Urban food security during COVID-19: The limits of statutory welfare and the role of community action in Sweden and Korea

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ABSTRACT

During COVID-19, the demand for food relief exploded as vulnerable people were suddenly more numerous and visible than ever, for which statutory welfare was not ready to cope with. We examine the role of voluntary and community organizations (VCOs) in food relief in Stockholm, Sweden and Seoul, Korea. Interpretive analysis of interview materials reveals how VCOs perceive their role vis-à-vis the state and take actions against urban food insecurity during the pandemic. The limits of statutory welfare in reaching out to vulnerable individuals reserve an indispensable role for community action in food relief even with the well-developed welfare state. Despite starkly different welfare state contexts, VCOs in both cases complement statutory welfare by swiftly identifying the risk of hunger and organizing community actions to meet the emergent needs. Given that Sweden and Korea represent the least likely cases to observe welfare provision by VCOs, the findings may have implications to general understanding of VCOs as indispensable welfare provider.

1. Introduction

As an unprecedented external shock, COVID-19 has imposed a great challenge on government capacity to ensure basic health and economic conditions for the population. In particular, the demand for food relief exploded as vulnerable people at the risk of hunger were suddenly more numerous and visible than ever. During the pandemic, food security has been maintained stable for broad population in most high-income countries, but not necessarily for vulnerable groups. As news media revealed the sudden surge of hunger risks (Cho & Jeon, 2021; Convey & Henriques-Gomes, 2021; Joo et al., 2021; Oscarson, 2021), scholarly research began to pay attention to urban food insecurity during the pandemic (Geiger et al., 2021).

To this challenge, many governments were not ready to cope with, inviting a greater role for voluntary and community organizations (VCOs) to deliver and co-produce basic social services (Miao et al., 2021; Pevnaya et al., 2020; Steen & Brandsen, 2020). These non-government and non-profit civil society organizations constitute the ‘soft’ infrastructure of urban governance as opposed to the ‘hard’ infrastructure represented by local and national governments (Healey, 1997).

Historically, VCOs have played a critical role in welfare provision before the government could take action and often in collaboration with the government (Davis Smith, 1995; Hogg, 2020; Lewis, 1999). For such a role, VCOs draw on their ‘greater ability to engage with and understand the needs of individual service users and communities’ compared to the government or market actors (Hogg & Baines, 2011: 346). This comparative advantage of VCOs in meeting social needs may well be manifest in unexpected socio-economic crises such as COVID-19.

This article aims to shed renewed light on VCOs’ role in welfare provision by examining how VCOs perceive their role vis-à-vis the state and take action in response to urban food insecurity during the pandemic. Our study focuses on food relief activities in Stockholm, Sweden and Seoul, South Korea (hereafter Korea). According to the conventional theory on VCOs in relation to the welfare state (Salamon & Anheier, 1998), Sweden and Korea are the least likely cases to observe VCOs in welfare provision. They also represent starkly different welfare regimes - social democratic of Sweden and developmental (or productionist) of Korea. By finding the common critical role for VCOs in the least likely cases under the most different systems, this study expects to speak to general understanding of VCOs as indispensable welfare provider.

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1 The voluntary and community sector (VCS) is also used to refer to voluntary and community organizations (Hogg & Baines, 2011). But, we use the term ‘organizations’ instead of ‘sector’ because our purpose is not to make distinctions between the sectors in welfare provision but to reveal their unique organizational behavior in response to the pandemic.

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Salomon & Anheier (1998) predict a negligible role for VCOs in welfare provision in Sweden because of the well-developed welfare state. They expect a similarly marginal role for VCOs in Korea due to the weakly developed civil society and class actors. Based on quantitative measure of welfare provision, such as the budget size, they claim VCOs and the state to be in a trade-off relationship in welfare provision. According to them, non-state welfare is the result of an underdeveloped welfare state, and thus it would diminish as the statutory welfare develops. However, such quantitative measure cannot adequately represent qualitatively distinct role of VCOs vis-à-vis the state in welfare provision. VCOs often do what governments fail to do, making their role critical and indispensable despite the relatively small resources. Moreover, official statistics rarely collects data on welfare provision by VCOs. If any, the data is inadequate to assess the role of VCOs vis-à-vis the state because they often help different groups for different purposes. Vulnerable individuals, like those at the hunger risks during the pandemic, are often eligible for social assistance, and therefore seeking support from VCOs.

