



**THE RISE OF FOOD  
CHARITY IN EUROPE:**

**The relationship  
between food  
charity and  
changing welfare  
states across Europe**

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# Summary

The second in a series of briefs based on the findings of the recently published comparative book *The Rise of Food Charity in Europe*, this brief sets out findings relating to what, if any, relationship there is between the changing nature of welfare states across Europe and the rise of food charity in the last few decades. The brief draws on data from the seven case study countries of Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Slovenia and the UK.

## THE KEY FINDINGS WERE:

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- Food charity provision spiked at times of economic crisis and state welfare retrenchment.
- Since neoliberal social policies have been introduced across Europe, regardless of the historical role of the third sector in the various welfare regimes, charities have come to play increasingly important roles in the provision of care in every country studied, whether in place of traditionally state-provided support or support from the family.
- The state was often involved in food charity provision in some way, for example professionals referring to food banks, providing loans to projects, or other symbolic support.
- We appear to be seeing a significant shift further away from welfare practices based on systems underpinned by universality and entitlements towards systems of ad hoc provision that are vulnerable, unreliable and exclusionary.

## THE RESEARCH

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The edited book, on which this brief is based, *The Rise of Food Charity in Europe* (Policy Press 2020) provides the first comparative study of food charity in Europe, drawing on case studies of Finland, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Slovenia and the UK. The countries – which formed stand alone chapters in the book – represent a mix of European welfare states usually categorised as having different welfare policy regimes, different histories of charitable and faith-based provision for those in poverty, and divergent political and cultural histories. In all countries charitable food assistance is well established.

Empirical analyses were undertaken for each individual case study; following commonly set guidelines, providing evidence on the dynamics and implications of the rise of food charity in the country. Existing relevant evidence and data from the countries were used and systematic secondary analyses undertaken to provide insight into the unique circumstances of the national context. An inductive comparative analysis was then completed which explored the following areas: the nature and scale of food charity; relationships between changes in welfare provision and the growth of food charity and the shifting role of charity more generally; the role of food supply in shaping food charity; and the social justice implications of changing welfare states and the growth of food charity.

## LINKS BETWEEN THE RISE OF FOOD CHARITY AND CHANGING WELFARE STATES

From the evidence presented throughout the book chapters, it would appear that there is a link between changes to social rights and entitlements, as well as increased emphasis on non-state providers, on the one hand, and the rise of food charity, on the other. While specific policies and timescales have differed, reductions and increased conditionality in state entitlements have played an important role in determining the need for and shape of help with food – in the form of widespread food charity – across Europe.

There are some further commonalities across case-study countries:

- Social security administration: In Finland, in the Netherlands and – at least early on in the development of food charity – in the UK, there is an emphasis on people ‘falling through the cracks’ of the welfare system. This implies that bureaucratic processes – as well as conditionality and criteria for entitlement – are an important factor in the need for help with food.
- Decentralised welfare systems: In Italy and Spain decentralised welfare processes lead to wide variations in entitlements and support for those in need across those countries.
- State spending after the crash: Additional pressure on public finance for welfare is also reported in Italy and Slovenia in the form of EU regulations on spending and deficits, exacerbated by the financial crisis.



