

Article

Food Security, Food Sovereignty, and the Right to Food Revisited from Food Bank Activities under COVID-19 in Japan

Sayaka Sano

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role that food bank activities play in the implementation of the right to food after reviewing the discussion of food security, food sovereignty, and the right to food in Japan.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of the right to food and food security has been reaffirmed. Food bank activities can complement these systems when income security systems fail to function due to extrinsic or intrinsic factors. The COVID-19 pandemic is a case in which the income security system is not functioning due to such extrinsic factors. However, food bank activities are able to function effectively in such cases only if they play a role as a hub for local food supply in ordinary times. Therefore, the support from food banks in providing emergency and temporary food supplies to impoverished households will continue to be of great importance in the years ahead.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has rocked the foundations of globalized economic and social systems. According to the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), the employment environment in 2020 significantly worsened, with the ratio of job openings-to-applicants at 1: 1.18, which was a 0.42 decrease from the previous year, and the most significant decline since the oil crisis in 1975. In a Labor Force Survey, the number of employees absent from work reached a record high of 2.56 million, while the unemployment rate hit 2.58%, the worst rate since 2009.¹⁾ Amid this significant deterioration in the employment environment, the number of suicides increased for the first time in 11 years, from July—December 2020, when the outbreak of COVID-19 swept Japan. While it is generally considered that most suicides are committed by males, an upward trend in the number of female suicides was observed during this period, suggesting that social isolation and loneliness

have increased due to lifestyle changes caused by the declaration of the state of emergency in Japan.²⁾ Therefore, the worsened employment environment calls for more attention to be paid to the socially vulnerable populations. In a questionnaire survey of single-parent households conducted by the Nara City Government, 52% of the households responded that their income had decreased.³⁾ In addition, after the provision of financial support, the free provision of and delivery of food was the second most important support aspect that the single-parent households were in need of. In short, while it is obvious that the entire population needs to be taken care of, the importance of paying special attention to socially vulnerable populations is increasing as they face mounting difficulties. In this context, food banks, as systems for distributing surplus food, are attracting attention.

It was only after around 2010 that Japanese society began to focus on the marginalization of the socially vulnerable populations who are deprived of food access. The food desert research conducted by Iwama eds. (2017) is one such trend. Food deserts refer to specific neighborhoods that have high concentrations of socially vulnerable populations that are deprived of adequate food access because of worsening living conditions. It refers to neighborhoods in rural and urban areas where social infrastructure is becoming vulnerable due to the aging population, which results in the deterioration of shopping accessibility and the weakening of social ties between families and local residents; in short, a decline in social capital. Those in these areas are known as “shopping refugees” or “vulnerable shoppers,” meaning people with limited access to shopping facilities. Another trend is *Kodomo Shokudo* (the Children’s Cafeteria), which focuses on children’s poverty and has been widely recognized via media coverage. This is a social activity that provides free or affordable nutritious meals and social gatherings to children, their parents, and local residents to respond to the growing number of single-parent households that have difficulties in feeding their children, and for children who eat alone. As these activities are being developed across Japan, and as unprecedented disasters, such as the Great East Japan Earthquake, repeatedly occur year after year, the activities of food banks, as organizations that reuse and collect surplus food, are attracting attention.

The deprivation of access to food for socially vulnerable populations is a food security issue, which has been primarily perceived as a problem of food insecurity in developing countries. Although many Japanese people are vaguely concerned about Japan’s extremely low food self-sufficiency rate and food safety, they tend to have little interest in food security or food sovereignty. This is because food is stably imported, while domestic agricultural production is barely surviving. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic has provided Japan with an opportunity to reconsider the issues of food security, food sovereignty, and the right to food, which were previously perceived as a “fire on the opposite shore”; that is, the stories of distant countries.

In this context, this paper reviews the discourses on food security, food sovereignty, and

the right to food, including the discussions in Japan, and unravels the challenges in establishing food safety nets in Japan that meet the right to food by drawing on the activities developed by food banks. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. First, the relationship between food security, food sovereignty, and the right to food will be examined in consideration of the conceptual evolution of food security. Subsequently, based on the data obtained from the participatory research and interviews of the activities organized by Food Bank Biwako and Food Bank Nara during the current COVID-19 pandemic, the role of food bank activities in the fulfillment of the right to food will be examined.

