

Food aid figures

Quantitative research

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CONCERTATION
AIDE
ALIMENTAIRE

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Quantification of food aid

A growing and significant share of the Belgian population, including adults, children, families or isolated persons, are relying on food aid. In this study, we estimate that 561,000 people use some form of food aid in Belgium at least once a year. This figure has doubled in 10 years.

Moreover, a recent survey carried out by IWEPS¹ shows that while one in 16 Walloons (7%) received food aid in 2024, almost one in 5 Walloons (20%) found themselves, at some point in the year, in food poverty.

The observed discrepancy between the number of people in need of food support and the number actually receiving aid indicates that the need for aid is not always addressed.

Hunger and extreme precariousness are spreading and the latest socio-economic developments combined with inadequate political responses to the problem point to a worsening of the situation.²

In estimating the total number of beneficiaries of food aid, it is relevant to look at parcel delivery as the main form of food aid, since the majority of beneficiaries are concerned by it. Although other forms of support exist (social restaurants, social grocery stores, solidarity fridges, vouchers) and appear, in some respects, to be more respectful of the dignity of the beneficiaries, their relative share remains low. According to the names of the organisations listed in this study, less than 10% of the beneficiaries counted are concerned by forms of food aid other than parcels.

Food parcels are distributed by various organisations. These include Vincent de Paul Belgium, the Red Cross, many CPAS and a multitude of local associative actors. The Restos du Cœur are also one of the important players, although they are not specialised in parcel distribution. The PPS-SI and the Food Banks act as second-line actors that enable, facilitate and (partially) monitor the work done by the first line, i.e. the food aid associations themselves.

Concretely, on the ground, standby duty is organised at regular intervals, often once a week or per month, during which beneficiaries come to receive the parcel to which they are entitled. For this, they obtain a certificate that defines their access to food from the CPAS or a food aid association.

Most often, the food that joins the stocks is unsold, recovered from shops, or food received as part of European funding aimed at financing food aid (ESF+).

In this note, we cross-reference several databases to determine the number of people receiving food assistance at least once a year. It should be noted, however, that the annual timeframe does not give us information on the frequency with which the aid is received, on its concrete modalities, or on the precarious situations that the aid aims to eliminate.

In the rest of this document, we begin by presenting the data used and their source. Then, using graphs, we present the key figures obtained by compiling the data. We also set out the method used for moving from raw figures to data compiled at Belgian level. This allows us to clarify the methodological choices chosen. We conclude this report with a discussion of the contributions and limitations of the figures presented.

¹ <https://isadf.iweps.be/?action=indicateur&droit=02&indicateur=01&type=1>

² https://www.fdss.be/wp-content/uploads/Carte-blanche_Acteurs-de-laide-alimentaire_Juillet-2025.pdf

Presentation of databases

For the analysis, we had access (1) to data directly produced by more than 1000 food aid organisations.

This data, at the organisation level, is compiled by two institutional actors independent of each other: the Federation of Food Banks (relating to the private sector) and the Public Programming and Social Integration Service, the PPS-SI (public sector).

We also use (2) the information provided by the Red Cross and the Fédération des Restos du Cœur, which includes certain partner organisations not included in the set (1) of compiled data.

Data from the Food Banks and the PPS-SI cover the majority of the Belgian food aid landscape, both in terms of the number of beneficiaries and the number of organisations active in the sector.

In the framework of ESF+ orders, the SPP-IS collects data on the number of beneficiaries supported (in year $n-1$) by each ordering organisation (in year n_0).

In practice, associations fill out an order form addressed to the SPP-IS, in which they must provide a set of encrypted information. These include the number of beneficiaries of the association in the last full year (in this case 2024). They also indicate the region to which they are attached, the ESF+ number, which they have following their registration in this under ESF+ and on which we rely to identify duplicates. Other data on the number of women, migrants and the elderly assisted are encoded in the form, but as they are not mandatory, the number of missing values prevents us from making a useful analysis of them.

Secondly, we use the data transmitted by Food Banks from FoodIT.

FoodIT is the computerised data encoding system for each organisation affiliated to one of the nine regional banks. Being affiliated allows them to have access to unsold or surplus products from the food industry, supermarkets and fruit and vegetable auctions. Data from FoodIT provide us with monthly figures on the number of people assisted.

The main difference is that in the PPS database, the variable “number of beneficiaries” covers all persons assisted *in one year* by each organisation that has placed an order under the ESF+ fund, while in the FoodIT database, the variable “number of beneficiaries” corresponds to the last *monthly* value encoded by the organisation in the system.

Since there is no comprehensive and centralised database giving a total and accurate number of food aid beneficiaries, the objective of this study is to approach this number with an estimate. To compare and add up the different raw figures from the two databases, it is necessary to homogenise them.

Thus, we first studied the difference between the *monthly* value (FoodIT) and the *annual* value (SPP-IS) for all the organisations featured in the two databases. The results of this analysis of the differences between the databases made it possible to estimate the annual (missing) value of each organisation which had provided only one (monthly) value in FoodIT.

In addition to these two comprehensive data sources, we also use additional figures obtained from medium-sized actors such as the Red Cross, Restos du Cœur and Vincent de Paul. These figures allow us to complete the totals from the first two bases.

Here is how the data are divided according to their origin:

Database	Precision level	Number of raw data & entity
SPP-IS	Organisation	745 (org)
FoodIT (Alim Banks)	Organisation	1369 (org)
Vincent de Paul Belgium	Province	11 (provinces)
Red Cross	Province	6 (provinces)
Restos du coeur	Organisation	6 (org)

Table 1 - Summary of data sources used. The level of precision 'organisation' means that figures are available at the level of each association, CPAS, etc. The level 'province' means that only a provincial total is available. For the Red Cross and Restos du Cœur, these are the Walloon provinces and Brussels.

Before going into the details of the consolidated figures, it should be noted that **the number of beneficiaries provided by the organisations is declarative and they use various criteria.**

Given the diversity of organisations considered (more than 1000) and their counting methods, we must compile heterogeneous and often partial data.

For example, when an individual seeks help from an organisation, the accountant, who may be a volunteer, is expected to take into account not only the applicant but also members of his or her household.

However, it is not possible to ensure rigorous monitoring of this method.

As a result, rounding, underestimation and overestimation affect a significant portion of the data collected.

In addition, to diversify their sources of supply, organisations rely on both SPP-IS and Food Banks. Thus, they provide their data to the two sources we use. This is both an additional methodological challenge and also a wealth. A difficulty because the raw compilation of the two data sets requires to take into account duplicates to avoid counting these organisations twice. To overcome this, we identified all the organisations concerned by this risk of double counting and selected a single value. The possibility of identifying duplicate organisations is also rich in that it systematically studies the discrepancy between the two values provided, giving information on the quality of the data from one or the other basis, but also on the extent of biases of one method of enumeration compared to another.