Alternatively, our study takes qualitative analysis approach, focusing on ‘how’ VCOs provide food relief rather than ‘how much’ they provide vis-à-vis the state. For this purpose, we conducted interpretative analysis using interview materials with VCOs. This method enables us to acquire qualitative information based on the on-site experience of VCO staff members who have interacted with service users, local community, and the government. The information includes which risk groups newly emerged during the pandemic, to what extent the number of food relief seekers increased, why statutory welfare fails to reach out to vulnerable individuals, and how VCOs could (or could not) help them. In particular, interpretative analysis focuses on how VCOs identify their role vis-à-vis the state and organize non-state welfare against the surrounding welfare regime context.

This study shows that the VCOs in both Sweden and Korea played an indispensable role in the domain of food security by identifying the most vulnerable groups outside the reach of statutory welfare and by organizing community actions to support them during the pandemic. In Sweden, VCOs targeted the elderly, marginalized ethnic groups, the homeless, those who do not qualify for statutory welfare or lack Swedish language skill. They provided food relief through community actions, such as food donations from food providers. Similarly, VCOs in Korea targeted old and new risk groups outside statutory welfare, including low-income college students, children at the risk of food insecurity, and low-income elderly who live alone or with small grandchildren. They not only expanded the existing programs but also deliberately adapted them to the pandemic situation. Rather than seeking the state funding, VCOs drew on community actions through donations and volunteers, working as a channel of social solidarity.

This article highlights qualitatively distinct roles between VCOs and the state in welfare provision. VCOs appear as an indispensable welfare provider even with the well-developed welfare state in Sweden because their provision for the most vulnerable individuals to whom statutory welfare fails to reach. In both cases, the limits of statutory welfare reserve a role for community actions. This common role of VCOs in the most different welfare regimes calls for renewed attention to welfare mix literature (Powell & Barrientos, 2004).

2. Theoretical framework: food security and community response

VCOs gain a growing attention in the literature related to COVID-19 (Santos & Laureano, 2021). Previous research found that VCOs play a key role in improving the most vulnerable individuals’ health, social and economic conditions, especially during socioeconomic crises (Healey et al., 2002). VCOs provide welfare by complementing or substituting the state provision (Davis Smith, 1995; Hogg, 2020; Lewis, 1999) and often pioneer the social services that later become part of statutory welfare (Osborne et al., 2008).

Food insecurity is a major issue for those VCOs working for poverty relief. As Tacoli (2019) points out, food is the main source of expenditure for the poorest urban households. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), food security refers to the physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food preferences for an active and healthy life. To achieve it, FAO calls for ensuring (1) food to be physically available, (2) individuals to have the sufficient economic or physical access to food, (3) households to have the ability to utilize and consume food, and finally (4) an absence from shocks that threaten the stability of the three domains (FAO, 2008).

Recent literature highlights that food insecurity is not exclusive to low-income countries, but it remains unresolved even in high-income countries (Mook et al., 2020). COVID-19 may have added a unique impact on food insecurity as it increased food price and unemployment rates, while restricting physical access to grocery stores and restaurants.

In most welfare states, social assistance programs for vulnerable households no longer provide food materials. Instead, they provide cash support to buy food. Typically, social assistance programs suffer from low take-up of benefits among the most needy because of moral stigma attached to it or complex process of means testing (Byun, 2022; Piven & Cloward, 1993; Soss et al., 2011). Given its inadequately low benefits (Nelson, 2013), the benefit recipients may reduce food consumption to pay for necessities such as electricity or heating when they face economic predicaments. Therefore, food insecurity among the poor households remains as one of the critical domains which statutory welfare programs have limited capacity to resolve. Such limits of statutory welfare leave food relief as one of the main domains where VCOs play an indispensable role as welfare provider.

In welfare provision, VCOs have unique strengths compared to the state. VCOs can better understand the needs of individuals and communities due to their closeness to local community (Pothukuchi, 2004). Drawing on this strength, VCOs bridge the gaps in local food systems, providing food relief to vulnerable individuals through food banks, food vouchers, and soup kitchens. Moreover, compared to the state, VCOs’ informal and flexible organizational structure allow them to be more responsive to the needs of service users (Billis & Glennerster, 1998). VCOs can adapt services more swiftly to specific local geographic, political and demographic characteristics, while building local community capacity to ensure the access to food (Hamm & Bellows, 2003; Anderson & Cook, 1999).

