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Author(s): Salonen, Anna Sofia; Silvasti, Tiina

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Faith-based organizations as actors in the charity economy: A case study of food assistance in Finland

Introduction

In recent decades, charitable food assistance has grown into a prevalent way to respond to hunger as a manifestation of severe or absolute poverty that persists even in the affluent European Welfare States. By severe poverty we refer to an economic condition of life, which leaves an individual or family not only physically hungry but also in a situation where the basic need for nutritious healthy food is unmet to such a degree that it seriously violates the chance of sustaining socially accepted membership of society. Throughout Europe, non-governmental organizations, and faith-based actors in particular, have taken up the task of alleviating the immediate food needs of the most deprived people by delivering food stuffs that originate to a great extent from food markets as surplus donated by food corporations and retailers. As an affluent Nordic Welfare State with more than two decades of history in this modern food charity, Finland provides an illustrative context to explore faith-based organizations as actors in the charity economy which is an alternative distribution system where unwanted consumer goods are redistributed from those who have a surplus to those who are in need.

In Finland, the first food banks and bread lines were founded in the early 1990's in order to respond to the immediate needs faced by increasing numbers of people in the aftermath of the deep economic recession of that time. The initial perception was that food charity was only a temporary emergency response that was supposed to come to an end after the economy recovered. However, from then on food charity has proliferated and become a rather permanent, even if so far only loosely publicly coordinated, feature of last resort material aid for people afflicted by severe poverty.

In Finland, recipients of food assistance typically do not need to prove their need of aid by any administrative documents, that is to say there is no means testing. Hence, neither accurate official statistics nor a reliable time series of the numbers of people receiving food assistance, nor the depth of the poverty these people are afflicted by are available. Nevertheless, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) has produced some figures relating to its own food delivery. In addition, there is an extensive survey collected by the hard-to-survey-populations strategy during 2012-13 (Ohisalo 2017, 51). According to these sources the recipients of food assistance compose a very heterogeneous group consisting of families with several children and people outside or on the fringe of the labour market: under- and unemployed people, low-income pensioners, people with mental health problems and/or substance abuse problems, students and immigrants. Also, in Eastern and Northern Finland access to food is becoming more difficult for many elderly people without a car and driver's licence due to the closure of village shops and ever-lengthening distances to fetch groceries. Many of the recipients of food assistance are nowadays dependent on food charity. This is so much so that according to the Church Resource Agency some of them would starve without it (Pajunen 2012). Consequently, it is fair to say that people who depend on food assistance are affected by severe if not absolute poverty with an unmet basic human need for food and living conditions, which leaves them in a situation that seriously violates their chance of sustaining membership of generally respected social groups.

As in many other countries (see e.g. Lambie-Mumford & Jarvis 2012; Lambie-Mumford 2013; Noordegraaf 2010; Poppendieck 1999; Tarasuk et al. 2014), in Finland too, religious organizations are active in the field of food assistance. Together with smaller national and local churches, parishes and other faith based organizations (FBO), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) is one of the leading agents of hands-on assistance work. This is unsurprising, given that the ELCF not only has experienced and educated personnel in diaconal work but also a nationwide network for delivery through congregations. In addition to facilities and resources, the food assistance work is motivated by the social doctrine of the church which maintains that abandoning the most vulnerable is not an acceptable option in the Christian community. In addition to hands-on assistance, the ELCF has taken an active role in advocating on behalf of people in poverty.

Particular institutional structures have promoted the process whereby food charity has taken root in Finland. The development of practical forms of food charity delivery was strongly determined by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the acceptance of the European Union's Food Distribution Programme for the Most Deprived Persons of the Community (MDP) in 1996. The acceptance of the MDP basically resulted in the entrenchment of food aid, because EU food offered, for the first time, a regular, nationwide, large-scale supply of food for the distributors – most of them parishes and FBOs. The Agency of Rural Affairs, which governed the MDP, operated directly with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF) and other FBOs and NGOs distributing EU food. Under these circumstances distributing charitable food assistance ended up as a mission for churches and NGOs which, in turn, took voluntarily responsibility for the hunger problem. The importance of the MDP for food charity delivery is also recognised in some other EU-member countries, for example in Spain (Pérez de Armiño 2014) and in Estonia (Kõre 2014). Later, reforms to the CAP and changes in the global food market were expected to guarantee that agricultural commodity markets in the EU will stay balanced without the need for market intervention. Without intervention stocks, which were the source of EU-food, the MDP lost the rationale and it was discontinued in 2013.

