

The Micropolitics of Care: Exploring Municipal Support for Community-Based Food Assistance Initiatives in Amsterdam Noord

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Abstract

Reforms in state care provision have increased reliance on community initiatives to address food insecurity and poverty across high-income countries. Community-driven food assistance initiatives (FAIs) have emerged as spaces of ‘embodied care’, fostering trust, solidarity and reciprocity among volunteers and recipients. Yet while research often studies the care provided within FAIs, less attention has been paid to how their care practices are shaped by local governance. This article examines the micropolitics of care in Amsterdam Noord, asking how changes in municipal support for FAIs affected the type and quality of care provided by and through these initiatives, and their relationships with social welfare organizations (SWOs). It draws on in-depth interviews conducted in 2023–2024 with FAI recipients and volunteers, social workers, municipal staff, NGOs and funders. The findings show that FAIs provide more-than-food support through attentiveness, familiarity and shared lived experience, while also acting as trusted bridges to more institutional forms of care provided through local welfare provision. However, newly introduced funding requirements for FAIs risked institutionalising their otherwise informal and relational care practices by introducing standardization, conditionality and distance into volunteer–recipient and SWO–recipient interactions. Ambiguity surrounding these changes further threatened fragile relationships of trust between FAIs and SWOs, weakening bridges between embodied and institutionalized forms of care. The article contributes to sociological debates on recipient positioning, food charity, welfare governance and food justice by showing

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how welfare retrenchment is negotiated through everyday care relations, and how municipal support can both enable and undermine the care-full food justice potential of community-driven food assistance.

Keywords

Amsterdam, care, food assistance initiatives, micropolitics, welfare

Introduction

Austerity measures following the 2008 financial crisis severely impacted state care provision across North America and Europe (Theodore, 2020). State care services, such as social welfare services and benefits, turned into commodities provided by business-like organizations (Chatzidakis et al., 2025; Farris & Marchetti, 2017). The burden of care shifted largely from the state to the individual and voluntary organizations (Chatzidakis et al., 2025; Colebrooke et al., 2023), making those who already live in precarious conditions even more prone to a lack of access or ability to care (Gabauer et al., 2022). These processes have been amplified by, among others, the COVID-19 pandemic (Branicki, 2020) and profit-oriented real estate urban development adversely impacting tenants' care practices (E. R. Power & Mee, 2020) and healthcare access (Cole et al., 2021).

But cities are also where new forms of care can emerge (E. R. Power & Williams, 2020). Community-driven food assistance initiatives (FAIs) are now widely recognized as crucial urban care spaces (Clope et al., 2017; M. J. Williams, 2017). Many of them disrupt long-standing criticisms of food banks as state welfare extensions entrenching the corporate food system (Poppendieck, 1994; Riches, 2002). FAIs can operate food banks (Surman et al., 2021), but also, for instance, food provisioning for rough sleepers (Midgley, 2016) or social kitchens (Augusto, 2024), and are often run by (working class) people with lived experience of food insecurity and precarity, rather than middle class volunteers – not uncommon in food banks (Caplan, 2016; Surman et al., 2021). Besides the fact that FAIs can offer immediate relief from food insecurity – a lack of consistent access to safe, nutritious food (Food and Agricultural Organization [FAO], 2020) – their informality and sense of familiarity can also disrupt traditional, paternalistic volunteer–recipient dynamics in food banks (Taylor et al., 2024). Instead, FAIs can cultivate relationships of trust, solidarity and reciprocity (Augusto, 2024; Surman et al., 2021). This has also allowed FAI volunteers to be the trusted first points of contact to (re-)connect food-insecure people with state-led care (e.g. Poulos et al., 2023), supporting the state to ensure the 'right to food' that many sociologists have long called for, combining food with income, health and social policymaking (Riches & Silvasti, 2014).

FAIs, however, cannot alone take on the responsibility to ensure the right to food. For this, they need to be embedded in governance arrangements that do not treat them as mere symptoms of food insecurity, but support their care work, alongside practices of material and symbolic redistribution by the state (Gabauer et al., 2022). Yet studies have mainly focused on the quality and types of care within these initiatives. Little is written about how their governance contexts affect their ability to care (Augusto, 2024). For instance, funders and municipalities can severely impact FAI operations (Regnier-Davies

& Edge, 2024), especially when they ignore redesigning food and wider support services (Milbourne, 2024). Research is thus needed that considers ‘the broader governing practices . . . that inform care practice’ (E. R. Power & Williams, 2020, p. 7), specifically on how municipalities and local welfare organizations support FAIs (or not) (Thompson et al., 2018). This could illuminate the power that state support yields over the on-the-ground care work (e.g. May et al., 2006), and so the potential for both food and care justice (M. J. Williams, 2022). While some research examined how (local) governance already shapes FAI operations (Mitchell et al., 2025; Regnier-Davies & Edge, 2024; M. J. Williams et al., 2024) and other care practices of, for instance, housing associations, gardens and charities (Colebrooke et al., 2023; Kotsila et al., 2020; May et al., 2006), no studies to date examine how governance can impact care provided by/through FAIs.

This article thus focuses on the micropolitics of care: how the type and quality of local care provision by and through FAIs are shaped by how FAIs are locally governed. It takes the case of the northern district of Amsterdam. In response to rising food insecurity since COVID-19, Amsterdam’s municipality has provided and coordinated support to connect FAIs with municipal social welfare organizations (SWOs). We show how changes in municipality(-coordinated) support for FAIs in Amsterdam over the past years have simultaneously enabled and undermined the type and quality of care provided by and through FAIs. We demonstrate how such support reconfigures relationships between institutionalized and embodied forms of care. In doing so, this article contributes to sociological debates on food charity, welfare governance and care and food justice.

