

The coping continuum and acts reciprocity – a qualitative enquiry about household coping with food insecurity in Victoria, Australia

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Abstract

Objective: Food insecurity exists when a household has limited or uncertain access to food. This paper explores the strategies employed by households who are already accessing emergency and community food assistance to meet their food needs.

Method: Interviews to explore strategies used to mitigate food insecurity of people living in Victoria, Australia, between June 2018 and January 2019. Data were analysed thematically.

Results: Seventy-eight interviews were conducted. Analysis resulted in two themes highlighting the range of coping strategies employed to mitigate the impacts of food insecurity; broadly described as 1) the coping continuum and 2) coping reciprocity.

Conclusions: Food insecure households employ a range of strategies to secure food. Households that engage with the emergency and community food sector are described as in crisis or struggling, often skipping meals or reducing food consumed, or as coping and managing, characterised by bulking meals and growing food.

Implications for public health: Coping with food insecurity exists on a continuum from crisis to management and reciprocity. With the prevalence of food insecurity expected to increase, some of these coping strategies will need to be incorporated into the practice of emergency and community food providers to assist households to meet food needs.

Keywords: Coping, strategies, food insecurity, low-income, food aid, charity

Introduction

Food insecurity exists when a household has limited or uncertain access to food.¹ The experience of food insecurity can range from mild to severe, depending on the extent of the disruption to food consumption and the frequency with which households reduce food intake due to insufficient resources. Approximately 14% of Australian households experience food insecurity.² In Australia, food insecurity is related to poverty and low income, with many people who experience food insecurity also reliant on government financial assistance.³ There is also an emerging group of people experiencing food insecurity and hunger who are in some form of employment and include people who receive an unexpectedly large utility bill, experience poor health or who are unable to keep up with cost-of-living pressures.^{3–5}

Emergency and community food agencies are commonly employed to address the vulnerability and ongoing need of people who are hungry and food insecure. In Australia, the sector operates through formal and informal networks and comprises food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens and meal programs.⁶ A variety of charitable organisations provide food assistance to low-income households; these are both faith and non-faith based and can be financially supported by the government, receive donations, or both, with most agencies providing services to a diverse group.⁶ Foodbank Australia, Australia's largest re-distributor of community food, have reported an increase in the number of people accessing their services, with almost one million people receiving food from Foodbank each month in 2021.⁴ While emergency and community food services are an important part of the charitable system in Australia, they are not able to solve food insecurity for families and in general are not designed for long term use.⁷

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There is a body of research that has explored food insecurity and responses to food insecurity in Australia. This includes that of Mungai et al.⁸ who describe the experiences of people in regional Australia who access food assistance, finding that there is a great need for culturally appropriate food provision for this setting. There have been state-based explorations of emergency and community food assistance. McKay et al.⁵ conducted work in Victoria, finding that people who engage with the system of emergency and community food assistance experience multiple social disadvantages and are, in general, also in receipt of some form of government benefit. In recent work exploring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on food insecurity in Tasmania Kent et al.⁹ found that the pandemic exacerbated economic vulnerabilities and by disrupting food supplies, increased the risk of food insecurity for some parts of the populations. McNaughton et al.¹⁰ explored the experiences of people who engage with emergency food in South Australia, finding that shame and stigma are common experiences in the system of food charity despite attempts to make the system more dignified. While in Perth, West Australia, Pollard et al.¹¹ explored the capacity of charity food system to respond to food insecurity, finding that as a result of government spending on social welfare, the charity system has been forced to play a bigger role in responding to food insecurity.

Many people who rely on emergency and community food services report being food insecure.^{7,12} Experiences of shame and stigma for those who rely on emergency and community assistance are evident, highlighting the complex emotions related to asking for and receiving assistance.^{13–15} Coping strategies employed by households when food insecure include shifting dietary intake towards cheaper and often more obesogenic foods,¹⁶ over-consuming in times of food plenty and reducing intake in times of hardship,¹⁷ adjusting household budgets,¹⁸ taking out short-term loans or finding other ways to increase income,¹⁹ limiting portion size, maternal buffering (where a mother limits her own food intake to ensure her child has enough)^{20,21} and unorthodox acquisition practices, including 'dumpster diving' (a board term that is applied to forms of food waste recovery and scavenging) and stealing food.²² Although these studies provide valuable insights into the prevalence of certain practices and related risks, there are currently few studies that explore coping with food insecurity in the Australian context. This paper explores the strategies employed by households who are food insecure to meet their food needs.