We acknowledge the weakness of VCOs as welfare provider as clearly as their strength. As non-government and non-profit actors, VCOs suffer from structural limitations, such as short of financial and human resources and the coordination problem with relevant actors. However, despite such weaknesses, VCOs have played a unique role as welfare provider, especially for the most vulnerable individuals. To put it differently, the weakness may constrain the strength, but not discount the strength as welfare provider.

3. Case selection: Sweden and Korea

To use qualitative case study as the lever to speak to general understanding of VCOs’ role in welfare provision, this study chose two cases, Sweden and Korea. Previous research found them the least likely cases to observe VCOs in welfare provision because of their welfare regime contexts (Salomon & Anheier, 1998). Thus, if the case study finds a critical role for VCOs in these cases, one can expect a similar role for VCOs in more likely cases. Our cases also represent the most different welfare regimes, social democratic and developmental regimes (Esping-Anderson, 1990; Holliday, 2000). The common finding in the most different systems suggests that such a role is independent of the welfare regime type.

According to Salamon and Anheier (1998), the welfare regime context shapes VCOs’ role in welfare provision. Drawing on the classic welfare regime typology (Esping-Anderson, 1990), they expect a large
role for VCOs in welfare provision in the liberal (e.g. the US) and the conservative regimes (e.g. Germany) where statutory welfare is underdeveloped. However, VCOs in the two regimes are distinguishable in terms of qualitative characteristics of their role. Whereas the former is active and independent of the state, the latter (e.g. the state church and its affiliated organizations) provides welfare as an extended arm of the state, and thus, their role is large, but passive and dependent. In contrast, they expect a marginal role for VCOs in the social democratic regimes (e.g. Sweden) because the state provides a comprehensive statutory welfare. VCOs’ role in the developmental regimes (e.g. Japan and Korea) would be marginal as well but for a different reason. Here, the strong state prioritizes economic development over social welfare, while weak civil society actors are unable to press the government to expand statutory welfare. Therefore, care and welfare responsibility largely remains at the family. Albeit for different reasons, the conventional theory expects to observe VCOs in welfare provision least likely in Sweden and Korea.

Our case selection also reflects the most different systems design, a classic comparative method that selects two or more cases which have the common (or a similar) outcome, but differ in many factors except one critical factor. The design attributes the common outcome to the shared factor between the cases (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). Sweden and Korea represent starkly different welfare regimes. In our expectation, the common outcome would be active VCOs in food relief for vulnerable individuals. The shared factor would be the limits of statutory welfare, which reserve an indispensable role for community actions.

4. Methods: interpretative analysis

The primary method of this study is interpretative analysis. By examining the verbal and written expressions of VCOs and the surrounding welfare discourse, it aims to reveal the social meaning of actors’ perception and behavior under particular policy contexts (Durnova & Zittoun, 2011). Based on this interpretative understanding, we assess the VCOs’ role in urban food security during COVID-19 and in general terms.

In specific, the interpretative uses Nordensvård & Ketola (2019)’s discursive analytic schema that relates framing and metaphor to policy discourse. In our study, policy discourse refers to the dominant welfare discourse shaped by the welfare regime; framing refers to the way VCOs identify and legitimate their idea and practice against the dominant policy discourse; metaphor refers to the simple and symbolic expression that embodies a particular frame. A discourse not only describes the reality but also constitutes the reality in a particular way (Keller, 2004). Against the dominant policy discourse, actors engaged in collective actions (e.g. elections, social movements) often use framing to ‘locate, perceive, and identify their role in relation to the events and surrounding conditions’ (Goffman, 1974: 21). They also use framing as a strategic and deliberate activity to justify and generate public support for particular ideas and practices (Beland, 2011). Based on interview materials with VCOs, our analysis reveals how VCOs frame their role in food relief against (or in favor of) the dominant welfare discourse, especially during the pandemic. We summarize the VCOs’ framing in several metaphors.

Our main source for analysis is the interview materials with VCOs (our own and published in news media), but is also includes published documents related government policy and VCOs’ activities, and opinion pieces in news media. For interview, we select the VCOs that have engaged most visibly in food provision during the pandemic in Stockholm and Seoul, which are the largest cities in Sweden and Korea, respectively. To identify active VCOs in welfare provision, we have searched the main newspapers in each city between 1 January and 30 October in 2021. The search used such key words as food insecurity, hunger risk, food relief, soup kitchen, food bank, food voucher, poverty relief, VCOs, NGOs, charity, church, temple, social assistance, and vulnerable groups during COVID-19. We have identified and contacted three VCOs in Stockholm and six VCOs in Seoul, ended up interviewing three VCOs in Stockholm and one VCO in Seoul that agreed to our interviews.

