

# COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM IN FOOD WASTE GOVERNANCE: INSIGHTS FROM THE RUANG PANGAN COMMUNITY

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## Abstract

Food waste has become an increasingly urgent global issue, spurring the rise of community-based ecological initiatives, particularly those driven by youth. In Lampung Province, the Ruang Pangan Community has emerged as a key actor in the social food movement, combining surplus food redistribution, public education, and policy advocacy through a multi-level approach. This study explores the dynamics of the Ruang Pangan movement using New Social Movement (NSM) theory, with a focus on collective identity formation and digital activism in the context of food waste governance. Employing a qualitative methodology, data were gathered through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis. The findings reveal that Ruang Pangan seeks to build a collective identity under the label Food Heroes, broaden participation via digital platforms, and foster cross-sector collaboration within the local food ecosystem. However, the movement remains largely rooted in volunteerism, resulting in an internally focused collective identity that has yet to be fully expressed in the public sphere. Volunteer engagement is primarily motivated by personal moral concerns or social networking goals, rather than political awareness of structural inequalities in the food system. Furthermore, the movement faces critical challenges, including limited funding, institutional inertia, and low levels of broader public engagement. This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on contemporary social movements by highlighting the interplay between moral action and structural critique. It also offers practical insights for developing more inclusive and participatory food waste management strategies at the local level.

**Keywords:** Activism, Food Waste, Ruang Pangan, New Social Movement

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the issue of food waste has garnered significant global attention, catalyzing a growing movement, especially among young people, advocating for more sustainable and equitable practices. Rising ecological awareness, coupled with the emergence of new social movements (NSMs), has led to notable transformations in how food waste is perceived, discussed, and managed at various levels.

Prior research, such as that by Baig et al., (2019), has exposed misleading narratives around food waste, showing that nearly 1% of all food produced is ultimately discarded. These findings underscore the urgent need for effective, multi-stakeholder strategies, with a particular emphasis on engaging youth. Sloan et al., (2022) further highlights the pivotal role of young people, not only as consumers but also as emerging leaders in environmental advocacy, capable of influencing community-level change. Although youth increasingly understand the root causes of intertwined environmental and social crises, their engagement remains strongly rooted in a commitment to equity and meaningful participation (Sloan Morgan et al., 2024).

In Lampung Province, an area with a strong agricultural identity, youth involvement in food waste initiatives is particularly relevant. The Ruang Pangan Community, the first food bank in the province, exemplifies such engagement. It focuses on food redistribution, public awareness, and waste prevention. The urgency of its mission is underscored by data from the Environmental Agency (Dinas Lingkungan Hidup, 2022), which estimates that food waste constitutes 60.81% (approximately 2,659.47 tons/day) of the province's total waste, posing direct threats to resource efficiency and food security.

This study investigates how youth mobilize, organize, and participate in ecological movements aimed at addressing food waste, employing NSM theory and the lens of grassroots activism. By analyzing local initiatives, youth motivations, and their social impacts, this research contributes to the broader discourse on environmental governance and underscores the need for inclusive, participatory approaches to ecological challenges.

While numerous studies have examined youth engagement in environmental activism (Carberry et al., 2019; Milan, 2015; Schulte et al., 2020), many focus on collective identity formation, networked mobilization, and the use of digital platforms for advocacy (Hilder & Collin, 2022; Sainz & Hanna, 2023). In the Indonesian context, studies by Abdillah et al., (2024) and Yandri et al., (2023) youth-driven environmental initiatives in urban waste management, although few explore the specific context of food waste in localized settings such as Lampung.

Moreover, existing literature on food waste tends to emphasize institutional or technological interventions (Singh et al., 2024), with limited attention to the socio-political dimensions of youth-led efforts. While Sutinen (2022) addresses cultural and systemic influences on food waste practices, there remains a gap in understanding how youth activism responds to—and reconfigures—these structures through grassroots approaches.

Given the socio-political dynamics and rapid urbanization in Lampung, examining youth-driven food waste movements through the NSM framework offers timely insights into sustainable development and participatory environmental governance.