Institutionalized or Embodied: The Micropolitics of Food-Related Care

Studies on food security typically focus on the availability and accessibility of sufficient and nutritious food, and on people’s stable ability to utilize it (FAO, 2020). Food banks are then a legitimate solution to such problems (Bazerghi et al., 2016). However, this view has been critiqued as obscuring the fact that food insecurity is a structural, justice and rights issue (Jarosz, 2014; Riches, 2011). Along these lines ‘right to food’ discourses have long emphasized the state’s obligation to guarantee food security. However, such discourses have also been criticized as not acknowledging the role and opportunities lying within civil society (Lambek & Claeys, 2016; Mowbray, 2007; Narula, 2015; Schwartz & Caspi, 2023). Furthermore, implicit critique has come from scholars highlighting the importance of everyday care work that grassroots civil organizations do, and how crucial this is to achieve food justice. Our focus on the micropolitics of care precisely builds on these criticisms to put more emphasis on the dynamics of care within grassroots organizations and how this contributes to food security and justice.

FAIs can nurture urban food justice, not only by aspiring to equitable food access for all urban residents regardless of their socio-economic status or background (Bedore, 2010), but also by doing so *care-fully*, when they support disenfranchised groups who face systemic social exclusion and discrimination through addressing deeper histories, traumas and drivers of marginalization and vulnerability (Bedore, 2010; M. J. Williams, 2022). As such, FAIs can promote what M. J. Williams (2022, p. 42) calls *care-full food justice*, by exemplifying the ‘inter-dependence of care and justice expressed through grounded responses to

the injustices of food systems'. With Williams we broadly understand care as a relational, ongoing process, foundational to justice 'defined by diverse practices involved with maintaining and repairing the world' (Alam & Houston, 2020, p. 2).

Recognizing care beyond the personal/private sphere makes it important to examine its micropolitics, meaning how care is organized, negotiated and distributed through everyday, relational and informal ways (Zechner, 2021). Micropolitics is about how global power structures are experienced locally, or in other words, how they are lived, reproduced and contested through day-to-day practices, often coming to light in moments of tension (Morley, 1999; Rasch & Köhne, 2016). We can apply micropolitics both to the sphere within FAIs (e.g. how volunteer–recipient relationships are affected by external pressures) and among FAIs and other (in)formal organizations. Importantly, this does not replace, but complements, structural critiques of FAIs, examining how such critiques can be experienced and challenged locally, for instance if FAIs serve as incubators and/or prefigurations of care-full food justice (Augusto, 2024; E. R. Power & Williams, 2020). To capture micropolitical tensions in everyday care practices, we further conceptualize two (non-exclusive) perspectives on care provision: institutionalized and embodied.

First, we see *institutional care* as resembling Foucault's analysis of pastoral care (Foucault, 2007), where care is provided one-directionally and top-down. As a response to the 'hollowing out' of welfare in many Global North contexts, an ethics of care as a public good redistributed by the state has been proposed to counter neoliberal austerity and economic crisis-driven individualization and un-caring institutions (Tronto, 2013). However, such idealizations are quite distinct from how state institutions actually provide care or support to others doing care work. Indeed, the state as a care-giving pastor has been scrutinized through a Foucauldian lens, as it reinforces state control over individual bodies by managing population health and the broader conditions of life (M. Power & Small, 2021).

When brought to the scale of food banks, Möller (2021, p. 855) stresses how there is the risk to 'idealise an ethics of care while obscuring the productive features of a pastoral power in guiding the conduct of both "clients" and volunteers'. Such pastoral power can dominate food banks through 'bureaucratic systems that play a central part in their operations' (May et al., 2019, p. 1261), which in turn shape intangible but care-defining aspects, such as the cultivation of suspicion of, rather than trust in, institutions, and stigmatization instead of empowerment for those seeking help. E. R. Power et al. (2022, p. 1174) similarly recognize that practices with the intent of care are not always, in fact, 'caring', and can counter diverse forms of care. For example, state institutions on which FAIs often depend might define how much FAIs can circumvent state agendas (Regnier-Davies & Edge, 2024), and thus also what types of care they can provide.

Second, we see *embodied care* as promoting 'social relationships of mutuality and trust rather than one-way dependence' (Alam & Houston, 2020, p. 2, citing Lawson, 2007, p. 3). Embodied care is reciprocally experienced and performed among care givers and receivers, rather than an abstract, transactional service translated into disembodied and controlling resources. With care like this, FAIs turn into spaces of collectivity, connection and interdependence between volunteers and recipients (Alam & Houston, 2020; M. J. Williams et al., 2024), or what Tronto (2013) called spaces of 'caring with'. FAIs can indeed be seen as spaces of 'quotidian, small, everyday acts of care and repair that make incremental steps towards redressing [food] injustice "in the meantime"' (M. J.

Williams, 2022, p. 44), which can also connect to more institutionalized forms of care through partnerships with welfare, social and health services (e.g. Poulos et al., 2023).

It is important to note that institutional and embodied care are not easily distinguishable across more formal settings, like the state, and more informal settings, like FAIs. Just as institutionalized care might trickle down into FAIs, for instance, because of their dependence on funders, embodied care can figure in state(-controlled) institutions. Furthermore, these perspectives on care are not new to sociology. Fine (2005) already identified how institutionalized, one-directional care had been making space for care based on relationships, community and solidarity, and warned how this shift was used to legitimize welfare austerity politics particularly harmful to those dependent on state care provision. Yet these perspectives have to our knowledge not been brought to the scale of care provision by/through food assistance and its local governing practices. So, recognizing the importance of care to food justice, and of understanding power related to food system dynamics at the micro-level, we find it crucial to examine food-related care micropolitics, looking at possible tensions between institutionalized and embodied forms of care provided by/through FAIs situated in their local governance context.

Food Assistance and its Municipal Support in Amsterdam Noord

This article focuses on Amsterdam's northern city area, Amsterdam Noord, a 'strongly urban area' where it is estimated that one-fifth of residents experience food insecurity, mostly because of low income levels (cf. Veldkamp & van der Hoeve, 2024). In Noord, a relatively high number of people live below the national poverty line (De Hoon et al., 2025) and in what the municipality calls 'vulnerable positions' (Gemeente Amsterdam [GA], 2019). Noord's residents are indeed among the most vulnerable to food insecurity across Amsterdam's metropolitan region (Smolders et al., 2023). Noord is currently home to (at least) 11 FAIs (Buurtverbinders, 2023), 18% of the total initiatives in Amsterdam (see Van Erp, 2021), while housing 12% of Amsterdam's residents (GA, n.d.a.). FAIs serve around one-sixteenth of Noord's residents (Luger & van der Meij, 2025) and were set up for many different reasons, mainly to address food unaffordability or waste. They do share two common characteristics, which is why we have focused our study specifically on FAIs in Noord.

