational training. Utrecht boasts high cultural diversity, home to 172 nationalities, with nearly 40% of residents having non-Dutch backgrounds (33% from EU countries, 23% from Morocco, 10% from Turkey, 8% from Suriname and the Dutch Carribean, and 24% from other non-EU). Religiously, 60% declare no affiliation, 28% identify as Christian, 10% Muslim, and almost 1% Hindu, fostering vibrant traditions like shared Iftar meals during Ramadan (Medema et al., 2024). Economically, Utrecht Province generates the second-highest GDP per capita in the Randstad, with the city's average household income at €55 000 in 2021 - above the national €46 900. However, 8% of Dutch residents face poverty risk, and a 2022 11% food price surge has strained budgets, potentially increasing reliance on food assistance (CBS, n.d.).

Utrecht's food system is shaped by its central location and surrounding agricultural areas. While the Netherlands dedicates 54% of its land to agriculture (average farm size 41 hectares), Utrecht Province focuses on grasslands for dairy, with fruit and vegetable production minimal. In the U10 Region (including Utrecht and neighbouring municipalities), farms average four hectares and often provide non-agricultural services like biodiversity enhancement, education, and labour integration via "zorgboerderij" (care farms) (RUAF Foundation, 2018). Households spent about €263 monthly on food in 2025, amid rising costs (van der Most, 2025). Challenges include food insecurity affecting vulnerable groups and waste reduction goals: the municipality aims to halve 2020 waste levels by 2030 (Davies et al., 2024). The Utrecht Food Agenda, aligned with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promotes transformation through awareness, healthy/integrated supply, rural-urban links, circularity, and edible cityscapes, encouraging residents to harvest from green spaces (Provincie Utrecht, n.d.).

The manual mapping of FSIs in WP2 of the CULTIVATE project resulted in 92 FSIs in Utrecht, of which multifunctional FSIs dominated (33 FSIs or 36%) followed by growing FSIs (29 FSIs or 32%), cooking FSIs (17 FSIs or 18%) and FSIs redistributing surplus food (13 FSIs or 14%) (Davies et al., 2024). The average density is 4255 inhabitants per FSI, and since the overall population density in Utrecht is not very high, it does not seem to be a defining factor for FSI distribution across the city (Davies et al., 2024). Among all FSIs, food (40%) and knowledge

(38%) were the most shared resources, followed by sharing of meals (36%), skills (30%), land (26%) and plants (11%) (Davies et al., 2024). The most popular modes of sharing included selling followed by gifting, with selling not always for profit and sometimes related to charging a symbolic fee to cover basic costs of an FSI (Davies et al., 2024). Compared to Barcelona (221 FSIs) and Milan (107), Utrecht has fewer FSIs but emphasises selling due to limited subsidies, with 78% sharing food/items and 24 FSIs lacking physical locations, the highest among CULTIVATE hub cities. Growing FSIs are evenly distributed, reflecting green space policies, while redistribution addresses social needs amid economic pressures (Davies et al., 2024).

3.3. POLICY LANDSCAPE AFFECTING FOOD SHARING IN UTRECHT

The policy landscape affecting food sharing in Utrecht is characterised by a decentralised and fragmented approach, lacking a unified municipal food policy. Unlike Milan, where the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (MUFPP) provides a comprehensive framework structured around governance, sustainable diets, social equity, food production, supply, and waste (City of Milan, 2015), or Barcelona, which integrates food sharing into broader urban regeneration and social inclusion strategies through initiatives like the Barcelona Urban Agriculture Plan (Ajuntament de Barcelona, n.d.), Utrecht operates within a "strategic ambiguity" (Medema et al., 2024). This allows for bottom-up innovation but creates challenges in coordination and enforcement. Food sharing is influenced by policies at national, provincial, and municipal levels, often intersecting with themes like public health, green space management, circular economy, and social welfare. Key regulations and policy orientation emphasise "*gedoogbeleid*": tolerance, volunteering, and sustainability issues, which in turn fosters various hybrid ecosystems of citizen-led initiatives supported by light-touch governance.

At the national level, food-related policies are overseen by the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality (LVVN) and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS). The

LVVN focuses on food quality and safety, enforced through audits by the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA), which applies to professional kitchens and redistribution initiatives (NVWA, n.d.). For instance, any community kitchen involved in cooking and eating together must comply with hygiene standards, though small-scale, non-commercial activities often benefit from flexible enforcement. The VWS promotes healthy lifestyles and supportive environments, aligning with the potential of food sharing to enhance social cohesion and nutrition (VWS, 2019). However, national policies avoid direct intervention in personal dietary choices, reflecting a neoliberal stance against "betutteling" (paternalism), which limits top-down mandates on food redistribution or urban growing (Djojosoeparto et al., 2022). The National Food Agenda (2018-2023) encouraged circular food chains and reduced waste, indirectly supporting surplus redistribution, but implementation is decentralised to provinces and municipalities (LVVN, n.d.). This national framework sets broad parameters, emphasising sustainability without specific urban food sharing directives, allowing local adaptations in Utrecht.

At the regional level, the Province of Utrecht's Food Agenda (2021-2023) aimed to enhance the regional food sector's sustainability through short supply chains, healthy consumption, and reduced waste (Provincie Utrecht, n.d.). This agenda supported networking events, funding for initiatives like Operation Food Freedom (a grassroots FSI redistributing food), and projects such as Regio Deal Foodvalley, which fosters collaborations between public, private, and civil society actors for healthy food environments (Regio Foodvalley, n.d.). The province acts as an intermediary, overseeing spatial planning in peri-urban areas, which impacts growing and composting activities. For example, policies on nature preservation and agricultural land use encourage edible landscapes and community-supported agriculture (CSA), aligning with environmental motivations behind food sharing (RUAF Foundation, 2018). Provincial subsidies have funded knowledge-sharing platforms and awards for best practices, promoting seed and tool exchanges. However, the agenda's expiration in 2023 highlights a gap in ongoing provincial leadership, shifting more responsibility to municipal levels.

At the municipal level, Utrecht's approach is dispersed across departments of Public Health, Green Space, Circular Economy, and Social Development, reflecting a "hybridity of forms"

where food sharing emerges indirectly from social and environmental agendas (Medema et al., 2024). The Utrecht Food Agenda provides a vision for healthy, sustainable, and accessible food, with six pillars: awareness of healthy food, availability throughout the city, actor networks, farmer-citizen connections, circular chains, and edible public green spaces (Provincie Utrecht, n.d.). This agenda lists existing initiatives but lacks implementation mechanisms, positioning food as a tool for broader goals such as combating loneliness and promoting inclusion. For growing and composting, policies fall under the Green Department, which manages 1 240 hectares of green space, including community-based urban agriculture represented by the allotment gardens (volkstuinen) and food forests (Gemeente Utrecht, 2018). Utrecht municipality owns land for 16 allotment associations, covering ca. 37.5 hectares, with a tolerance policy (*gedoogbeleid*) allowing flexible use as long as public access is maintained (OVU, n.d.). This non-stringent enforcement supports bottom-up composting and seed sharing but poses risks for long-term land security.

Utrecht's participation in national City Deals further shapes its food policy landscape. The "Food on the Urban Agenda" (2017-2019) elevated the political role of food, focusing on regional systems, education, and innovation, leading to a "Recipe Book" of best practices featuring Utrecht's Edible Neighbourhood Rijnvliet (Verbeek, 2018). Its successor, "Healthy and Sustainable Food Environments" (2021-2025), aims for predominantly healthy foodscapes by 2030, with Utrecht's Cartesius neighbourhood as a living lab for sustainable streetscapes (Eijken, 2022). These deals, involving multi-stakeholder commitments (e.g., €5 000-€10 000 annual municipal contributions), encourage knowledge sharing, indirectly boosting cooking and redistribution FSIs. However, without zoning tools to control food business diversity, implementation relies on dialogue rather than mandates.

Volunteering policies are crucial for the operational sustainability of food sharing, as many FSIs rely on unpaid labour. The Initiatievenfonds (Initiative Fund) allocates up to €35 000 per resident-led project, including community gardens and cooking events, with district coordinators prioritising social cohesion ("Initiatievenfonds", n.d.). The "Volunteering for Each Other" (VIVE) subsidy supports buddy systems for vulnerable groups, applicable to eating-together programmes (VIVE, 2025). In neighbourhoods like Overvecht, "Together for Overvecht" provides targeted funding for social activities, including food redistribution to combat exclusion (Samen voor Overvecht, n.d.). These align with national decentralisation under the Social Support Act and Participation Act, devolving welfare to municipalities (VWS, 2019).

For (surplus) food redistribution, policies intersect with waste management and social welfare. The Circular Economy Department promotes food waste reduction, supporting hubs like BuurtBuik, which redistributes surplus food from supermarkets. Various food banks, distributing packages to vulnerable families, operate under national guidelines but receive municipal support (Voedselbanken Nederland, n.d.).

Overall, Utrecht's policy landscape fosters resilience through flexibility and multi-stakeholder collaboration, as seen in hybrid models like Utrecht Natuurlijk, a municipal spin-off managing educational farms. However, fragmentation risks inconsistent support, with long-term financial viability being a key challenge (Davies et al., 2024). Utrecht emphasizes relational welfare, using food as a medium for dignity and participation (Medema et al., 2024). Future policies could benefit from integrating these into a cohesive framework, as recommended in the FAO's Utrecht City Region Food System Assessment (RUAF Foundation, 2018), to enhance impact on sustainability and equity.

3.4. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES AND ACTORS IN FOCUS

To study food sharing in Utrecht within the CULTIVATE project, the researchers employed various social science methods (see Section 4 for details). Interactions in the form of online and in-person interviews, site visits, guided tours, in-situ observations, workshops, and reflexive discussions with key food sharing actors in Utrecht formed the core of the field research, documented in this report. Specifically, the researchers interacted with FSIs that facilitate different ways of food sharing following the CULTIVATE definition described above. Many of these FSIs are also involved in sharing food space, tools, knowledge, and seeds, for instance:

- **FSIs that grow and/or compost together:** Stadstuin Food for Good, a volunteer-run urban garden that focuses on growing organic produce, composting, rehabilitation programs, and redistributing through meals and vegetable boxes to support vulnerable groups; Utrecht Natuurlijk, a municipal spin-off offering educational and recreational gardening, allotment access, self-harvest opportunities, and neighbourhood sharing initiatives to promote urban greening and community engagement; Rijnvliet Edible Neighborhood, an innovative edible landscape integrated into urban planning where residents collectively harvest from shared green spaces, fostering a sense of ownership and nature connection; De Moestuin (Noordertuin urban farm), a social enterprise providing green spaces for vulnerable people to participate in farm activities, including gardening, harvesting organic produce, baking, and societal integration; care farms (**zorgboerderij**), small-scale agricultural foundations that combine food production with non-agricultural services like biodiversity conservation, educational activities, and labour integration programmes for therapeutic and inclusive purposes; Amped, which innovates in regenerative food systems using gamification and blockchain to support short food chains and local production, often supported by the EU funding.
- **FSIs that promote cooking and eating together:** Restaurant Nula, a social enterprise emphasising labour integration and social return on investment by providing job training and meals for refugees and vulnerable groups in a supportive community setting; Grounded Kitchen, which challenges traditional kitchen hierarchies through radical organisational change, offering subsidised student meals funded by corporate catering, rooted in social justice and ecological sustainability to empower participants and build relational welfare.
- **FSIs that support (surplus) food redistribution:** BuurtBuik, a grassroots initiative that rescues surplus food from supermarkets and redistributes it through community meals, emphasizing dignity and waste reduction without stigma; Oscar Circular, a social enterprise focused on market-based circular food activities, including surplus recovery and redistribution to promote sustainability; food banks, which distribute weekly food packages to vulnerable families, operating under national guidelines with municipal support to address food insecurity; Operation Food Freedom, a grassroots programme funded by the province that facilitates ethical redistribution, prioritising fairness and solidarity over charity models; Groentetas, a volunteer-run service that

Figure 1: Learning about the policy landscape affecting food sharing in Utrecht at the City of Utrecht offices

offers affordable seasonal produce bundles sourced from local producers, reducing waste through partnerships like InstockMarket; Local food bag providers, market-based schemes that distribute surplus and local food to consumers, often charging symbolic fees to cover costs while supporting circularity.

- **Multifunctional FSIs involved in several food sharing activities:** Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) schemes, which combine local food production, sharing of harvests, and community involvement in growing, composting, and knowledge exchange to build resilient rural-urban connections.

These FSIs reflect Utrecht's hybrid food sharing landscape, characterised by strategic ambiguity and bottom-up innovation, where non-profits dominate but social enterprises and market actors like Oscar Circular and CSA schemes play growing roles. Many initiatives, such as Stadstuin Food for Good and De Moestuin, target social inclusion by integrating vulnerable populations through therapeutic and participatory activities, aligning with municipal goals for relational welfare. Others, like Rijnvliet and Utrecht Natuurlijk, emphasise environmental education and edible cityscapes, contributing to circularity and biodiversity. Redistribution-focused FSIs like BuurtBuik and Groentetas prioritise low-threshold access, reducing dependency on formal systems while building solidarity. Overall, these FSIs demonstrate how food serves as a medium for broader outcomes, including participation without bureaucracy, care without stigma, and learning without institutional programmes, thriving under flexible regulations like the "*gedoogbeleid*" policy towards tolerance, volunteering, and sustainability.