## **METHOD**

This study adopts an interpretive, qualitative case study design (Stake, 1995) (Stake 1995) to examine how collective identity and digital activism are constructed within Ruang Pangan, a youth-led food waste movement in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. Ruang Pangan was selected as a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) due to its unique position as Lampung's first food bank and its hybrid approach combining grassroots activism, digital campaigns, and policy advocacy. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with key community members, participant observation during food distribution activities and digital campaigns, as well as analysis of organizational documents and social media content. An iterative thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns related to collective mobilization, participant motivation, and strategic actions. To ensure the validity of findings, data triangulation was employed across sources and methods, complemented by member checking with key informants. The entire research process adheres to established ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity toward the community's socio-cultural context.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Building Collective Identity**

This study positions Ruang Pangan as a representative case of how collective identity is constructed and mobilized within the framework of a new social movement centered on environmental and food justice. By integrating values such as passion, social solidarity, and community empowerment, the movement successfully fosters the identity of 'Food Heroes' among its volunteers and activists engaged in food rescue and redistribution. This identity not only strengthens internal cohesion but also aligns local narratives with broader global agendas, including Zero Hunger and Zero Food Waste. The movement thus exemplifies how localized discourse can be embedded within wider frameworks of social transformation.

While the 'Food Hero' identity strengthens cohesion, it inadvertently reproduces neoliberal subjectivity by framing systemic food waste as a problem solvable through

individual moral action (Guthman, 2008). 'This mirrors critiques of 'lifestyle activism' (Maniates, 2001), where structural critiques are diluted into celebratory narratives of personal responsibility. Notably, beneficiaries of food redistribution were never labeled 'heroes,' revealing a classed asymmetry in the movement's discourse."

The literature on social movements underscores the centrality of collective identity in fostering a sense of belonging, commitment to shared goals, and motivation for sustained participation. Kerstetter et al. (2023) emphasize that social solidarity—comprising both social infrastructure and interpersonal relationships—is a key foundation for building community resilience against food insecurity. Within Ruang Pangan, the construction of the Food Heroes identity can be interpreted as a symbolic expression of purposive and participatory solidarity, transforming personal concerns into collective action.

Theoretically, solidarity also serves as a crucial basis for reconfiguring social relations within grassroots activism. Buchter (2022) argues that activism has the potential to challenge dominant social norms and generate new forms of egalitarian and reciprocal relationships, disrupting traditional hierarchical patterns. In this context, Ruang Pangan promotes a solidarity model oriented toward social justice by positioning volunteers not merely as technical implementers but as central actors in a broader process of social transformation. Through active volunteer engagement, the movement strengthens social cohesion and cultivates a sense of collective ownership over the food justice agenda.

However, while the integration of desire, solidarity, and empowerment values is commendable, it is important to critically assess potential limitations. Identity-based mobilization, exemplified by the Food Heroes label, risks depoliticizing the food justice issue. Rather than directly confronting the structural inequalities within food production and distribution systems, this narrative may inadvertently reduce the problem to a matter of volunteerism and individual moral heroism. As such, the focus shifts from systemic change to symbolic, lifestyle-oriented participation, often driven by self-image, personal gratification, or social validation rather than a sustained commitment to structural transformation.

Fraser (2020) and Žižek (2009) similarly caution that movements overly focused on recognition—through identity representation or digital visibility—may neglect the imperative of material redistribution, which is essential for addressing deep-rooted inequalities. When movement narratives prioritize collective identities that are publicly appealing yet detached from political agendas confronting structural drivers such as food

monopolies, commodification, and unequal access, they risk reproducing the neoliberal logic they seek to resist.

Our findings also reveal that some volunteers are motivated more by personal moral imperatives or the desire to expand social networks than by political consciousness regarding systemic food injustice (Informants 1 and 2). This observation highlights the need to strengthen the movement's critical and political dimensions, ensuring that solidarity extends beyond interpersonal relations to become a collective force capable of advocating for structural change.