After the MDP ended, a new replacement fund, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) came into effect during 2014. It aims to reduce poverty by providing non-financial assistance to the most vulnerable people in the EU. The main focus of the FEAD programme is on supporting national programmes that distribute material assistance, such as food, clothing and other essential items for personal use. However, the scope of the programme extends from material assistance to also include the promotion of social inclusion activities. The programme explicitly supports schemes that collect and distribute food donations with the intention of reducing food waste. One of the main principles of the FEAD is “considering the possible impact of the earth's climate when purchasing food, and making an effort to reduce food waste” (European Commission / FEAD 2015, 4). With this focus, the programme steers support to those operations that many food charity organizations have *de facto* already utilized, namely the redistribution of market excess. At the same time, this marks a shift in the focus of the EU's food assistance programme from food market regulation to managing the disposal end of the food system.

The introduction of ecological matters and waste management as additional rationales for food charity in the EU's food assistance programme is but one illustration of an increasing rhetoric and practice where the problem of food poverty is linked to the question of food waste. Due to its link to the food system, food charity can be – and increasingly has been – framed as a social innovation that aims to bring together and, thereby, solve the problems of

overproduction of food and people who do not have enough food. It is promoted throughout Europe as a solution to both food insecurity and food waste, as it utilizes excess from the food system and turns it into the means of last resort assistance. This twofold aim of poverty relief and environmental protection is reflected in the goals of the organizations that advocate for food charity. For example, the motto of the European Federation of Food Banks (FEBA 2015) is, 'Against hunger and food waste', while the Global Food Banking Network (2015) claims that 'food banking is the link between food waste and hunger'.

Is food charity, then, a win-win-win-solution that combines the fight against hunger as an expression of severe or absolute poverty and the fight against waste in a way that is fitted for FBO's as it enables them to practice both their social and ecological gospel at once? This paper problematizes this perception by discussing the puzzles behind the seemingly propitious arrangement by utilizing the emergent concept of the charity economy. The charity economy means an alternative distribution system where excessive elementary goods are donated to the people in need. The distribution system is based on donations. The basic idea is that unwanted consumer goods, which might be interpreted as waste, are redistributed from primary food markets to charity purposes. In this process, necessities that are already used or cannot be sold, are collected from private actors and, then, delivered by voluntary or low-paid workers to the recipients.

By examining food charity as part of the charity economy, we argue that food charity is an indication of, rather than an effective solution to the problems of persistent severe or absolute poverty and food waste. Reducing food waste is necessary on the grounds of environmental issues but also ethically, and the same applies of course to reducing hunger. However, the substantial question here is whether food charity can be accepted as a way to reduce both food waste and hunger? Such a linkage might be supported by prevailing neo-liberal economic thinking, but what kind of human or social message is signalled by such (eco)social policy? To what degree does it align with the social and ecological values and pursuits of the FBO's and, above all, how does it promote the social rights of people exposed to absolute poverty?

Food assistance as a part of the solution?

Ostensibly, charitable food assistance seems profitable from at least three perspectives. First, food charity is framed as part of the solution to the problem of hunger as a manifestation of severe and absolute poverty. In Finland, the first food banks started as emergency responses to a sudden economic downturn in the early 1990s. They were seen as reactive responses to the immediate consequences of the economic downfall that were presumed to be able to stop operating after the economy recovered. However, this did not happen, and instead food assistance became a permanent way for many NGO's and FBO's to help people living in severe poverty. Currently, food charity has become a constant mode of helping the poor, but it has not so far been institutionalized at a national level under any umbrella organization. The assistance endures as a widespread, yet uncoordinated activity. Hence, there are no reliable statistics for the extent and volume of food assistance in Finland, although it has been estimated that there are food banks in over 200 municipalities (out of a total of 311 municipalities) across the country and they serve over 20,000 people on weekly basis (the population of Finland is 5.5 million people) (Ohisalo et al. 2013).

