

Stream #18

Food Insecurity and Food Assistance: The Need for Social Policy

Conveners:

- Susana Brissos, University of Lisbon
- Fábio Rafael Augusto, University of Lisbon

Food insecurity has become an increasingly visible yet insufficiently addressed dimension of social hardship across Europe. While poverty, inequality, and social exclusion occupy a central place in debates on the future of the European Social Model, difficulties in securing adequate and dignified access to food often remain analytically marginal and politically underdeveloped. Recent increases in the cost of living, particularly in housing, food, and energy, have intensified vulnerability across diverse socioeconomic groups, exposing the limitations of existing social protection mechanisms in safeguarding basic needs.

The Portuguese case illustrates how quickly food insecurity can escalate in a context of eroded purchasing power, high housing costs, and the limited redistributive capacity of social transfers. As households face increasingly tight budgets, food becomes one of the few adjustable expenses, leading to compromised nutritional adequacy or reliance on food assistance. In response, food banks, charitable organisations, and community-based initiatives have expanded significantly, often operating in close articulation with public programmes. These developments point to the consolidation of hybrid food assistance systems, in which responsibility for addressing food insecurity is shared between the state and third sector organisations.

While such hybrid arrangements can mitigate immediate hardship, they also raise important questions for social policy analysis concerning coordination, equity, dignity, and accountability. The growing institutionalisation of third sector provision risks normalising emergency-based responses and obscuring the structural drivers of food insecurity, including inadequate income protection and rising living costs. From a social policy perspective, this shift challenges traditional understandings of welfare state responsibility and social citizenship.

This stream invites contributions that place food insecurity and the policy responses developed to address it, including food assistance, at the centre of

social policy analysis, in line with ESPAnet's commitment to comparative, theoretically informed, and empirically grounded research. It welcomes papers examining how food assistance policies are designed, governed, and experienced across different welfare regimes, and how these arrangements shape, mediate, or sometimes reproduce food insecurity. Particular attention is given to welfare hybridity, policy design, and implementation processes at the intersection of state and third-sector provision. By foregrounding food insecurity as a core dimension of social protection, and food assistance as a key site of policy intervention, the stream aims to advance debates on the capacities, limits, and future directions of European welfare states in addressing basic needs under conditions of economic and social change.