Note on categorisation. The FSIs types used in this report should be understood as analytical categories rather than fixed or mutually exclusive labels. In practice, many FSIs combine several functions at once. For example, an initiative may recover surplus food, prepare shared meals, provide social support, and create opportunities for volunteering or training. In such cases, initiatives are placed in the category that best reflects their primary activity or public role, while recognising that their work often extends across multiple types.

In addition to FSIs, the research team interacted with organisations in the retail and support sectors that bolster food sharing, such as local supermarkets partnering with redistribution hubs and platforms facilitating short supply chains. The team also engaged researchers from Wageningen University & Research and Utrecht University, who view FSIs as living systems of distributed governance intersecting ecological, social, and welfare processes. Municipal representatives from departments of Public Health, Green Space, Circular Economy, and Social Development provided insights into policy support, funding, and hybrid models (Figure 1). Provincial government actors highlighted regional agendas for sustainable food chains, while community organisers, volunteers, and participants shared perspectives on motivations like purpose, social recognition, and empowerment. Grassroots redistribution actors emphasised ethical commitments to dignity and fairness.

These interactions demonstrated the collaborative multi-stakeholder ecosystem in Utrecht, where academics contribute through research-by-doing, and authorities adopt a hands-off approach to enable innovation.

4. MOBILE RESEARCH LAB APPROACH

This report is based on a case study of food sharing in Utrecht conducted as part of Task 3.1 in WP3 of the CULTIVATE project. The case study employed a Mobile Research Lab (MRL) approach (Mont, 2018; Voytenko Palgan and Sadovska, 2023) to investigate the costs, investments, benefits, challenges, risks, drivers, success factors, and motivations associated with establishing and maintaining FSIs in Utrecht. The MRL methodology enables immersive field research in which an interdisciplinary team engages with diverse actors over a short intensive period, typically 5-7 days. This approach combines deductive and inductive methods, drawing on multiple data sources and techniques to generate rich, contextual insights into complex phenomena like urban food sharing. In the CULTIVATE project, the MRL follows a structured protocol (Voytenko Palgan and Sadovska, 2023) that emphasises tracing the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of FSIs while exploring their evolution, governance interactions, and resilience-building potential.

The Utrecht MRL was conducted on 24-28 March 2025 by a team from the International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics (IIIEE) at Lund University, Sweden: Yuliya Voytenko Palgan, Vera Sadovska, Oksana Mont, and Andrius Plepys. Preparation involved approximately four weeks of planning, including desk research, initial online interviews, and coordination with local partners Mirjam Scholtens, Miriam Weber and Imara Antonius, Utrecht Municipality, and Oona Morrow, Lucie Sovova and Ana-Maria Gătejel, Wageningen University & Research (WUR), who provided contextual expertise and joined selected activities (Figure 2). The MRL incorporated a mix of methods: semi-structured interviews, site visits, guided tours, in-situ observations, participatory workshops, and daily reflexive discussions. Ethical considerations followed Lund University's guidelines, with informed consent obtained from all participants, anonymisation of sensitive data (e.g., interviewees coded as UT01-UT23), and data stored securely in compliance with GDPR. The approach aimed to triangulate data from multiple sources for robustness, while fostering

Figure 2: Starting mobile research lab in Utrecht: Lund University and Utrecht municipality team

transdisciplinary dialogue to co-produce knowledge with FSIs, municipal actors, and academics.

4.1. DESKTOP RESEARCH

Desktop research formed the foundation of the MRL, providing a comprehensive overview of Utrecht's food sharing landscape and informing the selection of FSIs and actors for engagement. This phase drew on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, grey literature, and online repositories. Key resources included the CULTIVATE Briefing Note on Food Sharing Landscapes in Hub City Locations (D2.2) (Davies et al., 2024),

which mapped 92 FSIs in Utrecht with digital footprints, categorising them by activity (i.e., 32% growing, 14% redistribution, 18% cooking/eating, 36% multifunctional). The report highlighted Utrecht's emphasis on knowledge sharing (second most shared resource after food) and a higher reliance on selling modes compared to Barcelona and Milan, potentially due to limited subsidies for social FSIs.

Additional insights came from the Food Sharing Governance Landscape Analysis for Utrecht (Medema et al., 2024), which analysed regulatory frameworks at national, regional, and municipal levels. This included the Food Agenda (Provincie Utrecht, n.d.), focusing on healthy, sustainable, and accessible food through pillars like awareness, circular chains, and edible green spaces. National policies the National Food Agenda (LVVN, n.d.) and the National Prevention Agreement (VWS, 2019) were reviewed for their indirect support of food sharing via waste reduction and healthy lifestyles. Provincial documents, e.g., the Province of Utrecht's Food Agenda (2021-2023), emphasised short supply chains and networking. Online searches using the European Food Sharing Dictionary (Phelan et al., 2023) refined queries in Dutch (e.g., "voedsel delen", "gemeenschapstuin", "surplus voedsel") to identify additional FSIs and actors. Grey literature, e.g., the RUAF's Utrecht City Region Food System Assessment (RUAF Foundation, 2018), provided demographic and economic context, noting challenges such as rising food prices (11% increase in 2022). This phase also involved analysing FSI websites, social media, and reports to assess business models, evolution, and motivations, ensuring a purposeful sampling of diverse initiatives (e.g., non-profits like BuurtBuik, social enterprises like Oscar Circular).

4.2. ONLINE INTERVIEWS

Prior to the field visit, the team conducted preliminary online interviews via Zoom or MS Teams to build rapport, refine research questions, and gather initial data. These semi-structured interviews, lasting 30-60 minutes, followed the CULTIVATE protocol (Voytenko Palgan and Sadovska, 2023) and targeted key informants identified through desktop research. Five online interviews were held in February-March 2025 with representatives from Utrecht Municipality (e.g., European Grants and Green Departments), researchers from Wageningen University & Research, and FSI coordinators from Amped and Groentetas. Questions explored themes such as funding sources, challenges, and policy interactions.

Figure 3: Study visit to Rijnvliet edible neighborhood, Utrecht

These interviews helped customise the field schedule, confirm participant availability, and identify emergent topics. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed using automated tools, and initially coded for themes on costs and benefits.

4.3. FIELD RESEARCH

The core of the MRL was a five-day intensive field phase (24-28 March 2025), involving immersive engagements across Utrecht. Each day included team briefings, site visits, interviews, observations and evening reflections. The schedule (Table 1) balanced coverage of FSI types: growing/composting (e.g., Stadstuin Food for Good, Rijnvliet Edible Neighborhood (Figure 3), De Moestuin), cooking/eating (e.g., Restaurant Nula, Grounded Kitchen), and food redistribution (e.g., BuurtBuik, Operation Food Freedom, Groentetas). Fifteen in-person semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting 40-80 minutes, with FSI founders, coordinators, volunteers, municipal officials, and researchers. Interviews used open-ended questions from the protocol, probing costs (e.g., funding streams), benefits (e.g., social cohesion), challenges (e.g., financial viability), and motivations (e.g., combating exclusion).

Site visits included guided tours (e.g., Rijnvliet Edible Neighborhood, Noordtuin urban farm, Metal Cathedral) and participatory observations (e.g., joining community meals at BuurtBuik, harvesting at Stadstuin Food for Good). A highlight was Transforming Urban Food Systems to Sustainability research and practice workshop on 27 March at Utrecht University, co-organised with Utrecht University and involving 30 participants in discussions on hybrid models and resilience (Figure 4). The team also attended Groentetas collection at Parnassos Cultural Centre. Data collection methods included audio recordings, field notes, photographs, and short videos (with consent), capturing interactions and contexts. Logistical support from local contacts (e.g., Imara Antonius, Mirjam Scholtens) facilitated access. Daily de-briefs (1-2 hours) allowed for collective reflection, hypothesis testing (e.g., links between design and sustainability), and methodological adjustments.

4.4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis followed a thematic approach based on the CULTIVATE research protocol (Voytenko Palgan and Sadovska, 2023) and insights from institutional theory and sustainability transitions. All 23 interviews (8 online, 15 in-person) were transcribed using MS Word dictate function and anonymised. Data coding was done employing a two-level tree structure: first-level broad categories (e.g., costs, benefits, drivers) and second-level sub-codes (e.g., volunteer labour under costs, social cohesion under benefits). Initial coding was deductive, based on protocol themes, followed by inductive refinement to capture emergent patterns like “strategic ambiguity” in governance. Triangulation integrated interview data with field notes, observations, and desktop sources for validity. Team reflections were analysed for meta-insights, such as the role of food as a “medium” for welfare. Quantitative elements (e.g., FSI counts from D2.2) complemented qualitative findings. Analysis occurred iteratively during the MRL (daily) and post-field (April-May 2025), with cross-checking among team members to ensure reliability. Limitations, such as potential bias from purposeful sampling, were addressed through diverse actor inclusion.

Colour legend	Growing food together	Cooking and eating together	Multifunctional FSI	Redistributing (surplus) food	Third party actor (city, university)

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
10.00-11.30 Meeting with Utrecht municipality, EU Grants Department	10.00-11.30 Visit to Oscar Circular/De Clique (circular food initiative)	10.00-12.00 Reflection session on findings; preparation for workshop at Utrecht University	10.00-11.30 Visit and guided tour at Stadstuin “Food for Good” (urban garden)	10.00-12.00 Reflection session on findings
11.30-13.00 Working lunch at Nula restaurant – circular, zero waste, locally sourced food	11.30-13.00 Tour and lunch in Noordtuin urban garden and CSA	14.00-15.00 Visit to “Grounded Kitchen”, social initiative for local community events	11.30-12.00 Visit and guided tour at Eilandsteede city farm	14.00 departure
14.00-16.00 Visit and guided tour in edible neighbourhood Rijnvliet	14.00-15.00 Meeting with Utrecht municipality, Space Department, Circular Economy team	15.00-16.00 Visit to community garden Voedseltuin Overvecht	15.00-18.00 Transforming Urban Food Systems to Sustainability: Research and Practice Workshop	
16.00-17.00 Visit to “Metal Cathedral”, a hub and venue for art and ecological circular innovation events	15.00-15.45 Meeting with Utrecht municipality, Health Department, “City deal Food” of the Good Food platform	17.00-18.00 Observing distribution of vegetable bags by “Operation Food Freedom”, interviews with volunteers	Lund University, Utrecht University, Wageningen University, Utrecht municipality, Amped and Grounded	
17.30-19.00 Dinner at BuurtBuik Utrecht, learning about its operations through informal interviews with kitchen volunteers and canteen visitors	16.00-16.45 Interview with a project coordinator of BuurtBuik Utrecht	19.00-20.00 Observing the distribution of vegetable bags by Groentetas at Cultuurcentrum Parnassos, interview with the volunteer	18.00-20.00 Working dinner with workshop participants	
	20.00-21.30 Attending a cultural event to meet members of the “Grounded” community			

Table 1: Schedule for the onsite fieldwork during the Mobile Research Lab in Utrecht (24-28 March 2025)

5. RESULTS

5.1. BUSINESS MODELS, EVOLUTION AND EXPERIENCES OF FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES IN UTRECHT

The business models, evolution, and experiences of FSIs in Utrecht illustrate a dynamic and hybrid landscape, where non-profit organisations dominate but are increasingly supplemented by social enterprises and market-oriented approaches, such as Oscar Circular's circular food activities (Figure 5) and community-supported agriculture (CSA) schemes that blend social goals with economic viability. These FSIs have developed through bottom-up innovation in a fragmented policy context that lacks a unified food strategy. Flexible regulations, such as those, based on "*gedoogbeleid" (*policy towards tolerance, volunteering, and sustainability*)*, enable experimentation and adaptation. Stakeholders highlight positive experiences in multimodal sharing, with over a third of initiatives combining activities like growing, cooking, and redistribution, often relying on selling modes - higher in Utrecht due to limited subsidies - to sustain operations while prioritising knowledge exchange and community engagement.

5.1.1. THE UTRECHT LANDSCAPE: STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY AND BOTTOM-UP INNOVATION

The food sharing landscape in Utrecht is characterised by a distinctive "hybridity of forms" that operate within a particular policy regime. Utrecht lacks a centralised, formal "food policy" decided on the municipal or regional level. Instead, the city employs what researchers, and municipal advisors describe as "strategic ambiguity" (UT3). FSIs are not governed by a single entity but are dispersed across the departments of Public Health, Green Space, Circular Economy, and Social Development (UT1, UT2, UT15).