Method

This research used qualitative methods to explore the experiences of people who are food insecure living in Victoria, Australia, between June 2018 and January 2019. The method for this research project has been published previously⁵. A summary is provided below. The Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval for this research (2018-053).

Sample and recruitment

Providers of emergency and community food assistance across Victoria, Australia, were used to recruit participants. An electronic copy of the plain language statement and flyer describing the study was provided to 35 agencies, individuals who were interested in participating in the research were directed to contact the research team to arrange an interview. Previous research⁷ suggests that any

adult accessing food assistance would be food insecure and, as such, suitable for inclusion in interviews.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via telephone or in person. Trained research assistants familiar with the emergency and community food settings conducted the interviews. An interview guide comprised of approximately 30 open- and closed-ended questions that explored a range of experiences related to food insecurity and hunger. Interviews consisted of the following four areas of investigation: i) Socioeconomic variables, including employment status, education attainment, welfare benefits currently receiving, country of birth, age, postcode; ii) food acquisition and managing on a low budget, including access to and use of food assistance (number of times visited, locations used, general experience) and coping strategies, impacts on adults and children in household; iii) engagement with the social security system and employment services, and employment history; and iv) food security assessed using the 18-item version of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Household Food Security Survey Module (HFSSM). Interviews ranged from 13 to 133 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service. Participants received an AUD\$20 supermarket gift card for their time.

Data analysis

Data were analysed thematically following the process described by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña.²³ Analysis was guided by the constant comparative method, where data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously. After reading and rereading the transcripts, patterns and themes were identified within the data. The research team met regularly during data collection and analysis to discuss the pertinent themes including the properties and details. Deep reading and immersion in the data allowed for the creation of codes and categories representing participants experiences when seeking food. The data were organised using NVivo software (version 12), where themes were named, evolved and refined through constant analysis. Data are presented as verbatim quotes; no attempts have been made to change or correct grammar or language used by participants. Gender and age are used in this paper to provide context to quotes presented in the results.

Results

Interviews with 78 people were conducted. A brief report of the sample is presented here, a detailed report of participant demographics and overarching results of the general experiences can be found elsewhere⁵. Most participants were female (n=57, 73.1%), average age of 52 years (SD 15.9), and had been accessing emergency and community food assistance for four years. Most participants reported low or very low food security (n=54, 67.5%), and almost all were in receipt of government welfare (n=75, 96.2%). Participants were recruited from both metropolitan (n=42, 54%) and regional (n=36, 46%) sites across Victoria. Analysis resulted in two key themes that highlight the range of coping strategies employed by people who are food insecure to mitigate hunger. These coping strategies can be broadly described as 1) a coping continuum characterised by the employment of strategies to cope with crisis and 2) coping

reciprocity, with examples of participants paying forward or paying back.

The coping continuum

In most cases, emergency and community food assistance was insufficient to meet household need. Participants described a range of strategies they employ to manage their limited food supply. Some participants described eating at fewer time points, rationing food, finding alternative food sources in addition to food assistance, and making constrained or limited food choices. These narratives are organised here in a way that demonstrates a coping continuum, summarised in [Figure 1](#).

Participants responded to food shortages by skipping one or two meals across the week, or by going a whole day without food. Some participants would regularly skip meals (for example, they may abstain from food until the evening), while others described employing this practice only in times of need. These were pragmatic decisions for all participants which were made to help them get through each day and extend their food provisions.

You just eat once a day and at times that once a day would be probably only half a meal because you know that you have to get through until the next day. Or you might have enough for a loaf of bread and that's all you eat ... You just do what you've got to do to feed your appetite at the time (male, aged 54).

This practice demonstrates how deep-rooted hunger and food insecurity is even for those who are regularly attending emergency and community food assistance. Skipping meals, either rarely or regularly, is an indicator of food insecurity and a sign that responses to food insecurity are not meeting needs. The most extreme form of this were respondents who regularly engaged in whole days of fasting.

