

## Summary

Soaring food prices, coupled with other challenges such as global conflict, social inequalities, poverty, and climate change, threaten food security, with 8.5 percent of the Lithuanian population facing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2021. The prevalence of moderate food insecurity reveals a gap within the Lithuanian social welfare regime, where existing support systems fall short of guaranteeing people's right to adequate food. The gap can be explained mainly by two food security dimensions: economic and physical access as well as food utilisation.

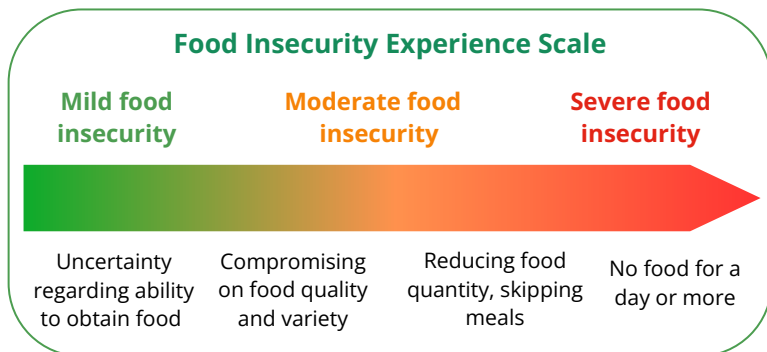
As a result of economic vulnerabilities, individuals compromise on food quality and variety and experience uncertainty regarding their ability to obtain food. This in particular affects vulnerable groups such as people with low incomes, the elderly, and women. While food charities play a crucial role in offering essential relief to those in need, their capacity and mandate are insufficient to address the structural causes of food insecurity. This policy brief provides recommendations to the government and the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Lithuania, highlighting the necessity for robust social assistance measures to address people's ability to afford sufficient healthy and nutritious diets and ensure comprehensive and sustained access to food for all.

## Food security in Lithuania

The Global Hunger Index 2023 shows that Lithuania has low hunger levels, yet Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) data reveals that 235,700 Lithuanians still grapple with some degree of food insecurity. Hunger and food insecurity are interconnected: severe food insecurity often leads to hunger. However, in Lithuania, similar to other European nations, the challenge of food security lies not in undernourishment but in ensuring access to a high-quality, healthy, and nutritious diet.

The overall situation in Lithuania shows positive progression. Prevalence of moderate food security in Lithuania has decreased from 15.3 % in 2015 to 8.5 % in 2021. Although higher than the European Union average of 7.8%, Lithuania's prevalence remains low compared to the global average of 29.6%. Only 2.1 % of population were severely food insecure in 2021.

A nuanced understanding of food security broadens our perspective on diets, emphasizing that food insecurity encompasses more than just hunger but also access to enough safe and nutritious food. Individuals experiencing moderate food insecurity might face unpredictable access to food and thus may resort to various coping strategies, such as consuming cheaper, less nutritious food, borrowing food or money, or even skipping meals.



## Food security dimensions

**There is no single indicator that measures food security.** It is determined by the interaction of a broad range of agro-environmental, socio-economic and biological factors.

### 1) Physical availability of food

Determined by the level of food production, stock levels and net trade.

### 2) Economic and physical access

Household level food security dependent on incomes, expenditure, markets and prices.

### 3) Food utilization

Determined by good care and feeding practices, food preparation, diversity of the diet and intra-household distribution of food.

### 4) Stability of all dimensions over time

## Defining food security

Based on the 1996 World Food Summit, food security is defined when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. For food security objectives to be realised, all four dimensions, outlined on the left, must be achieved simultaneously.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), moderate or severe food insecurity affected 29.6 percent of the global population (2.4 billion people) in 2022. In the context of rising inflation, global conflicts, and widening social inequality, what food security challenges can be found in Lithuania?

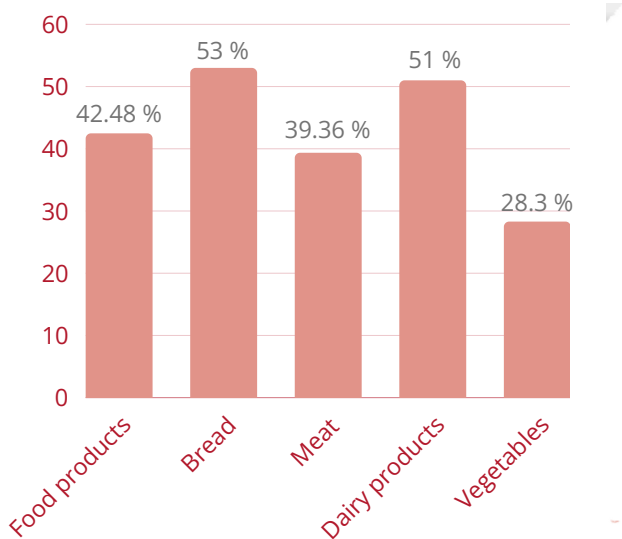
This policy brief will focus on two dimensions, namely economic and physical access, and food utilisation, to demonstrate the importance of considering food security in social assistance programs. Using case studies of food charities, this brief will discuss food security responses and related recommendations to the government and NGOs.