Evolution of the concept of food security

The concept of food security has greatly expanded over three main periods in the international arena. The term “food security” became widely recognized within the international community in the 1970s. This was triggered by the simultaneous crop failure in the United States and the Soviet Union, which led to a tightening of the global supply and demand for grain. At the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) General Assembly in 1973, food security was proposed as follows:

Availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and price (FAO 2003: 27).

The World Food Conference was held in 1974, which discussed the issues of agricultural investment to increase food production and the measures to stabilize food supply and demand, and resulted in the broader recognition of food security. In short, it was confirmed that the member countries would implement policy coordination on global food issues to achieve global food security. However, the issue was that the discussion was defined by the rationale of the supply side. In short, food security was seen as a problem of insufficient food supply and inadequate market response in the international market, and the main topic of discussion was how to cooperate at the national level against price hikes caused by the so-called crop failures and stockpile shortages. As a result, after the conference, both developed and developing countries adopted measures to increase food production through increased agricultural investment and technological innovations, such as the Green Revolution, to solve the supply shortage.

However, despite such technological innovation and increased agricultural investment, famines caused by conflict and drought were frequent in Sub-Saharan Africa. Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate in economics, argued that the direct cause of famine was not supply shortages, but the failure of exchange entitlements, based on his study of the Bengal fam-

ine (1943) and the Ethiopian famine (1972–1973) (Sen 1981). The reason for the large number of deaths, despite the availability of food, was not due to insufficient supply, but because the people were not entitled to access the available food supplies. Sen argued that they lacked the means and entitlement to produce and purchase food. In this context, in 1983, the FAO's Committee on World Food Security defined food security as follows:

Ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food that they need (FAO 2006)

Unlike the 1974 definition, the 1983 definition took a significant step forward by including the issue of purchasing power from a demand-side perspective instead of a supply-side perspective. In addition, it was groundbreaking in its declaration of mentioning the need for food security not only at the national level, but for all constituencies; that is, at the individual level as well (Tsubota 2007). In 1983, food security covered all people at the global, regional, national, and municipal levels, as well as at the household and individual levels. Further, this established today's fundamental understanding that we need to address both the supply-side and demand-side issues, especially structural and chronic poverty.

In the late 1980s, however, new threats emerged, such as global environmental problems, widening disparities within developing countries, and increasing food demand caused by higher income in developing countries, which was accompanied by the Westernization of dietary habits. These threats provoked warnings from the pioneering environmentalist Lester Brown and others (Tsubota 2007). Under these circumstances, the World Food Summit was held in 1996. The summit's main objective was to provide assistance to 800 million people suffering from hunger in developing countries. More specifically, it was a commitment by the international community to halve the world's undernourished population by 2015. Moreover, food security was defined in more detail as follows

Food security, at the individual, household, national, regional and global levels. Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. (FAO 1996).

Although the 1996 definition did not differ much from the 1983 definition, it was highly significant that it incorporated preferences and nutritional aspects of food security in addition to supply-side and demand-side purchasing power. Then, in 2002, the State of Food Insecurity in the World 2001 (FAO 2002) added the aspect of social availability, resulting in the current definition that

Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food pref-

erences for an active and healthy life (FAO, 2003).

Based on this definition, food security is comprised of four major components. The first is food availability. This means ensuring sufficient quantities of food that is of appropriate quality and is supplied through domestic production or imports, including food aid. The second component is food access. This is the access by individuals to their entitlement for acquiring nutritious and appropriate food. The third is utilization. This means the utilization of food through adequate diet, clean water, sanitation, and healthcare to reach a state of nutritional well-being. This suggests the importance of sectors other than food and agriculture in ensuring food security. The fourth component is stability. This means that all households and individuals must have access to adequate food, at all times, to be food secure. In particular, they should not be exposed to the risks of losing access to food due to sudden shocks (e.g., climate change and economic crises) and cyclical events (seasonal food insecurity). Therefore, the concept of stability refers to both the quantitative availability and the access dimensions of food security (FAO 2006).

The FAO's concept of food security has shifted from the supply-side to the demand-side perspective; has been expanded to include not only the national level, but also the household and individual levels; and has been enriched by adding qualitative dimensions of food in addition to quantitative ones. According to the FAO, since the 1990s, there has been growing awareness and in-depth discussions on the social, political, ethical, or rights-based dimensions of food security. This transition has also been linked to the trend in development assistance policies that have started to emphasize social development, environmental conservation, and economic development.