Between the recession in the 1990s and the financial crisis in 2008-09, the public perception of food assistance changed. The first food banks were criticised for taking up the task of alleviating food needs with charity and thus giving the government a chance to withdraw from its duty to provide an income that enables everyone's basic needs to be met (Karjalainen 2008). Instead, as the financial crisis hit Finland in 2008, church aid to the poor was welcomed and did not raise any vocal objections (Hiilamo 2012). Hence, in the current situation of persistent economic downturn and prolonged austerity, the efforts of NGOs to help the needy are increasingly called for and food charity has normalized as a long-term solution to alleviate poverty (Silvasti 2015).

Second, food charity seems to provide a way to tackle the problem of food waste. It can be seen as an attempt to overcome the problems of both food poverty and food waste and thus to enhance the sustainability of the food supply chain. In Finland the level of food waste is moderate by international comparison (Koivupuro et al. 2010, 27) but, nevertheless, it is recognised as a problem. At the household level approximately 130 million kg of avoidable food waste is generated each year. This means around 23 kg per capita making households the biggest source of food waste in the food production and consumption chain. In food services the amount of food waste varies between 7 and 28 per cent of cooked food and in the retail sector the estimated amount of waste is 65-75 million kg per year. (Katajajuuri et al. 2014, 322.)

The inconsistency between the huge amounts of wasted food and food poverty in affluent societies prompts one to ask whether the integration of these two problems would provide a solution. Garrone et al. (2014), for example, maintain that "if a certain level of surplus food proves to be intrinsic in some segments of the supply chain, it is important to recover it and to prioritise its use towards the reduction of food insecurity."

Thus it is not surprising that a new discourse has recently emerged that welcomes food assistance as a good and benevolent way to reduce food waste. Recently, France has banned large shops from destroying unsold food. Instead, they are obliged to donate the food to charities. Similar laws are advocated at EU level (*The Guardian* 2015). In the spring of 2016, over a hundred members of the Finnish parliament signed a similar legislative initiative (Lakialoite LA 29/2016 vp), which was well received by the media. There has been a relative increase in the number of media reports that raise the issue of food aid as a question related to food waste (Tikka, 2016). Hence, alongside the process of normalizing food charity, there is a process of reconstructing food charity in positive ecological terms by linking it to efforts to fight food waste.

Third, through the aims of fighting severe poverty and food waste, food charity can be seen as a way for faith based organizations to practice their social gospel and maintain their image as socially and ecologically responsible public actors. Food charity seems to be an activity suitable for churches. It is widely recognized that it is characteristic for Christian communities and individuals to love their neighbour and witness to the values of caring, even though the churches vary in the ways they consider what constitutes a good society and what the role of the church is in promoting a good society and fighting social evils (Ekstrand 2011, 107). When it comes to the ELCF, which is the leading agent in the field of food charity provision in Finland, the social teachings of the church concerning its role as a provider of material assistance are not straightforward. However, in short, Lutheran social doctrine allows the church to act both as an agent tackling social problems and as a political or moral voice calling for state responsibility for taking care of those problems (Ekstrand 2011).

In practice, the relationship between state and church responsibilities in welfare has developed historically in Finland so that the role of one has diminished as that of the other has strengthened (Yeung 2003, 205). The construction of the state-provided social security system diminished the role of the church in providing social services. However, the “the role of the church’s poverty alleviation became more pronounced after the recession in the early 1990s and continued to do so throughout the economic collapse of 2008” (Hiilamo 2012, 401). Local parishes, together with other FBO’s have remained active in hands-on material assistance to the poor.

