

Other Ways of Eating in Spain: Food Itineraries in a Context of Increasing Precarisation

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Abstract

This article examines the extent to which the 2008 economic crisis has led to a shift in ways of eating among people living in precarious conditions in Spain, and the kinds of strategies they have developed to obtain daily food.

Building on a literature review on precarisation in Spain and an analysis of action plans to combat food insecurity, participant-observation ethnography was carried out in Catalonia. Fieldwork was conducted during 2014-2017 in public and private spaces focusing on the food practices of 51 first-time applicants for social assistance. Qualitative data obtained from interviews and direct observation were recorded, transcribed and coded using the ATLAS-ti program to facilitate thematic analysis.

Study participants' oral narratives reveal substantial changes in food procurement and eating practices. Strategies include buying different foods, shopping less often and/or in different stores, seeking out cheaper brands, preparing simpler dishes, and recycling leftovers. Their food itineraries reflect increasing reliance on charities, although a common alternative is meals prepared outside the home by family, neighbourhood, activist organisations or themselves. Food itineraries reveal not only experiences of food deprivation and social suffering, but also alternative ways of food procurement. Although food aid is based mainly on an assistance-oriented model, participatory initiatives have the potential to become political spaces that invite us to rethink the distribution of food resources and the limitations of social policies.

Keywords: food, itineraries, social inequalities, economic crisis, food insecurity

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1 Introduction

Since the beginning of the global economic crisis in 2008, living conditions in Spain have changed significantly. The government responded to the initial effects of economic recession by focusing its efforts on bank bailouts, liberalising labour regulations, reducing health spending and increasing direct and indirect taxes (Navarro 2015). At the same time, it took regressive action that affected social rights, restricting family allowances, the 'Renta Básica de Emancipación' (which helped young people with accommodation costs) and support for dependents, and also reducing salaries, freezing retirement pensions and cutting school lunch subsidies (Mateos and Penadés 2013).

Although some macroeconomic indicators have improved since 2015 and, according to the Active Population Survey (EPA 2018), the unemployment rate fell to 16.55% in the fourth quarter of 2017, the number of unemployed is still nearly 3.5 million. Additionally, the quality of jobs available has deteriorated, with more temporary contracts and lower wages which do not allow many workers to lift themselves out of poverty (Fernández 2017). Both poverty and income inequality are among the highest in the European Union (European Commission 2017). According to the AROPE index¹, the proportion of Spain's population at risk of social exclusion increased from 23.3% in 2007 to 29.2% in 2014, reaching nearly 13 million people (Llanos Ortiz 2017), many of whom depend on social assistance for basic needs (Caritas Europa 2015). Fuel poverty has increased dramatically during the crisis period, affecting more than 4.5 million people (BOE 2017)².

This increasing impoverishment has had consequences in several areas of daily life for the most vulnerable groups (Laparra and Pérez 2012), particularly in their diet and ways of eating. Studies indicate that the volume of food bought and the quality of meals consumed have both decreased, and the incidence of specific nutrient deficiencies has risen (Antentas and Vivas 2014). However, the real socioeconomic and health consequences of precarisation are not well known because, as in other European countries (Borch and Kjaerns 2013), research on people's access to food has for many years been sporadic and fragmented, based on a variety of definitions and methodologies (Díaz-Méndez et al. 2018). There are no studies at the state or regional level that systematically track the extent of food insecurity in Spain (Fargas et al. 2014).

This article explores shifts in eating habits among people living in precarious conditions as a result of the crisis, and the strategies they have developed in order to obtain daily food. It is argued that food itineraries among the sectors of Spanish society most affected reflect the tensions and improvisations that have come to characterise their lives. Food deprivation creates uncertainty which, in turn, requires a change of strategies, environments and interlocutors. The empirical results show how people resolve problems of food procurement using various resources that, in some cases, go beyond the institutionalised forms of food assistance provided by charities or social services. These resources not only minimise the impact of irregular access to food, but also transform subjective experiences of food deprivation into points of departure for new ways of providing for daily needs.

2 Materials and Methods

The research presented here is part of ~~two~~ broader studies~~y~~ entitled [The precarisation of everyday life: food \(in\)security, gender and health' \(CSO2016-74941-P\)](#) and ['Eating matters: precarization and \(in\)secure food itineraries in later life' \(PID2019-104253RB-C21\)](#) ~~[name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]~~ carried out by a team of anthropologists at the University [Rovira i Virgili](#) ~~[name deleted to maintain the integrity of the review process]~~.