### Multi-Level Strategy

Based on interviews with key informants, this study finds that Ruang Pangan adopts a multi-level operational strategy encompassing micro-level education, meso-level coordination within the food supply chain, and macro-level collaboration with government institutions (see Table 1). This strategy reflects an integrated approach to addressing food waste and promoting responsible consumption practices.

Table 1. Micro, Meso, and Macro Approaches in Ruang Pangan's Collaborative Practices

Level of Approach	Collaborating Partner	Type of Engagement	Duration of Collaboration	Role in the Movement
Macro	National Food Agency (Bapanas)	Policy and strategic program collaboration	Ongoing (program-based)	Provides regulatory support and alignment with national food waste reduction strategies
Macro	Provincial Office of Food Security, Food Crops, and Horticulture (Lampung)	Program collaboration and operational facilitation	Ongoing (program-based)	Supports local activities through provincial programs and logistical assistance
Meso	Nutrifood	Corporate engagement through trial partnerships	Three initial trials (non-continuous)	Explores synergy for distributing healthy food and co-developing educational outreach
Meso	Holland Bakery	Short-term partnership	1 year	Donates surplus food and supports redistribution of edible but unsold products
Micro	Community members/individual volunteers ( <i>inferred</i> )	Voluntary participation based on education and local action	Continuous (voluntary basis)	Transforms consumption behavior, raises food awareness, and acts as agents of local change

Source: Adapted from Field Interview (2025)

While this multi-level approach appears comprehensive and structurally coherent, it risks obscuring the underlying structural conflicts that drive food waste and consumption inequality. Contextually, Ruang Pangan's strategy emphasizes the integration and harmonization of various actors; however, it often underplays the extent to which food waste is a symptom of an exploitative and fragmented political economy. In this regard, technocratic and collaborative frameworks—particularly those embedded in cross-sectoral networks—can inadvertently limit spaces for resistance and critical engagement with dominant actors, such as large food corporations or state institutions aligned with pro-market agendas.

The Food Rescue partnership with Holland Bakery (Table 1) exemplifies how redistribution practices can inadvertently legitimize corporate food waste producers. As acknowledged by key informants, the initiative does not call for a reduction in production levels, but rather focuses solely on the management of surplus. This dynamic reflects Barnard's (2016) concept of the "charity-industrial complex," wherein corporate social responsibility (CSR)-driven collaborations serve to depoliticize the structural issue of overproduction. In contrast, initiatives aimed at collecting farm-level waste—particularly that caused by aesthetic grading standards—have encountered resistance from agribusiness intermediaries, highlighting the movement's limited capacity to confront upstream systemic drivers of food waste.

First, the emphasis on micro-level education tends to assume that individual behavioral change is the primary solution to the food crisis. This assumption overlooks the reality that consumption choices are not fully autonomous but are shaped by structural factors such as pricing mechanisms, accessibility, and market-driven cultural norms. Critics of lifestyle movements argue that educational efforts targeting individual behavior often displace broader political demands, turning personal responsibility into a substitute for collective and confrontational action (Smith, 2019). This creates a paradox in which individuals are encouraged to reduce waste, while the broader food system remains governed by surplus production and profit maximization.

Second, meso-level coordination within the food supply chain can foster alliances across sectors, yet such coordination often privileges actors with pre-existing resources, reputational capital, and institutional networks. Consequently, grassroots communities or vulnerable groups lacking bargaining power risk being relegated to tokenistic roles within these partnerships. As noted in the literature on social movements, inclusive narratives

within institutionalized collaborations may obscure power asymmetries and suppress the transformative potential of grassroots critiques (Smith, 2019).

Third, macro-level collaboration with government agencies may enhance the legitimacy and influence of the movement, but it simultaneously exposes it to risks of co-optation and depoliticization. Efforts to align with public policy frameworks often require movements to adapt their agendas to bureaucratic logics and institutional constraints. This dynamic may shift their role from agents of change to policy implementers, thereby compromising their capacity to challenge the status quo. As Smith (2019) argues, formal engagement with the state can dilute the radical impetus of social movements, pressuring them to moderate or abandon their more critical and redistributive demands.