I trained myself to just have water on four days in a month. That is how I'm coping nowadays. I make it a point that every Tuesday in a month, so just water and the next day I feel very hungry (female, age not provided).

Participants spoke about how they source food. Some participants described times when they could ask a friend or family member for a

meal. Others, however, preferred going hungry to asking family for help, especially if they were uncertain of the answer.

[I] just go a couple of days without food, and then if I'm coming here [to the food bank], I'll get food here, or if I have a friend and I'm really, really, desperate I can go to them, but I don't like doing that... And sometimes my son's dad, if he's in a good mood, he'll look through his cupboard and see what's not going to be used and give it to us (female, aged 46).

Participants described times when they had increased autonomy over the food choices. However, even during these times, the choices were limited or constrained by low financial resources, were often not the most nutritious foods, or were not what participants wanted to eat. This included, for example, foods of convenience rather than foods that might be more nutritious.

We usually just buy a lot of the cheap two-minute noodles, pasta, rice, what else usually, like eggs and bread. We don't usually buy fruit, vegetables, we don't – whatever is sort of cheap at the time that we can get. If things are on special, we might grab it or whatever but, we don't – we eat pretty plain actually. We don't sit down and have like three veg sort of – or we might have cheap meat pies or cheap lasagnes (female, aged 46).

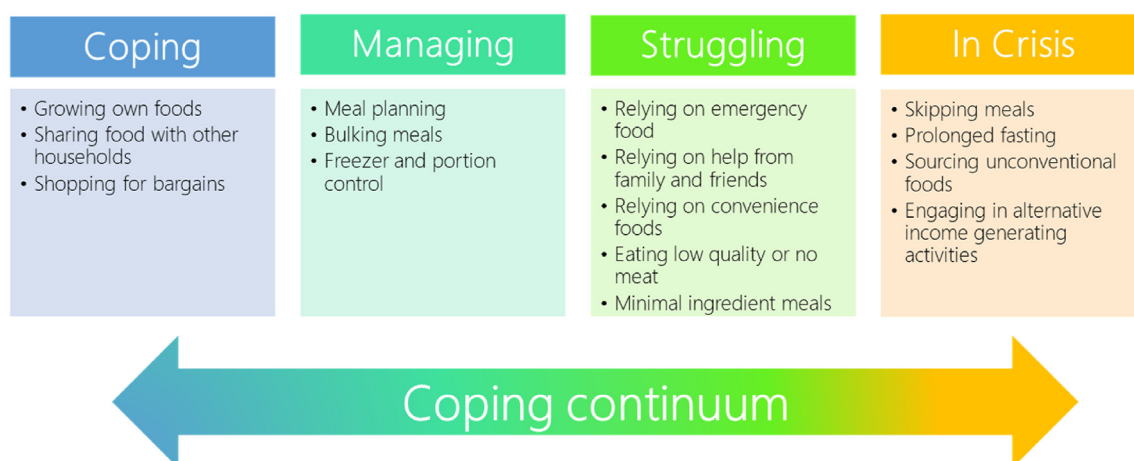
While participants were generally pragmatic about what they were and were not able to eat, many described wanting more variety in their diet, especially when it came to meat. Participants reported purchasing low cost and often low-quality meat products.

You know [I'm] trying to limit [my spending]. If I have to, I will go over with meat, but mainly it's for meat, like fish and chicken. I can't afford - oh and mince - I can't afford steaks and stuff because they're too expensive. I haven't bought chicken for a while actually, just because chicken's quite expensive at the moment too. But fish is alright, like I can get fish on special or frozen fish (female, aged 33).

Bulking out food was common, with participants meeting their desire for meat by making vegetable-based meals with a small amount of meat.

I'd like to have more steak ... And roasts, I like to have roast lamb and roast pork and roast chicken, and I haven't been able to afford those...I mean, now it's soups made from vegetables with a little bit of meat thrown in (male, aged 63).

Figure 1: The coping continuum for food insecure households.



Participants described strategies they employed to create meals from the few items available to them. Most of these examples included pasta, bread, eggs, and tinned items. If they were able to include vegetables, participants were unlikely to purchase fresh vegetables as these are more costly and may not last as long.