¹ AROPE is an indicator developed by the European Union, and refers to the percentage of the population that is at risk of poverty and/or social exclusion

² <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2017/10/07/pdfs/BOE-A-2017-11505.pdf>

A variety of information sources were used to explore the impact of the recent economic crisis in Spain on food itineraries. First, an earlier literature review was updated in order to identify the socioeconomic dimensions of the crisis (Gracia-Arnaiz 2017), searching the SCOPUS database in order to identify studies published between 2008 and 2017 that examine the negative consequences of unemployment and cutbacks in salaries and social services, and analyses of Spanish social policies that address increasing impoverishment and food insecurity. The studies selected were those published in Spanish and English based on populations in Spain, as well as comparative studies on Europe that include Spain. Search terms included 'economic crisis', 'poverty', 'food consumption', 'social cutbacks', 'food security' and 'social policy'. This search yielded 13,680 sources. After applying the inclusion criteria (publication dates, type of publication, language, study location and subjects) a total of 761 publications were identified. From these 761 journal articles and book chapters, 198 were finally selected based on their relevance to the study objectives (Table 1).

Table 1

Second, in order to analyse the social measures adopted to cover basic needs and food procurement, the main action plans and specific programmes to combat poverty and the food assistance programmes deployed by Spanish government bodies and third-sector organisations at the municipal, regional and state level were collected, focusing on documents published between 2008 and 2017. These included publications from the Spanish Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, FEAD (the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived 2014-2020), the Spanish Federation of Food Banks (FESBAL), the Red Cross, and Caritas. Of the 37 documents initially selected, a total of 25 met the requirements for inclusion (Table 2).

Table 2

Finally, ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in the region of Catalonia between 2014 and 2017. Although the broader study considers the relationships among several stakeholders (social workers, volunteers, health professionals and activists), this article focuses only on people living in precarious situations. Members of the research team worked in a variety of different contexts – soup kitchens, food banks, supermarkets and public spaces – using direct observation and in-depth interviews. Specifications for selection criteria of informants included people living in precarious conditions who were responsible for feeding themselves and/or family members, and who had applied for food assistance and/or social services, or received them as a result of a medical diagnosis or referral by a social worker, since the beginning of the economic crisis. All 51 informants selected were adults living alone, with other family members or in shared flats. Most were unemployed. Those who had jobs were employed in poorly paid positions or worked in the informal economy. Pensioners were also included if they had economic responsibilities for family members, most often adult children and grandchildren (Table 3).

Table 3

A narrative approach, focusing on relationships between individual experience, cultural context and the construction of meanings (Garro and Mattingly 2000), used biographical interviews to analyse experiences of food deprivation in order to shed light on how people with limited resources navigate the continuum between food security and insecurity.

Literal transcriptions of interviews were digitalised using the ATLAS.ti 7 computer program, which facilitated data analysis by identifying the topics and themes that emerged from the practices and trajectories through which people obtain food for themselves and their

families. A coding protocol was created by agreement among the members of the research team, and the resulting 53 concepts and labels were then classified into the five categories on which the analysis is based: precarisation, food access, practices and consumption strategies, welfare benefits and institutional support, social networking and health condition.

3 Results

3.1 Food insecurity and social assistance

With the exception of some local studies, there are no surveys focusing specifically on food insecurity in Spain, and much of the available data comes from statistical sources on living conditions, food purchased and nutrient intake. The diversity of research designs and data collection methods makes it difficult to evaluate and compare them (Del Pozo et al. 2015). Nevertheless, certain items from these surveys and other secondary sources point to the rising problem of food access. According to the Survey of Living Conditions (INE 2016), 38.1% of households are unable to manage unforeseen expenses, while 15.3% report great difficulties in making their income last until the end of the month, an increase of 1.6% compared to 2015, and 17.2% say they cannot afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish at least every other day. Similarly, the latest Promotion of Social Studies and Applied Sociology report (Valls and Benzunegui 2014) indicates that 16% of Spaniards consume a nutritionally poor diet due to loss of income.