# Food security dimensions analysis

## Economic and physical access

In 2022, the at-risk-of-poverty population rate in the country reached 20.9 percent, signalling a substantial portion of the population grappling with economic vulnerabilities. Notably, the highest at-risk-of-poverty rate was observed among individuals aged 65 and older, at 39.5 percent, revealing age to be an important vulnerability.

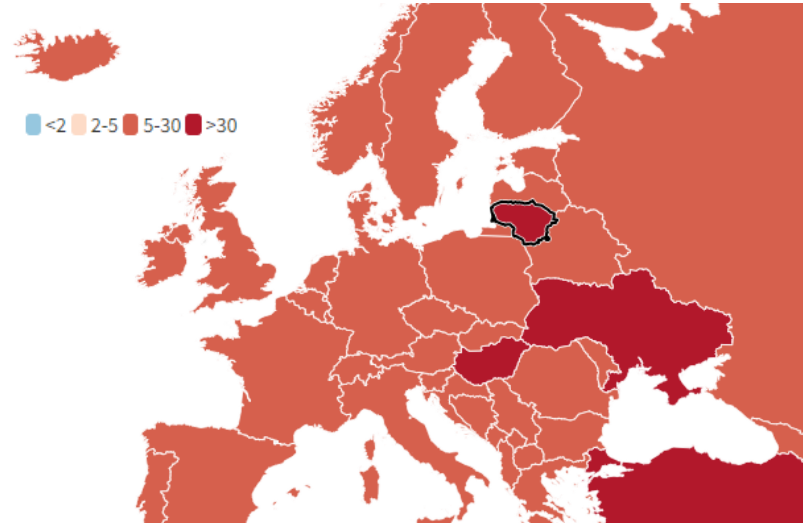
### Change in price of food products in Lithuania (%) 2021 to 2023



Source: Statistics Lithuania

The escalating cost of food reaching 42.48 percent inflation from 2021 to 2023 - one of the highest in Europe - presents a challenge for low-income households, making it increasingly difficult for them to afford an adequate supply of nutritious and high-quality food.

### Food Inflation Heat Map October 2022 to January 2023



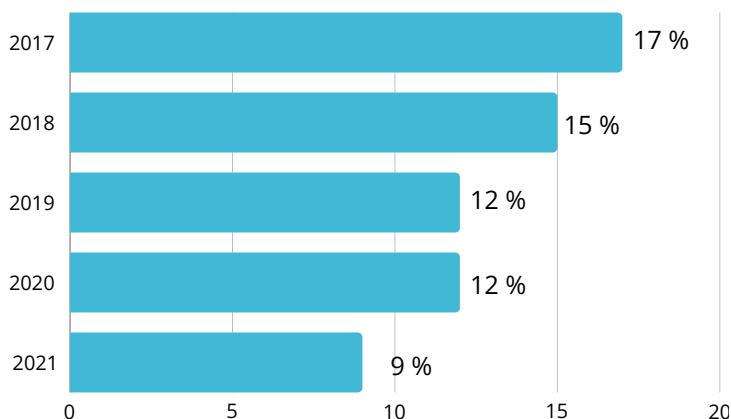
Source: International Monetary Fund, Haver Analytics, and Trading Economics

## Food utilisation

Although there is a declining trend, a concerning 9 percent of the population still exhibits signs of a limited diversity of diet, potentially compromising their intake of essential nutrients. Notably, individuals living below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold are 2.3 times more likely to face difficulties affording regular consumption of meat, fish, or plant-based equivalents, underscoring the important link between income levels and food security yet again.

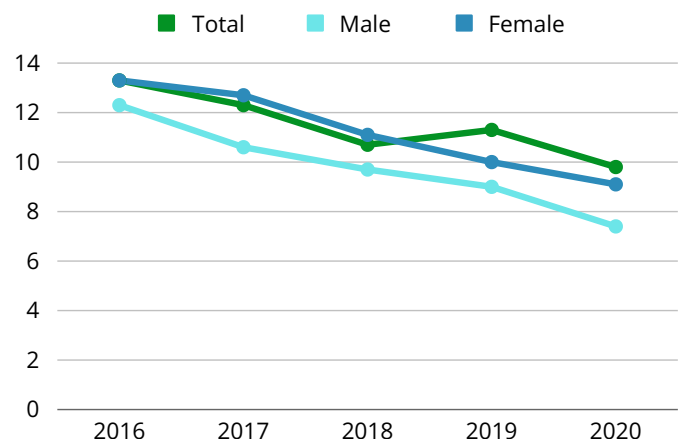
Dietary disparities are further highlighted in gender-based food insecurity rates, with women consistently experiencing higher levels than men. In 2020, the food insecurity rate for women stood at 9.1 percent, compared to 7.4 percent for men. Beyond these challenges, there is a concurrent concern with rising obesity levels, suggesting a complex interplay of economic, gender-based, and health factors influencing the food security landscape in Lithuania.