However, while the concept of food security has been enriched from the various elements that have been incorporated into its definition, these elements reflect a neoliberal bias toward the implementation of market-based food security rather than the food security measures by states and international organizations (Fairbairn 2010). For example, there are criticisms against the prevailing food security theory that consider agriculture as a mere economic activity, agricultural producers as mere rational economic agents at the micro level, and food as a commodity that is equivalent to industrial products and assumes that economic growth and poverty reduction can be achieved and food access can be improved by integrating inefficient peasant agriculture and backward rural communities into the rationale of the market (Schanbacher 2010).

Food Sovereignty as proposed by La Via Campesina

Food sovereignty was proposed by La Via Campesina (hereinafter LVC) at the NGO Fo-

rum, which was held in parallel with the World Food Summit in 1996. LVC argued that the food security discussed by FAO and others referred to availability and access but lacked perspectives on structural issues such as how, where, and by whom food is produced, and how food should be distributed and consumed. LVC also offered critical perspectives on the industrialized model of agriculture implemented under the neoliberal agricultural and trade policies, and thus proposed the concept of food sovereignty based on an alternative. Further, food sovereignty was the central theme of the discussions at the NGO Forum held in parallel with the World Food Summit in 2002. The definitions of food sovereignty, as adopted in 1996 and 2002, are as follows:

Food is a basic human right. This right can only be realized in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed. Food sovereignty is the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in our own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security. (La Via Campesina 1996)

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self-reliant; to restrict the dumping of products in their markets, and; to provide local fisheries-based communities the priority in managing the use of and the rights to aquatic resources. Food sovereignty does not negate trade, but rather, it promotes the formulation of trade policies and practices that serve the rights of peoples to safe, healthy and ecologically sustainable production. (La Via Campesina, 2001).

Thus, food sovereignty is defined as the right of all nations and people to determine their own food and agricultural policies. It is the right of all people to obtain food that is safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate to their own food traditions and culture. It also states that it is the right of family farmers and peasants to produce food in a sustainable manner. Therefore, LVC and food sovereignty scholars have called for the regulation of the current market-oriented food and agriculture policies and trade policies to enable national governments to implement policy measures that can boost sustainable food production based on family farming (Patel 2009, Wittman et al. 2010). In short, the discussion of food sovereignty involves the transformation of the political and economic systems of each national government.

The food sovereignty arguments often hold a negative view of food security,⁵⁾ as they call for an alternative model, as aforementioned. However, Clapp (2014) argues that proponents of food sovereignty ignore the process in which the concept of food security has been enriched, and views food security as an oppositional concept without considering that it is in-

herently descriptive and more open-ended. In short, Clapp argues that food sovereignty advocates take the binary position of a social movement that resists neoliberalism. Murphy (2014) also points out that food security is a concept of normative objectives, while food sovereignty is a concept of normative processes, and argues that it is important to view both as complementary, and vital to understand these concepts in their historical context.

As the food sovereignty advocates argue, today's neoliberal trends are critical issues to be discussed (Mckay, Nehring and Walsh-Dillely 2014, Schanbacher 2019). In Japan, Tashiro (1998) interpreted food sovereignty as "the mutual acknowledgement by all nations of the world that each sovereign nation-state has the right to increase its own food self-sufficiency rate and to make maximum policy efforts to improve it is self-sufficiency rate," and critically examined the state of agricultural policy under the global deregulation agenda after the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Uruguay Round.

However, to examine the marginalization of the socially vulnerable populations in terms of their access to food (i.e., the focus of this paper) is to discuss the issue from a demand-side perspective. Most critical analyses of neoliberal agricultural and trade policies have been discussed mainly from the supply-side perspective. Of course, the concept of food sovereignty incorporates the demand-side perspective into the argument, such as the right of all people to food that is safe, nutritious, and appropriate to their unique dietary habits and culture. However, this perspective is almost as close as the interpretation that if an alternative world that is based on small and family farming is realized, then it will follow automatically. In addition, what is being discussed from the consumer's perspective is agroecology and non-GMO, which are issues of food safety rather than food security.

The same applies to the discussion of food security. Most of the discussions on food security in Japan have centered on poverty and development issues; that is, how to tackle the problems of poverty and hunger that actually exist in developing countries. Conversely, in developed countries, including Japan, the demand-side risk, namely the risk of food unavailability in terms of income and purchasing power, is extremely small. As a result, the discussion on food security in developed countries continues to be exclusively centered on the supply-side perspective, even though the global discussion has been redefined to include the demand side. This is especially true in Japan, where the trend is remarkably high. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the demand-side perspective has been overlooked, since the discussion thus far has focused exclusively on the risks associated with the dependence on food imports, such as the decline in food self-sufficiency, embargoes by export countries, disruptions in supply and demand caused by expanding conflicts, and global crop failures due to extreme weather.