This fragmentation, while occasionally creating logistical hurdles for FSIs, has fostered a fertile ground for bottom-up innovation. FSIs in Utrecht are largely citizen-led or organised as independent foundations that maintain a symbiotic, albeit complex, relationship with the municipality. The city combines relative "affluence with forms of hidden vulnerability",

Figure 4: Research and practice workshop Transforming Urban Food Systems to Sustainability at Utrecht University

where food is frequently used not just as nutritional sustenance, but as a “medium” for addressing broader urban challenges such as social isolation, mental health rehabilitation, and circular waste management (UT3, UT8). As noted by UT4, the landscape is “quite bottom-up”, with community gardens and redistribution hubs acting as “food commons” where governance is shared between the state and the civil society.

5.1.2. FOOD SHARING BUSINESS MODELS AND ORGANISATIONAL FORMS

Food sharing in Utrecht is characterised by a heterogeneous set of organisations that operate across the city and represent a mix of municipal, grassroots, social enterprise and hybrid actor constellations. These initiatives differ in their primary mandates, business models and governance arrangements. The organisational forms of Utrecht’s food sharing have evolved, motivated by welfare provision, rehabilitation programmes, neighbourhood initiatives, and circular economy experimentation.

Municipality-supported actors form a core institutional layer in this landscape. Organisations such as Stadstuin Food for Good (Figure 6) operate as publicly funded urban gardens that combine job rehabilitation, community gardening, and limited redistribution through daily shared meals and small-scale vegetable box sales. Redistribution in such cases emerges as a *by-product of social care and participation*, rather than as the primary institutional mission. Similar features appear in urban community gardens, which are part of Utrecht Natuurlijk network, where educational and recreational gardening is supported through mixed funding streams. Here, food growing is primarily organised around nature education, volunteer participation, and allotment access, with food redistribution taking place indirectly through self-harvest and occasional neighbourhood sharing. Both initiatives illustrate how food becomes a medium embedded in broader missions centred on well-being, healthy lifestyles, and connection to the living environment, instead of being framed as a food security or waste reduction service.

Figure 5: Reusable coffee grounds at circular food initiative Oscar Circular (previously De Clique), Utrecht

Grassroots organisations rooted in neighbourhood engagement represent another important organisational form in Utrecht. Initiatives such as BuurtBuik, Grounded Kitchen, or Operation Food Freedom mobilise volunteers to cook, distribute or subsidise meals, often relying on surplus food recovered from supermarkets or wholesalers. Several of these redistribute meals without income screening, favouring low-threshold access that reduces stigma and enables interaction between residents (e.g. BuurtBuik). Others implement hybrid models that combine paid subscriptions with donated boxes. Operation Food Freedom, for instance, uses membership fees and anonymous donations to make surplus-based meal packages available to residents, while providing cooking advice and support for those uncomfortable with formal assistance programmes. These hybrid models demonstrate

a shift from charity-based food aid towards participatory redistribution and shared responsibility.

A further organisational segment includes small social enterprises that integrate circular and ecological principles with food provisioning. Examples include urban gardens that sell honey or small vegetable boxes, initiatives that repurpose surplus food for community dinners, and local delivery services that connect redistribution with sustainable mobility. Although operating at micro-scales, these organisations use food to demonstrate circular learning, community building, and local skills development, often reinvesting any revenue to improve volunteer infrastructure, logistics, or educational workshops. Their activities position food sharing as a lever for environmental awareness rather than as a commercial goal.

Across these organisational forms, a distinctive feature of Utrecht is that food sharing often emerges *indirectly from other social and environmental agendas*, rather than as a targeted policy response. Urban food redistribution is driven by welfare referrals, neighbourhood participation, healthy living programmes, and hands-on learning, rather than systematic food policy or municipal coordination. Utrecht's food sharing ecosystem is more decentralised, smaller in scale, and driven by place-based practices that prioritise participation, health and community experience over volume and centralisation.

The result is a food sharing landscape where meals, produce and skills circulate through reciprocity, small-scale exchanges and social support, forming an informal infrastructure that complements municipal welfare and neighbourhood development. These varied business models reinforce that food sharing in Utrecht functions not only as a mechanism of redistribution, but as a multisectoral practice that connects food to care, learning, community building, and urban environmental stewardship.

Figure 6: Urban community garden Food for Good, Utrecht

5.1.3. THE EVOLUTION OF FOOD SHARING

The evolution of food sharing in Utrecht reflects a broader European shift from private consumption to collective "commoning." Historically, Utrecht was home to traditional private allotment gardens. However, as the city has grown and space has become a premium, municipal policy has shifted toward "community-based initiatives" (UT2).

A landmark in this evolution is the Rijnvliet “Edible Neighborhood” (Figures 3, 7). Unlike traditional developments where green space is ornamental, Rijnvliet was co-designed with residents as a “food forest” from its inception in 2008-2009 (UT10ab). This project represents a transition where food sharing is no longer a peripheral social activity but a core component of urban infrastructure and “placemaking” (UT23).

Furthermore, the “professionalization” of the sector is evident in the transition of grassroots groups. For instance, the Groentetas student initiative at Utrecht University began in the 1990s as a simple vegetable box scheme; today, it is an independent NGO (KVK registered) navigating complex supply chain shifts from commercial partners back to independent sourcing to maintain its mission of student affordability (UT20).

5.1.4. GROWING AND COMPOSTING TOGETHER: EDUCATION, REHABILITATION AND DIGNIFIED REDISTRIBUTION

Growing and composting practices constitute a central foundation of Utrecht’s food sharing landscape and are deeply integrated into the city’s health and education mandates. Unlike production-oriented urban agriculture models focused on feeding large populations, growing in Utrecht primarily serves educational, ecological and social purposes, and only secondarily generates food for redistribution. Vegetables, herbs, compost and small harvests emerge through two distinct mechanisms: as a secondary outcome of capability-building and ecological learning, and as a discreet form of welfare support distributed without stigma (Table 2). These mechanisms produce food, but differ fundamentally in their motivations, accessibility and redistribution logic. They are described below along examples from Utrecht.

Figure 7: Edible neighborhood Rijnvliet, Utrecht

A. Growing as capability-building and ecological participation

In initiatives such as urban community garden Food for Good (Figure 6 and 20) and the educational gardens of Utrecht Natuurlijk (Figure 8), food production is intentionally modest and embedded within broader goals of rehabilitation, routine-building and ecological stewardship. Staff stress that “the main thing is that people can work with their hands”, highlighting that gardening contributes to mental recovery, physical activity and meaningful daily structure. Activities such as compost management, soil care, planting, weeding or harvesting are understood less as horticultural outputs and more as exercises in confidence-building, ecological awareness and participation.

Circular systems - including soil regeneration, compost loops and even manure-based heating - function as pedagogical instruments, teaching resourcefulness, ecological responsibility and closed-loop thinking through embodied practice. Honey production, small vegetable boxes and seasonal harvests illustrate how micro-scale production supports micro-economies and recognition of effort, rather than market efficiency. Redistribution of harvests occurs indirectly: volunteers take vegetables home, occasional

boxes are sold at symbolic prices, and small quantities may reach the surrounding neighbourhood. In this mechanism, food is secondary to the social and ecological capabilities cultivated through growing, and redistribution reflects participation rather than provisioning goals.

> *Noordtuin urban farm*
>
> *Noordtuin represents a "multi-functional" model that combines a garden centre, a wildlife hospital, and a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme (UT14). Their model relies on a mix of 60 volunteers and paid staff. The CSA allows 100+ local members to pay a yearly fee (approx. 250 euros) for a weekly vegetable basket. This creates a stable financial floor for the farm while providing "garden feelings" to residents who lack private green space (Figure 12).*

Figure 8: Visit to one of the community gardens in Utrecht Natuurlijk network of urban gardens - Voedseltuin Overvecht

B. Growing as dignified welfare: discreet and informal redistribution

Other initiatives mobilise growing primarily as a form of low-visibility, dignified support for residents with unmet welfare needs, without framing it as assistance. For residents referred through social workers or mental health channels, access to garden plots or workspaces offers a private means to obtain food without institutional stigma. Instead of being recipients of aid, participants become gardeners. Redistribution occurs through self-harvesting, a practice that allows vulnerable residents to "take vegetables home and do what they want", avoiding dependence on formal food charity or ration systems.

Here, gardening becomes a soft welfare mechanism, where food access is embedded in participation rather than need categorisation. Because no income criteria or consumption labels are applied, harvests provide nutritional and psychological support without exposing identity or vulnerability. The garden becomes a welfare space without the social markers of welfare. Redistribution through growing is therefore intentional but discreet, addressing food insecurity by giving people access to resources they produce themselves.

> *Urban community garden Food for Good*
>
> *Operating within the Utrecht Natuurlijk framework, Food for Good exemplifies the "social gardening" model. Its business model is unique: it is financed primarily through the healthcare system as a site for "vocational rehabilitation" (UT21). Participants include individuals recovering from burnout, refugees, and people with mental health challenges. Here, the "product" is not the vegetables, though they are sold in a small on-site shop, but the "therapeutic value of the soil." As one volunteer noted, the garden provides a "feeling of bliss" and a way to escape the "cog in the machine" feeling of modern labor (UT21). (Figure 6)*

Although both mechanisms involve planting, caring and harvesting, they differ in their underlying purposes and outcomes:

Table 2: Mechanisms for FSIs growing and composting together

Mechanism	Primary objective	Role of food	Redistribution logic
A - Growing as capability-building	Rehabilitation, learning, ecological participation	Food as a result of skill and engagement	Relational and small-scale; tied to participation
B - Growing as dignified welfare	Discreet social support without stigma	Food as a private outcome of work	Informal, autonomous, embedded in personal harvests

This distinction highlights that urban food production in Utrecht is best understood not as a supply strategy but as a social and ecological practice that produces food only through the act of care and participation itself. Gardens function simultaneously as public health infrastructures, environmental learning environments and subtle welfare mechanisms. Through growing and composting, food circulates as a material expression of autonomy, effort and dignity, rather than as the main purpose of the systems that enable it.

5.1.5. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT COOK AND EAT TOGETHER: PARTICIPATION, SOLIDARITY AND DIGNIFIED REDISTRIBUTION

Cooking and eating together are key mechanisms through which FSIs build community participation and social support. As with growing and composting, shared meals operate under two distinct logics: meals can be a vehicle for empowerment and participation, or a dignified response to unmet welfare needs (Table 3). Both involve cooking with surplus food and collaborative preparation, but they differ in how redistribution is framed, by whom it is accessed, and what social value is created through eating together.

A. Meals as participation and empowerment

In initiatives where food is a secondary outcome of broader ecological or social goals, shared meals function as the culmination of collective effort rather than a service. At urban community garden Food for Good (Figures 6, 20), eating together is not scheduled as a separate programme, but follows from the morning's work in the garden. Participants grow produce, harvest vegetables, learn cooking techniques through informal practice, and then share what is made. The meal therefore reinforces achievement, skill-building and solidarity among participants who may be recovering from burnout, loneliness or unstable living conditions. Preparing soup from vegetables harvested by volunteers transforms food into a "material recognition" of their contribution.

In this context, cooking is not charity and not an act of volunteering for others. It is participatory labour followed by collective enjoyment, reinforcing capability-building. Cooking, therefore, becomes a pedagogical process rather than a provisioning activity. Participants learn how to transform their own harvest, reduce waste, and use low-cost ingredients creatively, strengthening both their autonomy and confidence. Importantly, meals are not targeted at the poor or socially vulnerable, but at those who invest time or effort. Redistribution is earned through participation, and empowerment lies in making and understanding food, not merely receiving it.

> *Restaurant Nula*
>
> *Located within the municipal office building, Restaurant Nula represents a high-volume Public-Private Partnership (PPP). The municipality contracts a catering company with a strict Social Return on Investment (SROI) clause. The restaurant serves up to 1500 people daily while functioning as a training centre for refugees. This model demonstrates how food sharing can be institutionalised: the "sharing" occurs through the transfer of professional skills and the integration of marginalised groups into the formal labour market (Figure 9)*

B. Meals as dignified redistribution and social protection

In contrast, organisations such as BuurtBuik (Figures 13, 14) and Operation Food Freedom explicitly design meals and meal packages as accessible, non-stigmatising welfare alternatives. Cooking is performed by volunteers for others, not necessarily by those who will eat, and the primary objective is redistribution rather than skill development. Residents arrive to eat together "because they want to chat", not because they are prepared to participate in production. The absence of income checks or eligibility criteria is fundamental to these meals; the guarantee that "anyone can come" reinforces food as an unconditioned social right.

Shared meals thus address hunger and isolation simultaneously, acting as low-threshold social protection. For people who do not meet food bank criteria, or who avoid formal welfare because of shame or fear of bureaucracy, communal meals offer a supportive entry point without labelling. Cooking in this model enables solidarity rather than competency-building. Volunteers, often skilled home cooks or amateur chefs, use surplus ingredients to prepare large quantities of food, sometimes with additional purchased staples to guarantee nutritious meals. Redistribution here is intentional, unconditional, and delivered through hospitality rather than entitlement, creating a collective experience instead of a beneficiary relationship.