Some authors point to decline in purchasing power as the primary explanation for the changes in consumption of certain foods, especially increasing recourse to those that are cheaper and less healthy (Medina et al. 2015). Usually, these trends are based on annual figures provided by Food Consumption Panel of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, Food and Environment, which reveal changes in the purchasing patterns of some food groups. According to Antentas and Vivas (2014), a comparison between 2008 and 2012 confirms a downward trend in household food consumption, with the sharpest fall registered for meat and fish. By contrast, purchase of fruit and vegetables has barely changed. A report by the Office of the Catalan Ombudsman (Síndic de Greuges 2013) interprets difficulty in consuming meat or fish at least every other day as a sign of food deprivation resulting in an increase in child malnutrition.

In Spain, most of the available data relating to food insecurity at the municipal level are provided by third-sector organisations. A study carried out by the Creu Roja de Catalunya (2015) among beneficiaries of aid programmes, showed that in this population 60.6% of families with children consume a nutritionally poor diet and experience levels of food insecurity ranging from mild (29.5%) to moderate (40.7%) to severe (21.7%). Non-governmental organisation reports have highlighted an upward trend in the number of first-time applicants for food assistance (Caritas Europa 2015), and it is estimated that more than two million people in Spain are dependent on public and/or private social assistance programmes in order to eat. Among people living in precarious conditions, 22.4% have had recourse to family members or friends for access to food or other basic goods, and 14.7% have approached private or religious organisations for assistance (Llanos Ortiz 2017). Between 2007 and 2015, Càritas Barcelona spent more than 2 million euros a year on food aid, a fivefold increase from before the crisis (Càritas 2016).

In the face of increasing social demand, various government bodies have expanded or instituted a variety of emergency programmes including transfer payments of various kinds, food services, and distribution of food products. These forms of assistance are managed by a complex network of non-profit organisations. In Barcelona alone there are 234 such organisations (Fargas et al. 2014). These policy responses are frequent in contexts where food overproduction and surpluses are common (Gascón and Montagut 2015). The European

Union's Food Aid Plan (FEAD), co-financed by EU and Spanish government funds, is the programme that currently provides the most extensive assistance “to palliate food deprivation” in Spain (FEGA 2017). Between 2008 and 2012 the number of beneficiaries of this programme rose by 217%. In 2015, 115 million kilograms/litres of food were purchased through this plan, including rice, children's cereals, powdered milk, chickpeas, beans, UHT whole milk, olive oil, canned tuna, spaghetti and dehydrated cream of vegetables. While the government bought 63 million kilograms/litres of food in 2010, this figure had almost doubled by 2015 (Pérez de Armiño 2018). These measures are accompanied by a programme for the collection of fruits and vegetables withdrawn from the market for distribution free of charge.

Government has addressed the problem of food assistance by strengthening and institutionalising the role of third-sector organisations. Supranational institutions such as food banks, the Red Cross and Caritas store and distribute surplus basic commodities from the agribusiness sector and from private donations (producers, companies, large-scale wholesalers) in collaboration with local authorities. Distribution of food purchased through FEAD is controlled by the Spanish Federation of Food Banks (FESBAL) and the Red Cross. FESBAL, with 56 partners, has been the main non-profit volunteer organisation distributing foodstuffs since 1996. According to data provided by FESBAL (2016), in 2015 the Federation distributed 152.9 million kilograms of food to 8,488 charities, which reached more than one and a half million beneficiaries – nearly twice as many people as in 2007. In the FESBAL-sponsored Big Food Collection that took place at retail outlets in November 2017, 21 million kilograms of food were collected, making Spain the European country where citizens donate the most food.

Apart from these institutions' ability to bring food from agricultural surpluses and private donations within the reach of the poorest people, other initiatives aimed at decreasing food deprivation have emerged since the economic crisis began in 2008, particularly since the Spanish government's 'More food, less waste' programme (MAGRAMA 2013) began incentivising donations to charities. These include, among others, Alimentos Solidarios [Solidarity Foods], Muévete contra el Hambre y la Pobreza [Take Action Against Hunger and Poverty], Ningún Niño sin Bigote [No Child without a Moustache], Restaurantes contra el Hambre [Restaurants Against Hunger] and BCN Comparte la Comida [Barcelona Shares Food]. Some of these projects were backed by local authorities and non-profit entities after the consequences of drastic cuts in social benefits became apparent, but others, such as community gardens, the distribution of food in public spaces or solidarity soup kitchens, are the result of the growing mobilisation of civil society, which is supporting people whose needs are not met by charitable institutions. The impact of such interventions is unknown. A recent analysis of current food resources carried out by the Barcelona city government (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2017) reveals a fragmented map of aid recipients and services provided.