In addition, discussions on food security in Japan have mainly focused on securing food stability at the national level. The Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas Basic Act defines food security as "the responsibility of the national government to provide a stable food sup-

ply as well as to assume responsibilities and take measures to prepare for unforeseen circumstances; that is, the disruption of a stable food supply caused by various domestic and international factors” (Art. 2 and Art. 19 of the Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas Basic Act). It is true that a stable food supply at the national level is essential for food security. However, as illustrated earlier, food security in the international community is a concept that encompasses not only the national level but also the local government, household, and individual levels. There has been a lack of discussion on the possibility of food insecurity at the individual level, even if a food security net is in place at the national level. The right to food is a discussion that includes these points.

The Right to Food of the United Nations

The Rome Declaration of the World Food Summit in 1996, which “reaffirms that everyone has the right to safe and nutritious food in the amount that meets his or her needs, and that everyone has the fundamental right to be free from hunger,” has led not only to the emergence of discussions of food sovereignty by La Via Campesina and others, but also of the right to food, particularly at the United Nations (Hisano 2009).

To begin with, the right to food is referred to in Article 25, paragraph 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, with the declaration is as follows:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (UDHR Art 25(1)).

In addition, Article 11(1) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), based on the UDHR and adopted in 1996, states that everyone has the right to adequate food, as follows:

The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. (ICESCR Art 11(1)).

However, a series of discussions by the UN and civil society organizations were stimulated by the World Food Summit in 1996. These were followed by the recognition and adoption of the normative content of Article 11 of the ICESCR at the Committee on Economic,

Social and Cultural Rights (General Comment No.12), which discussed legal obligations to be adhered to by the state parties, and the implementation of a concrete policy framework. This adoption provided the opportunity to establish an international legal interpretation of the “right to food,” which is described as follows:

The right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement. The right to adequate food shall therefore not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense which equates it with a minimum package of calories, proteins and other specific nutrients. The right to adequate food will have to be realized progressively. (CESCR 1999: para 6).

Therefore, the right to food is applicable to all people and must be realized at all times. To realize this right, the mere quantitative guarantee of food, such as the caloric intake or a full stomach, is insufficient. Moreover, in General Comment No.12, accessibility is described as the ability to have economic and physical access, as follows:

Economic accessibility implies that personal or household financial costs associated with the acquisition of food for an adequate diet should be at a level such that the attainment and satisfaction of other basic needs are not threatened or compromised. Economic accessibility applies to any acquisition pattern or entitlement through which people procure their food and is a measure of the extent to which it is satisfactory for the enjoyment of the right to adequate food. Socially vulnerable groups such as landless persons and other particularly impoverished segments of the population may need attention through special programmes. (CESCR 1999: para 13).

Physical accessibility implies that adequate food must be accessible to everyone, including physically vulnerable individuals, such as infants and young children, elderly people, the physically disabled, the terminally ill and persons with persistent medical problems, including the mentally ill. Victims of natural disasters, people living in disaster-prone areas and other specially disadvantaged groups may need special attention and sometimes priority consideration with respect to accessibility of food. A particular vulnerability is that of many indigenous population groups whose access to their ancestral lands may be threatened. (CESCR 1999: para 13).

In short, national governments are required to take measures to ensure that households and individuals have sufficient financial resources to pay for an adequate diet. To this end, General Comment No.12 identifies the obligations imposed on state parties to the convention regarding the right to food as: (1) the obligation to respect existing access to adequate food, (2) the obligation to protect, and (3) the obligation to fulfill. In line with these obliga-

tions, governments are required to provide a safety net, such as income security (Ziegler, Golay, Mahon, and Way 2010).