> *BuurtBuik community kitchen*
>
> *BuurtBuik operates across six locations in Utrecht, rescued from the brink of waste. The model is centrally steered from Amsterdam but locally executed by volunteer boards (UT17). Their primary "cost" is zero, as they use donated surplus from small local shops and "cargo-bike logistics." The value created is social; visitors attend not necessarily because they cannot afford food, but for the "opportunity to spend time with others" and the "safe feeling" of a local community centre. The municipality supports this model indirectly by providing subsidised access to community centres (UT15) (Figures 13, 14).*

Figure 9: Nula restaurant – circular, zero waste, locally sourced food initiative at Utrecht municipality premises

Despite similarities in peeling vegetables, chopping onions or sharing soup around a table, the social value of communal cooking diverges sharply between participation-based and redistribution-based initiatives. The difference is embedded in the relation between the kitchen and the people it serves:

Table 3: Mechanisms for FSIs of cooking and eating together

Mechanism	Who cooks?	Who eats?	Nature of support	Value creation
A - Participation empowerment	Participants themselves	Those who contributed to the work	Mutual effort > shared enjoyment	Confidence, skills, routine, achievement
B - Dignified redistribution	Volunteers & cooks for others	Anyone, without judgement or income tests	Anonymous support > shared hospitality	Inclusion, dignity, social protection, trust

Both models demonstrate that cooking together is not merely a technical or logistical practice; it is a relational one. Even when meals originate from the same surplus food, they generate very different social infrastructures. One builds capabilities and shared ownership, the other provides dignified welfare through solidarity. Together, they illustrate how the everyday act of preparing and sharing food becomes a mode of governance within the city: one that distributes care, fosters participation, and shapes the ways residents relate to institutions, volunteers and each other.

5.1.6. REDISTRIBUTION, LOGISTICS AND VOLUNTEER BROKERAGE IN FRAGMENTED FOOD NETWORKS

Food redistribution in Utrecht extends beyond cooking and growing into a network of initiatives that negotiate access to surplus food, volunteer labour and infrastructure on

uneven terms. Utrecht distinguishes itself through a highly professionalised approach to circularity and "resource orchestration." In this context, food waste is not merely diverted from landfills; it is treated as a high-value feedstock for new urban industries. These initiatives are not organised around a central coordination hub; instead, they function through distributed, improvised and highly relational brokerages, where volunteers, coordinators or municipalities become mediators of food flows, labour and space.

> *De Clique and Oscar Circular circular food initiative*
>
> *The case of De Clique (now integrated into Oscar Circular) illustrates the industrial evolution of food sharing (UT13). Operating in the four largest Dutch cities, this initiative moves beyond grassroots "dumpster diving" toward a systematic "mission to help cities move towards circular and social economy." Their business model targets commercial waste - a sector where, despite legal requirements to separate paper and glass, food waste separation remains largely unenforced and poorly managed. De Clique's innovation lies in its "high-hierarchy" waste management. Instead of simple composting, they extract high-value materials: coffee grounds are used to extract oils for cosmetics or as a substrate for the Fungi Factory to grow oyster mushrooms (Figure 5); orange peels are transformed into soaps and beers (UT13) (Figure 10). This model, however, faces significant logistical and financial hurdles. The transition from De Clique to Oscar Circular reflects a consolidation in the market, driven by the need for better "financial numbers" and specialised mobility (UT13). As noted in UT13, the logistics of food waste are complex; "you cannot use the same truck for food and for waste", leading to a need for "circular waste collectives" that share infrastructure to achieve self-sufficiency.*

Because surplus food circulates through personal contacts with supermarkets, wholesalers, farms and restaurants, redistribution relies heavily on trust-based relationships rather than formalised agreements. Organisations such as Operation Food Freedom or BuurtBuik

Figure 10: Reusable orange peels at circular food initiative Oscar Circular (previously De Clique), Utrecht

secure their weekly supplies through informal partnerships with stores or restaurant donors, which may shift from week to week. This uncertainty produces both creativity and instability: cooks learn to adapt menus to unpredictable ingredients, while coordinators must continually renegotiate access to suppliers. Redistribution is therefore shaped not by planned logistics but by the shifting availability of actors willing to collaborate.

> *Operation Food Freedom (OFF) and the "Food Hero"*
>
> *Operation Food Freedom utilises a decentralised "Food Hero" model (UT7, UT19). OFF addresses the logistics of the "last mile" by empowering local volunteers to act as neighbourhood coordinators. The model works by connecting regional farmers - who often have "non-aesthetically pleasing" produce (e.g., crooked carrots) - with urban hubs. By collaborating with Instock, a social enterprise wholesaler that rescues surplus from supermarket chains like Albert Heijn, OFF bypasses traditional retail logistics. The "Food Hero"*

> *manages a weekly pick-up moment, often on a street corner or in a shared space (Figure 11) like the Noordtuin urban farm (Figure 13). This reduces the farmer's logistics costs while providing residents with produce at "a third to half the price of the supermarket" (UT7). Beyond the economic transaction, OFF uses food for cultural empowerment. Their "Cooking with the Chef" project in Overvecht brought together Moroccan women and professional chefs to share recipes, demonstrating that food sharing is a medium for power-sharing and cultural recognition (UT19).*

Similarly, volunteer brokerage is a central logistical mechanism. Many initiatives do not struggle primarily with food procurement, but with finding and coordinating the labour needed to handle donations, cooking and service. Organisations frequently rely on individuals who act as logistical anchors, those who know how to communicate with donors, schedule volunteers, or mediate between municipal departments and neighbourhood groups. These coordinators often perform what could be described as invisible logistics work: they respond to last-minute calls from stores, organise cargo-bike pickups, or navigate liability questions when surplus food is handed over outside official channels. Redistribution is thus steered through skills embedded in people rather than infrastructure.

The role of the municipality is more enabling than directional. Municipal support is often provided indirectly through low-cost space, reimbursement of paid coordination time, or access to land or kitchens. These forms of support are crucial yet limited; they rarely include sustained logistical planning, storage provision or structured redistribution pathways. As a result, organisations scale only to the extent that they can expand their relational networks, not their budgets or infrastructure. Some initiatives express that they "do not need money, but a kitchen", signalling that growth depends less on financial capital and more on access to spaces where redistribution can be prepared safely and consistently.

In this environment, redistribution becomes a social practice rather than a technical one. Food arrives not just because it is surplus, but because someone asks for it at the right

time; meals are served not only because ingredients are available, but because volunteers feel respected and supported enough to return each week. Coordination thus hinges on morale, trust and recognition as much as on logistics. The city's food sharing ecosystem thrives on creativity in the face of uncertainty and on social organisation more than on volume or efficiency. Redistribution is therefore best understood not as a logistics chain, but as an everyday infrastructure of relationships, where food, labour and space are negotiated continuously through informal governance.

> *Groentetas vegetable bag subscription*
>
> *The student population of Utrecht is a critical driver of food sharing evolution. Groentetas, an NGO run by Utrecht University students, has operated since the early 1990s (UT20). Their model is a weekly vegetable bag subscription based on pre-orders. Interestingly, Groentetas's evolution shows a move toward greater independence. After a period of sourcing from the commercial aggregator Local2Local, they returned to independent sourcing to ensure they could keep prices at a "student-friendly" level (UT20). This highlights a common tension in Utrecht: the trade-off between the convenience of professionalised wholesalers and the mission-driven need for radical affordability (Figure 15).*

5.1.7. SYNTHESIS: THE UTRECHT MODEL

In summary, Section 5.1 reveals that food sharing in Utrecht has evolved into a sophisticated, multi-layered ecosystem. It is characterised by:

- Hybridity: The merging of healthcare and rehabilitation (urban community garden Food for Good), urban planning (Rijnvliet), and food waste management (De Clique).
- Dignity-first food redistribution: A move away from the "stigma" of traditional food banks towards inclusive "neighbourhood dinners" and "food hero" bags.

Figure 11: Distribution of vegetable bags by the "Operation Food Freedom" and "The Food Hero"

- Strategic informalism: A system that thrives on bottom-up energy but is increasingly seeking institutional "place-making" roles within new urban developments.

For Utrecht, the "food sharing experience" is the successful transformation of "waste" (both material food waste and "wasted" human potential in the form of social isolation) into a vibrant urban "common." The municipality's role is shifting from a provider of services to an "enabler of dots", connecting various departments and citizens to ensure that as the city densifies, its "edible" and social infrastructure grows in tandem.

5.2. COSTS, INVESTMENTS AND SOURCES OF FUNDING OF FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

Following the diverse business models identified in Section 5.1, the financial landscape of Utrecht's FSIs is also varied. This section details the costs, investments, and funding mechanisms, categorising them by their primary activity.

Food sharing initiatives in Utrecht operate through diverse financing arrangements that reflect their mandates in education, welfare, environmental stewardship and redistribution. Rather than being funded through a dedicated food policy, most initiatives rely on indirect funding streams tied to municipal green policy, healthy living programmes, circular economy objectives, neighbourhood grants or social work budgets. These sources shape the types of activities initiatives can sustain and the degree to which food is treated as a core or secondary element in their work.

5.2.1. GENERAL COSTS OF FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

Costs across Utrecht's food sharing ecosystem are primarily related to people, space and infrastructure, and food procurement (Table 4). Many initiatives emphasise that volunteer coordination, training, access to kitchens, land, storage or compost infrastructure demand more resources than food itself. As one interviewee stated, "We do not need money, but a kitchen", underscoring that financial support often fails to address material constraints such as certified cooking facilities, cold storage, or secure land tenure.

Another common cost arises from organisational labour, especially for initiatives working with vulnerable residents or coordinating volunteer networks. Even when food is free, the act of organising redistribution, maintaining donor relationships or supervising participants

requires consistent staff time. Organisations frequently rely on unpaid workers to bridge these gaps, with several noting that "key people keep everything running", indicating that labour costs are present regardless of whether they are paid for.

Table 4: General costs of food sharing initiatives

Cost category	Examples
Personnel costs	This is the most significant category. Institutionalised FSIs like Utrecht Natuurlijk maintain a high number of paid staff to manage their 11 sites, with a total annual budget of ca. €6 million. Conversely, grassroots initiatives like BuurtBuik and Taste Before You Waste operate almost entirely on volunteer labour, with only central coordination roles receiving a salary.
Rent and space	Many FSIs benefit from "space-as-subsidy." The municipality of Utrecht provides community centres for BuurtBuik and land for urban farms, e.g., Noordtuin, at subsidised rates or as part of social development mandates.
Logistics	For food redistribution FSIs, logistics (cargo bikes, fuel, and vehicle maintenance) represent a core operational expense. Groentetas utilises car-sharing and bikes to collect produce, while larger actors like Oscar Circular (formerly De Clique) face high costs associated with specialised waste-management mobility.
Food procurement	While some FSIs rescue surplus for free, others, like Grounded Kitchen and Operation Food Freedom, pay farmers to ensure a fair price, balancing social goals with financial sustainability.

5.2.2. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT GROW AND/OR COMPOST TOGETHER

Gardens and compost-based initiatives experience costs related to land access, soil management, compost systems, tools, and supervision of participants. Although growing may appear low-cost, it depends on secure spaces and long-term maintenance. Temporary land allocations discourage investment in soil quality or infrastructure, with some initiatives reporting that they "cannot plan long-term when land might be reassigned." This limits their ability to expand or sustain production, even when participation and interest are high.

> *Utrecht Natuurlijk network of urban gardens*
>
> *As the city's primary environmental education actor, Utrecht Natuurlijk operates on a model of "Service Level Agreements" with the municipality.*
>
> *Funding: 59% of its €6 million budget comes from municipal subsidies.*
> *Investment: Significant capital is invested in maintaining 5 farms and 6 gardens, which serve as "rich places" for the public.*
> *Experience: Their funding is linked to providing nature education for all primary schools in Utrecht (Figure 8).*

Funding for garden-based initiatives often comes through green public space and healthy living budgets, rather than food support. For example, staff noted that gardening is supported "through green policy and healthy living environments", meaning food is an outcome of ecological participation, not the object of investment. Garden production occasionally generates small revenue through symbolic box sales or honey production, but these micro-economies exist primarily to reinforce participation rather than to finance operations. As a result, gardens remain dependent on municipal subsidies and staff reimbursements tied to rehabilitation or educational tasks.

> *Noordtuin urban farm*
>
> *Noordtuin illustrates a more commercialised community model (Figure 12).*
> *Funding streams: Revenue is generated through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) scheme where members pay €250 per year for a weekly basket.*
> *Labor costs: The farm relies on a massive volunteer base of approximately 60 people, though it also employs 30 to 40 paid staff across its garden centre and hospital operations.*
> *Investment: Capital is reinvested into specialised facilities, such as a wildlife hospital for injured urban animals.*

Figure 12: Guided tour of Noordtuin urban farm and community supported agriculture initiative.

5.2.3. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT PROMOTE COOKING AND EATING TOGETHER

Organisations that prepare communal meals require kitchen facilities, hygiene compliance, equipment, storage and volunteer capacity. Costs are shaped by food safety regulations and liability protocols, even when food ingredients are sourced from surplus. One coordinator explained that "it depends on where food comes from; not everything can be used", highlighting how donations generate hidden compliance costs that must be managed through trained staff, inspected facilities or additional purchases to ensure safe meals.