Well, you buy the cheapest mince. You buy pasta. You buy maybe, say, a chicken breast or something like that and you'd buy some sauce and rice. Not many fresh vegies. Oh, you'd buy your vegies but it'd be frozen so they could last. And you just learnt to turn all that into a few meals. Instead of making small batches, you made big batches and froze it (male, aged 54).

Described so far are the experiences of those who were in crisis, living week-to-week and often having to resort to drastic measures like going without food to manage their budget. While relying on emergency and community food, some participants had incorporated a range of strategies that meant, despite very low incomes, they were able to balance their finances. These participants described alternative ways of coping with food shortages, the significant planning that goes into their meal preparation, and the ways that they managed their food supply in times of hardship.

Many participants described how they planned their meals. This included traveling to different locations to purchase the most cost-effective foods, meal planning to limit food waste and growing their own foods. These participants described their enjoyment of cooking, which made it easier to put the work into finding food.

I enjoy cooking and so I need the ingredients for the soups and so on ... if you put some effort into it, you can get a good meal. And I'm the kind of person who enjoys - I don't eat meat [because it's too expensive] ... I set out at the beginning of the week; I can only go shopping once a week. But my planning is also to the extent that I know when to go to the supermarket to get things when they're reduced (female, aged 64).

These participants had developed strategies that meant they were savvy when shopping and knew where and when to get food that was discounted or on sale. This might have taken a little extra time, but they were able to dedicate this time to have the foods they wanted at the prices they could afford.

We can go into Not Quite Right (NQR), which is discount food there. And we can pick up a few bits and pieces. Some frozen foods there. Frozen foods and a bit of cheese and anything that we don't get in the parcel. So, we're keeping our costing down (male, aged 63).

While participants were aware that these stores often stocked mislabelled or surplus foods, they were comfortable purchasing from discount stores as, unlike some of the foods they received from emergency and community food agencies, they did not have to worry that the food would be out of date.

I can put in my fridge or in the cupboard and know that it hasn't been out of date for six months or a year. Although I mean I do go to NQR ... and there's stuff there that's near the expiry date but that's what you end up doing, that's what you have to do. I can get yoghurt there, I can get a kilo of yoghurt... at NQR for \$1 or \$2, whereas if you go to the supermarket, you'd be paying \$5 or \$6 for exactly the same item (female, aged 64).

Participants also engaged in bargain shopping at 'mainstream' supermarkets, making sure that they were getting the best deals and the most value for their money.

I always buy home brand or the cheapest. I always look at the value for money, you know this one's got more if it's, you know if

something's got more, it's like five cents extra or whatever I'll get that one or if it's on special I'll get two for one. If things are half price, I'll get two (female, aged 33)

These participants were very aware of food prices and would modify their shopping behaviours to have foods that they liked while staying within budget.

I get my bread for nothing. I get most of my greens for nothing. The only thing I've got to buy then now is some meat, cheese, and milk powder because that works out to 56 cents a litre. See when I buy cheese, I buy a kilo block and it costs me \$6.49 and its beautiful tasty cheese from Aldi and you slice it thin ... and it'll last me for a month, a kilo of cheese! A kilo of skim milk powder will last me a month. You know, everything I work out that it lasts me a month... You pay a bit more to start off with but if you work it out over the long term you save a lot of money (male, aged 71).

Participants described the range of other practical activities used to stretch their food budget or the food they were provided through emergency and community food assistance. Many participants described bulking out meals that they got with cheaper vegetables or tinned beans or other legumes. These activities helped participants stretch their food for more than one meal and even if the meals that resulted were smaller than the original, this was considered a successful activity.

I try and work so that I can somehow get several meals from it but it's really hard. If I've got an apple or something I'll dice that up and I might add some of the yogurt to it and split the little yogurt cups, only a 125-gram tub, but it's better than nothing and I'll divide that into two meals (female, aged 57).

Participants who had access to a freezer were skilled and prepared for these activities and were always thinking about how they could portion out the meal they were cooking and eat it another day, reducing food waste and saving themselves time and money.

When I've got left-over bolognese sauce that always goes straight in the freezer. When I make it, I make enough of what I'm having, instead of using half I cook it all up, use what I've got to use and then freeze the rest for another meal for spaghetti bolognese or something like that (male, aged not provided)

Finally, some participants described gardening and growing vegetables and herbs that could be used to enhance the flavours of the food they purchased and obtained through food aid.