First, FAIs in Noord are all relatively *informal*. They operate with little to no eligibility requirements or support from formal organizations (see Welschen et al., 2018), and most are entirely volunteer run. They are thus different from the one *formal* food charity in Noord, Voedselbank, the official food aid partner of the municipality, and a local branch of a national NGO. Voedselbank determines recipients'¹ eligibility with social workers from Buurtteam, the umbrella organization of local SWOs (see below), by checking bank statements, proof of income/benefits, ID and proof of basic costs (Leefkringhuis, n.d.). Second, Noord's FAIs all seem to do more than food provision. While empirical insight on FAIs in Amsterdam is lacking, which this article addresses, Welschen et al. (2020) did study how similar initiatives in Noord perform 'hidden voluntary social work': unpaid, invisible, community-driven care work.

FAIs in Noord interact with formal organizations, like municipality branches and NGOs (see Figure 1), in several ways. Municipality-run SWOs that support people's

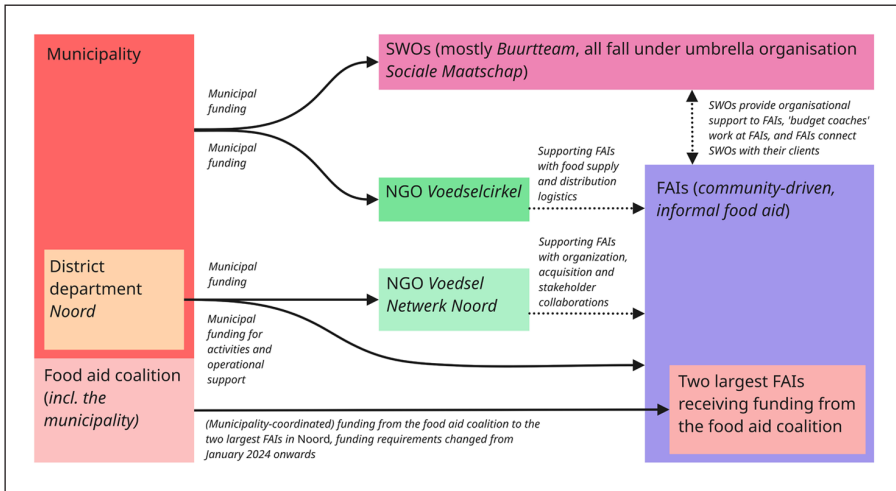


Figure 1. Overview of organizations (in)directly involved with food assistance and social care in Noord. Solid lines indicate financial support; dotted lines indicate non-financial support.

health, personal development, and assist with income and debt issues, have been supporting and collaborating with FAIs since 2020 (Samen Noord, 2021). Most SWOs have, since 2021, been brought under, or started to collaborate closely with, Buurtteam, an Amsterdam-wide organization with a branch in Noord. Buurtteam is a one-stop-shop for social services (GA, 2024b) and carries out eligibility screenings for Voedselbank, as noted above. Buurtteam is, together with other organizations, part of an umbrella organization called Sociale Maatschap, which coordinates a programme where Buurtteam-employed 'budget coaches', social workers specialized in financial, employment or benefits issues, assist with food distribution and support FAIs to access funding, in return for budget coaches getting close to FAI recipients. Sociale Maatschap reported that its partner organizations increasingly rely on this collaboration because of austerity pressures (De Sociale Maatschap, 2024).

Furthermore, most FAIs receive funding from the city district department for various activities (e.g. events, workshops) (GA, n.d.b.) and support with funding or permit applications (GA, 2024a). Two local NGOs receive municipal funding to support FAIs: Voedselcirkel assists FAIs with logistical operations, and Voedsel Netwerk Noord is a support and advocacy group for FAIs, whose meetings are also attended by SWO employees and municipal staff (Buurtverbinders, 2023). The two largest FAIs in Noord have received support from a food aid coalition active since the COVID-19 pandemic (Rode Kruis Amsterdam-Amstelland, 2023). This coalition consists of implementation partners (the Red Cross and Human Aid Now, an NGO supporting food distribution logistics), the municipality as main funder², and other funders (GA, 2022). Crucially, this support changed over time. Initially, the coalition provided vouchers that FAIs could use to distribute food at weekly food banks (Rode Kruis Amsterdam-Amstelland, 2022). From January 2024, people only have to go to an FAI once to collect a digital food

voucher they can independently use at supermarkets for six months (Rode Kruis Amsterdam-Amstelland, 2025).

The dynamics in Noord between FAIs, SWOs and the food aid coalition are situated in the context of Dutch welfare reform. Since the 2015 Social Support Act (*Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning*), municipalities have increased responsibility for welfare provision, following the decentralization of Dutch welfare (Kampen et al., 2020). Individuals are now expected to ‘participate’ in society and rely on family or community networks before turning to state welfare, while social workers increasingly struggle with the complexity of welfare provision (Dibbets et al., 2021; Jansen et al., 2021). Simultaneously, Dutch austerity politics have led to cutbacks to local care infrastructures (see Janssen et al., 2016). Amsterdam’s municipal involvement with FAIs thus reflects national social policy developments: care initiatives like FAIs fill gaps left by state decentralization and austerity, while simultaneously being shaped by municipal influence and funding.

Methods

Following background research for a project under which this study was conducted, we selected Amsterdam Noord as an area where food insecurity is widespread (see Smolders et al., 2023). Data collection included 24 semi-structured interviews conducted between June 2023 and April 2024 and participant observation by Author 1 through volunteering at three FAIs (June 2023) and attending a grassroots network meeting of FAIs (May 2023) and a municipality event with FAIs (October 2023).

Since interviewees often had multiple affiliations, they were grouped into six categories: people with personal experiences of food insecurity (6); volunteers at FAIs (11); professionals at SWOs (6); professionals involved with the food aid coalition (7); and professionals organizing collaborations between FAIs and SWOs (8). Interviews lasted 40–90 minutes, focusing on people’s own experiences and the more structural causes of food insecurity, how FAIs address food insecurity, the challenges that they face in doing so, and the strategies they employ to address these challenges. Following the Code of Ethics of Author 1’s university and the guidelines of the wider project, no ethical review was needed for this study (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2019). All interviewees participated on a voluntary basis and provided informed consent prior to data collection. To ensure confidentiality, all names and identifying details have been anonymized, and interviewees are referred to through coded identifiers (see the Appendix). We provided compensation for interviewees’ participation through our project.