The FAO/Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2010) summarizes the relationship between food security, food sovereignty, and the right to food as follows. Food security is “a precondition for the full enjoyment of the right to food; however, the concept of food security itself is not a legal concept per se, and does not impose obligations on stakeholders nor does it provide legal entitlements to them.” However, the “right to food” guarantees, under international law, that “individuals have the right to access to adequate food and the resources necessary for the sustainable enjoyment of food security,” and places “legal obligations on states to overcome hunger and malnutrition and realize food security for all beyond their borders.” Conversely, food sovereignty, which incorporates what is guaranteed as “the right to food,” is characterized by the fact that it presents and promotes “an alternative model of agriculture, trade policies, and practices” that are necessary to ensure the right to food. However, “there is currently no international consensus on it,” meaning that the right to food is a component of food sovereignty, and can simultaneously be interpreted as a concept that allows food sovereignty to evolve from a political slogan to a normative legal concept, as supported by the international legal system (Hisano 2011). Thus, the right to food is guaranteed under international law, which obliges states to establish a safety net to ensure food security at the household and individual level. In this context, the next section explores how the activities of direct food provision organizations, such as food banks, can be understood.

Situating food banks within the right to food perspective

Even if the importance of the right to food and food security is recognized, this does not necessarily translate into the need for activities from those such as food banks. For example, Riches and Silvasti (2014) argue against the activities of food banks because the state, which is supposed to ensure food security for all its people, fails to fulfill this obligation within its own borders, thus leaving the realization of the right to food to charitable activities such as food banks. According to them, the combination of the failures of labor policies and the austerity of social security policies cause difficulties for people living in insecure conditions to achieve a decent standard of living, including accessing adequate food and nutrition. In short, according to their analysis, food banks have emerged to address the deficiencies of social security.

In particular, Riches and Silvasti (2014) are skeptical about the effectiveness of the food aid provided by food banks because of the limited resources available, such as the insufficient amount of donated food to meet the need for assistance, the risk of the cooperating

companies withdrawing from their provision of support, the risk of shrinking subsidies from government agencies, and the problem of securing volunteers and staff. In addition, the food bank beneficiaries are often not permitted to make satisfactory food choices that cater to their preferences. Riches and Silvasti (2014) point out that the food distribution criteria are left to the discretion of the charitable organizations and volunteers, and thus the food banks' operations does not necessarily guarantee the right to food on an equal basis. Therefore, to realize food security, Riches and Silvasti (2014) argue for the importance of the income security system, which includes adequate monetary benefits and stable employment rather than food provision through food banks.

Indeed, as Riches and Silvasti (2014) argue, it is the duty of the government to ensure the right to food. This right stipulates not only the direct provision of food, but also the guarantee of the population's accessibility to food. In this sense, the guarantee of a sufficient income to meet basic needs, including food, should not be ignored. There is no doubt that an income security scheme plays a significant role as a tool for food security. However, can we assume that such a scheme will be fully functional at all times?

Kadosaki (2018) highlighted cases in which income security schemes have become dysfunctional due to extrinsic and intrinsic factors. First, extrinsic factors refer to cases in which the income security system is unable to cope with unpredictable recessions, disasters, or other incidents that were not anticipated when the system was originally designed. In these cases, direct food provision, even if only for a temporary period, would be effective as a support. In short, to maintain an active and healthy lifestyle at all times, it is essential to incorporate programs that directly provide food, such as food banks, into the social security system as a buffer to prevent food insecurity from escalating, even temporarily.

Second, Kadosaki (2018) identified the following three cases in which income security does not work because of intrinsic factors. The first case is when income does not convert into adequate food. In this case, people may secure a certain level of income, but they do not have access to sufficient food due to a decline or lack of ability to manage household finances. In addition, there are cases where people do not have access to healthy food at affordable prices, even if they receive an income. Food deserts represent these cases. The second case is when food does not translate into nutrition, and prevents one from enjoying an active and healthy lifestyle. For example, one may have access to food, yet lack the skills and environment to cook that food, or they may not have access to nutritionally adequate food due to a lack of knowledge about food and nutrition. Finally, there are cases where individuals do not have access to adequate food due to personal factors, despite the existence of income security as an extrinsic scheme. For example, due to personal circumstances, people may not have access to an income security system, or even if the household is guaranteed an income security system, some people may not be able to receive ad-

equate food due to domestic redistribution problems within the household (e.g., neglect or child abuse). In the above cases, the existence of a well-developed income security scheme would not likely lead to adequate food security because the intrinsic functions of linking the scheme to food security at the household and individual levels are not working properly. In short, direct food provision via food banks may not directly solve private problems, but it may provide an opportunity to find a solution (Kadosaki 2018: 58-61).

As illustrated above, the activities of food banks can be understood as a countermeasure to the failure of food security that is caused by the extrinsic and intrinsic dysfunctions of income security. The COVID-19 pandemic is an extrinsic factor, and cases that suffer from intrinsic factors are more likely to be vulnerable to such extrinsic factors. Therefore, the next section examines whether the activities of food banks during the COVID-19 pandemic functioned to complement the income security system.