Main results

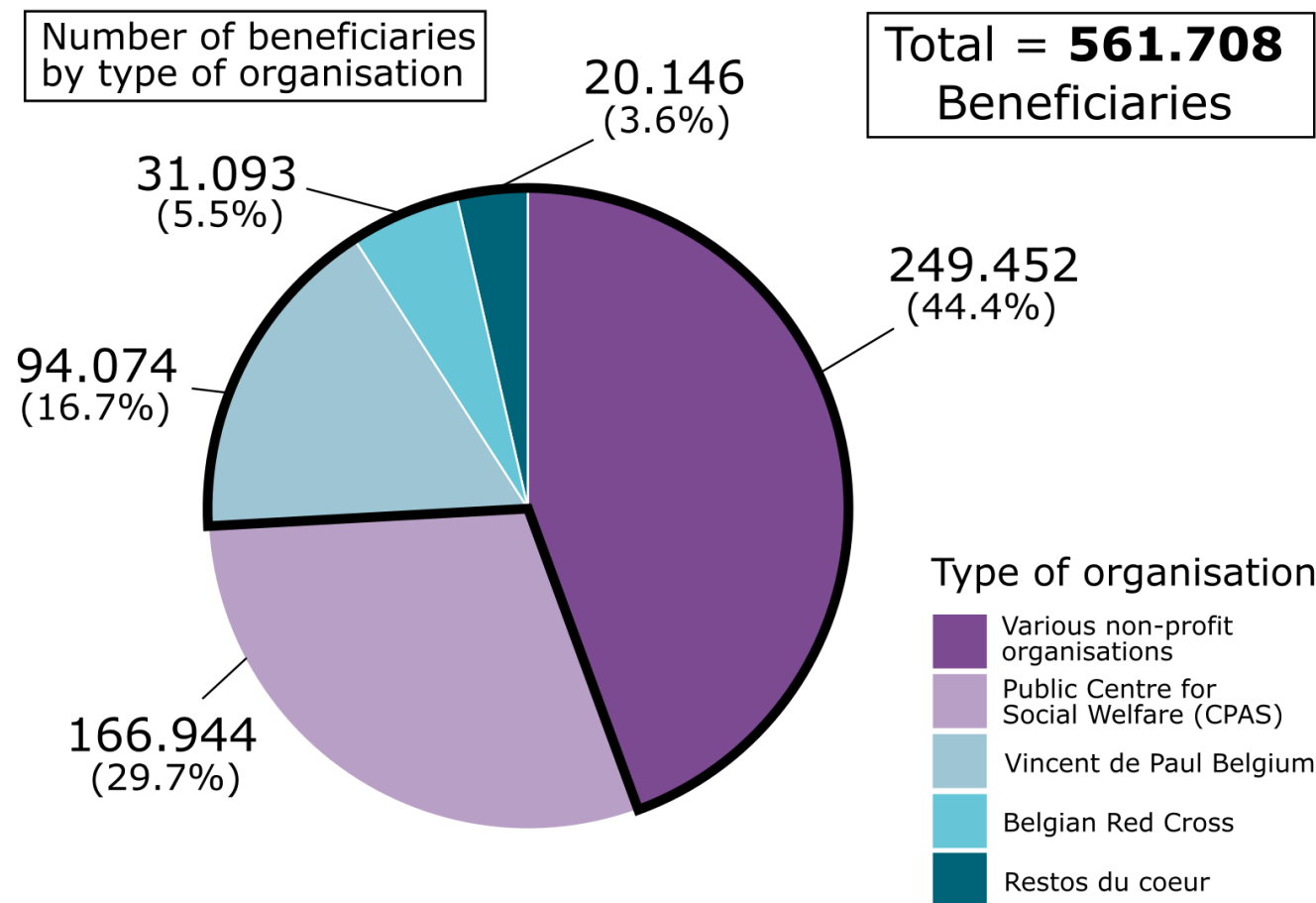


Figure 1 - Overview of food aid by number of beneficiaries

Figure 1 shows the overview of food aid that we obtained on the basis of the data collected and processed. The number of beneficiaries for each type of organisation is observed. The shares in bold correspond to beneficiaries assisted by a structure other than a CPAS.