Ultimately, while identity markers such as Food Heroes may reinforce emotional bonds and group cohesion, they also risk depoliticizing collective struggle by framing participation as individual moral action. This framing aligns with neoliberal rationalities that prioritize personal responsibility over structural solidarity. In this context, the construction of collective identity within social movements must not only serve to unify participants, but also foster ideological contestation and political transformation—rather than creating a depoliticized and comfortable pseudo-community.

### **Digital Activism**

Ruang Pangan actively integrates social media and digital platforms as central instruments in its communication, mobilization, and advocacy strategies. Its digital activism extends beyond the mere dissemination of information to include efforts aimed at cultivating critical awareness and fostering active public participation in addressing food inequality and food waste. Utilizing platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and LinkedIn, Ruang Pangan delivers educational campaigns and curated visual narratives targeted especially at younger demographics—key users of digital media.

These campaigns are complemented by online fundraising and crowdsourcing initiatives, enabling broader public engagement with programs such as *Food Rescue*, *Food Drive*, and *Food Back to Nature*. Collaboration with public figures, influencers, and digital sustainability communities forms a strategic part of this digital activism, enhancing both the movement's credibility and its capacity to reach wider audiences.

Internally, Ruang Pangan employs a variety of digital management tools—including project management software, content scheduling platforms, and documentation systems—to streamline operations. These tools facilitate message consistency, structured

cross-channel campaign management, and transparent documentation of community activities. In this sense, digital media functions not only as a communication tool but as an essential infrastructure for networking, volunteer coordination, and the consolidation of collective identity within the movement.

Moreover, the visual and symbolic elements embedded in Ruang Pangan's digital narratives play a critical role in articulating the movement's mission. By linking its messaging to global frameworks such as *Zero Hunger* and *Zero Food Waste*, the movement generates emotional resonance while enhancing the perceived legitimacy of local interventions. As Odağ et al. (2023) suggest, effective collective mobilization hinges on contextual sensitivity and the ability to frame issues in ways that integrate moral, social, and ecological values into a cohesive narrative.

Nevertheless, while digital storytelling enhances visibility, it often privileges individuals who are already media-savvy or socially connected, thereby excluding marginalized voices in the food system—such as informal workers, subsistence farmers, and undocumented food handlers—who may not see themselves reflected in the "Food Hero" narrative. This reveals a tension between the movement's aspirations for inclusivity and its potential reproduction of a middle-class, media-centric framework.

At the institutional level, Ruang Pangan's involvement in policy advocacy marks an important shift toward political engagement. Its participation in policy dialogues with the National Food Agency (BAPANAS) illustrates how grassroots movements can articulate community concerns within formal decision-making processes. Leveraging both quantitative data and qualitative testimonies, the organization adopts an evidence-based advocacy approach to influence national food waste governance.

In parallel, Ruang Pangan has developed alternative, community-based practices aimed at reducing food waste. Initiatives such as *Food Rescue* and *Food Drive* redistribute surplus food from commercial sources—such as restaurants, hotels, and bakeries—to underprivileged communities. Programs like *Gleaning*, which collects produce deemed unsuitable for market sale, and *Food Back to Nature*, which focuses on composting and recycling, reflect efforts to construct a circular food system that balances social, economic, and ecological objectives.

While these initiatives represent creative and community-driven responses, they are largely remedial rather than transformative. Redistribution efforts operate within the logic of surplus production, addressing the consequences rather than the root causes of



overproduction and waste. As such, these practices risk normalizing the very inefficiencies and inequalities they aim to counter, potentially shifting the focus from structural reform to the charitable management of crisis conditions.