At a national level, the ELCF has done advocacy work both by giving out public statements and by forming expert groups. In 1997, Bishop Eero Huovinen established the Hunger Group that was influential in promoting public debate about poverty. In the statement *Towards the Common Good* in 1999, the bishops of the ELCF aligned themselves with the Nordic welfare state. In 2010, the bishops announced a declaration on behalf of global food security. In 2011, Archbishop Kari Mäkinen appointed a new national poverty group that also aspired to bring poverty onto the political agenda (Silvasti & Karjalainen 2014, 76). Thus, since the 1990’s, the church has taken an active role as the helper and defender of the poor both regarding practical assistance at a local level and advocacy at a national level.

Currently, there seems to be a shared appreciation in Finnish public discussion that food charity is a suitable activity for faith based organizations, even with a simultaneous perception that food charity is not legitimate or appropriate for the Finnish welfare state (Silvasti and Karjalainen 2014, 75). It is considered characteristic and proper for churches to “do good” by helping the most deprived. For churches, food charity is an established model for aid and a socially accepted way to put their religious beliefs into practice and follow their social calling. In addition, in Finland, due to the low level of institutionalization and absence of regulation of religious manifestations in these settings, faith based organizations have the ability to communicate the values of the community to food recipients and sensitize people to the Christian religion (Salonen 2016a).

The perceived appropriateness and public endorsement for food aid is particularly important in the current situation in Finland where the role of religious organizations as public actors is in many ways contested. Despite the relatively high church membership rate, the church is losing its members, which affects its financial basis and probably also its privileged status in society. In 2006, 82.4 per cent of the population were members of the ELCF, whereas the figure was 77.2 per cent in 2011 and 72.8 per cent by the end of the year 2015. At the same time, the work of the church in helping the disadvantaged and defending the poor and the marginalized is an important reason for church membership for many people in Finland. According to the *Gallup Ecclesiastica 2011* survey (Church Research Institute 2013, 47):

Approximately three quarters of Finns agreed that the Church should do more as an advocate of the disadvantaged in the social debate (75%), support the poor and marginalized more determinedly (75%) and most of all focus on helping the disadvantaged (73%). Nearly as many agreed that the Church should speak more directly about social grievances (73%). Only a small percentage of Finns disagreed on these issues. In this, therefore, the Finns’ understanding of the Church’s task and role in society is very clear and unanimous. There were no great differences between those who considered themselves to be religiously liberal or conservative, although the liberals emphasized these issues slightly more.

While the benefactor role of the church might not be sufficient on its own to maintain the memberships of those inclined to leave the church, the public perception is still highly important, and thus the church has an internal impetus to maintain its role as the defender of people afflicted by poverty.

Therefore, it can be argued that food assistance can provide a haven for religious communities to both practice what they preach, and maintain their prominence in society in a situation where they are under threat of losing their authority or status. Food charity has legitimatizing power across different audiences: it is an auspicious activity for the church to pursue its age-old goal of feeding the hungry, while at the same time it appeals to the population that adheres to the values of urban communal spirit and neighbourly help, and emphasises environmental protection and recycling. Whether seen as an indication of the new visibility of religion in the public sphere or as an inner secularization of a church, food charity provision nevertheless easily attracts the idea that it can serve as part of the solution to the problems faced by the church.

Food assistance as part of the problem?

At first glance, charitable food assistance seems to be a profitable solution to the problem of hunger as an expression of severe if not absolute poverty as well as, at the same time, by minimising food waste, enabling FBO's to practice their social and ecological gospel in tandem. However, on the flip side of growing charitable food provision there are at least three problematic developments.

First, charitable food assistance does not address the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. At its best it offers a temporary band-aid for the acute problem of hunger. Moreover, it runs counter to the ethos of Nordic welfare with the result that the acceptance of charitable food assistance as a means of poverty policy disconnects Finland from the traditional Nordic Welfare State model. In the context of European Welfare States, the Nordic Welfare State model refers to the economic and social policies common to the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland). It includes a combination of free market capitalism with a comprehensive welfare state and collective bargaining at the national level. Essential common principles are the universalistic idea of social rights based on citizenship and the normalcy of paid work (Kettunen 2001).