The choice of interviewees reflected the centrality of their role in the organization. For those VCOs we could not interview, the analysis drew on their interviews published in news media and the relevant documents published on their webpages. The interviews followed the common interview guide, which is semi-structured to contain the VCO’s organizational background and funding sources, the organization’s food provision during COVID-19, and the organizational challenges, and practical solutions. The questions were open-ended and proceeded with spontaneous questions for about 60 min. This allowed us to gain information on how each organization perceived their role and take actions to ensure food security for those outside the reach of statutory assistance programs. Given the pandemic situation, we conducted the interviews through online meetings using Zoom.

5. VCOs in food relief during COVID-19 in Stockholm and Seoul

As opposed to the conventional wisdom, VCOs have played an indispensable role in food relief even with the well-developed welfare state in Stockholm, Sweden. Although VCOs expanded food relief programs during the pandemic, they have established such programs before COVID-19 for those vulnerable groups outside the reach of statutory welfare. Similarly, in Seoul, Korea, VCOs’ role in food security was far from negligible. VCOs swiftly identified the increased hunger risk and adapted their programs to the emergent needs in the pandemic situation. Like their Swedish counterpart, VCOs in Korea have played an indispensable role by supporting those vulnerable individuals outside the reach of statutory welfare. Upon the increased need for support, community actors in both cases were proactive or entrepreneurial rather than passively overburdened. Rather than seeking financial support from the state, VCOs relied on community actions, organizing donations and volunteers among citizens and local businesses. Table 1 presents the VCOs in Stockholm and Seoul along with their mission, background, and funding.

In Stockholm, food stores and pharmacies have operated as usual despite the restrictions for social distancing put in place during the winter of 2021. These restrictions meant that each visitor or shopper needed to maintain distance at least 10 m’s in indoor space (Kuhlmann & Hellström, 2021). Nevertheless, food was always available for broad population. In contrast, the pandemic limited food supply among traditionally vulnerable groups and caused food shortages among newly emerged vulnerable groups.

Three VCOs have actively engaged in food relief activity during the pandemic, including Stadsmissionen, Salvation Army, and St. Klara church. Stadsmissionen and Salvation Army are the largest charity organizations in Stockholm, having operation branches throughout the Greater Stockholm area for food provision and other social services. St. Klara church is smaller in terms of funding and operational size, focusing on emergency interventions, such as emergency shelter and food provision. All of them run soup kitchens.

These organizations target vulnerable groups, including the homeless, illegal migrants, asylum applicants, poor elderly, and those inadvertently or deliberately live outside of the statutory social security
During the pandemic, food insecurity increased for vulnerable groups, and organizations received special grants from the state or municipal governments, monetary and food donations to stock up foodstuffs for distribution. However, during the pandemic, they received special state grants to combat poverty. Although these organizations from local food providers and their own budget. However, during the pandemic, three groups - low-income family, the unemployed and young adults - stand out as new risk groups: low-income family, the unemployed and young adults (Sommar, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). These stores lower the threshold to access food by allowing economically vulnerable clients to shop food for discounted price with the limit of total 300 kronor (30 Euro) per week.

All three organizations have a similar funding mechanism for their food relief programs. They provide food normally through food donations from local food providers and their own budget. However, during the pandemic, they received special state grants to combat poverty (Myndigheten för Civilsamhällesfrågor, 2021). In Sweden, even if the state partly funds VCOs, it strictly earmarks such funding for designated services. In case of food relief, those VCOs primarily rely on donors to meet the increased demand for food. They are also actively raising monetary and food donations to stock up foodstuffs for distribution. During the pandemic, food insecurity increased for vulnerable groups, but so did the donations to counter the risk. Although these organizations received special grants from the state or municipal governments, all interviewed VCOs in Stockholm rely on donations for maintaining operations as the main source of funding. The traditional stream of food supply consists of donated leftovers from grocery stores, bakeries or wholesalers. In addition, the VCOs receive complementary food donations from canceled flights and conferences or the events that have leftover food.

Like in Sweden, during the pandemic, food security in Korea has been maintained stable for broad population, but not necessarily for certain vulnerable groups. In Seoul, Korea, six VCOs turned out most visibly engaged in food relief during the pandemic, including Friends of Hope, Myung-dong Babjib, Half-price Restaurant for the Youth, Anna’s House, Zero Won Store, and Seocho Elderly Welfare Center.