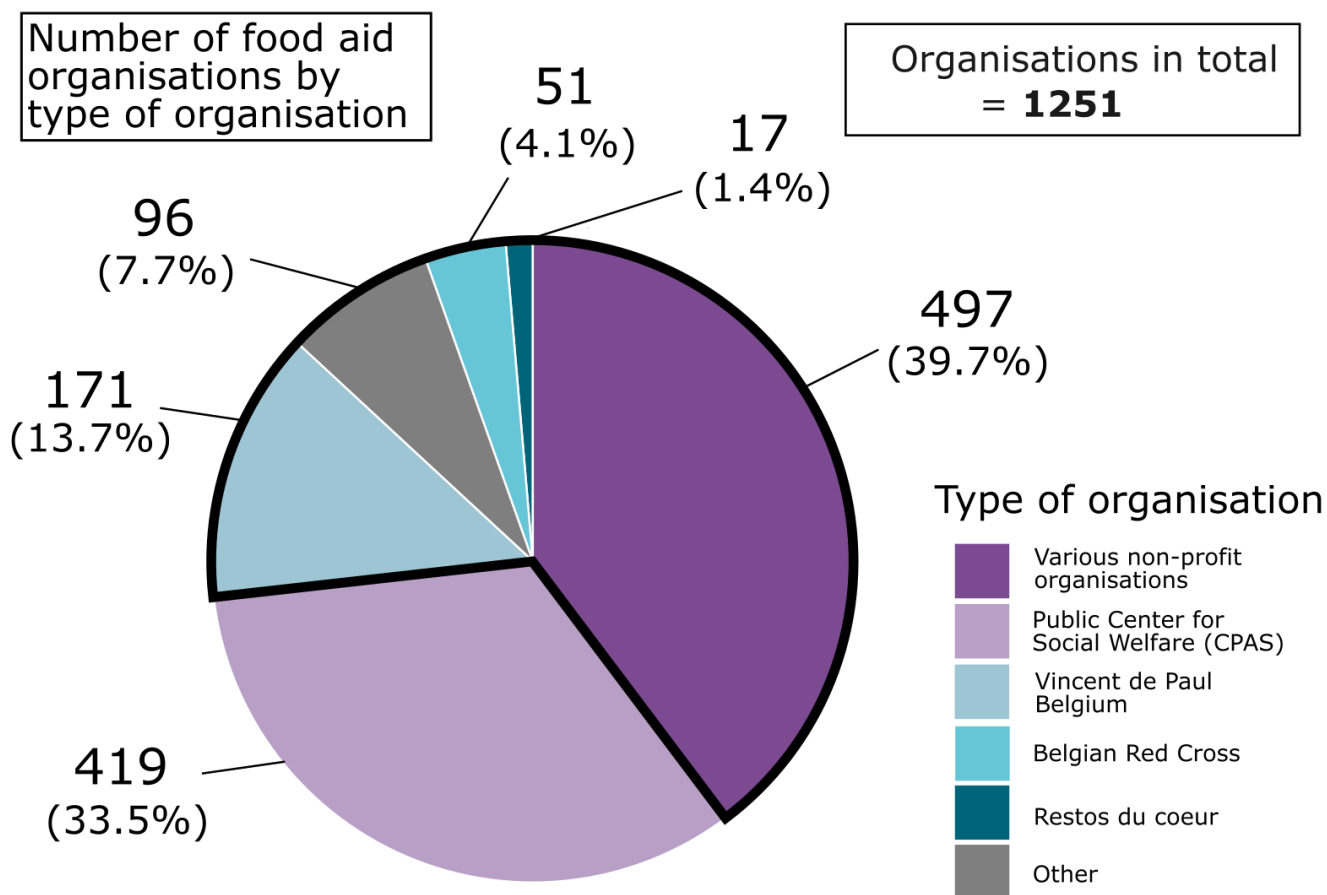


Figure 2 - Overview of food aid by number of organisations

Figure 2 shows the distribution of food aid organisations by type. Within the group of non-profit organisations, it should be noted that organisations are directly mandated by a CPAS, as part of a partnership, to distribute aid to people seeking its help at municipal level. These organisations are classified as non-profit organisations although they are active on behalf of the CPAS. The proportion of CPAS on the graph is therefore limited to beneficiaries of CPAS, while beneficiaries of non-profit organisations working on behalf of CPAS are in the category of non-profit organisations. On the right side, described in the left part. The units shown in bold represent the aid provided outside the activities of the CPAS.

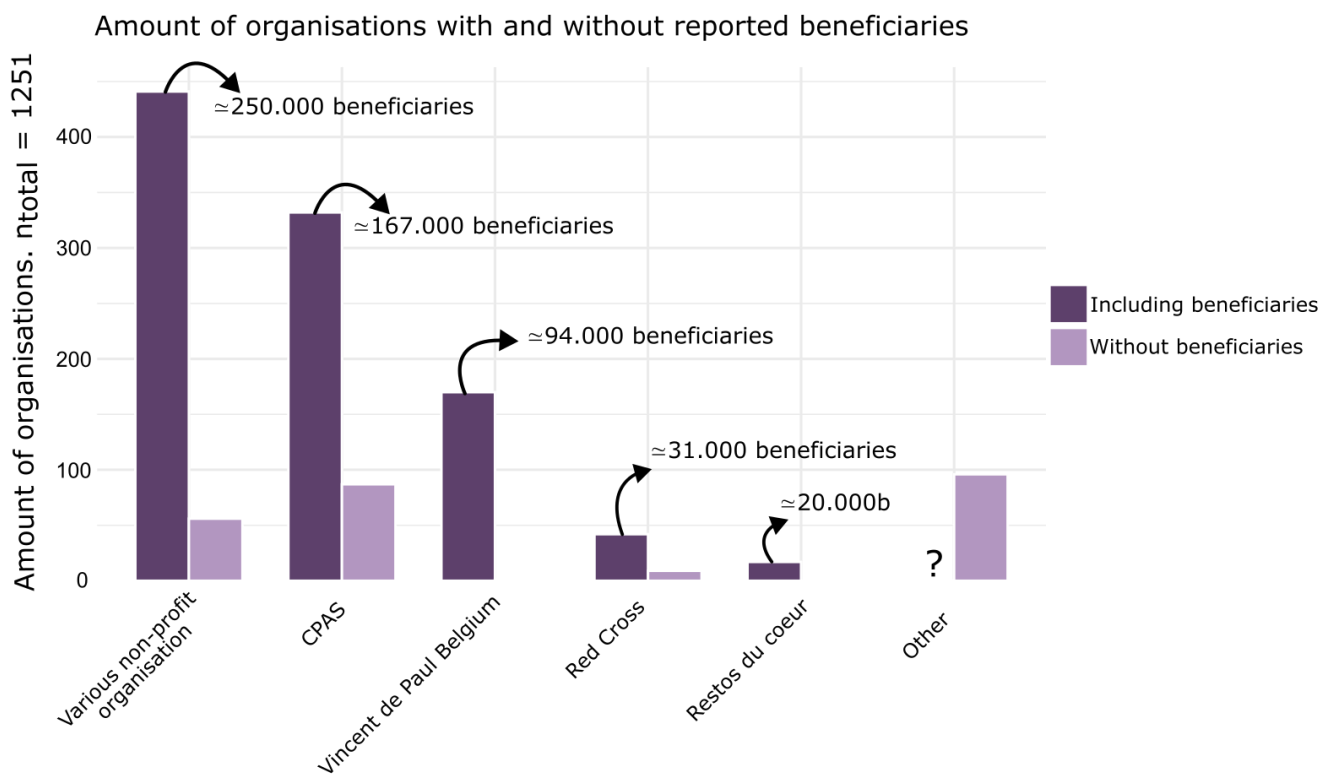
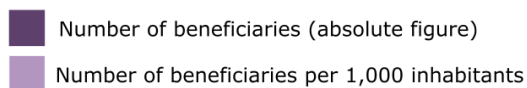


Figure 3 - Proportion of organizations according to the presence of informed beneficiaries in a database

Figure 3 shows the food aid landscape from a different perspective. Here, the category “without beneficiaries” (in pink) includes all organisations that have not encoded anyone. This means that we have a record of their existence in the databases used, but we cannot establish a number of beneficiaries for these organisations. The ‘Other’ type of organisation contains the most organisations with no encoded beneficiaries. In most cases, these are schools, day and night reception centres, for which there is a lack of data.³ The second group of organisations without registered beneficiaries are in the CPAS category. Some CPAS delegate food aid to a grassroots association, while others are simply not active in food aid. In the first case, the beneficiaries of the municipality are already included elsewhere, in particular in the ASBL category.

³ Most of the missing observations come from FoodIT, the computerized database of Food Banks. It contains more organisations than in the SPP-IS, but the number of beneficiaries is more often lacking.