Accepting charitable food assistance is an expression of the transformation of the Nordic idea of the Welfare State manifesting a transition from eradicating poverty to governing its consequences. It indicates the disinclination of society to challenge increasing social inequality in the spirit of universalism. (Silvasti & Karjalainen 2014, 73). The Nordic interpretation of welfare has historically obligated the state to take responsibility for reducing poverty and inequalities within society. Accordingly, the state is accountable for the social protection of the most vulnerable who cannot take care of themselves or who lack supportive and resourceful social networks (Hänninen 2010).

Charitable food aid, by contrast, represents residual social policy – usually connected to the Liberal Welfare State model characteristic of the UK and the USA – supplemented by private charities opposing the universalism integral to the Nordic regime of welfare.

Institutionalizing charities may well support the dismantling of the universal ethos of the Finnish welfare state by enabling the process of moving the initial aim of eradicating poverty

to the margins of social policy, when seemingly well-running charity operations diminish the pressure on the political system. When the greatest political interest is in charities, the fundamental social evils, which primarily drive people afflicted by poverty to emergency food delivery, are easily pushed to the background of the political arena. This is how the acceptance of and support for charitable food assistance opens doors to political forces seeking to reduce the existing social security system and to diminish access to social rights even further (Poppendieck 2000).

In the history of European social policy the development has thus far taken an entirely opposite direction: from charity to social rights, from church and philanthropy to public sector and governmental responsibility, from individual responsibility to collective insurance and risk management. From this point of view, by providing charitable food assistance, charitable organizations stand in the way of more lasting solutions to severe and even absolute poverty and, in the worst case, jeopardize social rights by participating in dismantling the welfare state (e.g. DeLind 1994; Poppendieck 1999; Rideout et al. 2007; Silvasti 2015).

Second, charitable food assistance can be interpreted as a part of the so-called charity economy. Expanding the charity economy is another expression and a part of the transformation of the European Welfare States, where the former politics of poverty alleviation is re-established and the earlier social policy goal to truly eradicate poverty (Kessl et al. 2016) is replaced by the goals of governing and trying to control the damage. At the same time, responsibility for the most vulnerable people in society is gradually passed from the state to the third sector, which is strongly in contradiction to the traditional Nordic Welfare State model.

The charity economy is strongly connected to the contemporary capitalist model of the economy. In the charity economy private actors can save money in waste management by donating expiring food, or food which remains unsold for one reason or another, to charities; distribution of food assistance is mainly done by volunteers or low-paid workers such as supported rehabilitees and, most importantly, it allows the current capitalistic production system to continue systematic overproduction by disguising surplus as a necessary philanthropic donation to people in poverty. This, again, helps private enterprises to portray positive outcomes in corporate social responsibility as it evokes a strong feeling of a win-win situation, where food poverty is fought by saving the planet and by donating wasted food to charities.

The charity economy is a means to create a secondary food market, one which is dependent on excess food coming from the primary market, where people have more than they need, so that items remain unsold. This excess is given to secondary consumers, i.e. people living in poverty who have no purchasing power (cf. e.g. Hill 2003; Hill and Stamey 1990). In other words, the charity economy is an emerging alternative distribution system provided for secondary consumers, where excessive elementary goods, such as food and clothes, are donated or sold on the cheap to the poor people in need. In this redistribution process, necessities that are already used or cannot be sold, which might as well be interpreted as waste, are collected from private individuals, households, retailers and industries and are then delivered by charities, utilizing voluntary or low-paid workers, to the people who cannot normally satisfy their basic needs in the market because of their severe poverty.

At this point positive ecological arguments are connected to charitable food assistance, as prevailing market-based food-systems waste huge amounts of edible food. It is usual that

food charities have two parallel goals: poor relief and environmental protection in the form of the circular economy. Preventing food waste is environmentally preferable. However, as a solution to the ecological problem of food waste organising a 'secondary food market' by distributing surplus food as charitable food assistance to people excluded from the primary market because of severe poverty is ethically problematic, and violates the human right to food (Riches & Silvasti 2014). Consequently, the process whereby expiring food, usually donated to charities, first turns to being waste – i.e. is interpreted as inedible for the customers in the primary market – turns back into being edible for the people suffering from severe or absolute poverty, needs to be more carefully explored. As Herbert J. Gans (1972) has pointed out, people in poverty consume expiring food that others don't want and, by doing so, prolong the economic usefulness of perishable food stuff. This can be interpreted as "a positive function of poverty", where the people afflicted by poverty benefit the primary market by utilizing its excess.