I've got some herbs growing but yeah, the reason why I decided to join the garden group is that from them we receive free seeds ... So, I grow things from seeds, but I also like to just let the garden grow whatever it's got in there because I compost everything in my garden beds. So, this year I got pumpkins but I'm down to my last one and I really love using stuff from my own garden (female, aged 64).

Coping reciprocity

Participants described a range of ways that they engaged in reciprocity with other users of emergency and community food assistance and with other members of their community. This included helping others in need and repaying the donations they received.

Paying it forward

Participants were aware of the help they received and how a little help can go a long way for someone who is in need. Participants

described the range of activities that they engaged with that could be described as paying it forward or helping people in situations of crisis.

Usually there's something I get off my daughters and that, they don't use, because kids are a bit fussy today and usually I won't use it so I take it to the food bank and there's a table there and whoever wants to help themselves, they do that (female, aged 73).

While participants in this study were on low incomes, they described sharing financial resources with people that they considered in greater need.

There's a lady. I sent her \$70. Her marriage is on the rocks. She's homeless because her husband's kicked her out. And she says she has to put aside scraps for her kids to eat and when - and she does work - and she talks about everybody goes for a cup of tea after they drop their kids off at school, and she can't even afford a cup of tea. And she has to - she says she's living in the back of her car, and the kids hate it (male, aged 62).

Participants also described sharing food resources, including food that was purchased and food that was received from emergency and community food.

I've got a couple of friends who go to food banks or help out. So, whenever I get a box of food I take out whatever I'm going to use and whatever I'm not going to use I either give to my family or I give to my friends, help them out as well (female, aged 33).

Participants who had a garden or who were involved in a community garden spoke of sharing the surplus food from their gardens.

We try to grow a lot of our own stuff and we take it like to our teenagers' group, our church group - mustard green and spinach and silver beet and all that sort of stuff and hot chillies. We always take - whatever we grow, we share. And someone else there gives me lemons (female, aged 70+).

Others described a more comprehensive or formalised bartering system that involved several parties.

I've been taking their green waste from them and the bread that they cannot give away, I pick that up and I take it to an elderly lady who has got a small farm, she's got chooks and a goat, you know, and she's on a pension. So I take that to her and she gives me a dozen eggs now and then. ... So it's like a barter system. I very seldom have to buy eggs (male, aged 71).

Paying it back

Participants described the ways that they would informally 'pay back' the donations or assistance that they had received, with some slightly more prosperous through changes in welfare payments or other financial situations, or when they were in a situation where they had greater control over their lives.

I volunteered at Lentil as Anything because they gave me a couple of free feeds there when I was kind of in the middle of it all (female, aged 43).

Participants made suggestions about how the system of emergency and community food assistance could be more sustainable if there was a gold coin donation or some small token payment. The suggestion here was this could possibly lead to the provision of higher quality foods.

I would be happy - I give a donation here but I would be happy to be told "You have to pay \$4 or \$5 for a bag of groceries" as they do in some other places, so long as it's nice stuff (female, aged 64).

Others had become involved in volunteering in the emergency and community food agency and were engaged in the various arms of the charity.

I used it quite a bit to start off with but, since I've been coming here and that, well I'm involved with - they run the pizza oven at the market, so I volunteer my time for about three hours once a month Sundays. Got quite heavily involved in the community garden with them, and just found a network of people in here (male, aged 54).

Some were thinking about a time in the future when they could be more engaged in paying it back, knowing what they know about how valuable the service is, they were interested helping others out in the future.

The first thing that I was going in my head when I was looking at all the canned stuff and all the food, one of the things that was going on in my head right at that time was I can't wait to give back. So, I can't wait 'til I get a job in full time because I want those shelves to be a bit more full for other people... I didn't realise I needed that until I was there (female, aged 50).