Despite the increased state support for those affected by the pandemic (Socialstyrelsen, 2021), during the first year of the pandemic, Statsmissionen observed 50% increase in terms of the amount of food relief throughout its distribution centers in Stockholm. Similar to this development was 164% increase in the number of visitors at the organization’s two food banks. The interviewee at Statsmissionen stated, “some studies report that those hit the hardest are those who have the worst, and I have no doubt about it when we see the queues for the food mission grow twice, three times during the first year of the COVID–period” (Sommar, 2021b). St. Klara church also has expanded food services in response to new groups who show up at their soup kitchens or make visits to the church to get pre-packaged grocery bags. However, Salvation Army (Frälsmningsarmén), which caters food mainly for the homeless, did not witness any increase in demand for food.

When it comes to food relief, Stockholm VCOs serve two purposes. One is acute, temporary food relief through soup kitchens or by handing out grocery bags to all in need of food. The other is through a long-term food relief system for vulnerable groups, exemplified by Statsmissionen’s social grocery stores. An interviewee noted, “The basic idea is that if you live on or below the limit for income support, or if you are eligible for support for food, you can shop in these stores with certain restrictions” (Sommar, 2021b). These stores lower the threshold to access food by allowing economically vulnerable clients to shop food for discounted price with the limit of total 300 kronor (30 Euro) per week.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Mission</th>
<th>Funding</th>
<th>Clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stockholm</td>
<td></td>
<td>food bank, social grocery store, soup kitchen, cafeteria, shelter, youth activities</td>
<td>private donations and volunteering</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>soup kitchen, cafeteria, shelter, social services</td>
<td>private donations and volunteering</td>
<td>the homeless, lonely elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Klara church</td>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>soup kitchen, cafeteria, shelter, social services</td>
<td>private donations and volunteering</td>
<td>all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seoul</td>
<td></td>
<td>food relief programs, including food voucher, food delivery</td>
<td>private donations and volunteering</td>
<td>low-income student, child, and elderly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero Won Store</td>
<td>partnership of NGO and local government</td>
<td>free grocery store for those that do not qualify for regular food banks</td>
<td>private donations for food and government fund for staff salary</td>
<td>low-income people who are not eligible to use food banks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half-price restaurant for Youth</td>
<td>NGO, Christian</td>
<td>soup kitchens and other social services</td>
<td>private donations and user fees</td>
<td>low-income youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna’s House</td>
<td>NGO, Christian</td>
<td>soup kitchen and other social services</td>
<td>private donations and volunteering</td>
<td>homeless and poor people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myung-dong Babjib</td>
<td>NGO, Christian</td>
<td>soup kitchen and other social services</td>
<td>private donations and volunteering</td>
<td>homeless and poor people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seocho Elderly Welfare Center</td>
<td>local government</td>
<td>food delivery, soup kitchen, and cultural activity</td>
<td>local government funding, private volunteers</td>
<td>the elderly at risk of hunger</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The limits of statutory welfare and community action

The welfare regime may affect VCOs’ role in welfare provision in quantitative terms but not necessarily in qualitative terms. Depending on the regime type, statutory welfare has distinctive institutional rules regarding who should provide welfare, to whom, and under what conditions. These institutional rules shape the dominant welfare discourse. A policy discourse not only describes the reality, but it also constitutes the reality by guiding actors’ perception and behavior (Keller, 2004). As the welfare-mix literature highlights, the welfare states rely on the mix of various welfare providers, including the state, employers, family, and VCOs (Powell & Barrientos, 2004; Salamon & Anheier, 1998).

6. The limits of statutory welfare and community action

The dominant welfare discourse in Sweden is universal state welfare, in which the state provides social security and services as citizenship rights to all persons in relevant risk categories. Thus, the quality of welfare does not depend on occupation, employer, region, gender, and family background. It promotes an equality of high standards, not an equality of minimal needs. This results in the lowest level poverty and income inequality among the welfare regimes. The origin and continuation of universal welfare regime has been explained by political mobilization of working class actors (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Korpi, 1983; Korpi & Palme, 1998). Summarily, the universal welfare state expects VCOs to play no or little role as welfare provider. In the conventional view, citizens and residents are unconcerned about voluntary and community action for welfare in the universal welfare state (Weisbroad, 1997).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Welfare regime</th>
<th>Dominant welfare discourse</th>
<th>VCO’s Framing of their role as welfare provider</th>
<th>The Common VCO Metaphor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social democratic regime (Sweden)</td>
<td>Universal state welfare</td>
<td>The universal welfare state is not accessible to some vulnerable people lacking food security. It is the responsibility of society to help those in need of food, outside the reach of the welfare state.</td>
<td>VCOs as an indispensable welfare provider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental regime (Korea)</td>
<td>Minimalist state welfare, shifting toward universal state welfare</td>
<td>Historically, VCOs have complemented the minimalist welfare state. The welfare state improved, yet social assistance remains ineffective or inaccessible to some vulnerable people. VCOs are more adaptive and sophisticated in ensuring food security for vulnerable groups.</td>
<td>VCOs as a channel of social solidarity Readily available community support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.1. Stockholm: VCOs as hidden complement to the universal welfare state