3.2 Food itineraries: changing strategies, contexts and interlocutors

A new profile for applicants for aid has recently appeared, consisting of lower-middle-class families whose daily life has been undermined by loss of income that jeopardises access to subsistence resources (Llanos Ortiz 2017). People who have experienced rapid declines in income have seen their purchasing power severely reduced, and they try to cut expenses in all areas, including food costs. These people are quite heterogeneous in terms of situations and needs, and their food itineraries, understood as trajectories and social practices to resolve everyday food needs, reflect this diversity.

Oral narratives reveal substantial changes in eating practices. These include changes in locations for purchase; changes in the types and frequency of the products purchased and the brands chosen, with the cheapest sought out in order to reduce spending; fewer meals consumed in restaurants and bars; and changes in the ways meals are prepared, avoiding dishes that require elaborate preparation and taking care to minimise waste, recycling any leftovers into

future meals. As one study participant explained: “The first thing you do is eliminate any spur-of-the-moment purchases. You buy the cheapest food possible, and you don’t throw anything away, not even foods past their sell-by date” (woman, 42 years old).

The unavoidable – although flexible – need to eat in order to survive means that all possible solutions are considered. Among the study participants, food aid has been incorporated into a range of old and new strategies that include community gardening, recycling of leftovers or even begging. In many cases this occurs at the same time as the emergence or expansion of the social support networks which are essential for understanding why food deprivation has not resulted in widespread hunger.

While feelings of helplessness and shame in the face of day-to-day pressures are repeatedly mentioned by the study participants, they also say that they consider themselves lucky to have found support from different organisations (city council, parish, soup kitchen) and people (social workers, volunteers): “At first you don’t know which door to knock on, but once you’ve left your embarrassment behind, you find out about what’s available and you start to ask around” (woman, 45 years old). None of them had ever imagined themselves in this situation; none of the mothers thought they would ever have to skip one or two meals a day or eat less to ensure that their children had enough to eat: “My children eat first, then my husband and I’m last. If I’m hungry I eat more bread...and I drink more water. It swells up in your stomach and takes your mind off it” (woman, 39 years old). Loss of predictable income and the need to keep up with utility bills and rent or mortgage payments lead them to improvise in many areas, including food:

I went to look where I thought they could help me. I remember asking my son’s teacher. Next day, she gave me a bag full of food. The meals that I prepare depend on the foods I get. A social worker evaluated my situation and I can have regular assistance (woman, 37 years old).

Changes in food supply and places of food consumption are the best evidence of the tensions caused by the difficulties that people face. They diversify their strategies, not only seeking food to take home, but also eating whenever and wherever possible. The limited food in the larders of those receiving food aid is striking compared to the number of times that some people leave their homes to eat. In these cases, people use strategies that differ markedly; from eating outside the home while at work or during leisure time, to making use of resources that free them from the need to use their kitchens, which in some cases cannot be used due to a lack of power.

The groups that have established the most complex itineraries are families with children in their care. More than half of the study participants reported that they eat less at home since their living conditions became insecure, and they do not cook a great deal. Those responsible for providing meals, usually women, said that the non-perishable food that charities give them does not meet their needs: “I am very grateful for the help received, but it’s not enough. If we want to eat well, we would need more meat and fruit. When I have money, I buy them” (woman, 42 years old). They usually receive pasta and rice, milk and canned tuna, but fresh foods requiring refrigeration such as fruit, vegetables, eggs and meat are very scarce, although they are gradually being added to the stocks of food banks and charities.

Study participants who eat outside the home do so for different reasons and in different ways. One possibility involves eating in other ‘homes’. Some people without access to energy in their home (the ‘energy poor’) have access to flats managed by charities or provided by municipal councils so that they can cook and even eat there. These have a pantry stocked with non-perishable foods such as pasta and rice, and users bring perishable foods which they have purchased either with cash or with supermarket vouchers, or obtained from charities. They are allocated three hours per week, and usually prepare simple dishes, thereby optimising the

limited time available. They cook as quickly as possible, and several dishes at once: for example, pasta with meat and white rice with tomato sauce and a fried egg.