Initiatives of Food Bank Biwako and Food Bank Nara

Food bank activities in Japan started with solidarity activities organized by the Second Harvest Japan (2HJ) in 2000 to collect food for soup kitchens. In 2002, 2HJ began full-scale activities upon registration as a non-profit organization (NPO). According to the Distribution Economics Institute of Japan (2020) survey, 60% of food banks operate as NPOs, with at least one organization operating in 44 prefectures. Further, 5% of the organizations that responded to the survey were active before 2007, 40% started their activities between 2008 and 2015, and more than 50% started their activities after 2016. A total of 40% of the organizations employ at least one full-time staff member, and 50% of the organizations have paid staff. They are also working to foster cooperation among food banks to form a domestic network, and 50% of the organizations are members of the All Japan Food Bank Promotion Council, Japan Food Bank Link, and the Alliance of Japan Foodbanks.

Food Bank Biwako, which operates in Shiga Prefecture, was launched in 2018. The organization provides support to impoverished households, and has the philosophy of “turning *Mottainai* into smiles and bonds.” The origin of the organization traces back to the “*Omi Issho* movement,”⁶⁾ a Buddhist version of food drive activities (food donations) organized by the *Jodo* sect. To expand its activities from the Buddhist community to the broader Shiga Prefecture, they launched the Food Bank Biwako, which runs food support activities in cooperation with the local government, social welfare councils, private companies, and other organizations. After obtaining the status of a general incorporated association in October 2020, the organization has promoted activities in the Koka/Konan, Moriyama, Yasu, Omihachiman, Takashima, Higashiomi, Otsu, and Hino areas.

Food Bank Biwako receives donations from food manufacturers, farmers, and bakeries,

and also receives food that cannot be sold because it is nearing its expiry date. The organization delivers the donations to children's cafeterias, children's homes, schools for foreigners, and impoverished households. The organization obtains food through three major sources. The first is direct donations to the organization from Japan Agricultural Cooperatives (JA), Japanese Consumers' Co-operative Union (COOP), companies, and so on. The second is donations from companies that are channeled through the All Japan Food Bank Promotion Council. The third is through food boxes installed permanently in Shiga Prefecture that aim to expand donations from individuals and food drive activities in the prefecture. At present, food boxes are placed in 20 locations in the prefecture, including civic exchange facilities, community centers, nursing homes, restaurants, and Buddhist temples. Surplus food collected through the above channels is delivered to impoverished households and children's cafeterias through food pantries (food distribution events) held in each district.⁷⁾

Food Bank Nara began its activities in Nara City in 2017, and works in both Nara City and its neighboring municipalities. The organization was founded to collect food for children's cafeterias. During the course of their activities, they received many requests from individuals willing to donate food. However, they were concerned about whether their support was really reaching the people who needed it, as their activities were conducted without information on the financial situation and family structure of the recipients. Under these circumstances, and in response to the offer from the Nara City Government to work together to support families raising children, the organization signed a consignment contract with the Nara City Government in October 2020 and opened the Food Bank Center in Nara City. The Food Bank Center is a logistics warehouse that makes use of a city facility that is not in use, where surplus food from households and businesses can be received, stored, and sorted. In addition, refrigerators and freezers have been installed as food storage facilities with the support of private companies and local governments. Food Bank Nara is currently working on its own initiative as Food Bank Nara in addition to the operation of the Food Bank Center as a project commissioned by the Nara City Government. Since April 2020, part of the deliveries have been outsourced to an office for the continuous employment of people with disabilities, and the company is expanding its business in Ikoma County, Kitakatsuragi County, Shiki County, Yamatotakada City, and neighboring municipalities.

Food Bank Activities under COVID-19

Two significant features were identified during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, the sudden implementation of school closures due to the declaration of the state of emergency and