Thus, third, the charity economy operates on the fact that there is a continually growing group of people not only at risk of exclusion but living constantly in severe poverty that threatens their ability to satisfy their basic needs. This is a self-evident result of giving up the social policy goal of eradicating poverty. During the time of austerity policies and, occasionally, as a result of austerity policy practices, the most vulnerable people are not able to cope without charitable assistance. It has been argued that the reason behind this development is the breakdown of the traditional connection between poverty and unemployment. At present, the permanent precariousness and crumbling normalcy of paid work in the form of temporary jobs, freelancing, mini jobs, McJobs, seasonal jobs, chain jobs and jobs without a living wage seem to create a firm basis for increasing poverty as well as increasing the need for charity. (Kessel 2015)

Excluding people who are constantly or repeatedly afflicted by severe poverty from the primary food market means that they are forced to consume what is left over from the more affluent population even if that is not what they really need or want. This does not correspond with what is considered to be appropriate and sufficient in contemporary consumer society, where the freedom of choice is an aspiration (Lorenz 2015, 10-11; Riches & Tarasuk 2014, 9; Silvasti 2015, 478). According to the Nordic ethos of welfare distributing non-monetary benefits, food or food stamps for example, has been interpreted not only as a restriction of freedom of choice but rather as patronizing towards people in poverty. This is why relying on charitable food assistance is often, if not always, shameful and stigmatizing, violating the chance to maintain socially accepted membership of generally respected social groups in society.

On the other hand, the ability of charitable actors to maintain their work relies heavily on the constant flow of excess from the food system. Socio-ecological sustainability would require both less surplus food and less social exclusion (Lorenz, 2012:393). In fact, food charities end up preserving, if not promoting, the continuous production of food waste. If donating surplus to charities is accepted as an adequate means to prevent food waste, producing more food waste could be interpreted a proper way to promote social justice as food waste would be used to feed the hungry. This kind of solution is ecologically unsustainable (Kortetmäki and Silvasti 2017).

Charities are also dependent on the companies that donate surplus food to charity in order to improve their image as socially responsible actors (Tarasuk 2005). In fact, in an American context it is argued (LeLind 1994) that at the same time as charity organizations are forming secondary food markets, where residual and wasted food is distributed to residual people who are surplus in the labour market, the food banks themselves have become dependent on the pension and insurance systems and functional office networks of charity organizations. In other words, they are dependent on hungry people as they are professionals of hunger. It is seldom recognized that growing numbers of poor people also contribute to the expansion of such valued professions as social or charity work (Gans 1972).

FBO's as actors in the charity economy

Understanding the connections between food aid and the charity economy places the role of the church and other FBO's in the field of food assistance in a different light compared to the win-win-win situation presented above. As noted, in Finland, just as in many other countries, religious organizations are widely considered as actors for whom charitable assistance is particularly suitable. Silvasti and Karjalainen (2014, 75) draw attention to an inconsistent construction found in Finnish public discussion that charitable food assistance is not legitimate for the Nordic welfare state, but is legitimate for churches. This viewpoint is constructed and established by the media, political actors, and the ELCF. The normalization of food aid as a long-term feature of Finnish society (Silvasti 2015) is accompanied with its normalization as a permanent mode for the church to address the needs of people living in poverty.

As actors in the charity economy, the parishes of the ELCF and other food charity providers are apportioned two functions. First, they become **players at the last resort end of the chain of social protection**, although they do this informally and without being assigned an official role or responsibilities in this chain (Hiilamo 2012, 404; Malkavaara & Ryökäs 2015, 122-123; Ohisalo & Saari 2014, 15-16; Silvasti 2015, 478, 480). Even if it is not done intentionally, with their work they engage in the institutionalization of charitable solutions to severe manifestations of poverty and in the social construction of poverty as a matter of charity. In that sense, they are actively, even if not deliberately, involved in the process of dismantling the ethos of Nordic welfare.