Interviews were transcribed and coded using ATLAS.ti 25. Coding followed interpretive thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2022; see also Finlay, 2021). Data collection and analysis proceeded simultaneously. Transcripts were first subjected to open coding, identifying concepts line by line informed by our research question. Through constant comparison, codes were grouped into categories during axial coding. Selective coding then helped identify core categories and integrate them into a coherent explanatory framework. Theoretical sampling guided further data collection until theoretical saturation was achieved, resulting in core themes forming the basis for the results section: (1) the (institutional/embodied) care provided by, and the relationships between, FAIs and SWOs; and (2) the impact of municipality(-coordinated) support, in particular funding changes, on (institutional/embodied) care.

In line with Soss (2015), we did not treat interview statements as neutral but recognized that interviewees' perspectives on care and municipality(-coordinated) support can vary, while aiming to build a 'more meaningful whole' out of individual comments. Importantly, while four interviewees were (former) FAI recipients, accounts of recipients' experiences are also expressed from the standpoint of FAI volunteers and professionals engaging closely with recipients. As our concept of embodied care precisely challenges a strict dichotomy between actors who move between positions of care giving and receiving, we analysed both perspectives to understand how care is understood and practised. Furthermore, perspectives on care were notably similar across interviewee groups. Interviewees rather differed in how they perceived changes in municipality(-coordinated) support and its impacts on care. To enhance the credibility of our analysis, we collected feedback on preliminary findings at an event for FAIs (November 2023) and verified our manuscript through expert interviews with the current lead researcher on the project (March 2025) and a community representative working with FAIs, SWOs and municipal officers (April 2025) (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Municipality-Supported Food Assistance in Amsterdam Noord: Between Embodied and Institutionalized Care

We first organize our findings around FAIs in Amsterdam Noord as spaces of embodied care, which, based on what many interviewees described, differs from the more institutionalized care provided by SWOs. We find that collaborations between SWOs and FAIs appear to have tentatively diffused this gap. We then explore how changes in municipality(-coordinated) support for the two largest FAIs in Noord have threatened both their ability to provide embodied care and their relationship with SWOs. Finally, we briefly reflect on alternative forms of municipality(-coordinated) support for FAIs.

Care Experiences Within and Across Food Assistance Initiatives and Social Welfare Organizations

Attentiveness and Familiarity. One of the attributes that interviewees attached to FAIs and their capacity to care in a relational manner (which we interpret as embodied care) had to do with the ability of volunteers to be attentive to people's stories and dedicate time 'without strings attached'. Unlike SWOs, which focus on problem solving, many interviewees stated that recipients experience FAIs as spaces where they can share and not only receive. SWO employees themselves admitted to how indeed, often for professional reasons, they cannot get too involved at a personal level with people receiving the help. This represents how care can easily be transformed from being a relationship to being a one-way transaction. As SW3 explained, 'when a recipient "comes in", [social workers] want to solve an issue' and are 'geared at solving issues . . . without attuning to recipients' needs'. However, as another social worker recalled: 'when a mother was stressed because her partner was abusing her and she didn't have any money, the ability to just share her story with . . . these volunteers [who] just listen [and] empathise . . . helps a lot . . . maybe even more than paid care' (SW1).

Our analysis suggests that FAI volunteers, in contrast to SWOs, actively create spaces to be attentive to recipients. For instance, volunteers running a weekly food bank out of a restaurant regularly organize social events:

I bake some cookies and then we [volunteers] can talk to people in ways that are not so professional . . . and just ask like, ‘how is it going at home?’ . . . but it’s also about just having a cosy time. This . . . is reflected afterwards at food distributions, and the things we heard we can later ask about again, like ‘how is it going, I heard your child broke its arm, is it better now?’ (FAI6)

This reflects how volunteers feel that knowing who recipients are, what they do and how they feel can create a sense of relationality and trust, characteristic of embodied care (FAI8).

We interpret these accounts as complicating a clear distinction between care givers and receivers in these spaces. Volunteers’ inclination to be attentive to recipients is likely supported by their positionality and shared lived experiences. Most have themselves been recipients of income support or food aid and have been through similar struggles (FAI4). Additionally, volunteers are often residents of the same neighbourhoods as recipients (FAI2). At one FAI, people who attended as recipients later started volunteering ‘to be of help to others . . . and be together’ (SW1), showing an interdependence between volunteers and recipients supporting embodied forms of ‘caring with’.

Unconditional and More-Than-Food Support. Most interviewees’ accounts, but notably those of social workers, volunteers and interviewees with experience of food insecurity, indicate that excessive bureaucracy and a lack of personal attention characteristic of SWOs, like Buurtteam and Voedselbank, can make recipients feel dehumanized, patronized and frustrated. For example, people are required by Buurtteam to ‘prove their poverty’ when applying for support, but this is often mentally and practically challenging (SW2). As interviewee SW5 stated, ‘people are already required to be on welfare benefits [to receive] a washing machine, but they still need to show bank statements [which] of course makes people say: fuck off’. At Voedselbank, also, a financial screening is required to determine eligibility, creating a significant bureaucratic barrier for people who need to receive food aid (SW3). Such challenges we see as characteristic of institutionalized care which alienate and eventually compromise care.

Contrastingly, FAIs emerge as very different spaces, according to many of our interviewees, who stated, for example, that FAIs ‘can act immediately and give things unconditionally’ (SW5), also beyond food distribution. This is ‘precisely their strength’, noted NGO1. As explained by SW2, who regularly works with FAIs:

If people go to [an FAI] on a weekly basis and then start to share confidential things, like ‘my children and I do not have beds because I can’t afford them’, then [FAI coordinators], who are well connected, start calling around to see where to can get beds from. Nobody sees these efforts, nobody hears about them, but it happens all the time.