Breakdown of beneficiaries by region

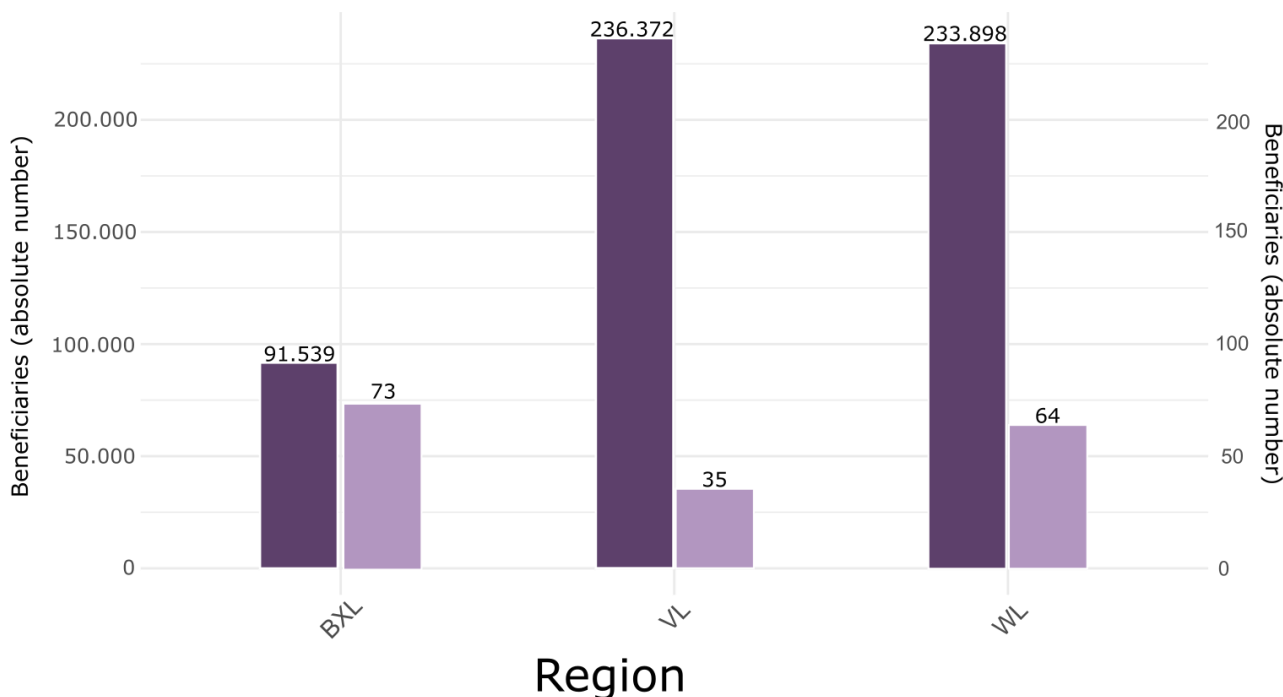


Figure 4 - Distribution of beneficiaries by region

The distribution of beneficiaries by region (Figure 4) illustrates the significant relative share of beneficiaries present in the Brussels Region. Indeed, per 1000 inhabitants, the Brussels Region has the highest rate of recipients of food aid. Flanders and Wallonia have a similar absolute number of beneficiaries. However, once reduced to the size of the population, the number of beneficiaries is almost twice as high in Wallonia as in Flanders. This proportion is even higher for the Brussels Region.



Trends in the number of people receiving food aid from food banks (1994–2025)

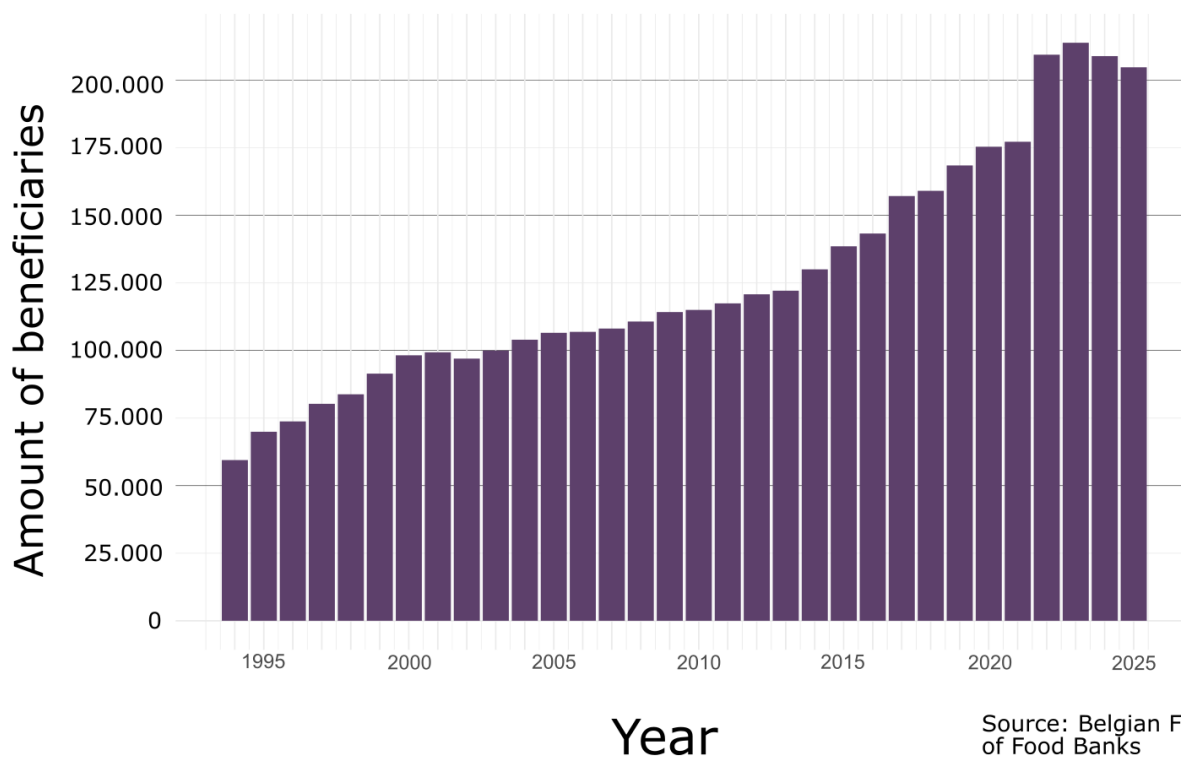
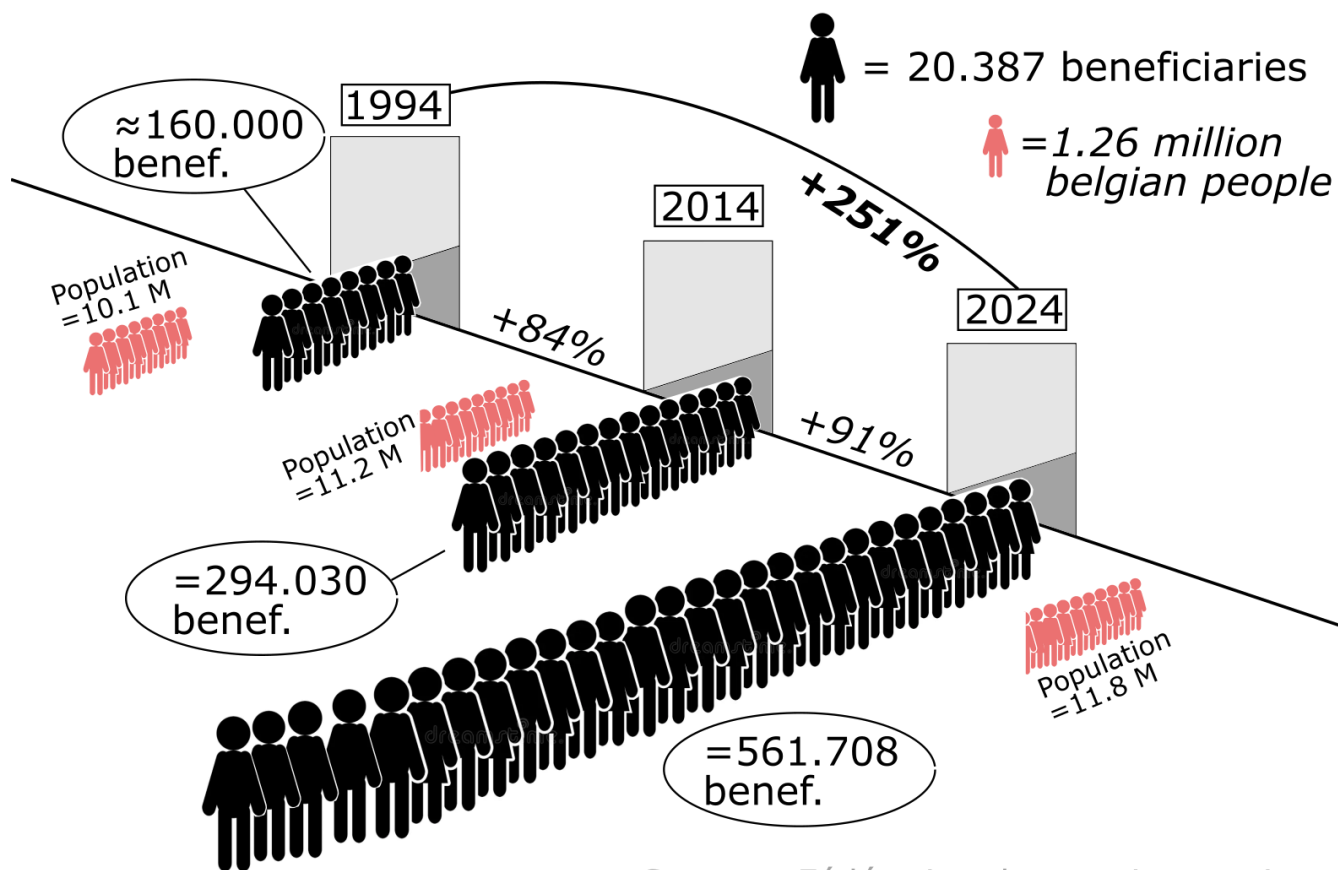


