



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

Surplus food distribution

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Summary

The third 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 the role of surplus food redistribution in food charity systems across Europe. 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:

- Evidence clearly highlighted the importance of food sourcing factors in determining the shape of emergency food provision. This evidence emerged despite the researchers setting out to focus only on the social policy dynamics of the rise of food charity.
- This reveals how other policy measures (particularly in the domains of agriculture or the environment) may have an impact on social policy: directing surplus food to food charities impacts on the nature, scale and embeddedness of food aid as a response to poverty.
- In particular, the case studies demonstrate the significance of the European Union (EU) Food Distribution Programme for the Most Deprived Persons of the Community (MDP) and - after 2013 - the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) in institutionalising the practice of redistributing surplus food through food charity.

THE RESEARCH

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.

SURPLUS FOOD REDISTRIBUTION TO FOOD CHARITY

Surplus food redistribution is the redistribution of food that would otherwise go to waste. This surplus can be intersected at any point in the food system (growing, processing or retailing). It is important to distinguish between surplus food redistribution generally and surplus food redistribution to food charity.

Surplus food redistribution does not always involve redistribution to people 'in need', other initiatives include apps to connect local people with organisations who have surplus, or using surplus food for catering at events, for example weddings. It is therefore important to distinguish between the redistribution of surplus food generally and the redistribution of surplus food to people who have no choice but to receive it. A defining line then becomes between redistribution initiatives in which people choose to participate (a neighbourhood app, lunch club, community café) and those to which people are forced to turn to for help because of their exclusion from the mainstream food market.

SURPLUS FOOD REDISTRIBUTION ORGANISATIONS: THE 'MID LAYER' IN FOOD CHARITY SYSTEMS

The following definition of food charity was used in this research:

'Food charity refers to all voluntary initiatives helping people to access food that they would otherwise not be able to obtain. It therefore covers a variety of provision, including projects that provide food parcels, food bank (of all kinds), soup kitchens, meal projects and social supermarkets. In these projects, food may be provided at low or no cost, with its distribution facilitated by a range of organisations (faith or non-faith) involved in delivery at various scales of operation (local, regional and national).'

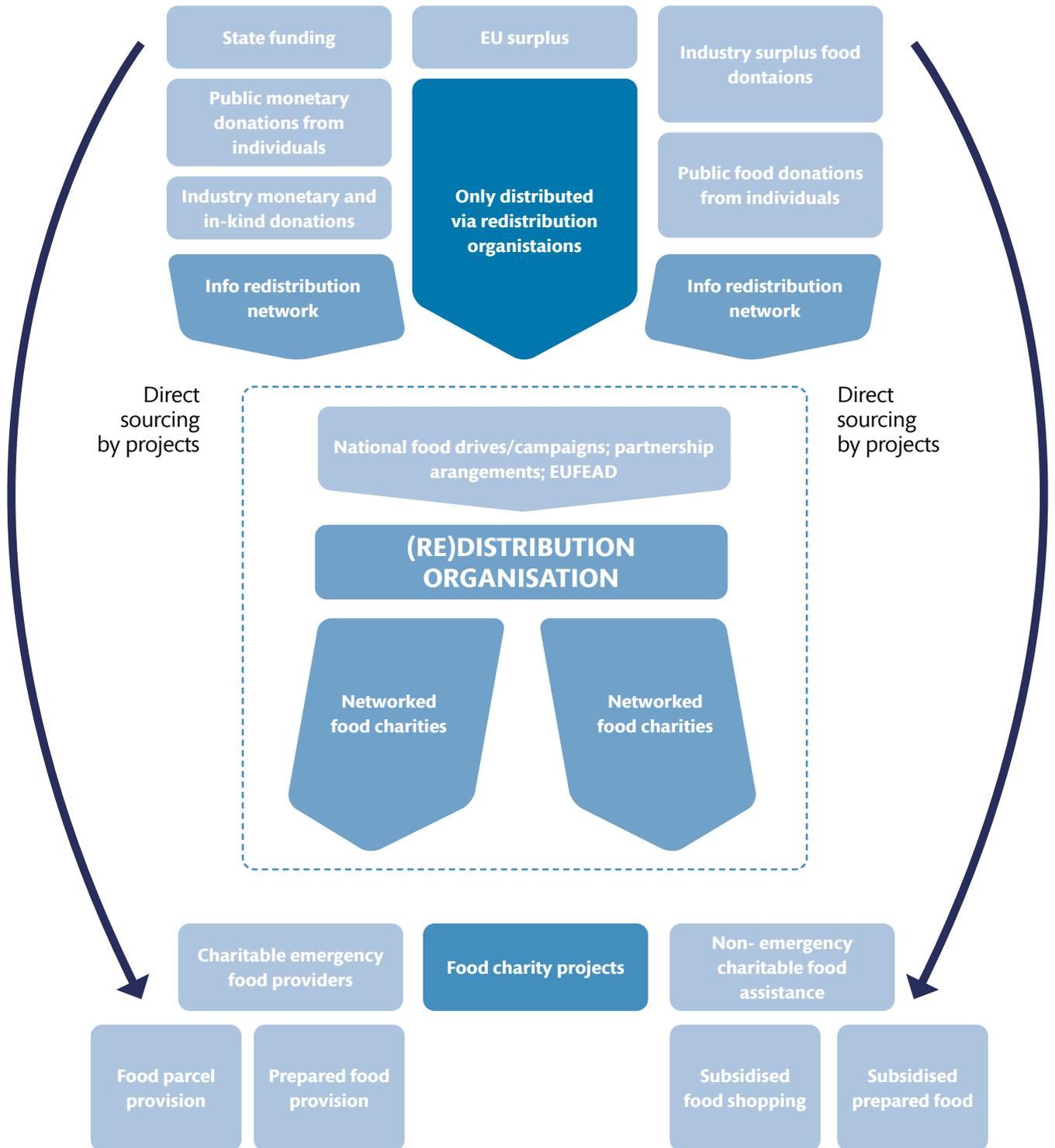
A food charity project is therefore the end link in a chain that gives food to people in need. Importantly, these projects are distinct from 'mid-layer' food redistribution projects which redistribute food to food charity projects. The redistributed food may include surplus food from producers and retailers or other food donations (including from individual citizens through food drives).