Another example comes from two recipients who explained how an FAI coordinator assists them with their taxes (FAI3). These examples, we argue, illustrate how forms of

unconditional, more-than-food care giving are significant, yet often invisible. We interpret this as a form of embodied care insofar as it addresses material exclusions with attention, compassion, and by surpassing ‘official’ duties.

Evolving Trust. Interviewees affiliated with FAIs, SWOs, NGOs and the municipality explicitly reported that both FAI recipients and volunteers generally feel distrust towards, and thus stay away from, SWOs, so that even if people are entitled to receive, for instance, income support, they are not necessarily receiving it. According to former recipients-turned-volunteers, recipients are often ‘very afraid to ask for help’ (FAI1) and they ‘do not want to have anything to do with public institutions’ (FAI2). A social worker also experienced that ‘there are quite a lot of families in Noord . . . who have negative experiences with SWOs and thus keep their doors shut’ (SW2). This is not surprising, explained SW5, as social workers and their organizations have created precedents for distrust over the last decades. This tendency that our interviewees speak to might explain why 34% of Amsterdammers entitled to benefits do not receive them (Hoedemaker et al., 2022). We interpret these accounts as showing how ‘pastoral’ institutional care ‘guid[es] the conduct of both “clients” and volunteers’ (Möller, 2021, p. 855) and can lead to the denial of care and thus to countering justice goals (M. J. Williams, 2022).

Contrastingly, social workers (SW3; SW5) and municipal staff (M3; M4) themselves also notice how FAIs tend to ‘enjoy a lot of trust’ with recipients. SW5 explains this by pointing to how FAIs aim to ‘not fit in the system’ and ‘oppose conforming to it’ (SW5). SW3 points to how FAIs ‘are just located in their own neighbourhoods, and that generates feelings of safety and trust [which] works well to get people [to] talk about things’. We conceptualize this proximity to lived realities and the distance from institutions as conditions that help FAIs perform embodied care. They can leverage trust to address immediate food insecurity and other needs in ways that can feel accessible and non-threatening to those (potential) recipients who might avoid welfare support. According to social workers and municipal staff, the trust FAIs enjoy is one of the main reasons that collaborations between FAIs and SWOs were deemed crucial to reach people in need back in 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social workers and budget coaches have since then been regularly in contact with, assisting or present at FAIs, to support recipients professionally when needed.

Our analysis of the collaborations that evolved between FAIs and SWOs reveals that since COVID-19 there has indeed been a more collaborative relationship, and even fusion, between institutionalized and embodied forms of care. Establishing these collaborations took time and effort, as mentioned by the Buurtteam coordinator of this collaborative programme, because, according to him, FAI coordinators, like recipients, tend to be ‘distrusting towards everything and everyone’ (SW4). As also shared by other interviewees, FAI coordinators initially did not feel comfortable sharing access to their networks and recipients, especially at a time when trust towards governmental bodies was widely in crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its management (M1; M4; NGO4; NGO5). Collaborations, however, seemed to have helped gradually improve relationships between SWOs and FAIs, because budget coaches ensured respecting and avoiding interfering with FAIs’ operations (SW4). Gradually, and seeing how this had positive results for recipients, many FAI coordinators started to open up more, as remarked by FAI2. FAIs now regularly refer recipients to SWOs; something that before seemed to be unthinkable (SW4).

We argue that the bonds established between SWOs and FAIs since COVID-19 started to dissolve the boundaries between institutional and embodied care. We do not argue that SWOs can *only* provide institutional and FAIs embodied care, but this distinction follows from how both volunteers and social workers reflect on their own and others' care practices – hence why their collaboration was seen by most interviewees as highly valuable. However, as our findings point out, collaborations have not been seamless. Social workers attend FAIs less because of the tightening accountability requirements they face from their managers, FAI volunteers and recipients remain distrusting of SWOs, and the widely different competencies of social workers make continued collaboration with SWOs difficult for some FAIs (expert interviews, March and April 2025). In the next section, we expand on this point to explain how changes in municipality(-coordinated) support for FAIs, as those noted in Amsterdam, can complicate both embodied care practices and collaborations between FAIs and SWOs.

Funding Changes and Their Repercussions on the Micropolitics of Care

Amsterdam's food aid coalition initiated support for FAIs during the COVID-19 pandemic that continues to date. Interviewees' accounts indicate two notable changes in support for the two largest FAIs³ in Noord from January 2024 onwards, as part of a supposed phase-out of a more emergency-type towards a more structural-type of support. These two FAIs were asked to offer digital food vouchers and to screen current and new recipients with standardized intake forms. The following subsections describe how these changes threatened the embodied care enacted by/through FAIs, and the collaborations between FAIs and SWOs that intertwine spaces of relative institutional and embodied care. Differences arise between the views of interviewees involved in the food aid coalition and those affiliated with FAIs and SWOs.

Implementing a Digital Voucher System. The shift to move away from FAIs distributing food parcels on a weekly basis to doing a one-time intake conversation, to decide (potential) recipients' eligibility for a digital food voucher that can be used at supermarkets for six months, was justified by members of the food aid coalition to alleviate the administrative and logistical burden on FAIs, and was seen as a more dignified form of food aid. Coalition members argued this saves volunteers time, which they can spend on other types of support, and that such 'direct cash aid' is 'more effective and human-centred' (NGO2). Some also argued the new system bypasses the dependency recipients can have on FAIs (NGO4; SW5). This change was framed by coalition members as 'moving away from having people stand in line' for food parcels and as making food assistance more 'effective and dignified' (NGO2; NGO5).