Figure 5 - Evolution of the number of beneficiaries of food banks between 1994 and 2025

Data provided by Food Banks (Figure 5) show that the evolution of the number of beneficiaries follows cycles of moderate and stronger increases. The reasons for the plateau observed in recent years will be discussed later.





Source : Fédération des services sociaux

Figure 6 - Evolution of the number of beneficiaries of food aid. Source - FdSS

Figure 6 shows that the number of recipients of food aid has almost doubled in 10 years, while it has multiplied by 3 to 4 in 30 years (+251%).⁴ The Belgian population increased by only 16% over the same period. This means that a significant proportion of the population has started using food aid since the late 1990s, and it amounts to hundreds of thousands of people.

⁴ Here, the estimated value for 1994 is deduced from a simple rule of three putting into perspective the data of the Food Banks and the two estimates of the FdSS for 2014 and 2024 (present study).

Methodology

In this section, we explain the method of calculating the totals presented in the previous section. We describe the data used according to their sources, the steps to compile them as well as the methodological choices made in the face of uncertainties related to the quality and representativeness of the data.

Homogenisation of data and working hypotheses

In the previous update of the food aid figures published in 2016, we added the SPP-IS data with those of the Food Banks taking into account the coverage of the organisations identified in the two databases (Hubert & Vleminckx, 2016).⁵ As a result, we were able to avoid counting an organisation listed in different data sources multiple times. However, the data were not homogenised to take account of the different counting methods. In this study, we go further by processing the data to account for this diversity and thus homogenise the counting. In concrete terms, we convert FoodIT data into an "SPP-IS" database.

This data transformation takes place on **two fronts**.

- On the one hand, the values provided by the Food Banks change from a monthly to an annual basis. They relate to monthly periods and do not directly represent an annual number of beneficiaries for each organisation that is a member of a food bank.
- On the other hand, we estimate the number of beneficiaries of organisations affiliated to a Food Bank as if it complied with the enumeration logic specific to the SPP-IS data. Irrespective of the temporal basis of the values provided, the aim here is to assess the difference between the number of beneficiaries notified to the SPP-IS and the same number notified to the Food Banks, since these two figures never correspond exactly in practice.

The method is as follows.

Whenever an organisation is identified in both databases, its SPP-IS data is given priority over that of Food Banks. SPP-IS figures are less at risk of being underestimated. Membership of a Food Bank requires payment of a contribution of €2 per beneficiary indicated. Affiliated organisations therefore have an interest in providing the minimum number of beneficiaries that allows them to have enough food to help as much as possible, while avoiding paying for the maximum number of people. At the same time, the figures provided to the SPP are checked in terms of the correspondence between the number declared and the official level of the organisation's accreditation. While the figures provided to the Food Banks are limited by a ceiling linked to the lump sum to be paid to join them, those of the SPP-IS are also limited to the extent that all the data provided in the context of ESF+ orders are checked and compared, from the point of view of authorisation, which officially determines the maximum number of beneficiaries that can be supported by the organisation. SPP-IS data cover organisations that placed an ESF+ order in 2025. There are also 57% of all organisations registered with a Food Bank (=380/672). To obtain the joint total of the two bases (SPP-IS & Food Banks), there is therefore a lack of organisations affiliated to a Food Bank that did not place an ESF+ order in 2025. This subset totals approximately 270 organisations, or 43% of all organisations affiliated with Food Banks.

In this particular subset, which represents 270 organizations out of the 1002 involved in our total, we perform a homogenisation of the figures in order to match them to the logic observed in the SPP-IS. The details of our

⁵ H-O. Hubert & J. Vleminckx. 2016. *Food aid today. The right to food tomorrow*. Action research. FDSS.

methodology are set out in the annex to this document. Here we present the result of our homogenisation according to the source of the data.

Data source	Organisations SPP & FB	SPP Organisations Only	FB Organisations Only	Total
Number of organisations	382	365	255	1.002
Gross number of beneficiaries before homogenisation	267.581	209.877	64.156	541.614
Beneficiary numbers after homogenisation	Unchanged	Unchanged	84.250	561.708

Table 2 - Distribution of organisations and number of recipients by data source.

The widest possible overview

Finally, we obtain a total number of homogenised beneficiaries for all the organisations present in the bases of the SPP-IS and Food Banks (FoodIT). This includes a large number of CPAS and non-profit organisations, but also the Vincent de Paul Belgium associations, for which the values identified by the dome internally correspond finely to the values provided on a case-by-case basis by the associations to the SPP-IS when ordering FSE+.