While food charity projects may collect surplus food or donations, and store food themselves (which is notably the case in Germany and the UK), they may also – or instead – use a mid-layer organisation to source food. The case studies highlight the importance and reach of such organisations, particularly in Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Slovenia, where the practice of surplus food redistribution is more embedded. These organisations' main role is to redistribute surplus food, which is sourced through EU schemes, as well as other corporate food surplus donations. However, they may also collect and distribute financial donations, and provide training and other support.

The case studies confirm both overlap and divergence in the use of the term 'food bank'. In four of the countries the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Slovenia, it is used to describe a mid-layer organisation concerned with food collection, storage and redistribution. In Germany the term is not used, with 'Tafel' being the most prominent label, based on the nationwide charity movement with that name. In UK and Finland it refers to a project that provides food directly to recipients.

In all cases except the UK, surplus food redistribution is the most common method for food charity projects to secure food. While all authors report that projects source additional food in other ways, redistribution of surplus food is shown to play a major role. We developed a representation of European food charity systems, as set out in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Food charity system diagram



THE ROLE OF EU AGRICULTURAL SURPLUS SCHEMES IN SHAPING FOOD CHARITY SYSTEMS ACROSS EUROPE

This research set out to focus particularly on the social policy aspects of the rise of food charity. However, analysis of the data provided by the case studies clearly highlights the importance of supply-side factors in the shape and scale of emergency food provision.

In particular, the countries studied demonstrate the significance of the MDP and – after 2013 – the FEAD in institutionalising surplus food redistribution through food charity. The MDP programme ran from 1987–2013, as a part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). Originally designed to redistribute agricultural surplus to deprived people in the EU, by the mid-2000s it had become a ‘financial support scheme for buying and delivering food for the most deprived’ and it was deemed to be no longer an agricultural policy. From 2014 onwards the EU Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) was created: designed as a combination of support including food aid, material assistance and ‘tailored social inclusion measures’.¹

In each country where FEAD food stocks are used in food charity – or have a history of such use – this was a determining factor in the shape of food charity. These countries were Finland, Italy, Slovenia and Spain. The research from these countries highlighted how the scale, organisation and regulated nature of participation in the FEAD scheme have resulted in the prominence and institutionalisation of the redistribution of surplus food through food charity.

The other countries used the FEAD programme differently. In the UK, the programme is used specifically to provide financial support to breakfast clubs in primary and secondary schools in England for pupils who are entitled to free school meals.² In Germany and the Netherlands, the operational programmes of the FEAD focus not on food initiatives, but instead on social inclusion programmes.

EU schemes paved the way for Good Samaritan laws

Following participation in EU redistribution schemes, Good Samaritan legislation – making the redistribution of surplus food easier – was introduced in Italy in 2016. In order to create an enabling environment for the food donation sphere, incentives contained in the EU Food Donation Guidelines were adopted by the European Commission in 2017. The same year Slovenia amended the Agriculture Act, introducing all the main solutions from the EU Food Donation Guidelines. In Finland, food supervision authorities have loosened the regulations on directing expiring food from grocery stores to charities by relaxing the rules concerning best before dates. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, the government’s coalition agreement states that there should be more scope for supermarkets and the hotel and catering industry to donate surpluses to food banks. This followed a 2016 publication of the Council of the European Union that calls on states to make the redistribution of surplus food easier.³

MID-LAYER SURPLUS FOOD REDISTRIBUTION ORGANISATIONS COULD BE AN IMPORTANT DETERMINANT OF THE CAPACITY OF FOOD CHARITY SYSTEMS

This research was framed to focus on food charity provision (first tier). However, it has become clear through the comparative analysis that, in fact, food sourcing practices at the second, mid-layer, tier – especially surplus food redistribution and food waste recovery through charitable food provision – constitute an important determinant of the scale, nature and embeddedness of first-tier food charity projects.