> *BuurtBuik community kitchen*
>
> *BuurtBuik operates six locations in Utrecht (Figures 13, 14).*
> *Costs: Primary food source is donated surplus from local shops. If donations are insufficient, volunteers buy extras using small visitor donations, which the municipality reimburses.*
> *Investment: Key investment is the cargo bike used for food collection, funded through a mix of municipal grants and private donations.*
> *Funding: The board coordinator's salary is covered by the municipality, reflecting the city's investment in food as a tool against social isolation.*

These initiatives often receive municipal or neighbourhood funds targeting community building, social participation or labour inclusion, rather than food provision. Funding supports social goals, but it rarely covers the infrastructural needs of shared cooking, leaving initiatives reliant on improvised storage, borrowed kitchens or donated labour. Because meals are framed as social connection rather than service provision, long-term financial security remains limited and tied to temporary project budgets. Volunteer availability therefore becomes the stabilising cost factor, rather than money alone.

5.2.4. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT SUPPORT FOOD REDISTRIBUTION

Redistribution projects face the highest logistical costs, particularly in coordinating volunteers, transport, storage and donor relationships. Costs are less about food procurement and more about managing unpredictable flows of surplus, ensuring storage conditions and building networks of trust with suppliers. As one organiser noted, "food arrives because someone asks at the right time", indicating that redistribution depends on people capable of negotiating, collecting and handling food safely.

Redistribution is further shaped by national legislation, which restricts donation of certain leftovers due to liability concerns, sometimes forcing initiatives to refuse edible food. When formal agreements exist, they require infrastructure that many initiatives do not possess, such as insured vehicles or cold storage. As a result, redistribution often occurs through informal relationships and volunteer labour, reinforcing a grassroots model where trust

Figure 13: Shared dinner at a community kitchen in BuurtBuik, Utrecht

substitutes for formal contracts. More than any other type of initiative, redistribution is limited not by demand or supply, but by infrastructure and legal responsibilities that carry financial implications.

> *Groentetas vegetable bag subscription*
>
> *Groentetas has evolved from a university-dependent project to an independent NGO (KVK registered) (Figure 15).*
> *Costs: The main expenses are car-sharing rentals for produce collection and the procurement of vegetables from wholesalers.*
> *Labor: The initiative is managed by an unpaid board of seven students who contribute over 20 hours per week each.*
> *Revenue: They rely on pre-orders from students to ensure zero financial waste, though they recently moved away from the Local-to-Local aggregator to keep prices lower*

> *De Clique and Oscar Circular circular food initiative*
>
> *Following the takeover of De Clique, this initiative represents the most professionalised end of the spectrum of food redistribution initiatives (Figures 5, 10).*
> *Funding: They are supported by diverse impact investors, including the Rambo Foundation, FNO, and the Social Impact Fund Rotterdam.*
> *Revenue: They generate income from corporate clients who pay for high-hierarchy waste collection (e.g., separating coffee grounds for fungi production).*
> *Investment: Future growth depends on scaling to 25 city collectives to achieve self-sufficiency by 2027.*

Figure 14: Interview with a volunteer at a community kitchen in BuurtBuik, Utrecht

5.2.5. SOURCES OF FUNDING FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

Across Utrecht, funding for food sharing flows through adjacent policy domains rather than food-specific budgets. Municipal subsidies support green spaces, rehabilitation programmes, social return on investment schemes and circular economy pilots, which indirectly finance food-related work. As one municipal respondent stated, “food is not a standalone theme... it comes through broader agendas”, highlighting how food sharing becomes an add-on to other priorities.

In addition to municipal funding, organisations rely on a mix of neighbourhood programme funds, membership fees, symbolic sales, donations, and project-based grants. One initiative described its model as a combination of “membership fees and anonymous donations”, while gardens rent plots or sell small-scale produce and honey. These income streams supplement operations but do not enable structural growth or infrastructural investment. Small earnings support participation and community cohesion rather than economic viability.

Figure 15: Groentetas vegetable bag subscription, Utrecht

This funding landscape reflects the broader positioning of food sharing in Utrecht as a tool for social participation, health, nature connection and dignity, rather than a problem to be solved through dedicated food policy. As a result, FSIs thrive on short-term experimentation and relational creativity, yet remain dependent on broader municipal agendas that recognise food only when it serves other goals.

5.3. BENEFITS AND PERCEIVED VALUE OF FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

The benefits of FSIs in Utrecht extend beyond food provision and waste reduction. In the absence of a formal, centralised food policy, Utrecht has fostered a landscape where food functions as a powerful medium for achieving diverse socio-ecological goals. These range from mental health rehabilitation and social cohesion to nature education and circular economy innovation.

Food sharing generates value primarily through participation, wellbeing and dignified support, rather than through the quantity of food produced or redistributed. Across gardens, community kitchens and redistribution projects, the benefits are deeply connected to health, relational welfare, ecological learning and inclusion, reflecting the multisectoral role food plays within urban life.

5.3.1. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT GROW AND/OR COMPOST TOGETHER

Growing and composting together generate benefits primarily related to ecological awareness, skill-building, rehabilitation and self-worth (Figures 6, 20). Participants gain access not just to food, but to routines, confidence and connection to nature. Staff working in therapeutic gardens emphasise that the garden “is really about the connection between

citizens and the green environment", emphasising how food production is valued as a way to support lifestyle change, not as a goal on its own.

Garden tasks provide meaningful activities for people recovering from burnout, loneliness or mental health stress, offering a sense of achievement and empowerment through physical work. One organisation noted that residents "are proud of what they grow", illustrating how self-harvest creates emotional value alongside material produce. Composting and soil care also foster environmental education, as closed-loop systems teach resource responsibility through practice rather than instruction. Food becomes evidence of capability and care, reinforcing participation, self-esteem and ecological literacy.

> *Utrecht Natuurlijk network of urban gardens*
>
> *The primary value generated by Utrecht Natuurlijk is educational and recreational. By managing 11 city farms and gardens, they provide "rich places" for both children and adults to connect with nature (Figure 16).*
> *Educational value: All primary schools in Utrecht utilize these gardens for lessons on animals, nature, and sustainability.*
> *Social and therapeutic value: "Social gardening" programmes allow residents to learn gardening skills in groups, fostering a sense of community ownership. Sites like urban community garden Food for Good (Figures 6, 20) are financed through the healthcare system for vocational rehabilitation, helping individuals with mental health challenges or burnout reintegrate into social and professional life.*

Figure 16 (on the right): Urban gardening at community centre Metal Cathedral, Utrecht

Environmental experience: Participants describe a "feeling of bliss" when working in these gardens, which provides an escape from the "cog in the machine" feeling of modern urban life.
Rijnvliet edible neighborhood
The Rijnvliet development project demonstrates the value of food sharing as a core component of urban infrastructure (Figures 7, 17 and 19).
Placemaking: By designing the neighborhood as a large-scale food forest, the municipality has created a public space that encourages residents to engage with their environment and each other through foraging and collective care of the green space.
Biodiversity: The project promotes urban biodiversity while making "green" a functional part of daily life rather than just an ornamental one.

5.3.2. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT PROMOTE COOKING AND EATING TOGETHER

Communal cooking and eating generate social value by reducing loneliness, creating routine and building low-threshold community interactions. Shared meals allow residents to meet without formal invitations or welfare registration, making participation less intimidating. As one volunteer explained, people come "because they want to chat", showing that social contact - not food security - is often the primary motivation.

BuurtBuik community kitchen

The perceived value for visitors to BuurtBuik is centred on social connection and safety (Figures 13, 14).
Socialisation: Regular visitors attend communal dinners not just for food but for the "opportunity to spend time with others" and learn their stories.

Figure 17: Visit and guided tour in the edible neighbourhood Rijnvliet, Utrecht

Safe spaces: For individuals with health challenges these dinners provide a "safe feeling" due to their proximity to home and the informal, welcoming atmosphere.
Integration: The initiatives also serve as integration platforms; for example, young immigrants are encouraged by the municipality to attend to practice Dutch and build local networks.

Preparing meals collectively provides opportunities for informal learning, creativity and cultural exchange. Volunteers experiment with surplus ingredients, learning techniques that can be reproduced at home with low-cost food. Making meals together "with vegetables

they helped grow" also bridges gardening and cooking, helping people understand food from soil to plate. The value of these meals lies in commensality and recognition, as eating together symbolises belonging and inclusion.

> *Grounded Kitchen*
>
> *Grounded Kitchen emphasises the value of "power sharing" and community empowerment through food.*
> *Skill sharing: Projects like "Cooking with the Chief" brought together diverse groups, such as Moroccan women and professional chefs, to exchange recipes and knowledge, creating mutual learning and cultural recognition.*
> *Community governance: By utilising a non-hierarchical organisational model, Grounded Kitchen provides a space where people can "use shared resources" and engage in ecological and social sustainability without formal bureaucracy (Figure 18).*

Figure 18: Premises of the Grounded Community and Grounded Kitchen, Utrecht

5.3.3. FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT SUPPORT FOOD REDISTRIBUTION

Redistribution initiatives offer dignified access to food, especially for residents uncomfortable with formal social services. By avoiding income checks or eligibility criteria, organisations ensure that "someone who cannot pay gets the same package." This low-threshold model reduces shame and fosters trust, demonstrating the value of redistribution as social protection that does not label people as recipients of aid.

Redistribution also fosters learning and confidence around food use. Some initiatives provide guidance on cooking donated vegetables for those lacking culinary skills, while others offer social interaction alongside food access. Because redistribution is mediated through community relations and volunteer care, it generates value by building solidarity rather than dependency, strengthening informal welfare networks that complement formal systems without replacing them.

> *Operation Food Freedom*
>
> *Operation Food Freedom provides significant economic value to both consumers and producers.*
> *Affordability: By rescuing "non-aesthetically pleasing" produce and using decentralised neighborhood hubs, they provide food to residents at "a third to half the price of the supermarket" (Figure 11).*
> *Fair pricing for farmers: The model ensures regional farmers receive a better price for produce that would otherwise be discarded, strengthening the regional food network*

5.3.4. BENEFITS AND PERCEIVED VALUE FROM THE MUNICIPAL PERSPECTIVE

From the municipal perspective, food sharing contributes to healthy urban living, social participation and circular resource use, providing benefits that extend beyond food access. Municipal staff describe gardening initiatives as a way to "foster healthy lifestyles and food choices", reflecting how food sharing supports behavioural change without imposing formal dietary interventions.

Food sharing also aligns with spatial and social goals, as activities help activate public green spaces and connect residents to their neighbourhoods. The city sees value in using green areas for community care, where citizens maintain public spaces, grow food and build relational ties. Some kitchens and food distribution initiatives also align with municipal labour inclusion, as through social return on investment schemes "we support initiatives via public procurement", linking food sharing to employment pathways.

In this view, food sharing is perceived not as a standalone function but as an enabler that connects urban health, nature, participation and social care. The main value for the municipality is systemic, not nutritional.

5.3.5. BENEFITS AND PERCEIVED VALUE FROM THE ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Academic perspectives emphasise the role of food sharing as relational infrastructure that binds ecological, social and welfare processes. Rather than evaluating food outcomes in terms of tonnes distributed or meals served, researchers highlight how FSIs generate capabilities, trust and informal governance. Academics stress that food sharing forms "an ecosystem of activities" that cannot be understood solely as provision or charity.

FSIs are recognised as distributed welfare infrastructures, offering support through participation rather than dependency. The academic perspective underscores how the value of these initiatives lies in everyday practices- growing, cooking, composting - that build social bonds and ecological literacy, providing collective benefits without centralised coordination.

5.3.6. SYNTHESIS: FOOD AS A MICROCOSM OF DISTRIBUTED WELFARE

Across Utrecht, the motivations of different actors converge around the idea that food is the medium rather than the objective.

- For participants: Food sharing acts as a vital "social glue" and therapeutic medium. Beyond basic nutrition, the perceived value lies in the provision of safe social spaces that combat loneliness, offer vocational rehabilitation through "social gardening", and provide a dignified entry point into urban collective life without the stigma of traditional welfare.
- For organisers: FSIs serve as platforms for "power sharing" and community empowerment. By utilising non-hierarchical models and "shared resources", organisers create inclusive spaces that bypass formal bureaucracy, allowing for cultural exchange - such as the sharing of traditional recipes - and the fostering of local resilience through collective action.
- For the municipality: FSIs are viewed as strategic "relational infrastructure" that delivers on diverse policy goals. The value is systemic rather than nutritional, as these initiatives activate public green spaces, support healthy urban living through "service level agreements" and provide employment pathways via social return on investment (SROI) schemes.
- For academia: Food sharing is analysed as a "distributed welfare infrastructure" where value is generated through everyday practices like composting and cooking. Researchers emphasise that FSIs create capabilities and informal governance systems that cannot be measured by simple output metrics like tonnes of food rescued.
- For the environment: The perceived value is anchored in "circular resource orchestration" and ecological literacy. By transforming high-value waste streams - such as coffee grounds into mushrooms (Figure 5) - and integrating food forests into new urban developments, e.g. Rijnvliet (Figures 7, 17, 19), FSIs normalize sustainable urban living and nature-based education.