However, some organisations are not included in these two bases. This is the case for a number of Red Cross or Restos du coeur entities. We therefore used some figures provided by these entities while combining them with the figures available at the SPP-IS and the Food Banks.

Contributions and limitations of the study

A look back at the figures recorded

To summarise, let us return to the main contribution of this study. Having homogenised the data makes it more reliable and enhances the quality of the total we get. The following graph shows how our correction method corrected the raw data.

Comparison: raw value versus homogenized value by type of organisation

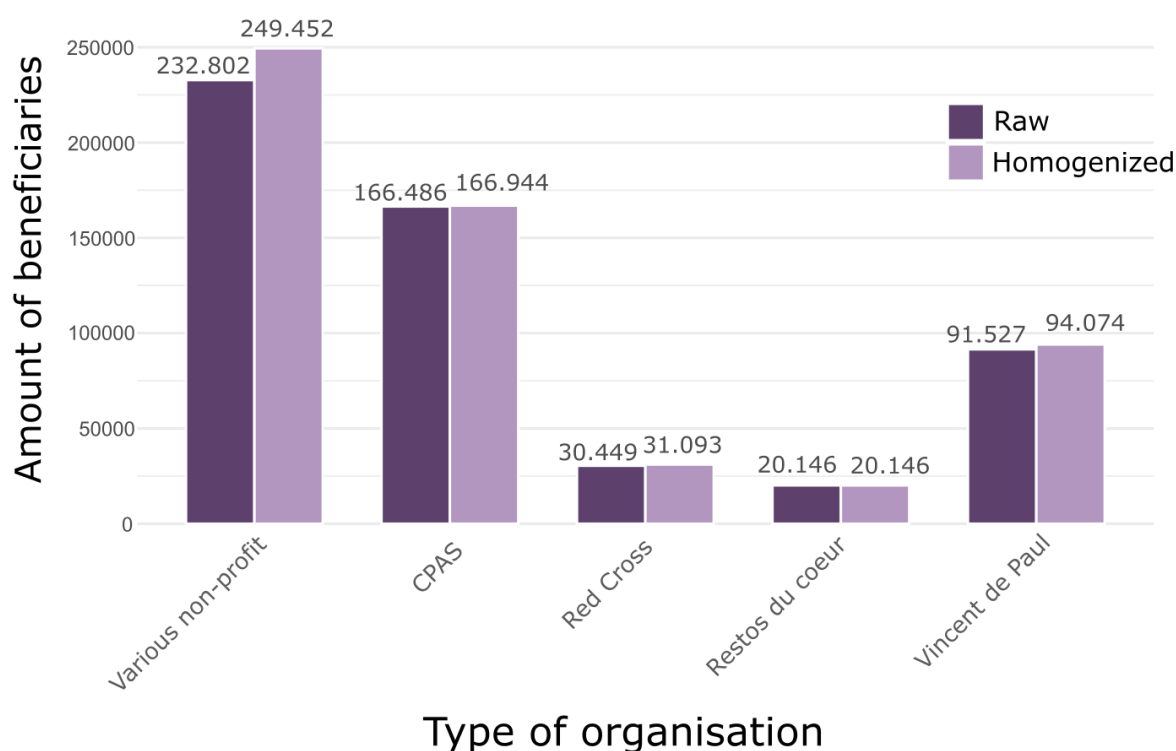


Figure 7 - Chart of the impact of data homogenization for each type of organization

As shown in Figure 7, the correction remains small.

In total, it leads to an increase in the total obtained before adjustment on the basis of the raw data of approximately 20 000 beneficiaries. This difference is small compared to the additional 142,000 beneficiaries listed in the SPP-IS by organisations that provide figures to both the SPP-IS and the Food Banks.⁶

The correction has the greatest impact mainly on the non-profit sector (category 'Various non-profit organisations'). The majority of these organisations are exclusively affiliated to the Food Banks. To explain this small variation compared to the reference sample, it can be pointed out that organisations that do not

⁶ In the reference sample, the number of beneficiaries increases from 125,000 to 267 000 once SPP-IS data are used rather than FoodIT (Food Banks) data.

have an ESF+ are generally smaller than those that do. Therefore, the corrected values in the adjusted sample that undergoes homogenisation of its data are lower at the origin and their evolution in absolute terms remains limited.

In other words, larger organisations spend less time under the radar of cupolas and censuses. However, the adjusted sample includes organisations that fall under the radar of the SPP-IS.

As these are smaller in size, the homogenisation of the data leads to an increase in the estimated total of 38% instead of 113% for the large organisations included in the reference sample.

Beyond the numbers

The interpretation of the figures presented in this study should be compared with statistics dealing with precariousness at a more general level.

On the one hand, as we explained in the introduction to this summary, food poverty appears to affect a significantly larger share of the population than those receiving support (the share covered by this study).

The proposed aid therefore provides an insufficient response to the problem of food insecurity in Belgium. In this regard, figures from *the Citizens' Survey on Living Conditions and Access to Fundamental Rights* (ISADF 2025)⁷ indicate that almost one in three Walloons fear a lack of food before they have the money to restock.⁸ Our total of 561,708 beneficiaries at national level is therefore to be considered as a minimum value. The methodological prudence we have shown allows us to state this, as well as the multiple potential underestimation factors of beneficiaries.

It is worth recalling that these figures are an estimate of the aid obtained, as accurate as possible on the basis of so-called declarative data.

The need for food aid is certainly greater than what we can actually count.

There are many reasons for this.

- Some people do **not have access to help**: access criteria are often restrictive, there is no food aid service nearby, psychological barriers (shame, fear), saturation of the service leading those responsible to refuse a request for help, ...
- Moreover, the **existing data we use does not cover all the aid provided**. Our study does not take into account a number of food aid initiatives of religious origin (e.g. evangelical churches or mosques) and citizens that operate under institutional radar and outside the scope of the Food Banks and the SPP-IS. The impact and actors of these informal food aids remain little explored to date.
- In addition, **the lack of data for more than 100 organisations active** in FoodIT, which are not affiliated with food banks, distorts the total number of beneficiaries. At the same time, some affiliated associations use parallel computer systems or work offline, thus omitting part of their audience. This under-reporting, although proportionally low, requires a verification of the actual activity of the structures to refine the estimates. Comprehensive data coverage therefore remains a challenge to ensure the accuracy of the food aid landscape.
- Finally, the figures presented are largely limited to data from ESF+ orders and Food Banks. However, as mentioned in **the introduction, food aid is not limited only to those sources and forms of aid**.⁹ More generally, food aid covers heterogeneous forms: parcels, social restaurants, social grocery stores,

⁷ Survey conducted in 2025 by the Walloon Institute for Evaluation, Foresight and Statistics (IWEPS)

⁸ <https://isadf.iweeps.be/?action=indicateur&droit=02&indicateur=01&type=1>

⁹ For example, at the level of CPAS, representing one third of the organisations listed here, only ESF+ support is quantifiable. All other forms of support, food or otherwise, which may contribute to a household's food security, are not counted. Think of the money paid on a case-by-case basis by a CPAS to a beneficiary to give a temporary boost.