Discussion

This study shows that households who are food insecure employ a range of coping strategies to secure food, some of which are highly problematic for the promotion of good physical and mental health. Coping strategies ranged from those which were practical and potentially health promoting, for example, bulking out meals with legumes or additional vegetables, to behavioural and more extreme 'in crisis' activities, including skipping meals or reducing the amount of food consumed. All participants in this study were reliant on emergency and community food assistance, however, in most cases, this was insufficient to meet household need; participant's experiences in these settings are detailed elsewhere.^{5,15,24} A major implication of these results is that the emergency and community food system is plainly not able to meet the demands of those in need. The rise in chronic food insecurity and poverty forced many households to rely on charity, which was never designed to be a long-term solution and triggered other sub-optimal strategies to make ends meet. This has been further compounded by the increase in the number of people accessing these services. From the 2008/9 to 2019/20 financial year emergency and community food services increased their redistribution of food from just under 20,000 tonnes of food⁶ to just under 80,000 tonnes of food.²⁵ Food charities and providers of emergency and community assistance are estimating that with an increase in cost of living and rising employment insecurity, the number of people who are in need will continue to increase.²⁶ This will result in an increased number of people accessing emergency and community food assistance and will lead to an increase in the number of people who are employing a range of strategies to manage their limited food supply.

Program and policy interventions that support the health-promoting coping strategies, characterised in this study as 'coping', 'managing' and 'reciprocity' would help buffer the challenges ahead. Such strategies might include the increased provision by emergency and community food assistance agencies of regular access to supermarket vouchers, prepared meals and pantry items and/or garden seedlings in addition to greater availability of food that can be prepared at home.^{27,28} Such strategies have been found to enable choice and autonomy in what foods that are taken for their family as well as providing options about what they can keep for themselves or share/

trade with others.^{29,30} Additional strategies could involve low-cost food co-operatives, social enterprises and community-led retail initiatives that support paid and voluntary roles for clients.^{31,32} Strengthening strategies that exist in the 'coping' and 'managing' aspects of the continuum may assist individuals before they reach the state of crisis. In addition, systemic action on root causes of poverty and nutrition inequities will need to be addressed in any strategy to address growing community food insecurity and hunger.

Much of the research that has explored the strategies employed by people who are hungry and food insecure comes from low- and middle-income countries,^{33–35} with a smaller amount of research coming from the high-income countries.^{36,37} Regardless of the location of the study, with the exception of extreme famines and major political unrest, many of the coping strategies used by households globally are largely the same and fit into the patterns described here. For example, participants in a study in Kenya, Namibia and Tanzania³³ were found to be reducing their food intake and seeking food from a greater diversity of places, a study from Nigeria found participants reduced their food consumption during times when they were under financial strain,³⁴ while a study from Indonesia³⁵ identified eating less preferred foods as one way to manage with food shortage. Likewise a study from the USA³⁶ found that food insecure households shopped for food strategically to get the best value, a strategy that has been found to be both a reaction to household food insecurity and a way to avoid it,³⁸ while a different study from the USA¹⁷ found that in addition to strategic shopping, food insecure participants relied on family, friends and other community members for their food needs. Complementing this is an Australian study finding that food insecure participants engage in coping strategies not in response to a perceived crisis, but as a 'common sense' approach to their current situation, one that could be adopted long-term, a reflection of the increasingly chronic nature of food insecurity.³⁷

Limitations

This article has highlighted the coping strategies employed by food insecure Victorians who are accessing emergency and community food assistance. While there are clear findings, there are limitations that need to be taken into consideration. Participants were self-selecting and only recruited from one state. There may be perspective from other services or states that are absent here. We did not explicitly document all coping strategies employed by participants, but rather allowed these to come up organically in conversation; as such, there may be strategies in addition those described here that are employed. While the sample was large for a qualitative study, the qualitative approach means that the analysis has been informed by the experience and knowledge of the research team. Finally, interviews were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and there is no doubt that the emergency and community food sector has been impacted by the pandemic with the precarious situation of many of the participants being further compounded.

Conclusion

This study contributes to our knowledge about food insecurity and those who access emergency and community food assistance in Australia. The results of this study suggest that coping when food insecure exists on a continuum from crisis to management and then

on to reciprocity. With food insecurity tipped to increase, it may be that some of these coping strategies will need to be incorporated into the practice of emergency and community food providers to assist households to make up the short fall in their food supply in the absence of increased government support.

Funding

No funding was obtained for this study.

Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Patients signed informed consent regarding publishing their data.

Conflict of interest

All authors have worked in paid and unpaid roles with not-for-profit food security organisations.

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