Table 2. Activities of the Ruang Pangan Community and Their Field Implementation

No.	Type of Activity	Description	Field Realities
1	<b>Food Rescue</b>	Collection of surplus food from hotels, cafés, bakeries, and other food businesses for redistribution to underprivileged communities.	Often constrained by irregular supply and the need for quick logistics; relies heavily on volunteer availability and informal networks for last-mile delivery.
2	<b>Food Drive</b>	Food collection campaigns conducted after major religious or national events, including community kitchens, seminars, or public outreach.	Highly dependent on seasonal generosity and event-based momentum; food diversity and quantity vary significantly across occasions.
3	<b>Gleaning</b>	Harvesting fruits or vegetables that are discarded due to aesthetic or market standards, usually post-harvest or during the harvest season.	Requires coordination with farmers and access to rural areas; limited scalability due to transport and labor constraints.
4	<b>Food Creative Campaign</b>	Awareness campaigns promoting food waste reduction and food surplus redistribution; functions similarly to a food bank model.	Effective for online engagement and volunteer recruitment; limited reach in low-digital-access communities.
5	<b>Food Back to Nature</b>	Recycling of food waste into usable products such as compost or animal feed.	Still under development; lacks consistent infrastructure and community buy-in; mostly done through pilot projects or small-scale workshops.

Source: Field Data Processed by Researcher, 2025

Despite achieving some success in awareness-building and the implementation of alternative food practices, Ruang Pangan continues to face several structural challenges. One major constraint is financial. Interviews indicate that the movement operates on limited funding, relying heavily on voluntary donations and short-term partnerships. This finding is consistent with Evans & Kay (2008) who argue that the ability to mobilize material and human resources is fundamental to the sustainability of social movements.

Low levels of public participation further complicate Ruang Pangan's efforts. Weak collective awareness regarding the urgency of food waste and its broader implications for food security and environmental sustainability undermines mobilization. Within Tarrow's (1996) framework of political opportunity structures, successful social mobilization depends on individuals' perceptions of both the severity of the issue and the feasibility of

enacting change. When food waste is not perceived as an immediate or personal concern, even active campaigns may yield limited engagement.

Institutional resistance, particularly from actors in the food industry, presents another formidable barrier. Organizations often resist change due to entrenched routines, regulatory frameworks, and the pursuit of institutional legitimacy, as highlighted by Vurro et al. (2010). Calls for more sustainable and inclusive practices thus frequently encounter opposition—either explicitly or through passive bureaucratic inertia.

In light of these structural constraints, forming and strengthening cross-sector coalitions emerges as a critical strategy. As Bandopadhyaya & Kenix (2023) argue, the strength of contemporary social movements lies not only in internal capacity but also in their ability to forge networks across civil society, government, private sectors, and international actors. Such coalitions expand the support base, enhance political legitimacy, and improve the likelihood of enacting systemic change.

To address these multi-layered challenges, Ruang Pangan must adopt a dual strategy: consolidating internal organizational capacity while simultaneously pursuing sustained external advocacy. Only through this integrated approach can the movement ensure long-term viability and contribute meaningfully to transforming the local food system into a more just and sustainable one.

## CONCLUSION

This research finds that *Ruang Pangan*, as an ecological movement, is in the process of developing its collective identity. However, due to the continued dominance of volunteerism in its practices, this identity remains largely internalized and has yet to be fully articulated in the broader public sphere. Volunteer participation is primarily motivated by personal moral commitments or the desire to expand social networks, rather than by a critical political awareness of the structural inequalities embedded within the food system. Digital activism has been employed to publicize various initiatives, particularly food rescue activities. However, the movement's engagement in political advocacy and efforts toward structural transformation remains limited. This is a crucial observation: youth engagement in food waste management has not yet evolved into a form of activism capable of generating substantive social change.

Theoretically, these findings underscore that social movements cannot rely solely on individual moral impulses. Driving sustainable change requires a deep understanding of

the social structures they aim to challenge, along with strategies directed at systemic transformation (Htun & Weldon, 2012). In the absence of such critical engagement, the movement risks becoming confined to charitable or philanthropic actions—ethically commendable, but politically inadequate.

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