When there are children in the household, instead of returning home for the midday meal, they eat in the school canteen if their school lunch is fully or partially subsidised – another meal consumed outside the home. Some children also have breakfast and their mid-morning snack at school. This aid programme for families with limited resources is provided by the parents' associations of schools in working-class neighbourhoods. The parents appreciate this because, as one 31-year-old woman put it, "At least my children have a good meal once a day."

Another way of eating consists of returning to the parental home. Many senior citizens provide meals for their adult children and their grandchildren; they cook food their children obtain from donations, but above all, they use what they can buy with their pensions: "I used to complain because my pension was less than 800 euros, but now it pays for all of us to eat – the two of us, and my children and grandchildren" (woman, 72 years old). Going to their parents' home "avoids the embarrassment of having to ask for food in other places, I prefer it a thousand times to a soup kitchen" (woman, 41 years old). But this choice is not only about shame. They reported that it is more convenient and personally more comforting. In addition to not being subject to inflexible schedules, they are able to eat familiar dishes that are also usually in line with their tastes and limited budgets: "My mother always asks me... but her kitchen isn't a restaurant, so we adapt to her budget. The thing is, we all eat hot food together with the people we love" (woman, 41 years old).

Going to a soup kitchen is another common way of eating, although it was not available to all informants. Although they have multiplied in many Spanish cities since 2009 (Pérez de Armiño 2018), access to a soup kitchen is usually a result of a referral from social services. Some informants considered them to be one option among many possibilities: "Here I get only some meals; the place is closed at night and on weekends" (man, 52 years old). They usually provide one daily meal, either breakfast or lunch. Some parish churches, municipal services, and civil society organisations also deliver cooked food to be consumed at home, providing the main meal of the day for users who live in a hostel room or shared apartment, in most cases elderly couples or single people. Hired staff and volunteers prepare lunch almost entirely with products from food bank donations and private donations. In addition to maintaining the three-dish structure of the meal (starter, main course and dessert), they attempt to prepare dishes that replicate culturally accepted recipes; for example, noodle casserole, paella or Spanish omelette. This does not necessarily mean that the expectations and wishes of the diners are met. Emotions of gratitude are mixed with feelings of loss of autonomy over food choices and satisfaction of tastes: "You eat whatever they put on your plate regardless of preferences, but at least I eat a hot meal every day" (man, 29 years old).

Eating in all these spaces is compatible with consuming food collected in grocery stores, or obtained from neighbourhood food collection points operated by civic groups. Some of the people who regularly use these spaces and food sources did not have a fixed address before the crisis, but now they are increasingly frequented by people waiting for a decision on their aid request. In general, asking for food from shops or collecting food distributed in public spaces is seen as one of many opportunities to increase their scarce resources: "When the soup kitchens are closed, I ask for food in bakeries or restaurants" (man, 52 years old). The study participants knew the days, places and times for the distribution food, often at night and first thing in the morning. Some said they take advantage of collective meals held in public spaces, but because of their sporadic nature no one considers them a regular source of food.

The study participants, especially younger and single people, also explained that they visited neighbourhood bars, pastry shops, supermarkets, grocery stores, bakeries and cafeterias to collect any leftover food items, unsold bread, tapas, and cooked dishes from the set-price

daily menu, as well as food in damaged packaging. “In my neighbourhood supermarket they told me that nothing gets thrown away there, and they let me take food from a box with items that probably had damaged packaging” (Maria, 38 years old). Encouraged by local policies against food waste, these businesses put leftover food in bags, plastic containers or cardboard boxes. At other times, when the practice is systematic, the informants bring their own receptacles. In general, people choose to eat this food in the street, “depending on how hungry I am or what the weather is like” (man, 52 years old). Sometimes they take it home to cook and/or share it with others, or simply consume it at another time of day.