other factors resulted in a large amount of surplus food, including perishable food with a short expiry date. For example, before and after the first declaration of the state of emergency (April—June 2020), approximately 18 tons of surplus food from school lunches were available in five cities and four towns, including Nara City and Kashiba City, and was distributed by Food Bank Nara to children’s cafeterias (nearly 50% of the total amount), organizations for people with disabilities (30% of the total amount), livelihood support groups (nearly 10%), and other support groups (over 10%). From April—June 2019, the amount of donated food totaled approximately 1.26 tons, and the total amount for the year totaled 9.29 tons. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the amount of food gathered for the same period in 2020 was more than double that of 2019. Thus, compared to normal times, a large amount of surplus food was generated during the COVID-19 pandemic, and because most of the surplus food was perishable, rapid distribution was required.⁸⁾ This was also applicable to Food Bank Biwako, and the organization launched a project to make use of the suddenly-generated surplus food and established a network with neighboring volunteer groups, schools for foreigners, children’s cafeterias, children’s homes, self-reliance support facilities, and maternal and child welfare organizations.⁹⁾ This allow networks allows them to be better prepared to handle unexpected situations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Second, as evidenced from the food pantry activities, various groups and households have required assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, including single mothers, households with people who need nursing care, older adults living alone, low-income households, and households raising children. While the circumstances of these households differ, they all generally experience difficult living situations. In Higashiomi City, Shiga Prefecture, the Higashiomi City One Parent Support Project¹⁰⁾ was launched, and started a monthly activity in June 2020 to support food provision to single-parent families and single people with family members in need of care who had lost their income due to restrictions imposed on work and activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of recipients continued to increase with each round of food distribution, from 40 households, 62 households, 100 households, 225 households, and 238 households. This phenomenon reflects the gradually increasing burden that has been caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The project is conducted in collaboration with the Food Bank; General Incorporated Associations; and NPOs such as Gamou Yume Kobo, Mitte, the Higashiomi City Council of Social Welfare, and the Community Development Council Liaison Committee.

A similar effort was made by Food Bank Nara in cooperation with government agencies. As aforementioned, in Nara City, Food Bank Nara established the Food Bank Center on consignment, and food drives and food pantries are organized with the support of government agencies. In Nara City, there are approximately 3,500 households raising children that experience social and economic difficulties.¹¹⁾ This is slightly more than 2% of all households in Nara City. Food Bank Nara distributes information about the food pantry to these

households via the city hall, disseminates information about the food drive in cooperation with the city government's public relations department using the Citizen's Newsletter and the city hall's website, and collects surplus food at the city office and the Food Bank Center. The collected food is temporarily stored and sorted at the Food Bank Center to be distributed to the pantry locations. The first food pantry was organized in December 2020, with 5 kg of food per household distributed to 500 households.¹²⁾ The food bank program in Nara City can be characterized by the following: (1) households with social and economic difficulties receive information by postal mail from the city office, and the application process can be completed on a smartphone; (2) 1.185 tons of food donations are collected from 105 organizations; and (3) food pantries are organized at five locations across the city. The collaboration with the city government has enabled the food bank to directly deliver support to the people in need and to collect many donations from private companies and others. However, since they are unable to secure the necessary amount of food through food drive activities alone, the remaining amount is covered by the supply received from Food Bank Nara. As aforementioned, many organizations are strengthening their cooperation with government agencies and other organizations as the number of impoverished households increases during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.¹³⁾ The activities that used to provide a safety net for impoverished households, such as children's cafeterias, have been constrained (e.g., closed under the declared state of emergency). As a result, they must switch from providing support to groups to individual households; therefore, cooperation with government agencies is essential. In areas where such cooperation has been established, food banks have become hubs for food donations, and they collect more surplus food by using their accumulated know-how to organize food drives and food pantries.

It is important to note that food banks have become hubs for food distribution within the prefecture or city, and they act as an intermediary between the surplus food and those who need it.¹⁴⁾ The food banks must function in collaboration with the local government and various community-based organizations to be able to provide food on a daily basis to maintain a functioning system during times of emergency. Food banks have been able to handle the emergency situation during the COVID-19 pandemic because their activities were rooted in the community as hubs for food provision during normal times. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure the presence of a certain number of organizations and public sectors that can collect and distribute surplus food, such as food banks. Moreover, we can understand that the activities of food banks are effective in filling the gaps in the public safety net to improve the quality of existing support for the impoverished population. For example, it has been reported that public support (e.g., household budget support and employment support) has been smoothly provided by building trust-based relationships between food bank stakeholders, supporters, and impoverished individuals. Further, the food banks' cooperation with children's cafeterias can provide appropriate food for children as well as indi-

rect support for problems caused by intrinsic factors, such as the detection of child abuse. As Riches and Silvasti have pointed out, it is true that cash provisions are preferable when emphasizing the social policy aspect. However, the support provided by food banks in terms of emergency and temporary food supply for impoverished households may have important implications.