Country	Welfare shifts	Rise in food charity
<b>FINLAND</b>	Economic recession in the 1990s was the catalyst for neoliberal change in economic and social policies. As a result, basic social security benefits remained frozen for more than ten years. In addition, activation policy measures were implemented to connect unemployment benefit to work-related obligations. Failing to meet the requirements of the activation model results in cuts to unemployment benefit.	Need for food aid was initially triggered by the recession of the early 1990s, and the first charitable activities started in the middle of that decade. Levels of basic social security benefits – for example, labour market support, sick leave allowance and income assistance – remain too low to provide a decent standard of living, maintaining the need for food aid.
<b>GERMANY</b>	The 2003–05 Hartz-Gesetze reforms embedded neo-social policies.	The increase in food charity happened alongside the introduction of these reforms. The period 1993–2003 saw moderate growth (with a total of 330 projects established). After the welfare reforms were introduced, there was a rapid increase during 2003–10 (up to a total of 877 projects), and there has been consolidation since 2010 (a total of 934).
<b>ITALY</b>	Austerity measures have involved cuts in welfare expenditure, which was already at a low level, and caused increasing regional differences in state provision.	There was a 47 per cent increase in food aid provision between 2010 and 2013 – up from 2.8 million recipients to 4.1 million.
<b>NETHERLANDS</b>	Since the 1990s, and more intensely since 2013, there has been increasing emphasis on individual responsibility and the role of non-state actors. There have been cuts to levels of entitlements and the introduction of more bureaucratic processes to access social security, which have resulted in income reductions.	Since the initial establishment of food charity in 2002, there has been evidence of local governments increasingly playing facilitative roles as regards the work of food charities, and that people are ‘falling through the cracks’ of more conditional welfare assistance.
<b>SLOVENIA</b>	The Social Assistance Act 2006 made welfare provision more conditional and focused on individual responsibilities. A further round of reform and welfare spending cuts was initiated in 2009 – in the wake of the economic crisis – with the Social Assistance Benefits Act. This came into force in 2012 at the height of the effects of the economic crisis, when unemployment rates had doubled.	Red Cross provision spiked in 2013.
<b>SPAIN</b>	Over the last decade, social security provision has stagnated and there is evidence of strain on family support networks, which have traditionally been a key aspect of the Spanish welfare system. The third sector has stepped in. Post-crisis, there has been a tightening of access to social security. Delays in processing applications and payments are common, and policies vary widely across different municipalities.	Distribution by FESBAL increased from 60,000 tons of food in 2008 to 151,527 tons in 2018.
<b>UK</b>	In 2010, the UK government began the largest overhaul of the social security system since the establishment of the welfare state. Reforms have involved capping and freezing social security payment levels, increasing conditionality, and tightening criteria for eligibility. At the same time, funding for public services – including local authorities and family support centres – has been cut across the board.	The largest increases in food charity followed these reforms, and there is mounting evidence linking welfare reform with the rise of food charity. In the year 2016/17, the UK’s largest food bank organisation, The Trussell Trust foodbank network, distributed 1,182,954 food parcels to adults and children across the country, up from 128,697 in the year 2011/12.

## THE CHANGING ROLE OF CHARITY IN WELFARE

Since neoliberal social policies have been introduced across Europe and the economic crisis of the late 2000s, regardless of the historical role of the third sector in the various welfare regimes, charities are now playing different and more prominent roles in the provision of care, whether in place of support traditionally provided by the state or the family.

- **From state to charity.** Data from Germany, the Netherlands and the UK suggests that since the 1990s – and in particular more recently – neoliberal thinking in support of privatised modes of care has fostered increasing political approval of charity, including food charity, playing a role in this area. In these countries, charities are assuming responsibility for support and provision that the state would previously have been expected to provide.
- **From family to charity.** In Spain, where the family has historically played a particularly prominent role in social support, evidence suggests that this is being exhausted. In response, charities – including those providing food – are playing ever more important roles.
- **From charity to policy.** Italy provides another interesting example of where charities have always played a prominent role in social assistance given the fragmented nature of state welfare. Arcuri et al observe that the role of charity in Italy – spearheaded by food charities – is shifting from a single focus on provision to an additional focus on advocacy and lobbying for improved public social policies. Seeing rising levels of need, charities are becoming increasingly aware of their inability to solve the root causes of poverty in the country.

## FOOD CHARITY EMBEDDED IN THE PRACTICE AND POLITICS OF WELFARE

There is also important evidence across the case studies of changing welfare practices, which increasingly incorporate food charity projects. This means not only that food charity projects are more and more present and prominent in the various welfare landscapes, but also that the ways in which the projects interact with state welfare providers in practice have been changing over time.

Evidence from across the case studies highlights increasing state support or involvement in food charity practices:

- At the local level this is most commonly in the form of state agencies or professionals formally or informally referring people in need to food charity projects, as reported in Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Slovenia and the UK.
- There are also reports of local authorities giving financial or in-kind (such as logistical) support to food charity projects across the countries studied, including Finland, the Netherlands, Spain and the UK.
- At a national government level, in Finland, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health maintains that food charity is not part of the social security system; however, at the same time, it allocated €1.8 million to food aid projects in 2016/17. In Germany, the Minister for Family Affairs is automatically appointed as the patron of Tafel.

Kessl et al sum up the situation across Europe: 'Existing welfare states as public systems of poverty reduction are being complemented by a private-public system of poverty relief, which has been established in the shadow of formal state institutional arrangements.'

## WELFARE RETRENCHMENT AND THE RISE OF FOOD CHARITY: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

**The social justice implications of the increasing need for and provision of charitable assistance with food across Europe are profound. The comparative analysis found that changing social rights have been a key driver for the rise of food charity across Europe and the result has been that these charities are increasingly assuming what have traditionally been the states' responsibilities for protecting people from poverty. However, these projects are ad hoc: what they provide is not a right or entitlement guaranteed to be accessible for all. Furthermore, the research from across the case studies highlighted how exclusion is embedded within both the need for and practice of food charity assistance.**

**Changing social rights have been a key driver for the rise of food charity: without reversing this, food charity is likely here to stay.**

In the first instance, the comparative analysis highlights how changes to social rights brought about by neoliberal policy shifts have had direct consequences on food charity assistance in terms of both practice and rising need. The authors of all the case studies highlight the role played by increased conditionality and reduced levels of entitlements in driving increased need. Several case studies also demonstrate how neoliberal assumptions and practices are embedded within food charity, for example, means testing as part of requirements to 'prove' one's need for food assistance (at projects in Germany and Slovenia) or via referral criteria (in the Netherlands and UK).