The dominant welfare discourse in Stockholm is universal state welfare, in which the state provides social security and services as citizenship rights to all persons in relevant risk categories. Thus, the quality of welfare does not depend on occupation, employer, region, gender, and family background. It promotes an equality of high standards, not an equality of minimal needs. This results in the universal welfare state is not accessible to some vulnerable people lacking food security. It is the responsibility of society to help those in need of food, outside the reach of the welfare state.

Historically, VCOs have complemented the minimalist welfare state. The welfare state improved, yet social assistance remains ineffective or inaccessible to some vulnerable people. VCOs are more adaptive and sophisticated in ensuring food security for vulnerable groups.
Despite different labels, all point out that its welfare state characteristics reflect the historical legacy of the development state— the model for industrialization commonly adopted in East Asian countries, including Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan. In this model, the strong state sets economic growth as the primary goal of government policies and strategically allocates economic resources to help infant industries grow and compete in the global market (Johnson, 1986). For that purpose, the state prioritizes economic growth over social welfare needs, leaving welfare and care responsibility placed on the family (Estevez-Abe et al., 2016; Peng, 2004) and those employers who can afford occupational welfare and care responsibility placed on the family (Estevez-Abe et al., 2016; Peng, 2004). Despite different labels, all point out that its welfare state characteristics make VCOs in Stockholm find that individuals and local businesses are concerned about the basic food security of other people and willing to provide donations and volunteer activities. One interviewee emphasized this point, “if you see a glimmer of light in it [the situation of increased hunger risk], it is amongst private individuals and those who have companies. We have never seen such a high willingness to donate whether it is monetary gifts or in-kind” (Sommar, 2021b). This finding on readily available community actions for welfare provision is in line with Lundström and Svensberg (2003)’s study. It shows that voluntary sector in the Swedish welfare state is relatively more active in non-welfare domains such as sports and culture, but it is still active in welfare-related domains in an international comparison. The study also suggests that strong welfare state and strong VCOs can co-exist rather than excluding each other.

Our analysis reveals that community welfare act as a ‘hidden’ complement to the for-granted state welfare in the universal welfare state of Sweden. For food relief, VCOs make no or limited contacts with local governments in addition, VCOs make contacts with the social service authorities to help vulnerable individuals claim their social rights and benefits. VCOs in Stockholm clearly recognize how their activities may fill the potholes in the welfare system, working for the most basic welfare needs and for those outside the reach of statutory welfare. During the pandemic, they have provided relief to hunger risks among vulnerable individuals directly by increasing food provision and indirectly by providing social services that may help the recipients escape poverty.

6.2. Seoul: VCOs as indispensable complement to the minimalist welfare state

For the Korean welfare state, there are multiple ways to characterize its regime type, including developmental, productivist, or familial welfare regime (Choi, 2013; Holliday, 2000; Kwon, 2005; Wang, 2017). Despite different labels, all point out that its welfare state characteristics reflect the historical legacy of the development state—the model for industrialization commonly adopted in East Asian countries, including Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Taiwan. In this model, the strong state sets economic growth as the primary goal of government policies and strategically allocates economic resources to help infant industries grow and compete in the global market (Johnson, 1986). For that purpose, the state prioritizes economic growth over social welfare needs, leaving welfare and care responsibility placed on the family (Estevez-Abe et al., 2016; Peng, 2004) and those employers who can afford occupational welfare (Kim et al., 2011). In addition, traditional Confucian ethics upholds the minimalist welfare state by emphasizing obligations to support the family rather than social rights as citizens, while valuing self-reliance through thrift, diligence in education and work (Wang, 2017). Against the backdrop of the minimalist welfare state in Korea, voluntary and community actors have played a significant role as welfare provider. After the Korean War (1950–53), there was an influx of foreign relief agencies into Korea. In particular, Christian churches and charity organizations have actively engaged in poverty relief activities. During the rapid industrialization between 1960s and 1980s, the state suppressed VCOs that engaged in political activism (e.g. pro-democracy movement or labor movement), while supporting VCOs in welfare and social service provision (Kim et al., 2011). In this regard, the conventional view (Salamon & Anheier, 1998) is misleading. The state repression on civil society actors had been selective rather than full-fledged.