Conclusion

Food banks provide emergency assistance to impoverished people during critical situations via food provision. A social safety net is a public assistance scheme that guarantees a minimum level for a healthy and cultural lifestyle to support people's independence. However, not all impoverished people can receive public assistance, thus food banks can serve as a food safety net for the socially vulnerable populations who cannot have their voices heard. In this sense, direct food provision through food banks acts as a complementary mechanism to the income security system.

However, it is not always possible to collect enough surplus food to distribute to all of those who wish to receive it. In addition, despite the efforts being made to procure food that considers nutrition and quality, it is not always possible to secure food that has excellent nutritional balance. Further, many issues remain to be addressed, such as the lack of human resources to sort and distribute food to impoverished households. In particular, human resource development and financial stability to support the food bank organizations are urgent issues.

Finally, the criticism of food banks from those who emphasize income security through cash distribution is based on the assumption that income will always be allocated to appropriate food, and that the food on the market is adequate. However, as the food sovereignty argument highlights, under the current food regime, traditional food habits and cultures are being lost, and in some cases, food safety is threatened, and people are forced to eat unhealthy diets. In light of this situation, we cannot assume that the market mechanism functions properly. From this perspective, a policy that relies excessively on income security, regardless of the importance of income security for the sake of food security, may also entail significant problems.

Notes

- 1) Nihon Keizai Shimbun (Japan Economics Newspaper), Evening Edition, January 29, 2021, p. 1.
- 2) Nihon Keizai Shimbun (Japan Economics Newspaper), Morning Edition, February 13, 2021, p. 4.
- 3) This questionnaire survey was on the impact of a new coronavirus disease on single-parent households and was conducted by the Child Rearing Division of the Nara City Government.

- 4) The interviews and participatory research with Food Bank Biwako were conducted in December 2019 and in February, April, September, October, and November of 2020. The interviews and participatory research with Food Bank Nara and Nara City Hall were conducted in December 2020 and February 2021.
- 5) Discussions of food sovereignty have been featured in *Dialogues in Human Geography* 4(2) in 2014 and the *Critical Perspectives on Food Sovereignty, Critical Agrarian Studies Series* in 2016.
- 6) The “*Omi Issho* movement” is an initiative started in 2010 by the Youth Association of the Shiga Diocese of the *Jodo* sect to encourage temples of the *Jodo* sect in the prefecture to donate at least one *sho* (equivalent to 1.5kg) of “Buddhist rice” per temple. The rice is donated to food banks and children’s cafeterias that provide food support to the impoverished groups, as well as to the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and other disasters.
- 7) They collected about 350 food items in food drive activities held at the Shiga Prefectural Office in 2019, and delivered them to children’s cafeterias and households in need of assistance.
- 8) In general, surplus food handled by the food banks is expected to have a shelf-life of at least one or two months, although this varies according to the food bank.
- 9) For example, school lunch provisions such as chicken, fish cakes, bok choy, napa cabbage, shimeji mushrooms, enoki mushrooms, *mitsuba*, and so on (total weight of 1.2 tons) that were going to waste due to the temporary school closures were distributed to a total of 14 organizations, including volunteer groups, schools for foreigners, children’s cafeterias, children’s homes, self-reliance support facilities, and maternal and child welfare groups.
- 10) As an example of another activity, the Takashima City government has been running the “*Sampo-Yoshi* Rice Share Project” since May 2020. They send rice as a return gift to the donors who have paid taxes through the *Furusato Nozei* tax scheme. Through the project, the government accepts a donation of a part of the rice as a returned gift from taxpayers as *Osu-sowake*, and distributes it to people in need during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 11) Child-rearing households, in principle, are households that contain children under the age of 18. Child-rearing households with social and economic difficulties are defined herein as households receiving child-rearing allowance, quasi-protected households that are eligible for schooling assistance, and households receiving public assistance with children who are 18 years old or younger by March 31.
- 12) There were 867 households that applied, and the selection ratio was 1: 7.
- 13) According to a survey conducted by Food Bank Yamanashi, 73% of households have cut back on food expenses to save money, while 46% have reduced both the number of meals and amount of food they eat (Asahi Shimbun, March 14, 2021).
- 14) Food banks also play an environmental role by reusing and collecting surplus food, which can reduce food waste, the cost of processing food waste, and CO2 emissions. However, food banks do not necessarily promote the reduction of food loss in a fundamental manner. In Japan, the national government as well as society often expect food bank activities to reduce food loss, and such expectations may cause conflicts with the intended purpose of food bank activities.

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