FOOD WASTE AND A LACK OF ACCESS TO FOOD ARE DIFFERENT PROBLEMS WITH DIFFERENT SOLUTIONS

Where issues of food waste and experiences of limited access to food are not treated distinctly, there is a real danger of conflating environmental policy questions – about how to reduce food waste – with discrete social policy questions – about both the need for assistance with food and the best and most appropriate social responses to experiences of poverty. The comparative analysis highlights that this conflation is taking place in policymaking through Good Samaritan Acts in Italy and Slovenia. In Finland, there was a legislative initiative proposing a ban on large shops throwing away or destroying unsold food and an obligation for retailers to donate such food to charities. The rationale behind the legislation was to tackle food waste and food poverty in tandem. However, the bill lapsed.

¹ https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/162559/SR_FEAD_EN.pdf

² ‘FEAD in your country’, <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1239&langId=en&intPagId=3630#navItem-1>

³ ‘Food losses and food waste, 10730/16’, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10730-2016-INIT/en/pdf>

POLICY CROSS OVER: AGRICULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROGRAMMES SHAPING SOCIAL RESPONSES TO POVERTY

In policy analysis terms, the importance of the MDP and the FEAD indicates that there is crossover between policy spheres. First, the MDP programme, as a part of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), purchased agricultural overproduction surplus to balance market fluctuations. This surplus food was later delivered as food aid. In this way, emergency food aid was used as a kind of market support for European agriculture. From 1987 to 2013, this manoeuvre worked to stabilise food supply for many of the charitable actors and thus helped to establish charitable food aid provision in many European countries.

Second, some recent EU-wide environmental policy initiatives, such as the zero-waste initiative (in 2017) and the circular economy (in 2019), have a tangible impact on social policy practices in terms of state funding or support through surplus food provision to food charities. While there is no common EU social policy, initiatives that have come out of the CAP – in the form of the MDP and later EU guidelines regarding food waste⁴ – have, in effect, served to homogenise private welfare practices in several member states in the form of surplus food redistribution through food charity.

This policy sphere crossover is also apparent at a domestic level – for example, in the Netherlands, Slovenia, Italy, Finland and, more recently, the UK.⁵ Here, decisions made in the sphere of public policy concerning the environment – namely, surplus food redistribution incentives – are impacting on the scale and nature of food charity in the practice of both private and state social welfare. These decisions also serve to legitimise charity as a response to need, providing an ‘illusion of a just system’ and proving hard to argue against a moral ‘buy one, get one free’.

Another reason why it is important to acknowledge that these initiatives originate in environmental policy spheres is that this highlights the fact that these policies stem from the problem of food surplus and how to avoid waste. Surplus food redistribution policies did not begin with the problem of lack of access to food, or any assessment that the provision of surplus food was the best response.

As the evidence provided in this research and many others⁶ shows, an ad hoc system of private food charity reliant on unpredictable redistribution practices is not an evidence-based policy solution to the problem of the systemic lack of access to food. Furthermore, the redistribution of surplus food through food charity is a downstream response to overproduction and does not represent environmental policy seeking to question the upstream production processes and construction of consumption practices resulting in the current scale of waste.

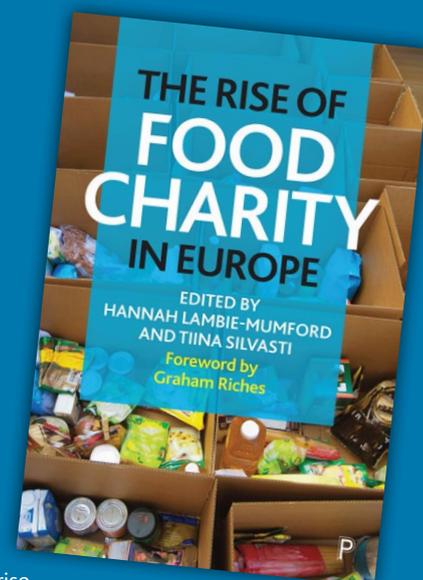
⁴Food losses and food waste, 10730/16’, <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-10730-2016-INIT/en/pdf>

⁵Environment Secretary announces new scheme to reduce food waste and Natural England Wildlife targets’, <https://deframedia.blog.gov.uk/2018/10/01/environment-secretary-announces-new-scheme-to-reduce-food-waste-and-natural-england-wildlife-targets/>

⁶Riches, G. (1997) First world hunger, London: Routledge.



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.

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