In Utrecht, the success of food sharing is anchored in its ability to enable participation without bureaucracy, care without stigma, and circularity without enforcement. This convergence of ecological, social, and economic values explains why FSIs thrive even in a fragmented policy environment.

Figure 19: Map of Rijnvliet edible neighbourhood, Utrecht

5.4. CHALLENGES OF FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

Despite its vibrancy and innovation, Utrecht's food sharing landscape faces logistical, financial and institutional constraints. FSIs face constraints linked to governance ambiguity, infrastructural fragility, regulatory barriers and dependence on volunteer labour. These challenges manifest differently across urban gardening, communal cooking and food redistribution activities, yet they stem from shared systemic vulnerabilities in how food responsibilities are organised and supported in the city. These challenges are categorised into general operational hurdles and those specific to the types of food sharing activities.

5.4.1. GENERAL CHALLENGES OF FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

A central challenge across FSIs is the absence of a clearly defined municipal mandate for food. Food-related activities intersect with welfare support, public green policy, neighbourhood development and circular economy work, without being structurally anchored in any of these. As one municipal respondent noted, "Food is for everybody and for nobody", reflecting how initiatives receive enabling support but without strategic coordination or continuity. A recurring theme in interviews with municipal staff and researchers is the lack of a centralised "food department" (UT15, UT16, UT19). Because food intersects with health, waste, green space, and social welfare, FSIs must navigate multiple departments. As noted by UT19, "Grassroots organisations find it hard to navigate, unclear where to turn for support." This fragmentation leads to "strategic ambiguity", where everyone supports the *idea* of food sharing, but no single department takes responsibility for its long-term infrastructure.

This ambiguity shapes how organisations understand their role. Community gardens and social kitchens become de facto welfare providers despite initiatives explicitly resisting that identity. Staff at an educational garden stressed that "we are not a social initiative, people need to tend their own gardens", yet they simultaneously work through referral systems supporting vulnerable residents. These blurred expectations complicate funding,

Figure 20: Guided tour at the urban community garden Food for Good, Utrecht

evaluation and planning, leaving organisations to negotiate policy gaps without mandates or protection.

Another shared challenge is the dependency on unpaid labour and the "Volunteer Burden". Across urban community gardens, meal sharing and food redistribution projects, FSIs frequently rely on a few highly committed coordinators to manage logistics, relationships with donors, volunteer schedules, and municipal communication. Several FSIs highlighted that the greatest risk they face is losing "key people who keep everything running", making organisational continuity fragile and highly person dependent. For student-led initiatives like Groentetas (Figure 15), the high turnover of Erasmus students every six months creates

a constant “management burden” (UT20). Even in established gardens like Food for Good (Figures 6, 20), maintaining a core group of 75 volunteers requires significant emotional investment and coordination (UT21).

5.4.2. CHALLENGES FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT GROW FOOD TOGETHER

The challenges specific to gardens and composting initiatives relate to spatial precarity, regulation of land use, and identity tensions around informal support. Many gardens operate on municipal land designated for temporary use, limiting investment in infrastructure, soil improvement or compost systems. Organisations report that they “cannot plan long-term when land might be reassigned”, making educational and social objectives difficult to embed across years.

> *Utrecht Natuurlijk’s subsidy trap*
>
> *While Utrecht Natuurlijk is a large-scale player (Figures 6 and 8), its dependence on municipal subsidies (59% of its budget) leaves it vulnerable to national budget cuts (UT8, UT23).*
> *The problem: Municipalities in the Netherlands have seen a 40% cut in budgets for decentralised tasks like healthcare and social care.*
> *The impact: This limits the ability to innovate. When a new neighbourhood is developed, the organisation must “lobby” to ensure green space is included as a basic need, rather than an afterthought (UT23).*
> *Experience: There is a growing tension between providing “nature education” and managing “public recreation”, as the sites are often over-capacity on the weekends*

Some gardens experience an implicit welfare role without being equipped to perform it. While participants may take produce home, staff emphasise that they “cannot take care of people full-time” and must rely on external social workers when support needs go beyond gardening. This reliance on outside agencies creates friction at the boundary between social care and ecological projects, especially where residents obtain food through self-harvesting to avoid formal food aid.

Regulatory barriers also affect distribution of produce. Gardens that package, sell or formally distribute vegetables face the same safety requirements as commercial food suppliers. Staff note that “a gardening plot is not enough for rehabilitation”, but formalising produce as a product introduces unexpected constraints that conflict with educational missions.

> *Soil and ground conditions in Rijnvliet*
>
> *In the development of the “Edible Neighborhood” Rijnvliet, the physical environment posed a challenge*
> *Technical hurdles: The soil was extremely wet, requiring the digging of many small canals (Figure 7) to lower groundwater levels before houses or food forests could be established (UT10ab).*
> *Social friction: Initially, residents resisted the plans, fearing that the “open” nature of a food forest would lead to a lack of privacy or maintenance issues. Overcoming these required years of “participatory planning” (UT10ab).*

5.4.3. CHALLENGES FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT PROMOTE COOKING AND EATING TOGETHER

Cooking and communal eating initiatives face infrastructural and regulatory vulnerabilities related to kitchen access, liability and volunteer capacity. Many initiatives lack access to certified kitchens or cold storage, making safe preparation of surplus ingredients difficult. Organisations repeatedly note they "do not need money, but a kitchen", highlighting that equipment and space are more limiting than funding.

Food safety regulations create uncertainty for FSIs that operate informally or through neighbourhood centres. Small community kitchens must comply with commercial-level hygiene requirements when dealing with surplus food, making some chefs hesitant to accept donations they cannot safely prepare. As one coordinator explained, "it depends on where food comes from; not everything can be used" indicating how liability shapes what is shared.

> *BuurtBuik and the regulatory grey area*
>
> *The volunteers at BuurtBuik and Taste Before You Waste operate with a sense of "legal precarity."*
> *Food safety: Volunteers admitted that they "never receive NVWA (Dutch Authority on Food Safety) checks" and fear they "probably would not pass" because they serve food that is past its "best before" date (UT12).*
> *Supply volatility: Because they rely on leftovers from local shops, the menu is a "surprise" every week (Figure 13). This makes it difficult to plan for specific nutritional needs or large crowds (UT12).*
>
> *Stigma and access: While initiatives like BuurtBuik aim to be open to everyone, there is a constant struggle to reach the "hidden poor" who may feel stigmatised by attending a "free" meal, or those who do not pass the strict income requirements of the formal food bank (UT3, UT11abc).*

These FSIs also rely heavily on volunteer cooks, whose personal commitment determines continuity. Shared meals can suddenly stop if one key volunteer withdraws, leaving community participants without support structures they have come to rely on. Even when food and demand are stable, the relational labour required to sustain cooking initiatives remains precarious.

5.4.4. CHALLENGES FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT SUPPORT FOOD REDISTRIBUTION

Redistribution initiatives face logistical fragmentation and regulatory friction. Access to supermarkets and suppliers is often informal, relying on relationships rather than secure agreements. As one FSI described, "food arrives because someone asks at the right time", illustrating how networks rather than systems direct flows.

Storage and transport infrastructure is also limited. Without cold storage or insured vehicles, organisations must refuse certain donations or transport food using improvised cargo-bike systems. Coordination often falls on single individuals capable of negotiating permissions, scheduling pickups and maintaining donor relations. The labour behind redistribution is therefore embedded in people, not infrastructure, intensifying vulnerability to volunteer loss.

> *Operation Food Freedom and the last mile challenge*
>
> *The decentralised "Food Hero" model (Figure 11) is highly flexible but lacks the "hard infrastructure" needed for scale.*

> *Logistics: The initiative is limited to Wednesdays because they lack permanent storage or cooling facilities (UT19). Without a refrigerated hub they cannot handle highly perishable goods, limiting their impact on the total waste stream.*
> *Systemic resistance: They argue that "system change needs more than sharing; it needs knowledge and power sharing" (UT19). However, because they are not a formal municipal partner, they lack the "social return" contracts that more established caterers enjoy (UT9).*

Regulations create further bottlenecks. Some edible leftovers cannot be redistributed due to liability rules, even at public events. A municipal interviewee explained that "leftovers cannot be redistributed because of the rules you must comply with", referring to national legislation. These constraints inhibit scaling, forcing redistribution to remain improvised and low volume even where food surplus is abundant.

5.4.5. SYNTHESIS: THE CHALLENGE OF "STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY"

The overarching challenge for Utrecht is that food sharing thrives in the "gaps" of the system, but those gaps are closing as the city becomes more crowded and professionalised.

- The conflict of values: There is a fundamental tension between social value (measured in "person-hours" and "community bliss") and monetary value (measured by funders and the municipality). As noted by Grounded Kitchen, "Talking in monetary terms often breaks the conversation" because it fails to capture the quality of the engagement (UT18).
- Scale vs. Mission: As initiatives like Oscar Circular scale to become "self-sufficient", they risk losing their community-led "mission" and becoming just another waste management company (UT13). Conversely, as grassroots groups like Groentetas remain small to keep prices low, they struggle with "board burnout" and administrative hurdles (UT20).

- In conclusion, the challenges in Utrecht are less about a lack of will and more about a lack of coordination and dedicated infrastructure. For the food sharing ecosystem to survive the next decade of urban growth, it will need to find a way to bridge the gap between "bottom-up" energy and "top-down" institutional stability without sacrificing the informal, inclusive spirit that defines the Utrecht experience.

5.5. RISKS FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

While Utrecht's food sharing ecosystem is characterised by innovation and social resilience, it operates under several layers of risk. These range from the "hard" threats of financial instability and regulatory shifts to "soft" risks like mission drift and the erosion of the volunteer base. Since FSIs increasingly inhabit the "middle ground" between informal citizen action and professionalised service delivery, the risks associated with scaling and institutional dependency become more acute.

5.5.1. GENERAL RISKS FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES

Across all categories, FSIs in Utrecht face systemic vulnerabilities tied to their organisational models and the broader urban environment.

- Financial fragility and the "subsidy trap": Many of Utrecht's most impactful FSIs rely heavily on municipal grants or Service Level Agreements (SLAs). The risk of "political wind" shifts (UT23) means that a change in municipal priorities - from sustainability to immediate housing or security - could result in sudden budget cuts. This is exacerbated by national-level decentralisation, where municipalities are tasked with more social care responsibilities but with 40% less budget (UT8).
- The "invisible value" risk: A significant risk is the inability to quantify "soft" benefits like "community bliss", loneliness reduction, or biodiversity (UT18, UT21). Because these values are difficult to translate into monetary terms for traditional funders, FSIs are often seen

as “nice-to-have” rather than essential infrastructure, making them the first to be cut during fiscal tightening.

- Volunteer precarity and institutional memory: Dependence on a fluctuating volunteer base - particularly the transient student population - poses a risk to operational continuity. The loss of a core group of “Food Heroes” can lead to a collapse of “institutional memory”, leaving the organisation unable to navigate its own logistics or municipal relationships (UT20).

5.5.2. RISKS FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT GROW AND/OR COMPOST TOGETHER

For growing and composting FSIs, the most significant risk is spatial precarity. Many operate on municipal land that may be reassigned for residential development or other functions. This makes it difficult to invest in soil quality, compost systems or educational infrastructure. As one interviewee noted, “we cannot plan long-term when land might be reassigned”, highlighting how temporary land tenure undermines ecological continuity and community relationships.

> *Utrecht Natuurlijk network of urban gardens*
>
> *The organisation manages a vast network of 11 sites (Figures 6, 8), but its stability is tied to a single primary funder.*
> *The “crowding out” effect: As the city grows, these sites become overcrowded. There is a risk that the “experiential value” for visitors decreases, leading to lower public support and, subsequently, lower political leverage for funding (UT8).*

A second risk relates to role ambiguity with respect to social care. Garden organisations that welcome vulnerable residents are not formally recognised as welfare providers and cannot offer professional care. Staff at one initiative emphasised that “we are not a social initiative, people need to tend their own gardens”, signalling the tension between

therapeutic expectations and limited capacity. If social care expectations continue to rise without appropriate support, gardens risk being overwhelmed or becoming exclusionary.

> *Rijnvliet and the “ownership” risk*
>
> *The Rijnvliet Edible Neighborhood represents a massive municipal investment in green infrastructure (Figure 19). The success of the project depends on residents taking “ownership” of the food forest (UT10ab, UT23). If the community does not engage in maintenance, the site risks becoming a “costly burden” for the city’s green department, potentially leading to the removal of edible species in favour of low-maintenance, non-productive greenery*

5.5.3. RISKS FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT PROMOTE COOKING AND EATING TOGETHER

The main risks for communal kitchen FSIs stem from liability, food safety and reliance on volunteer labour. Even when using donated ingredients, community kitchens must comply with the same hygiene standards as commercial food providers. One coordinator emphasised that “not everything can be used”, revealing how legal uncertainty may restrict which foods can be served or how they are handled. These regulations can increase costs, reduce flexibility or discourage cooking with surplus food altogether.