We find that some interviewees, mostly those working outside of the coalition, but some also part of it, hold a different view. They seem to suggest that precisely because FAI recipients can regularly pick up food parcels unconditionally and casually talk to volunteers, recipients come on the 'radar' of SWOs and thus care is more efficiently received. Shifting towards digital vouchers takes this space of interaction away because recipients are required to meet a volunteer once, but then they do not have to attend for at least six months. They can simply use the voucher at supermarkets independently from FAIs (NGO4; M5). So, what some interviewees seem to perceive as a way of keeping

recipients dependent on FAIs – a view that legitimizes bureaucratizing care towards other more impersonal ways of receiving help – others seem to see as an incentive to get people who otherwise might remain socially invisible to talk to attentive volunteers. As we have discussed earlier, it is precisely this latter, more embodied care practice that, as many interviewees have attested to, can ‘take away shame and . . . feelings of distrust’, allowing FAIs to act as bridges to more institutionalized forms of care offered by SWOs (M5). As NGO4 expressed, shifting to vouchers threatens the contact between recipients and social workers, because ‘part of [them] will go back to being under the radar’. FAI coordinators also view this change with precaution, as they similarly wondered: ‘what does this mean for our contact with our recipients?’ (NGO2 reporting on conversations with FAI coordinators). Eventually, one of the two FAIs adapted to the new system and welcomed its efficiency, while the other chose to only receive food parcels and not implement the vouchers system (NGO2, expert interview March 2025).

Standardizing Intake Procedures. The second change required the two FAIs to standardize intake conversations with current and new recipients, to better ‘understand the underlying reasons of why [recipients] need to receive food parcels’, as NGO4 explained. Such information, another coalition member argued, is much needed to lobby with political parties for continued support to address food insecurity (NGO2). The coalition noticed that from the start FAIs were hesitant ‘to ask people why they need food assistance’, but, as another coalition member perceived the situation, ‘the cost of receiving funding from the municipality is that [FAIs would have to] provide information’ (NGO4), such as recipients’ phone number. One FAI coordinator texted municipal employee M1 that ‘most of [their] recipients would never want to give their phone number to third parties’. Some viewed this change even more critically, seeing it as being more about the coalition requiring data to legitimize why they keep funding FAIs, than about supporting these initiatives (SW3).

Overall, our analysis shows that the rising demand for collecting information on recipients’ characteristics, data and proof of needing assistance created worry among social workers, FAIs and some municipal staff, who reported fearing this could negatively affect the otherwise ‘unconditional care’ characterizing FAIs (M1; SW3; SW4; SW5). Social workers wondered, with this change, what remained of the crucial differences between FAI and SWO operations. As SW3 explained:

Key neighbourhood residents started FAIs, and then you sort of turn them into professionals, who must judge whether people adhere to the required norms. That is detrimental to the strengths [of FAIs] because otherwise [people] would just come to *Voedselbank* anyway.

We interpret increasing intake requirements for FAIs as potentially transforming relationships of trust between volunteers and recipients, creating hierarchies of power where recipients can feel obliged to give information to receive help, ultimately institutionalizing FAIs as spaces of bureaucratically mediated care. Moreover, volunteers are, unlike social workers, ‘not covered by an organization, education, training [and] regulations’, putting them in possibly ‘vulnerable’ and ‘strange’ positions (SW5).

Impacts on Trust Between Food Assistance Initiatives and Social Welfare Organizations. Even if, as the food aid coalition suggested, the changes described above would contribute to less administrative stress for FAIs and enhance the coalition's ability to lobby for structural food aid, interviewees' accounts also seem to indicate that the way in which the coalition appears to have implemented these changes risked jeopardizing the trust between FAIs and SWOs.

In 2022, after about two years of support for the two FAIs in Noord, the municipality, as the coalition's coordinator, decided to stop this support. According to interviewees, the argument was that 'the crisis was over, and [the coalition] would not give away money for free anymore' (SW5). The municipality then, according to SW3, initiated an 'exit-strategy'. Within the coalition, however, a discussion ensued about the possibility to continue this support. This initially resulted in an extension of the 'emergency support' in 2023, and subsequently, from 2024 onwards, in tightening the requirements for FAIs to receive support through the two funding changes described earlier (implementing a digital voucher system and standardizing intake procedures). Yet some interviewees explicitly questioned whether this was the true intention of these changes, doubting the duration of the support (anonymous⁴) and seeing the tightening of rules for the funding as a strategy of phasing out funding until the municipality eventually withdraws completely (SW4). We interpret these accounts as reflecting uncertainty about the coalition's long-term intentions, with implications for trust and the relationship between embodied and institutionalized forms of care.

Importantly, our analysis points to how the lack of transparency surrounding these changes can trickle down and affect the cooperation between FAIs and SWOs. Interviewees' accounts indicated that earlier ambiguities around municipal support for FAIs already led to friction between Buurteam, Voedselbank and FAIs. As one social worker described, the municipality gave contradictory signals, by asking Voedselbank and Buurteam to take over recipients from FAIs, while also subsidizing FAIs to keep working with their recipients (SW4). Some interviewees suggested that the continued lack of transparency surrounding the two funding changes from January 2024 onwards could lead to similar effects, fearing that the confusions created by the coalition risked undermining the arguably still fragile collaboration between FAIs and SWOs (SW3; SW5). For example, poorly informing frontline workers like budget coaches of top-down decided funding changes can lead to potential setbacks in their relationships with FAIs:

We should have been aware of [these changes], because otherwise, we could make mistakes and instantly lose the trust we've built . . . one wrong move can have serious consequences [like] if something happens and our budget coaches don't understand the questions they're being asked. (SW4)

Such consequences can, for instance, include FAI volunteers being more hesitant to refer their recipients to social workers (SW4). Overall, these findings point to how the trust between FAIs and SWOs, and by extension the bridges built between embodied and institutional care in Noord, depends on the quality and timing of communication around funding changes. Taken together, our analysis indicates that governing practices shape not only how FAI recipients receive material support, but also the relational conditions under which embodied and institutional forms of care can be connected.

Beyond Dependency? Alternative Forms of Support for Food Assistance Initiatives

Our research shows how the support from the food aid coalition can affect the type of care given by/through FAIs. Because of this, one FAI already decided to discontinue with the coalition's support in 2022, before the funding changes of 2024. Its coordinator reflected: 'I decided to not go along with [the funding], because . . . [the coalition] already gave so many rules, and I wanted to . . . just be able to do it my way' (FAI9). Another FAI coordinator similarly opted not to receive any funding, as, according to her, it complicates things and she would much rather her organization survive without it (FAI8). This distancing from support, despite the need for it, we find, reflects a tension between municipal funding conditions and FAI coordinators' desire to retain autonomy.