After the democratic regime change in 1987, Korea began to expand its statutory welfare substantially in terms of program type, budget, and coverage, making the state emerged as the main welfare provider (Byun, 2022; Peng, 2004). Whereas the dominant welfare discourse was minimalist state welfare under the developmental welfare regime, it has been shifting toward universal state welfare after the democratization in 1987 and the subsequent liberal market reforms in the late-1990s (Kwon, 2019).

Our analysis reveals that VCOs clearly recognize the very specific limits in the coverage and benefit levels of statutory welfare programs, as well as their behavioral impacts on the benefit recipients. Furthermore, they design relief programs deliberately to overcome the limits of statutory programs. For its food relief program for children in low-income families, Friends of Hope sets the eligibility threshold as 150% of the poverty line income (75% of the median income), whereas the statutory social assistance sets the threshold as 60% of the poverty line income (30% of the median income) (National Basic Living Security Act, 2000). According to the program manager, “if one member of the recipient family starts to earn income that exceeds 60% of the poverty line household income, social assistance benefits would stop. This disincentivizes employment efforts among the recipient family members. This is why they have their own standard” (Byun, 2021).

Despite significant welfare reforms, the familial welfare state partly remained. For instance, the social assistance entails a strict conditionality not only on the recipient’s income and asset but also on his family members’ (National Basic Living Security Act, 2000). As the food bank program exemplifies, many people in need of food are not qualified for the social assistance. VCOs have filled this gap between statutory welfare and actual needs for food.

In addition, during the pandemic, VCOs identified newly emerged risk groups, and took immediate actions. As introduced earlier, Friends of Hope swiftly identified a sharp increase in need of food among young adults in education and expanded its food voucher program, Lunchbox for Youth. The VCO also started a new program for children at risk of food poverty. The program manager pointed out that the social assistance benefit (KRW 1 million per month for a four-member family) is “far from sufficient” to make a living in metropolitan areas like Seoul. In addition, neither unemployment benefits nor social assistance benefits cover those self-employed who had to close their business during the pandemic (Byun, 2021). The interviewees perceive their proactive role during the pandemic as a natural response. Such an organizational response has to do with the historical context of the minimalist welfare state, which has long left the welfare responsibility for children and elderly in vulnerable families outside the statutory welfare.

Like in Sweden, VCOs in Korea appear to provide a channel of social solidarity in their food relief activities. Rather than relying on government support, VCOs have initiated their own programs by organizing volunteers and donations for community action, maintaining financial independence from the state. In doing so, VCOs served as a venue to mobilize citizens’ empathy to other citizens who fell in hardship during the pandemic. Friends of Hope’s new fundraising campaign gathered 568 donors for their food vouchers program for low-income college students. Anna’s House organized 9448 volunteers and a number of donors to provide dinner to 187,027 people in 2020. Half-price Restaurant found sufficient community support to expand its half-priced restaurants for youth. Zero Won Stores could run its free
grocery stores through the donations from local businesses and residents.  

Upon the sudden surge in need for food, VCOs have proactively expanded their organizational activities rather than passively responded or being overburdened. In case of Seocho borough’s Elderly Welfare Centers, the activity is beyond mere provision of food. They approached food security issue from a social perspective, encompassing not only meals for living, but also a socializing venue that provides a sense of belonging and social interactions. Thus, their food relief concerns a broader social work scheme. Before the pandemic, they ran three free restaurants for around 700 elderly people aged 60 and above who live in the borough and at risk of not having meals. At the Elderly Center, those low-income elderly can have meals as well as cultural and sport activities along with other non-poor elderly people. As the restaurants had to close due to the pandemic, the Center started to deliver lunch boxes to low-income elderly. Upon the reopening of the restaurant in the fall of 2021, the director of the restaurants accurately addressed the social meaning of food service to low-income elderly. She stated, “This restaurant is a very important place for the elderly people to meet each other, not just having food. We are glad to reopen the restaurant now” (Ryu, 2021). A female user aged 74 makes it clear that she comes to the restaurant not only for eating but also for socializing, saying that “I was excited and glad when I got a phone call from the staff that I can come to the restaurant again. I got my hair done and dressed up today for this outing” (Ryu, 2021). This community approach to food relief provides something beyond food. An elderly user in his 70 s expressed that it is ‘warm’ food rather than food itself that matters to him a lot, saying that, “I feel so good to have warm food after a long time” (Ryu, 2021). However, this social approach may have to do with the fact that Seocho is the richest borough in Seoul. If the hunger risk were more prevalent as in Yeongdeungpo borough, the Center might have to focus on providing basic food relief to more people.