Figure 21: Visit to the Grounded Kitchen, Utrecht

> *BuurtBuik community kitchen*
>
> *Supply volatility: Relying on leftovers means the "menu is a surprise" (UT12) (Figure 13). The risk is an inability to meet specific nutritional or dietary needs of guests, potentially alienating the very populations they seek to support.*

Because cooking FSIs often run on unpaid labour, the withdrawal of a single experienced cook can temporarily shut down community provision. Many interviewees highlighted that infrastructure poses a more significant risk than ingredient costs or demand. Without secure access to certified kitchens or storage (Figure 21), shared meals can become irregular or impossible to hold.

The final risk concerns the instrumentalisation of community meals. When meals are funded under social programmes, their value may be measured in participation statistics rather than quality, belonging or cultural relevance. This may push FSIs to prioritise attendance over meaningful community-building, undermining the relational value of eating together.

5.5.4. RISKS FOR FOOD SHARING INITIATIVES THAT SUPPORT FOOD REDISTRIBUTION

Food redistribution FSIs face logistical and legal risks stemming from dependence on informal supplier relationships and strict national food safety regulations. Access to surplus food often relies on personal trust with supermarket staff rather than formalised contracts. One interviewee indicated vulnerability to changes in staff turnover, donor policies or interpersonal networks.

Legal restrictions present another risk. Some edible leftovers cannot be redistributed due to liability concerns, preventing scaling even when excess supply is available. A municipal respondent noted that "leftovers cannot be redistributed because of the rules you must comply with", revealing how national legislation creates bottlenecks that small initiatives cannot absorb.

Finally, redistribution infrastructure remains fragile. Many organisations lack the insured vehicles, cold storage or trained staff needed for reliable logistics. These weaknesses threaten continuity, particularly when initiatives operate in low-income neighbourhoods where redistribution also provides social support. If these initiatives collapse, they take with them informal welfare systems that reach beyond the remit of formal food banks.

> *Operation Food Freedom and the infrastructure gap*
>
> *Organisation's decentralised model is highly flexible but lacks the "hard" assets needed for security. Without dedicated cooling or permanent storage (Figure 11), they are limited to a "Wednesday-only" model (UT19). This creates a "glass ceiling" for their impact; they cannot scale to handle high-risk/high-volume waste (like dairy or meat), leaving them vulnerable to supply chain shifts and the logistical dominance of larger, less social players.*

5.6. DRIVERS AND SUCCESS FACTORS FOR FOOD SHARING IN UTRECHT

5.6.1. ENABLING MUNICIPAL INFRASTRUCTURE THROUGH STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY

Food sharing initiatives in Utrecht thrive within a governance environment that supports them without claiming custodianship over food as a policy domain. Food is enabled through budgets and mandates associated with green public spaces, healthy living programmes, neighbourhood development, circular economy pilots and labour participation schemes. This strategic ambiguity allows initiatives to frame their work in ways that align with existing municipal priorities, rather than competing for explicit food funding. As one municipal representative explained, "Food fits a bit into green, health, circular economy... but it is not a standalone theme" (UT01).

Figure 22: Panel discussion by representatives of Utrecht municipality, researchers and FSIs during the research and practice workshop Transforming Urban Food Systems to Sustainability at Utrecht University

This positioning means initiatives are supported indirectly through infrastructure and resources that are not labelled as food investments. Access to municipal land is provided through green policy; community kitchens emerge from neighbourhood budgets; and food redistribution is tolerated as a circular activity but funded through social projects. Organisations succeed when they can anchor their activities within these broader agendas, demonstrating relevance to multiple policy targets simultaneously. For example, a municipal respondent noted that funding was possible because a programme "was sold internally as healthy living and participation, not food" (UT02).

The absence of ownership over food has the paradoxical effect of creating space for experimentation. Without strict mandates or predetermined objectives, FSIs can develop context-responsive practices such as composting workshops, therapeutic gardening, community meals, or informal redistribution. Food becomes a tool of urban social and ecological governance, rather than a narrowly defined problem to be solved. Through this ambiguity, FSIs gain the freedom to innovate on their own terms, while the municipality fulfils multiple objectives without increasing regulatory burden.

However, this strategic ambiguity also embeds risk; FSIs remain dependent on their ability to continuously justify food activities through adjacent policy areas. Their success, therefore, is inseparable from their capacity to translate food into other municipal priorities. What enables thriving today may produce vulnerability tomorrow if policy agendas shift.

5.6.2. SOCIAL RETURN ON INVESTMENT AND LABOUR INCLUSION AS A DRIVER

A distinctive success factor for food sharing in Utrecht is the ability of FSIs to operate under labour inclusion and social participation schemes, rather than being funded directly as food projects. Through the municipal policy of Social Return on Investment (SROI), organisations that engage individuals distant from the labour market are eligible for financial support, procurement contracts or operational subsidies. This creates a stable funding pathway that is anchored in welfare goals instead of food provision, enabling initiatives to sustain daily operations through staffing support.

Food sharing activities become an accessible medium for work participation because they offer structured tasks, routine, and low thresholds for engagement. People can work in gardens, manage compost systems, help cook meals, or participate in food redistribution without requiring formal qualifications. Staff in one garden initiative highlighted that labour-based funding works because "the municipality pays the people to work here", rather than subsidising food directly (UT14). By funding labour, the municipality indirectly finances food-related infrastructure, volunteer supervision and community support.

This labour-oriented framing is particularly relevant for initiatives combining ecological work and social care. For example, municipal catering services employ people with labour market disadvantages to prepare meals, while gardens and redistribution organisations build staffing structures around reintegration or supported employment. As another respondent explained, "we support initiatives via public procurement", referring to municipal contracts that outsource catering or cleaning services to food-related social enterprises (UT02).

The SROI mechanism transforms food sharing into a practical and fundable tool for recovery, inclusion and employability. It supports initiatives not by covering their food or infrastructure costs directly, but by integrating them into a broader welfare strategy. This

driving factor allows organisations to stabilise operations and maintain staff continuity, reinforcing their capacity to run consistent programmes in growing, cooking and redistribution. Therefore, food sharing thrives where it can be successfully translated into labour participation, creating predictable funding streams that sustain activities beyond short-term community grants.

5.6.3. RELATIONAL GOVERNANCE AND THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Another key driver is strong relational governance, in which coordination relies on interpersonal networks and trusted community leadership rather than formalised management systems. Many FSIs depend on a small number of individuals who build and sustain relationships with municipal departments, supermarkets, neighbourhood centres, vulnerable participants, and volunteers. These coordinators function as the operational glue of the system; they understand both local needs and bureaucratic requirements, allowing them to mediate between state structures and grassroots actors.

Relational governance is especially visible in food redistribution and cooking FSIs, where access to surplus food depends not on contracts but on personal trust with suppliers. A volunteer cook explained that donated food arrives because "someone asks at the right time" (UTR09), indicating that supply is contingent not on formal agreements but on the initiative's relationship with supermarket staff or local businesses. In this context, coordination hinges more on social capital than logistical infrastructure, as redistribution becomes possible through rapport, reciprocity and goodwill.

The same applies to volunteer management. Coordinators who know how to recruit, motivate and retain volunteers enable continuity in cooking, gardening and education activities. Organisations repeatedly identified that "key people keep everything running" (UT18), referring to leaders who bridge municipal expectations, donor relationships and community participation. These leaders perform invisible labour: they interpret regulations,

negotiate liability concerns, teach participants how to cook or garden safely, or calm social tensions when working with vulnerable groups.

Importantly, relational governance enables initiatives to operate flexibly across boundaries. A coordinator who understands social workers can help a resident access a garden plot; another who knows the municipal permit system can secure kitchen access; another with retail contacts can retrieve surplus food. As a result, food sharing in Utrecht thrives where leadership competencies intersect: in communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and informal brokerage. In these settings, governance emerges through relationships rather than rules, making social trust the most significant driver of operational success.

5.6.4. ACCESS TO PUBLIC GREEN AS A THERAPEUTIC ENVIRONMENT

A key driver of FSIs in Utrecht is the availability of public green spaces that function as low-threshold therapeutic environments. Gardens supported through municipal land policies or partnerships provide opportunities for residents to participate in structured outdoor activities without being formally enrolled in social care. Working with soil, compost, plants and shared spaces generates routines, physical engagement and a sense of achievement that are particularly valuable for individuals dealing with burnout, loneliness or stress-related conditions. As one garden coordinator explained, “the main thing is that people can work with their hands” (UT21), underscoring how gardening is conceived as a form of embodied care rather than as an agricultural objective.

These environments provide support indirectly by creating meaningful tasks, quiet surroundings (Figure 23) and non-stigmatising participation. Residents can take part in activities that contribute to shared goals while maintaining autonomy. Unlike formal interventions, gardens do not categorise people as clients or patients; participants are gardeners, volunteers or neighbours. As one participant described, “you grow something,

Figure 23: Recreational area in the urban community garden Voedseltuin Overvecht (part of Utrecht Natuurlijk network), Utrecht

and you are proud of it” (UT23), highlighting the emotional value generated by self-directed learning and visible results. This tangible progress - a sprouting seed, a harvested tomato, a finished compost cycle - reinforces confidence and strengthens personal resilience.

Public green spaces also afford therapeutic sociality, where relationships develop through shared tasks rather than spoken expectations. People can join as they are able, without pressure to participate fully or continuously. This makes it possible for residents with fluctuating capacity to engage safely, avoiding the formality and stigma that sometimes accompany welfare services. The garden thus becomes a site where physical environment, ecological learning and social interaction converge to support wellbeing.

By allowing FSIs to use public space flexibly, Utrecht enables therapeutic practices without requiring specialised staffing or diagnostic frameworks. The key driver is not clinical care but environmental affordance; green spaces enable healing not through targeted interventions but through access, participation and the slow rhythms of ecological

work. In this way, food grows not only as a product of cultivation but as a by-product of rehabilitative engagement.

5.6.5. HYBRID MODELS LINKING ECOLOGICAL, SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC VALUE AS RESILIENCE

A further success factor in Utrecht's food sharing landscape is the presence of hybrid organisational models that operate simultaneously across ecological stewardship, social participation and small-scale economic exchange. Rather than specialising narrowly in food production, redistribution or welfare, many FSIs succeed because they span multiple purposes, enabling them to access different funding streams, collaborate with varied partners, and remain relevant even when policy agendas shift. This hybridity creates resilience by preventing organisations from being dependent on a single mandate.

For example, some urban community gardens are at once centres of composting education, community rehabilitation and micro-economies of produce sales. While the scale of food production is small, symbolic revenue generated from selling honey or occasional vegetable boxes reinforces participants' sense of contribution and provides modest financial support. One urban garden described how "we sometimes sell a vegetable box... ten of them" (UT21), demonstrating that economic value is small but socially meaningful. The sale is symbolic rather than commercial, functioning as validation of ecological labour and community effort.

Hybrid social kitchens similarly combine redistribution, participation and skill-building. Their operations may be funded through neighbourhood programmes, staffed through SROI subsidies, and supplied with surplus vegetables from local supermarkets. This multi-sourced model allows them to withstand fluctuations in any one resource area. When surplus food availability shifts, they can opt to purchase staple ingredients; when volunteer numbers decrease, they can slow cooking operations while maintaining community engagement;

when neighbourhood funding ends, they may operate through donations. Their continuity is therefore embedded in functional flexibility.

Importantly, hybridity enables organisations to adopt different narratives depending on the institutional audience. A garden can be presented as a health intervention for funding, a community space for neighbourhood authorities, an educational tool for schools, or a circular economy pilot for environmental offices. One coordinator explained that their initiative "was sold internally as healthy living and participation, not food" (UT02), illustrating how strategic framing allows organisations to align with shifting municipal priorities. The ability to reposition food within multiple policy domains strengthens organisational stability and creates protection against budgetary changes.

Hybridity therefore strengthens sustainability by allowing initiatives to operate across multiple domains. By operating at the intersection of ecology, economy and care, initiatives embed themselves in various urban systems, gaining multiple sources of legitimacy and support. Their resilience stems from this interconnectedness, enabling food sharing to persist even in the absence of explicit food policy.

5.7. MOTIVATIONS FOR FOOD SHARING IN UTRECHT

Motivations for food sharing in Utrecht are closely tied to how food activities enable broader urban goals related to social participation, ecological engagement and circular practices. Actors across the ecosystem - participants, community organisers, municipal staff, redistribution actors and academics - do not frame food primarily as a commodity to be consumed, but as a platform for building resilient relationships and enabling everyday welfare. The motivations are therefore not centred on producing or accessing food, but on how food offers a low-threshold entry point for participating in healthy, connected, and meaningful city life. This distinguishes food sharing from social services that target deficits or needs, positioning it instead as a medium for urban wellbeing.

5.7.1. MOTIVATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PARTICIPANTS

For participants, FSIs offer a combination of routine, recognition and social connection. Many individuals who engage in gardening, cooking or redistribution activities are not primarily motivated by the prospect of receiving food; they seek a sense of purpose and belonging. One garden participant described being proud that "you grow something, and you are proud of it" (UT23), emphasising a motivation rooted in capability rather than provision. Food becomes a by-product of participation, providing emotional value that is not measured by quantity harvested.