- meals provided in a day/night shelter, informal assistance, financial assistance indirectly securing amounts for food purchases, ...

While the majority of organisations involved in parcel delivery are included in our study, only a part of social restaurants, shelters and grocery stores are included. However, the more specific set of these organisations is only partially included in our figures, which give only an incomplete representation of the beneficiaries of other forms of food aid. It is therefore also a reason to think that our figures underestimate the reality of food aid in Belgium.

In recent years, the deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Belgium has led to an increased need for aid and fewer resources to meet it.

Food aid is witnessing this rapid change: waiting lists for saturated services are growing. At least half of the food aid services in major cities are affected, according to the main umbrella organisations working with the SPP-IS and the Federation of Social Services. Given the decline in co-financing planned by the federal government in addition to ESF+ funds, professionals expect the situation to worsen considerably in the course of 2026, especially from spring, when stocks will gradually be emptied.

The combination of this with the expected inflow of people excluded from unemployment benefits and not finding employment raises a lot of concerns.

Food aid has not increased substantially since 2023, because services are saturated and no longer able to accommodate new people.

The almost doubling of our estimate of the number of beneficiaries in 10 years, from 300,000 to 560,000 between the surveys conducted in 2016 and 2026, is alarming.

To estimate the share of unmet need for food aid, saturated services could keep track of the number of people on the waiting list. It should be added that this information does not, however, provide us with information on the rate of non-use of food aid.

Indeed, our figures show that 50% of all organisations surveyed have fewer than 400 beneficiaries. Together, they account for 20% of the estimated 561 703 beneficiaries. This means that 80% of beneficiaries are concentrated within the largest organisations. It is possible – and even likely – that the number of beneficiaries provided in the other half (representing 20% of beneficiaries) is underestimated, because of poor and inadequate counting methods and tools, also because they are sometimes organisations that, lacking the means, do not have the opportunity to become professional and operate through volunteering.

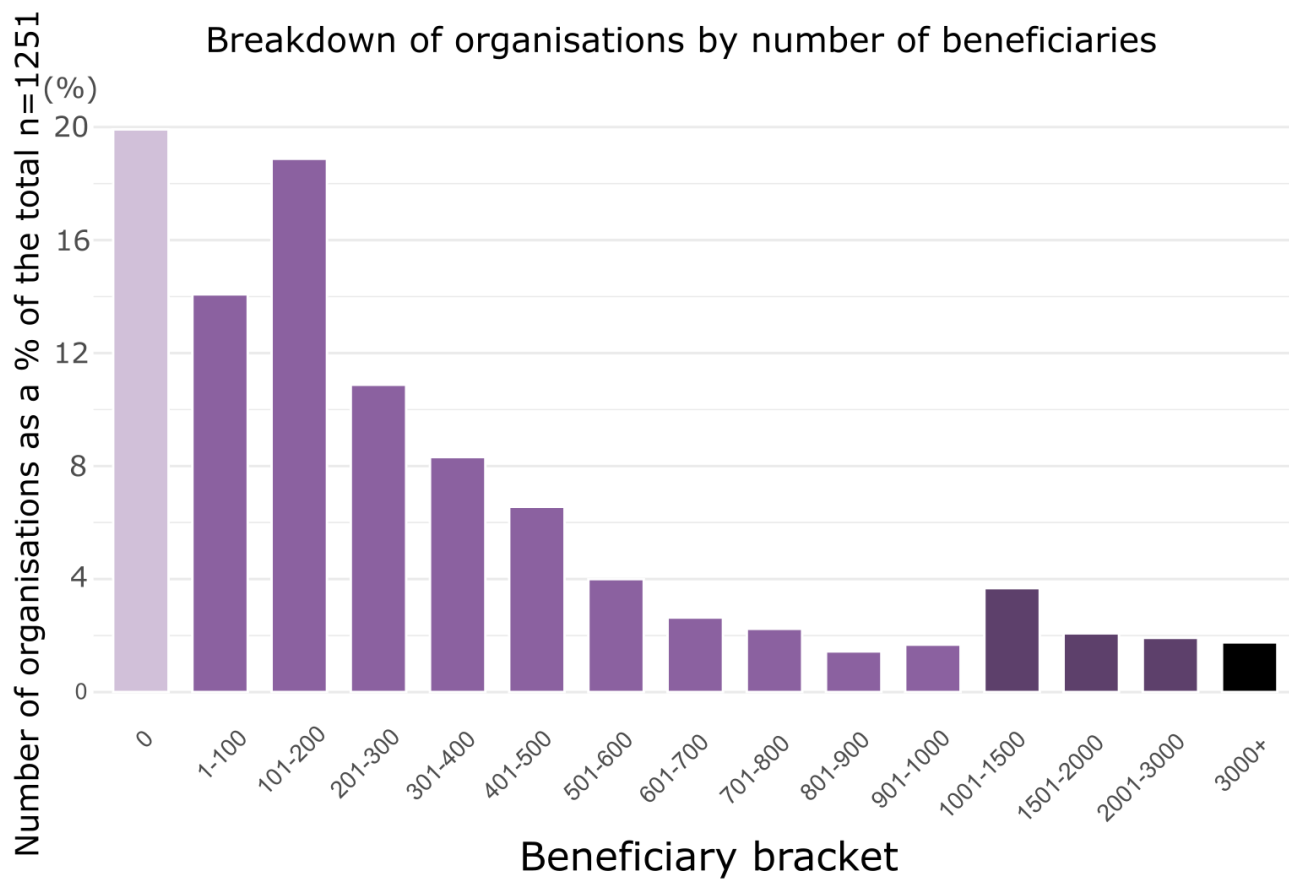
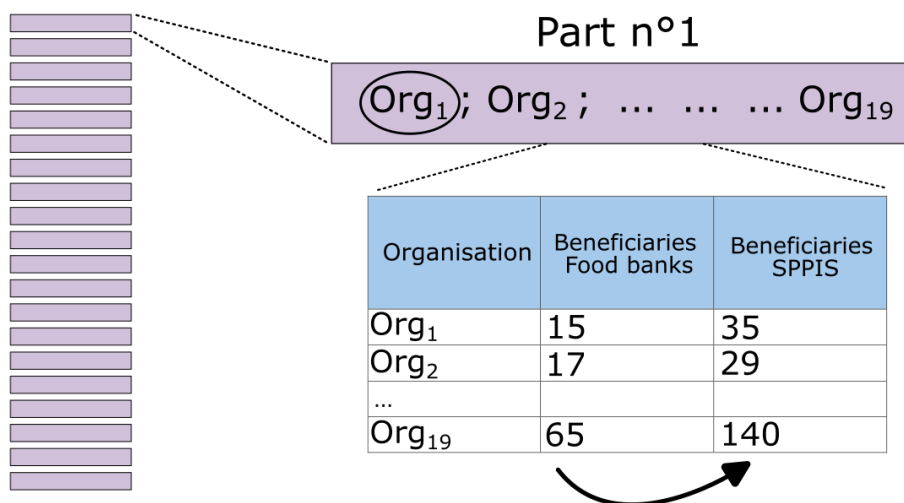
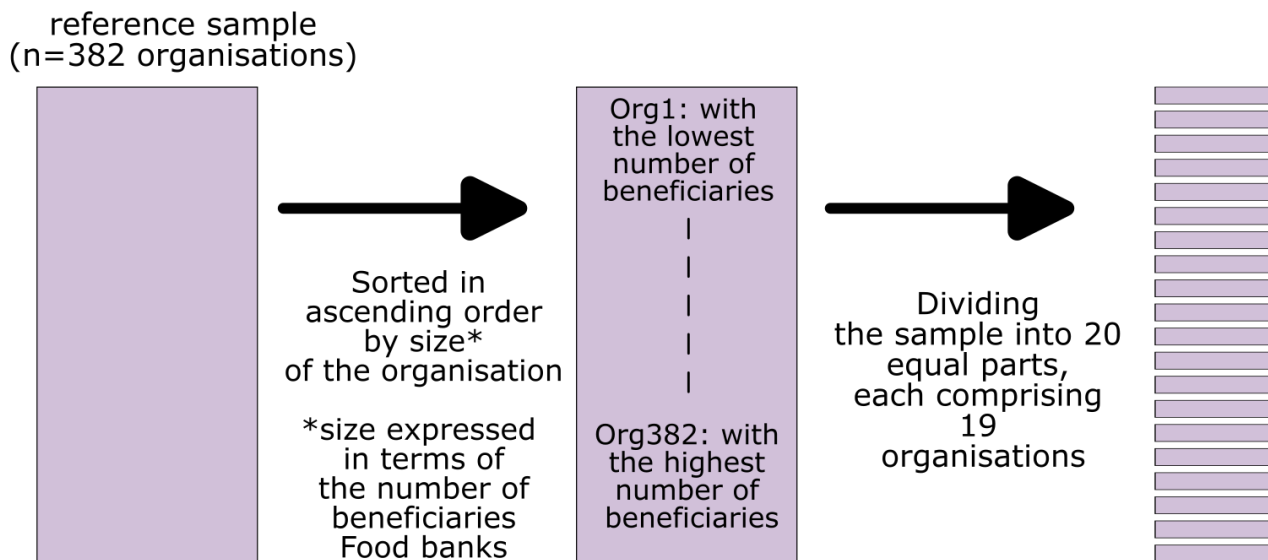