Soup kitchens and food banks self-managed by residents of the city's most deprived neighbourhoods constitute an additional resource, although these small-scale initiatives can be difficult to sustain because they depend on volunteer labour and an irregular supply of resources, and are sometimes closed down by the authorities because they lack the requisite permissions. Their structure is group-based, and they meet weekly to arrange collections from shops, transport, distribution and cooking. In the soup kitchen of one cooperative, “many food items come from neighbours or local shops and the cooks are pensioners, unemployed people or neighbours” (man, 49 years old). In working-class urban districts, neighbourhood associations and other local organisations have encouraged the use of community gardens, which in some cases have also been promoted by the city government as tools for community development, education and social transformation. In these collaborative projects, people living in precarious conditions participate actively, generating resources in their own communities, learning to grow food organically or rescuing and reusing food that is not considered edible:

the vegetables collected are for our own consumption, but also for the neighbourhood social soup kitchen and charities. I attended a recycling workshop and I learnt to reduce waste and prepare meals with leftovers. No throwing away wilted lettuce leaves; they have vitamins, and you can use them to prepare delicious croquettes (woman, 37 years old).

Some study participants also help to organise ‘soup discos’ in public spaces: culinary events that recycle unused vegetables from food producers, markets and restaurants in a huge soup distributed free of charge in order to dramatise the reduction of food waste. In one such event, organised in Barcelona by the non-profit *Aprofitem els Aliments* (Make the Most of Food), more than 150 volunteers were involved in cooking for 4,000 people. While it is true that because of its sporadic nature the people interviewed for this study do not see it as a regular source of food, their participation is felt to be socially relevant, because they share experiences and knowledge that make it evident that other forms of eating, “cheaper and more sustainably” are possible in their view.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

In Spain, the economic crisis represents simultaneously a continuous restructuring and an institutionalised uncertainty embedded in the life of social groups (Alonso and Fernández 2013). Both phenomena embody the notion of precarisation, understood by Paugam (2013) as a dynamic process related to increasing socio-economic difficulties. It is not necessary to be in extreme poverty to experience precarisation, which is not merely a financial indicator, but also points to changes in consumption on many levels as a result of unemployment or underemployment; difficulties in paying housing costs, electricity and gas bills, or purchasing food. Precarisation is no longer an exceptional situation in capitalist societies but a current that runs through people’s everyday lives (Lorey 2015). The everyday eating behaviour of many Spaniards reflects this process of precarisation and highlights the paradox identified by Warde (1997): while food production is more abundant, flexible and diversified than ever, social class,

which now has more fluid boundaries, continues to be the main explanatory variable for unequal access to food.

Although indicators related to living conditions and types of food purchased reveal constraints on consumption in recent years, they rely on excessively general food categories (meats, vegetables, oils and fats) that make it difficult to determine whether these dietary changes are nutritionally healthy. Further, they do not show how the whole food pattern has changed (Gracia-Arnaiz 2018). Because there are no studies of the nature and degree of food deprivation in Spain, there is no accurate diagnosis of its extent as a social problem. What is more, the government does not acknowledge that food insecurity exists and, consequently, it is not understood as a political issue (Escajedo 2018). Instead, it is treated as a problem of individuals and families who are unable to manage their food requirements using their own resources and need emergency assistance, which is provided by strengthening mitigation programmes. Like the majority of wealthy states (Pfeiffer et al. 2015; Lambie-Mumford 2017), Spain has responded to the growing demand for food assistance by buying more food on the international and national markets and also by incentivising donations from food-related enterprises to charities in order to reduce waste. In this sense, food aid has become increasingly corporatised.

This has required the creation of more locations for distributing food and authorisation of more organisations to do this. The institutionalisation of organisations such as FESBAL and the Red Cross is presented by the state as a kind of moral achievement that, according to Poppendieck (1998), implements the solidarity and altruism of thousands of donors and distributors of food, along with the volunteers who take part in food distribution. These organisations embody the triumph of top-down charity and non-judgemental solidarity because something donated or given away is not intended to change the causes of impoverishment, only to alleviate it (Riches 2018). Food assistance helps the most disadvantaged groups to meet their basic food needs, but at the same time deflects social pressure on the state, and makes the recipients of these benefits increasingly dependent on charities. This is illustrated by the fact that many study participants have normalised the use of these services as a usual recourse.

People manage their needs by adopting a variety of strategies, both old and new, negotiating with various interlocutors, groups and institutions in different contexts. As other experiences of material deprivation have shown (Heflin et al. 2011; Caplan 2016), these strategies are not limited to public and private assistance, but also include informal resources based on family, neighbourhood and friendship networks.