At the individual level, an unintended consequence of continuous food charity provision is the institutionalization of the assistance to the individuals that rely on this aid (Salonen 2016a, 51). This is contradictory to the outspoken aims of much of food aid that emphasises the social dimension of the assistance and the intention of lifting people out of poverty. Instead, there are signs of the processes of socialization into food charity culture and charity dependency, which can be considered a rather dubious way to pursue social inclusion that is promoted by, for example, the FEAD programme.

Second, actors participating in food aid become **players in the disposal end of the food markets** and participate in the redistribution of the assets of the food system (Riches 1986, 122; Silvasti 2008). The significant amount of food available for distribution via food aid consists of market excess, and thus the ability of the church to help the needy relies strongly on the continuous flow of excess, and routine production of food waste. Hence, attempts to fight waste in fact maintain the generation of waste.

From the perspective of the individuals who receive aid, obtaining and eating leftover food contradicts with what is considered as culturally acceptable (Lorenz 2015, 10-11; Riches & Silvasti 2014, 9; Silvasti 2015, 478). For the recipients of assistance food aid use is paradoxical: the utilization of food charity assigns food recipients two contradictory social positions where they are simultaneously excluded from consumer culture, yet dependent on the consumption practices of the more affluent population (Salonen 2016a, 56-57). This excluded position runs counter the FEAD efforts to promote social inclusion. Together, the unintended outcomes of these two roles demonstrate for their part the fact that, instead of fighting poverty and waste, the charity economy is dependent on the group of people who are continuously poor and on the continuous flow of excess.

However, as mentioned above, Lutheran social doctrine allows the church a role not only as an actor that confronts practical social problems, but also as a political or moral voice in society (Ekstrand 2011), and the ELCF has also utilized this role at a national level. When the food bank project of the ELCF started in 1997, it provoked differing views within the church. While some criticised food banks as inappropriate for the Finnish welfare ethos, others saw them as a good way to raise awareness of poverty and serve as a public voice of the poor while acknowledging the problems of the assistance work (Heikkilä & Karjalainen 2000, 246-247). However, since the latest economic downturn, the advocacy dimension of the church with regards to food poverty has not been as prevalent and food aid has not appeared in critical public debate as it did in the 1990's (Hiilamo 2012).

So far, in relation to food aid, church advocacy has focused on helping people afflicted by severe poverty. The idea of food aid as an attempt to fight environmental problems has not been as prominent, albeit there would be grounds for that, too. In recent decades, with the influence of the developing eco theology, the scope of theological ethics has expanded to emphasise sustainability and the conservation of the Earth for future generations (Veijola 2002, 19-32). The diaconal responsibilities of the church have thus expanded to include not just the indebted, the poor, the strangers, the sick and the old, but also the environment (Kopperi 2016, 131).

When it comes to theological arguments surrounding food aid, the system has not hitherto been praised as a way to protect the environment by diminishing food waste. However, neither has its reliance on continuous production of waste been challenged in any profound way. Rather, **waste has been taken for granted and utilized as a resource for helping the poor** (Salonen 2016a). The ELCF has emphasised environmental responsibility elsewhere, for example in its environmental programme that highlights moderation as a buzzword alongside respect and gratitude (*Gratitude, Respect, Moderation*, 2008). There is friction between the idea of moderation and the utilization of its antonym, excess, and it can be questioned whether the idea of waste as a utility of last resort aid would suit Lutheran ecological thinking.

The experience and knowledge that the local parishes gain from their hands-on work with the needy and with food waste could provide substantial assets for the church to raise the public debate on both poverty and excess in contemporary society. However, currently this potential has not been considerably exploited. A study of everyday food assistance work in Finland has noted that, in practice, advocacy is overshadowed by hands-on assistance at the grassroots level (Salonen 2016a, 51). In addition, the division of labour between local parishes that engage in practical assistance work, and the national church that participates in public discussions might stand in the way of using these issues for the purpose of advocacy. This

functional differentiation might be labour efficient, but disconnection between the two levels of operation tends to hinder the use of everyday knowledge for the purposes of advocacy.