Interviewees' accounts indicate that the FAIs that remained or went back to being independent of the coalition have been struggling to stay afloat, due to temporary/precarious premises from which to function, uncertain funding, competition over food supplies, and voluntary labour. However, these are pressures that the two FAIs that do receive the coalition's funding also struggle with. These pressures oblige FAIs in general to put most of their time into distributing food parcels, although their strength, we argue, lies precisely in that they can do 'more than food'. In response, municipal officers from Amsterdam's sustainable food programme have been initiating food waste circularity since 2023 (GA, n.d.c.), hoping it also strengthens the 'social functions' of FAIs. Concrete efforts include funding two NGOs (Voedselcirkel and Voedsel Netwerk Noord) that support FAIs with food supplies and logistics, supporting FAIs with applying for diverse lines of funding, and organizing events to connect FAIs with food retail for more stable and sufficient food supply.

After two years of difficulties setting up Voedselcirkel, in 2025 the organization finally professionalized and has been supporting FAIs. Our findings suggest that this change is significant, because it does seem to relieve FAI volunteers from securing and organizing food supplies, increasing their ability to put more time and energy into practices that make them spaces of (embodied) care (expert interview, April 2025). Yet FAIs still struggle with the abovementioned pressures on premises, funding and labour. As such, while the municipality and its support for FAIs is multidimensional, it does seem to lack the means to adequately support FAIs as spaces of care. Simultaneously, as one expert interviewee informs (March 2025), SWOs struggle with increased efficiency measures limiting social workers' ability to collaborate with FAIs. If SWOs rely on FAIs, increasing FAI autonomy with steadier food provisions might not be enough to support embodied spaces of care in the city district. Care professionals notably suggested different measures are needed to support the care work of FAI volunteers, including assigning administrative tasks to Buurtteam and not to FAIs, like negotiating with the municipality, strengthening trust between Buurtteam, the municipality and FAIs, and taking away other pressures from FAIs (SW4; SW5; SW3). Currently, people who do not qualify for Voedselbank or Buurtteam services are still sent to FAIs 'who are [already] barely managing to stay afloat' (SW3). Taken together, these accounts indicate that supporting FAIs as spaces of care requires not only material resources but also governing practices that do not undermine their autonomy and relational practices.

Concluding Discussion

This article is among the first to explore how care provided by and through food assistance initiatives (FAIs) alongside social welfare organizations (SWOs) is affected by municipal governing practices. Our analysis shows that FAI volunteers share lived experiences with recipients, and their mostly unconditional and more-than-food support can create a sense of community, compassion, solidarity and trust that supports reciprocal care relationships beyond food provision (see also Andriessen & van der Velde, 2024; Cloke et al., 2017; May et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2024). We interpret this cultivation of reciprocal relationships as embodied care work through which FAIs can contribute to food and care justice (M. J. Williams, 2022). This type of care work, however, contrasts with the conditionality and problem-solution-oriented institutional care provision of SWOs, typical of Dutch state care provision (Kampen et al., 2020). Our analysis also shows that embodied and institutionalized care intertwine: social workers' tactful engagement with FAIs led to bridging the otherwise separate spaces of relatively embodied care, like FAIs, and institutional care, like SWOs, as it enabled FAI recipients to access broader resources. Connecting such fundamentally different forms of care is significant (Oncini, 2023) and valuable to diverse state and non-state actors involved in addressing food insecurity (Milbourne, 2024; Regnier-Davies & Edge, 2024). It shows the care-full food justice potential of connecting spaces of 'formal/informal, state/non-state, or market/non-market care' (E. R. Power et al., 2022, p. 1179).

Yet this potential also seems precarious. We find that municipality-coordinated changes in funding requirements for the two largest FAIs in Noord risk institutionalizing embodied care practices and threaten the bridge between FAIs as predominantly embodied and SWOs as predominantly institutionalized care spaces. First, our analysis shows that switching to food vouchers can bypass the care provided by/through FAIs (supported by Taylor et al., 2024) and so, as a recent Dutch study similarly found, exacerbate recipients' anxieties around welfare dependencies (Andriessen et al., 2025). Second, it shows that implementing standardized intakes can create distance between recipients and volunteers reminiscent of institutionalized care, pointing to a 'growing convergence in the bureaucratic practices shaping welfare encounters in both statutory and voluntary welfare settings' (May et al., 2019, p. 1255; see also Meyer et al., 2018). Furthermore, we find that how these two changes were prepared for throughout 2023 did little to protect the already precarious relationships built between FAIs and SWOs, highlighting the powerful role that local authorities can have over FAIs (Regnier-Davies & Edge, 2024) and their social care function (see Iafrati, 2018). Our analysis remains unclear on whether municipal efforts to increase the food autonomy of FAIs would also protect their embodied care practices, as FAIs have become permanent features of Noord's care landscape. Lambie-Mumford (2019), Iafrati (2018) and A. Williams et al. (2016) identified how such entrenchment in UK contexts has undermined the autonomy of FAIs *to care*.

Our findings contribute to sociological debates around the politics of food charity and social welfare governance, showing how welfare retrenchment is negotiated not only through decisions of funding allocation, but also through governing the spaces and forms through which food or welfare is provided. Our work complements broader critiques from sociologists and 'right to food' scholars seeing food charity as symptomatic of the neoliberal state: normalizing offloading welfare responsibility to volunteer-run emergency aid

(Möller, 2021; Poppendieck, 1994; Riches, 2002). More concretely, our micropolitics lens shows how retrenchment and state dependency take shape in practice, on the ground: neoliberal demands placed on grassroots care initiatives pushes them to align with state-led expectations, so local care provision ‘emerges as . . . uncaring’ (Singleton & Mee, 2017, p. 144; see also Fine, 2005; E. R. Power et al., 2022). In Noord, the politics of food provision thus seem very much about enabling or limiting everyday care relations. We found FAIs not simply filling the gaps left by the state, or being simply absorbed into municipal welfare provision. Rather, while they depend on municipal support, they also seem to cultivate crucial relational, everyday and informal forms of care that exceed institutional care logics (Zechner, 2021; see also Spring et al., 2022). Digital vouchers, standardized intakes and eligibility requirements are sites where retrenchment and state dependency reshape, and sometimes bypass, volunteer–recipient relationships, while FAIs still preserve possibilities for embodied care. Our analysis notably resonates with Global South scholarship, including Chatterjee’s (2004) work on negotiations between marginalized groups and the state in India, and Gago et al.’s (2023) account of Argentinian community kitchens that politicize care rather than merely provide charity. It also speaks to other contexts and forms of care where self-organization comes into tension with state-led support, including, for example, in community gardens or voluntary sector organizations (see for example Colebrooke et al., 2023; Kotsila et al., 2020).