Food itineraries, understood as ways and means of obtaining food, reflect the improvisations that structure daily life for the most vulnerable. They also include the spaces in which people seek resources, their relationships with different interlocutors and forms of social care. Due to their flexibility, food itineraries reflect the changing nature of the practices and knowledge that people deploy in each situation/stage, underlining the importance that all the formal and informal support networks acquire in urban contexts when it comes to managing food assistance. Food itineraries are thus also a useful tool for analysing how each society applies and legitimises measures for the care/protection of those it renders vulnerable, while at the same time providing a record of alternative practices, both individual and collective, in the face of precarisation. Food itineraries reflect different constraints, particularly in supply and places of consumption. In a context of uncertainty, people attempt to diversify sources of food for their households. With the foods they buy, are given, or otherwise find, they try to create or reproduce orderly meals that are acceptable by cultural standards. But this replication is not always possible because changes have affected the whole food pattern. When food is in limited or uncertain supply, people may also engage in more improvised food practices, substituting cheaper or lower-quality foods, eating less, altering the distribution of food among family members or even eating food previously not considered edible. Some of these solutions entail

experiences of suffering. Applying to social services for food assistance or searching for food among items discarded by restaurants, bars, supermarkets or bakeries is often accompanied by feelings of shame and guilt. Impoverishment is experienced as the inability to be autonomous and to cover basic needs.

In this sense, the measures adopted in Spain by the state and by regional and municipal governments are failing to address what is specific about the experience of food deprivation. Although 'being hungry' in Spain may not be comparable to the problems described by international aid organisations working in other continents, the decline in the ability to obtain food independently and on a regular basis is reflected in the frequency with which expressions such as 'shortage', 'eat what you can' and 'skipping meals' appear in everyday speech. As embodiments of penury, these expressions constitute evidence that these social interventions can alleviate the problem, but they are not the solution.

If increasing precarisation has led to serious difficulties for many people, it has also impelled some to discover other means of meeting their need for food. One of the consequences of insecurity in everyday life is the change that has taken place in ways of thinking about food. Among people who have suffered most from the effects of the crisis, food is considered something to which access is limited and uncertain, and must be rationalised. Although to date they are minority options, some initiatives based on collaborative work constitute an alternative response to official policies. Participatory projects have the potential to become political spaces in which people not only meet their basic needs, but also transform their subjective experience of food deprivation into a point of departure for more active ways of providing daily sustenance. These initiatives illustrate two important issues: other, more participatory ways of producing and redistributing food are possible; and people can draw unexpected conclusions from experiences of uncertainty. These activities are frequently unplanned and emerge from family, neighbourhood and friendship networks with the goal of achieving not only a greater coverage of basic needs but greater personal autonomy. Community gardens or collective soup kitchens require co-responsibility and resources, and their continuity over time can be difficult to maintain without political backing. As embodiments of impoverishment and penury, these solutions frequently constitute experiences of social suffering; but they are also opportunities to question the role of government and the institutional means currently being deployed to ensure the right to food.

Considering the impact of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 at the beginning of 2020, we wonder how much more fragile the living conditions of the Spanish population – and thus its food security – are going to become. All the economic indicators predict a deep new global recession, particularly in those countries where the health emergency is having its worst effects. In the European context, Spain is one of them. In April 2020, the International Monetary Fund estimated that the Spanish economy would shrink by 8% and that unemployment would reach 20% this year, representing a contraction double that experienced in 2009. Following the failure to reduce the poverty risk rate to pre-2008 levels, another new crisis is giving way to an unprecedented social emergency. Given these circumstances, the current government has approved a package of measures to help its citizens. A case in point is the minimum living income, whose impact on inequality is as yet unknown. In fact, since the state of alert was declared, requests for social assistance have tripled, most of them to cover basic needs, while in the big cities there have been twice as many requests for food aid than in the previous year. After a decade of material constraints imposed by a context of economic and political instability, Spain seems to have learned little if the only policy response to the health and financial crisis is to go back to charitable and humanitarian organisations. We still do not have official estimates for the percentage of people living in food poverty –with untold consequences for their health and well-being. This lack of knowledge cries out for immediate action by central and regional administrations to make food insecurity a political issue.

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