Participants also value food sharing as a low-threshold way to enter social life. Shared meals give residents a reason to leave their homes, particularly if they are dealing with burnout, loneliness or uncertainty. As one cook explained, some volunteers come "because they want to chat" (UT09), suggesting that motivation lies in being socially recognised rather than being fed. In gardening initiatives, the ability to work at one's own pace allows people to join based on their capacity that day, making participation accessible without formal commitment.

> *Groentetas vegetable bag subscription*
>
> *Motivation: Student agency and ethical procurement*
> *This student-led NGO (Figure 15) is motivated by a desire for independence and the ability to choose ethical suppliers like local organic farmers. Their transition from working with a larger aggregator (local-to-local) to an independent model was driven by a need to keep costs low for students while maintaining a mission-oriented focus on local food.*

Motivations are therefore relational, not nutritional. People do not join FSIs merely to access cheap meals or vegetables, but to experience recognition, autonomy and participation. This motivation aligns with broader urban governance goals around activating citizens, engaging vulnerable populations, and creating supportive environments through informal welfare. Food is valued because it is a tangible and socially acceptable entry point into public participation, rather than a resource distributed to individuals in need.

5.7.2. MOTIVATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF COMMUNITY ORGANISERS

Community organisers across gardens, kitchens and food redistribution initiatives are motivated by building local networks that foster dignity, ecological awareness and shared responsibility. Their commitment is not framed as charity or service delivery. Instead, they emphasise inclusive participation through non-stigmatising practices. One coordinator explained that their organisation is "not a social initiative, people need to tend their own gardens" (UT14), highlighting a desire to avoid labelling participants as recipients of care. This reflects a motivation to enable agency rather than dependency.

> *Operation Food Freedom*
>
> *Motivation: System change and knowledge sharing*
> *This initiative is driven by the belief that "system change needs more than sharing". It requires sharing knowledge and power. The "Cooking with the Chief" project illustrates a motivation to build cultural ties and empower diverse groups (e.g., Moroccan women) to share recipes and sustainable cooking practices.*

Organisers are also driven by a belief that food activities help people learn through practice. Cooking with surplus ingredients teaches flexibility, while gardening teaches soil care and composting. Although these activities may produce limited amounts of food, they create a sense of achievement that participants often lack in other institutional settings. Organisers frequently describe food as a tool for "helping people grow, not just vegetables", signalling a motivation to cultivate confidence and capability.

Finally, organisers are motivated by the relational aspects of their role. They emphasise the satisfaction of building connections across neighbourhoods, creating inclusive spaces, and guiding volunteers through practical tasks. Their motivation is rooted in community infrastructure: they see themselves as stewards of relationships that allow the city's informal welfare and ecological participation to thrive. These motivations align with Utrecht's broader governance landscape, where distributed responsibility requires active civic leadership.

5.7.3. MOTIVATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MUNICIPALITIES

Municipal staff involved in food sharing do not describe their motivation in terms of food policy or food security. Instead, they view food activities as supporting the city's broader agenda of Healthy Urban Living. Food sharing enables goals related to public health, participatory green space management, circular practices and labour inclusion. As one municipal representative explained, food "fits a bit into green, health, circular economy… but it is not a standalone theme" (UT01). Their motivation is therefore not to manage food, but to harness food as a vehicle for other policy objectives.

Municipal actors are also motivated by how food enables participation without formal intervention. Renting out community kitchens, providing plots of land, or offering small subsidies allows initiatives to design their own programmes while contributing to social development. Another municipal respondent noted that funding was possible because a project "was sold internally as healthy living and participation, not food" (UT02). This illustrates a motivation to channel support toward relational welfare without increasing bureaucratic responsibility.

> *Restaurant Nula*
>
> *Motivation: Social return on investment (SROI) and labour market integration*
> *The municipality's motivation is to use its own procurement power to support social companies. The restaurant's contract requires it to provide education and employment pathways for refugees and people distanced from the labour market, using food as a tool for economic inclusion.*

Furthermore, municipalities view food sharing as a tool for activating public spaces and supporting collective stewardship. Gardens and kitchens embody a governance approach where residents participate in producing healthy living environments rather than consuming services. Motivations are therefore strategic: by enabling food sharing, the municipality promotes wellbeing, circularity, and social participation without needing an explicit food policy. Food becomes a means of urban governance, not an object of it.

> *Rijnvliet edible neighborhood*
>
> *Motivation: Systemic urban planning and nature connection*
> *The primary motivation is municipal: integrating food production into the very fabric of a new neighbourhood to foster a "right to green space" as a basic need. It aims to create a sense of collective "ownership" over public spaces, moving away from individual private gardens to shared edible landscapes.*

5.7.4. MOTIVATIONS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GRASSROOTS REDISTRIBUTION ACTORS

Grassroots redistribution actors are motivated by ethical commitments to dignity, circularity and fairness. They do not see themselves primarily as providing emergency support, nor do they want to reproduce models of charity that separate givers from receivers. Redistribution initiatives aim to reduce waste while ensuring that food is shared without stigma. One actor emphasised that "someone who cannot pay gets the same package" (UT10), expressing a motivation to eliminate distinctions between beneficiaries and participants.

These actors also find motivation in reducing food waste at the local level. Their work is based on helping food find a purpose, and on valuing care rather than cost. Redistribution becomes a tool for building solidarity rather than dependency. This stands in contrast to formal systems such as food banks, which require eligibility checks. Redistribution actors are motivated by providing an alternative that reaches people who fall outside bureaucratic definitions of need, as well as those who feel uncomfortable seeking formal assistance.

> *Grounded Kitchen*
>
> *Motivation: Radical organisational change and community empowerment*
> *The founders are motivated to challenge "toxic" traditional kitchen hierarchies (like the "Gordon Ramsay" kitchen model) and empower people to use shared resources (Figure 21). Their model uses corporate catering fees to subsidise cheap student meals, reflecting a motivation rooted in social justice and ecological sustainability over profit.*

Motivations in this sector therefore revolve around creating relational welfare rather than institutional aid. The goal is not to distribute as much food as possible, but to support equitable access to shared resources while replacing stigma with solidarity. These motivations align with a governance model that prioritises low-threshold participation over regulated service delivery.

5.7.5. MOTIVATIONS FROM THE ACADEMIC PERSPECTIVE

Academics engaging with food sharing initiatives view them as living systems of distributed governance that illustrate how ecological, social and welfare processes intersect. Their motivation lies in understanding how everyday practices produce public value without relying on formal institutions. This perspective emphasises food sharing as relational infrastructure through which people gain capabilities and build local resilience.

Academics are motivated by research-by-doing relationships, where knowledge emerges through collaboration rather than observation alone. Gardens and kitchens provide environments in which participation, composting, cooking and redistribution become material demonstrations of governance. This motivates academic interest in how informal systems complement formal welfare, how participation replaces service dependency, and how communities build support through ecological practices.

Their motivation is therefore analytical: they see food sharing as a lens through which to examine hybrid models of urban care, ecological participation and circular food governance. Food becomes a microcosm of distributed welfare, inspiring scholarly interest in how cities might function when services emerge from communities rather than institutions.

5.7.6. CONVERGENCE: FOOD AS A MEDIUM FOR URBAN WELLBEING

Across the food sharing landscape in Utrecht, motivations converge around one unifying principle: food is not the objective but the medium. Participants engage to find purpose and social recognition; organisers are motivated to build inclusive spaces; municipalities use food to deliver healthy urban living; redistribution actors care about dignity and waste ethics; and academics view food sharing as infrastructure for relational and ecological governance. These motivations align because food activities allow governance outcomes to emerge without formal structures.

Food sharing succeeds in Utrecht not only because it solves food needs directly, but also because it enables participation without bureaucracy, care without stigma, circularity without enforcement, and learning without institutional programmes. Food functions as a socially acceptable entry point into urban collective life. It activates public spaces, builds capacities, provides dignified support, and strengthens local resilience. The convergence of motivations around participation, care, dignity and ecological engagement explains why food sharing thrives in Utrecht without a formal food policy: the value of food sharing is anchored in what it makes possible, rather than in merely what it provides.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This case study of food sharing in Utrecht shows how food initiatives contribute to social, environmental and economic sustainability. Drawing from immersive fieldwork, interviews, and stakeholder engagements between December 2024 and June 2025, the findings provide evidence on Utrecht's approach to urban food sharing, characterised by strategic ambiguity in governance, bottom-up innovation, and hybrid organisational models. Unlike cities with centralised food policies, Utrecht's landscape thrives through decentralised municipal involvement and a pragmatic regulatory framework known as "*gedoogbeleid*", which favours tolerance, volunteering, and sustainability, and minimises barriers to experimentation. This "hands-off" stance has enabled a diverse array of FSIs to evolve, integrating non-profits, social enterprises, market-based actors, CSA schemes and local food bag providers.

At the core of Utrecht's food sharing model is a blend of business forms and operational strategies that prioritise social return on investment. Non-profit FSIs dominate, focusing on growing, composting, cooking and eating together, and redistributing surplus food, often in partnership with community leaders and volunteers. For instance, FSIs that grow and compost together emphasise education, rehabilitation, and dignified redistribution, utilising public green spaces as therapeutic environments for vulnerable groups like refugees and individuals with disabilities. FSIs promoting cooking and eating together foster participation and solidarity, addressing loneliness and promoting cultural integration through shared meals. Food redistribution efforts, meanwhile, tackle logistics and volunteer brokerage in fragmented networks, reducing food waste while supporting economically disadvantaged populations. Over time, these FSIs have evolved from grassroots efforts into more structured entities, adapting to challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic by enhancing digital tools and hybrid models that link ecological benefits (e.g., composting and local production) with social and economic value, thereby building resilience.

The costs and investments associated with these FSIs vary by type but share common themes of reliance on diverse funding sources to ensure viability. General costs include operational expenses such as venue rentals, transportation, and staff salaries, often mitigated by volunteer labour and in-kind contributions. Growing and composting FSIs incur land access and maintenance fees, while cooking initiatives face kitchen equipment and ingredient procurement costs. Food redistribution FSIs grapple with logistics and storage expenses. Funding streams are multifaceted, encompassing municipal subsidies, external grants, private donations, impact investments, subscriptions, and revenue from services like catering. Despite these efforts, long-term financial sustainability emerges as a persistent challenge, exacerbated by fluctuating grant availability and the need for continuous volunteer engagement.

Conversely, the benefits and perceived value of Utrecht's FSIs are multifaceted and far-reaching, positioning food sharing as a microcosm of distributed welfare. From a participant perspective, the FSIs enhance social cohesion, combat isolation, improve physical and mental health through nutritious meals and outdoor activities, and raise awareness about sustainable food systems. Municipal stakeholders value the contributions to public health goals, such as those aligned with the National Prevention Agreement, and the reduction of food waste, which supports environmental objectives. Academics highlight the educational potential and the role of FSIs in advancing research on urban resilience. Across categories, growing initiatives promote biodiversity and community empowerment; cooking efforts build solidarity and cultural exchange; and redistribution networks ensure food security for vulnerable groups. Collectively, these benefits align with broader sustainability goals, demonstrating how food sharing can integrate social inclusion, environmental stewardship, and economic innovation.

Challenges and risks, however, temper this optimism. General hurdles include bureaucratic navigation, volunteer burnout, and scalability issues in a fragmented landscape. Growing FSIs face land scarcity and seasonal dependencies, while cooking initiatives contend with hygiene regulations and participant retention. Food redistribution FSIs risk supply inconsistencies and logistical issues. The synthesis of these challenges points to the double-edged nature of "strategic ambiguity": while it enables flexibility, it can also lead

to uncertainty in policy support and funding. Risks such as health and safety liabilities, particularly in food handling, and potential exploitation of volunteer labour further underscore the need for robust governance.

Key drivers and success factors illuminate pathways forward. The enabling municipal infrastructure, rooted in "toleration policy" of *gedoogbeleid*, allows FSIs to innovate without stringent oversight. Social return on investment, particularly through labour inclusion for marginalised groups, serves as a powerful motivator. Relational governance, driven by community leadership, strengthens networks, while access to public greenspaces provides therapeutic and educational venues. Hybrid models that intertwine ecological, social, and economic values enhance resilience, as seen in initiatives blending profit with purpose.

Motivations across stakeholders converge on food as a medium for urban wellbeing. Participants seek connection, health, and purpose; organisers prioritise care and dignity; municipalities aim for societal benefits, e.g., reduced inequality; grassroots actors focus on circularity and waste reduction; and academics pursue knowledge advancement. This convergence highlights the potential of food sharing to foster inclusive, resilient communities.

In conclusion, Utrecht exemplifies how strategic ambiguity and community-driven innovation can cultivate sustainable food systems. By addressing financial vulnerabilities and enhancing cross-sector collaborations, the city can amplify FSIs' impact, offering replicable insights for other urban contexts within the CULTIVATE framework. Ultimately, this study affirms that food sharing not only combats immediate issues like waste and loneliness but also nurtures a distributed welfare model, where flexibility, inclusivity, and hybridity pave the way for more equitable and resilient cities.

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