Furthermore, our findings contribute to sociological debates on how recipients are positioned within food charity and welfare systems. Existing research has examined such positioning through concepts such as ‘deservingness’ (Blau et al., 2025; Dickinson, 2022) or ‘participation’ and ‘engagement’ (Martin et al., 2003; Pinard et al., 2017), showing how recipients are categorized, evaluated or given access to support. We extend this discussion by showing another mechanism of such positioning: how and by whom food charity is governed locally. In Noord, embodied care through FAIs was sustained through attentiveness, familiarity, shared lived experience and more-than-food support. Yet, top-down implemented changes in municipal funding requirements risked threatening these qualities by introducing standardization, conditionality and distance into volunteer–recipient and SWO–recipient interactions. These changes have had direct impact on how recipients were approached, spoken to/with, treated, referred and supported, i.e. how they were positioned in relation not only to the help/food/care provided, but also in relation to the people involved in this provision. This also contributes to discussions on food justice that go beyond distributional aspects, calling to examine food justice as a relational process (e.g. Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Food charity systems are not only systems through which food is (re)distributed, but relational configurations in which care practices shape who is fed, how and under what conditions (see also Oncini, 2026).

Some limitations need to be mentioned. As with all interpretivist research, we recognize that our analysis interprets already situated interviews, telling a particular story about micropolitics of care. Some perspectives may therefore have been foregrounded more than others (Finlay, 2021; Soss, 2015). Notably, this study primarily draws on the accounts of volunteers and professionals, while four interviewees identified as (former) FAI recipients. Previous research has shown how practices viewed by FAI volunteers as, for instance, compassionate, can be seen as embarrassing by recipients (Middleton et al., 2018) – discrepancies that the current study has not been able to comprehensively capture. We did observe differences between those more supportive and more critical of the food aid coalition, which

strengthened our analysis of micropolitical friction, although interviewees' accounts might have carried more diverse meanings than we unpacked (Soss, 2015). Finally, the distinction we made between the municipality and FAIs may be too crude, as FAIs can (un)intentionally be governed by a range of municipality and other (non-)state governance actors and processes (see Moragues-Faus & Battersby, 2021), requiring further research on the more intricate 'everyday governance' of FAIs (Cornea et al., 2017).

For FAIs to contribute to care-full food justice (M. J. Williams, 2022), caring about their micropolitics is essential. Research and practice need to consider the inevitable power asymmetries in municipal and (other) funders' governance of FAIs to avoid privileging more dominant institutional care ideologies and practices over more precarious forms of embodied care, or threaten bridges built between informal and formal care organizations. Particularly, municipalities should break with problematic histories of public-private partnerships and welfare rollbacks and recognize that the contributions of FAIs to social care should receive adequate support, for instance, through a 'care municipalism' supporting care commoning practices (Kussy et al., 2023). Aligning with previous calls (Augusto, 2024; E. R. Power & Williams, 2020), we further recommend that research continues to investigate how the governance of FAIs impacts local care provision, and how FAIs and similar initiatives should alternatively be supported. Crucially, we suggest that such research should be carried out in close collaboration with FAIs and their supporting actors, such as municipalities, to foster a shared learning process and contribute to tangible changes in practice.

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Notes

1. The term 'recipients' is used here for people attending FAIs or SWOs, as it was the commonly used term by interviewees (translated from the Dutch word *klanten*).
2. The Red Cross received between €500,000 and €1,500,000 yearly between 2021 and 2024 from the municipality; Human Aid Now received €200,000 and €500,000 yearly (GA, n.d.b.).

3. Interviewees FAI1–4 volunteer at one FAI, the other we studied indirectly through NGO2 and NGO5 who work closely with its volunteers. We estimated that these two FAIs together serve about a third of all FAI recipients in Noord.
4. At the interviewee's request, this quote remains completely anonymous.

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Appendix

Categories of interviewees' experiences and affiliations									
Interviewee number	Affiliation	Interviewee abbreviation	Date of interview	Personal experience living with food insecurity	Food assistance initiative	Social welfare organization	Food aid coalition providing support to food assistance initiatives	Tasked with organizing collaborations between food assistance initiatives and social welfare organizations	
1	Food assistance initiative 1	FAI1	June 2023	x	x				
2	Food assistance initiative 1	FAI2	June 2023	x	x				
3	Food assistance initiative 1	FAI3	June 2023	x	x				
4	Food assistance initiative 1	FAI4	June 2023	x	x				
5	Food assistance initiative 2	FAI5	June 2023		x	x		x	
6	Food assistance initiative 3	FAI6	June 2023	x					
7	Food assistance initiative 4	FAI7	June 2023		x				
8	Food assistance initiative 5	FAI8	October 2023		x				
9	Social welfare organization 1; Food assistance initiative 6	SW1; FAI9	October 2023	x	x				
10	Social welfare organization 2	SW2	October 2023			x		x	
11	Social welfare organization 3; Formal food assistance organization	SW3; FFA	October 2023						
12	Social welfare organization 4	SW4	October 2023			x		x	
13	Social welfare organization 4	SW5	October 2023			x		x	
14	Social welfare organization 4	SW6	June 2023			x			
15	Emergency and public healthcare NGO	NGO1	June 2023				x		
16	Emergency and public healthcare NGO	NGO2	April 2024				x		
17	Emergency and public healthcare NGO	NGO3	April 2024				x		
18	Food aid distribution NGO	NGO4	September 2023				x		
19	NGO functioning as network for food assistance initiatives in Amsterdam Noord	NGO5	September 2023		x		x	x	
20	Municipality	M1	October 2023					x	
21	Municipality	M2	October 2023					x	
22	Municipality	M3	November 2023					x	
23	Municipality	M4	November 2023				x		
24	Municipality	M5	January 2024				x		
Total				6	10	6	7	8	