### Food charities are assuming states' responsibilities

The case studies in this book demonstrate that food charity projects across Europe are assuming responsibility for helping people who lack adequate access to food. At a structural level, the shift of this responsibility appears, from this analysis, to be a function of states no longer assuming full responsibility for social protection. This is seen in the regressive neoliberal social policy shifts that have occurred – whether through reduced entitlements (in the UK, Germany, Slovenia and Finland), increased conditionality (in the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, Slovenia and Finland) or the failure to pursue more comprehensive social protection (in Spain and Italy).

As welfare states retrench – or at least policy fails to adequately respond to need – in practice, food charity projects are assuming responsibility for care. As Van der Horst, Pijnenburg and Markus argue, there is an iterative process at play here. As charitable initiatives step in to fill gaps left by state provision, and the political discourse praises the efforts and impact of charitable social assistance, food charity could be further exacerbating state retrenchment by taking on this role.

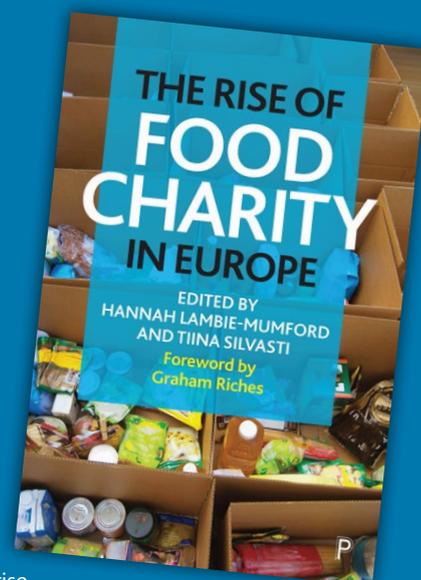
### Potential role for food charities in increasing the state response

The evidence collected also highlighted that food charities across Europe are playing important roles in trying to press for social policy change. For instance, the worsening of need in Italy has prompted Caritas to monitor the inadequacy of social assistance (see Arcuri et al). In the UK, The Trussell Trust has always regarded advocacy and lobbying as part of its role (see Lambie-Mumford and Loopstra). The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) has regularly put poverty issues on the political agenda (see Silvasti and Tikka). It will be important that this lobbying and campaigning work remains a focus for food charities.

## CONCLUSION

**This is an important juncture at which to take stock of the implications of the rise of food charity across Europe. Researchers in social policy and other areas are now beginning to ask about the longevity of these projects as part of welfare landscapes. This research provides urgently needed social policy insight into the drivers of the growth of food assistance. The findings indicate a pressing need to radically reassess social policy priorities if the ever-increasing provision of food charity is to be abated or reversed.**

# THE RISE OF FOOD CHARITY IN EUROPE



As the demand for food banks and other emergency food charities continues to rise across the continent, this is the first systematic Europe-wide study of the roots and consequences of this urgent phenomenon.

Leading researchers provide case studies from the UK, Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Spain, each considering the history and driving political and social forces behind the rise of food charity, and the influence of changing welfare states. They build into a rich comparative study that delivers valuable evidence for anyone with an academic or professional interest in related issues including social policy, exclusion, poverty and justice.

- **New Frames for Food Charity in Finland** ~ Tiina Silvasti and Ville Tikka (pp19-48)
- **Social Exclusion and Food Assistance in Germany** ~ Fabian Kessl, Stephan Lorenz and Holger Schoneville (pp49-78)
- **The Role of Food Charity in Italy** ~ Sabrina Arcuri, Gianluca Brunori and Francesca Galli (pp79-110)
- **Food Banks in the Netherlands Stepping up to the Plate: Shifting Moral and Practical Responsibilities** ~ Hilje van der Horst, Leon Pijnenburg and Amy Markus (111-134)
- **Redistributing Waste Food to Reduce Poverty in Slovenia** ~ Vesna Leskošek and Romana Zidar (pp135-164)
- **Food Aid in Post-crisis Spain: A Test for this Welfare State Model** ~ Amaia Inza-Bartolomé and Leire Escajedo San-Epifanio (pp165-190)
- **Food Banks and the UK Welfare State** ~ Hannah Lambie-Mumford and Rachel Loopstra (pp191-218)

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## HOW TO CITE THIS BRIEF

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