### Share of persons who cannot afford a meal with meat, fish or plant-based equivalent every second day (%)



Source: Statistics Lithuania

### Prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity in Lithuania by gender (%)



Source: FAO

## Case study - food charities

- This paper looks at three prominent food assistance mechanisms in Lithuania to analyse approaches taken to address food security — food charities Maisto Bankas and Maltiečiai, and The Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD).
- **Maisto Bankas**, with a mission to combat food waste and provide food to those in need, made significant strides in 2022. Distributing 10,773 tonnes of food and 21.5 million portions, the charity supported 30,237 individuals. While an important effort, they reach 11 percent of moderate and severely food insecure population in Lithuania.
- **Maltiečiai**, focusing on food aid for the elderly, extends their services to 2,600 seniors across 42 locations in Lithuania. Beyond delivering sustenance, their initiatives target social issues, notably the problem of loneliness among the elderly.
- On a broader scale, **FEAD** plays a vital role in supporting EU countries to provide assistance to the most deprived. In Lithuania the fund dedicates €38,000,000.00 between 2021 and 2023 for the provision of food and hygiene products. The project is implemented through municipalities with the help of Maisto Bankas and Lithuanian Red Cross.

### Key takeaways

#### Mission beyond food security

Both Maisto Bankas and Maltiečiai frame their food aid efforts beyond addressing food security. Maisto Bankas focuses on combating food waste, while Maltiečiai's mission extends to alleviating the loneliness prevalent among the elderly. This underscores a nuanced approach, recognising the need to address broader societal issues. The fact that no Lithuanian NGO is engaged only with the core dimensions of food security also helps to explain the lack of discussion around food security in wider Lithuanian discourse.

#### Root causes

Despite the crucial role played by food charities in supporting vulnerable groups, it is essential to recognize their limitations in addressing structural factors and root causes of food insecurity. The reliance on food charity can inadvertently reinforce the perception of hunger as a matter for charity rather than a political and systemic issue. The existence of food charities therefore can be viewed instead as a signal of inadequacies in social safety nets, indicating a broader concern about the effectiveness of current social support systems.

#### Challenges in targeting

NGOs rely on poverty statistics to identify needs which can miss out on the intersectional vulnerabilities that exist within Lithuania's population. Disparities between rural and urban areas, variations in food insecurity among the elderly, single mothers, or people with disabilities among other vulnerable groups are narrowly addressed. The distribution of food charity is contingent on the official beneficiary status granted by the state or referrals from social workers. As a result, food charities operate without a comprehensive understanding of their program recipients' profile. This highlights a potential area for improvement, as a more targeted approach could enhance the effectiveness of their initiatives by meeting the diverse needs of different households.

#### Competitive edge in agile response

A competitive advantage observed in food charities is their speed and flexibility. Unlike bureaucratic processes that may hinder social workers with paperwork, NGOs like Maisto Bankas and Maltiečiai demonstrate an immediate response capability. This agility enables them to address urgent needs, proving an important role. However, it also serves as a reminder that food charities do not have the capacity or the mandate to provide for all food insecure populations, demonstrating the need for government level interventions.

## Recommendations

#### Government:

In light of the ongoing challenge of escalating food prices, measures to expand social assistance programs are important. The current economic landscape restrains the ability of vulnerable populations to afford nutritious and healthy diets. The government should provide crucial financial support to individuals and families grappling with the impact of rising food costs.

A proactive step towards strengthening the right to food is encouraged by signing the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). This commitment would establish complaint and inquiry mechanisms, allowing individuals to address violations of their right to food. By endorsing the Optional Protocol, the government demonstrates a dedication to upholding and protecting the fundamental right to an adequate standard of living, including the right to food.

## Recommendations

### NGOs:

NGOs should prioritise refining their targeting mechanisms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse needs within the communities they serve. This involves collecting data on their beneficiaries, and incorporating different vulnerabilities affecting people's ability to access food. This effort would provide a better insight into the profile of food insecure Lithuanians and ensure that resources are directed to the areas of greatest need.

Advocacy efforts at the government level are encouraged to address the structural factors contributing to food insecurity. By collaborating with policymakers, NGOs can play a pivotal role in influencing and shaping policies that address the root causes of food insecurity. This includes advocating for measures that enhance social safety nets and tackle broader issues such as income inequality.

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