Figure 8 - Histogram of the distribution of organisations by size



Annexes

Methodology: general logic of correction



Median ratio x2 = At least 50% of organisations in Part 1 double their number of beneficiaries between the Food Banks and the SPP-IS

Figure 9 - Explanatory diagram of the method for calculating the correction coefficient

To homogenise the FoodIT data on the basis of the SPP data, we use the so-called reference sample (n=382, **Figure 9** above). It is composed of all duplicate organizations, present both at the SPP (following an FSE+ order) and in FoodIT (Food Bank). Each duplicate organisation therefore has two different values. The in-depth analysis of the reference sample makes it possible to deduce two crucial pieces of information. First, the difference between a monthly figure (FoodIT) and an annual figure (SPP). On the other hand, the difference in the method of identification between the Food Banks (FoodIT) and the SPP-IS.

With this information, we are able to homogenise the so-called “adjusted” sample (n=255) which brings together all the organisations listed only in FoodIT and not in the SPP-IS. The treatment is the same as the one we summarized in the diagram above. The adjusted sample is ranked in ascending order and divided into 20 equal parts, containing 12 or 13 organisations each, instead of 19 in the reference sample.

Only one “number of beneficiaries” value is identified for each organisation. The adjustment is made by multiplying the number of beneficiaries by the corresponding coefficient, deducted from the reference sample.

Here are some examples of correction.

Name	Beneficiaries FoodIT	Quantile	Coefficient	“Adjusted” beneficiaries
Le Chant d’Oiseau ASBL	65	5	X1.9	121
Satelliet VZW 's	148	12	X1,4	209
Ougrée Red Cross House	220	15	X1,1	237

Table 3 - Examples of raw data adjustment

Instead of applying a single correction coefficient to the whole test sample, 20 different ones are applied and each one has a better statistical representativeness. Samples with small organizations have coefficients up to X3, while larger structures are affected by coefficients between X1 and X2. Thus, the same coefficient is used to rework the figures of organizations of similar size.

The decrease in the coefficient with the size of the organisation is explained by the fact that it is easier to underestimate by half 150 beneficiaries than 1500. Therefore the difference between FoodIT and SPP-IS values can vary from double to triple for small organisations, but not for large structures that help more than 1000 people for example. To miss such a mass of individuals when counting the organisation is materially and statistically unlikely. In other words, missing 100 people out of a total of 1000 individuals is relatively less impactful for the coefficient (10% missed) than missing 100 people out of a total of 200 individuals (50% missed).

The high sensitivity of the average to extreme values has therefore made us prefer the median. This is why the coefficient we use calculates the median difference between the numbers of beneficiaries identified in FoodIT and the SPP-IS.

Data cleaning

Compiling data from SPP & FoodIT (FB) databases is a task that requires being able to distinguish each organization. A food aid service appears in one of the two databases following encoding by an organisation manager. The name of the organisation that appears in the data therefore varies according to the information that the person in charge wanted to encode. Thus, an NPO is not always informed as such, nor is a parcel delivery service or a social grocery store. Extensive research on each of the services, taken in isolation, cannot be dispensed with in order to ensure, for example, that a difference in name between the two compiled databases reflects the existence of two different services, and not a different naming. Many duplicates may have appeared in the data following this cleaning. This is why the gross number of organisations registered with the Food Banks (FoodIT) increases from 750 to 650 organisations (approx.) once the cleaning has been

carried out. Another useful identification variable to discriminate against duplicates is the EAFRD Code available to organisations that have already placed an order with the SPP-IS.

Among organisations with zero beneficiaries informed, the risk of missing out on well-functioning organisations, which help a significant number of beneficiaries, is limited.

These organisations are probably inactive or grant aid only on the basis of their own funds or donations. In this case, the number of affected beneficiaries that slip under the radar remains limited. However, we do not have the means to ensure this.

In addition to these organisations, much of the FoodIT encodings that were not considered in the total are actually structures that do not grant direct aid to beneficiaries.

These can be, as we have seen, logistics platforms whose mission is to store the products of the distribution associations. They may also include institutions such as schools that have used FoodIT in the past to manage food stocks, whether or not linked to food aid. We still find day or night centers, shelters for homeless people, and finally freight transport companies.

Although these organisations can be linked to a food aid mission, it is nevertheless impossible to determine the order of magnitude, expressed in terms of the number of beneficiaries, of that mission.