Finally, the Korean case suggests that VCOs can be a source of welfare innovation. An exemplary case is how Friends of Hope reached out to the college students at the risk of hunger. When they launched a fundraising campaign, the hunger risk remained largely unknown to the public. More problematic was a social stigma for the benefit recipients. The college students at the risk of hunger tend to perceive food voucher as something shameful and are reluctant to apply for the program. Previous recipients of the voucher tend not to spread the information to others. To overcome this obstacle, the organization put innovative and deliberate efforts to disseminate the program information via social network services in a close collaboration with an NGO called Tenspoon (meaning that many a little makes a mickle). Tenspoon has an established network among the college students who participated in its food support activities. This sophisticated approach reflects the comparative advantage of VCOs vis-à-vis the state in welfare provision.

7. Conclusions

Our analysis reveals that VCOs in both Sweden and Korea have contributed to urban food security during the pandemic by providing food relief to those vulnerable groups outside the reach of the welfare state. Despite the difference in the welfare regime context, the VCOs in both cases commonly acknowledge the limits of statutory social assistance to reach out to vulnerable individuals and families at the risk of hunger. Acknowledging such a limit, the VCOs legitimate their reserved role in welfare provision vis-à-vis the state. This finding challenges the conventional view that sees VCOs and the state in a trade-off relation in welfare provision. Furthermore, VCOs in both cases utilize the advantages as voluntary and community actors to meet the sudden surge in need of food relief during the pandemic. They acted in a more adaptive and sophisticated way than the state agencies could do, responding to the emergent food insecurity among vulnerable individuals and families.

VCOs in our cases could find sufficient community support to finance their expanded food relief programs. Whereas the conventional theory predicts a weak civil society support for welfare in Sweden and Korea, our case study reveals that VCOs can find sufficient community support in both cases. Furthermore, by taking community approach in financing (donations and volunteering among individuals and local businesses), VCOs serve as a channel of social solidarity. Their financial independence from the state is distinctive from the VCOs in the UK under the New Public Management scheme, by which VCOs provide social services with the state funding (Hogg & Baines, 2011). In Sweden and Korea, VCOs do not intend to take over government services or receive state funding for their programs. Although the community approach in financing sets limits to their capacity to provide food relief, it allows the VCOs to focus on what the state cannot do, such as ensuring food security for those who are not qualified for the statutory social assistance. In addition, the financial independence allows them to freely initiate and adapt their programs to emergent needs for support. They can do what they can do.

This study does not argue that VCOs are more effective than the state in ensuring food security, and thus they should take a greater role vis-a-vis the state in food security. The state and statutory welfare can ensure food security for broad population, which VCOs certainly cannot do. Instead, this study intends to highlight the qualitatively indispensable role for VCOs in welfare provision vis-à-vis the state. Even with the well-developed welfare state of Sweden, there are vulnerable people at the risk of hunger outside the reach of statutory welfare. Based on their close interaction with the service users, local community, and the government, the VCOs in both Sweden and Korea address the limits of statutory welfare and legitimate their community action for those who have no or limited access to statutory welfare. Their role is indispensable because they do what the state cannot do. For such a role, they could find readily available community support among individuals and local businesses. By relying on the quantitative measure of welfare provision, the conventional theory on the role of VCOs as welfare provider could not adequately assess this qualitatively distinct role for VCOs vis-à-vis the welfare state (see Casey, 2016; Hogg, 2020; Ragin, 1998; Von Schnurbein et al., 2018).

Given that Sweden and Korea represent the least likely cases to observe welfare provision by VCOs and the most different welfare regime contexts, the findings of this study may have implications to general understanding of VCOs’ role in relation to the welfare state. This study suggests that community welfare can be an indispensable complement to statutory welfare rather than the manifestation of an underdeveloped welfare state. The welfare-mix literature may need to consider VCOs as an indispensable welfare provider along with the state, the employer, and the family. VCOs may play such a role either independently or in collaboration with the government. For the case of collaboration, future research may need to specify the conditions under which VCOs can maintain their strength as voluntary and community actors.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References