An additional reason for the absence of critical voices from within the food aid providers can be found in the aims of some food providers, particularly in the more evangelically inclined parishes outside the ELCF. Some of these communities have explicitly religious goals for their work, which poses a challenge in a secular welfare sphere. It seems that the critique that springs from the social policy area and deems food aid as standing in the way of more lasting solutions to defeat social and material deprivation or food waste does not resonate with the ethos of such food charity providers who are inclined to provide a religious message alongside material assistance (Salonen 2016a, 52). FBO's are often between a rock and a hard place as they try to please different audiences – their parishioners, workers and volunteers, as well as the food donors and the general public. While there are theological grounds for the ELCF and other FBO's to challenge charitable models of poor relief, the current situation in Finland seems to correspond with the findings from food aid contexts outside Finland, which suggest that theological arguments are applied “to preserve rather than to challenge the food charity system” (Salonen 2016b). All in all, within the charity economy, where the needy and the excess are reframed as utilities instead of problems, there seems to be little room for criticism of the root causes of poverty and waste.

Conclusions

Hunger still persists as one of the gravest manifestations of severe as well as absolute poverty in contemporary European Welfare States. With food assistance, this problem has been framed as an issue that ought to be fought against via charitable solutions and hands-on food donations, and churches and other FBO's have been mobilized into this action. In this article we have sought to disclose some of the pressing critical arguments that challenge food assistance as a win-win-win-solution to social and ecological problems. Food aid is a sign rather than solution to hunger, and it indicates but does not overcome the problems of poverty or waste. Instead, we argue that food charity illustrates the emergence of a charity economy. Food charity conveys some of the key features of the charity economy, namely, that the charitable system we witness today operates on the fact that there is a growing group of constantly poor people in need of charity and a constant flow of surplus food that is not consumed through primary food markets.

The persisting need for material assistance and the continuing flow of excess that materializes in food assistance provides a site where theological claims concerning ecological sustainability and social justice are intertwined, yet not explicitly connected. Instead, as food charity providers, faith-based organizations become actors in the charity economy that actually relies on persistent severe, if not absolute, poverty in form of an unmet basic human need for adequate nutritional food and a constant flow of excess. Thus, FBO's participate in the institutionalization and entrenchment of such a secondary market for non-consumers that rests on what the food charity system proclaims to fight against. This aligns with a critical remark that religious organizations and communities have had a tendency to address economic disparity with charity instead of confronting structural causes of inequality (Cox 2003, 25). Institutionalized practices and structures that encourage excess-based poor relief as a suitable way for churches to practice their social calling make it ever more difficult to address the root causes of food poverty and waste.

Further, food charity is an area where environmental policy overlaps with social and poverty policies, often without careful reasoning about fundamental questions of social justice and equality. However, the prevailing food system is socially, morally and environmentally questionable. It produces huge amounts of edible food which is not purchased and consumed and, which is hence regarded as waste. Consequently, environmental impacts are huge (UNEP 2009) and there still exists food insecurity indicating severe and absolute forms of poverty even in the wealthy European Welfare States (Riches and Silvasti 2014). Nevertheless, food security should be the main outcome and the principal policy objective of the functioning food system (Ericksen et al. 2010). In the food charity context the assertion of ‘waste’ as a solution to ‘hunger’ is seldom challenged.

In European Welfare States where providing food security is possible – as wealthy countries are living in conditions of surplus food production – it is a violation of the human right to food and social justice to expose people to food poverty. The right to food is a human right. It should be emphasized that charitable food assistance is never an entitlement, it is a gift. This means that people affected by severe or absolute poverty in the form of the unmet basic human need for food do not have a legal right to food assistance. In this sense charity is by no means comparable to statutory public social services which are eligible and accessible to all citizens equally (Riches and Silvasti 2014). Charitable givers don’t even have any formal responsibility to provide food assistance equitably. Moreover, cultural approval for the Europe-wide expansion of food charities normalises and legitimates personal generosity and voluntarism as an answer to the major social policy disorder of food poverty as a manifestation of severe and absolute poverty in Europe.

List of abbreviations

CAP Common Agricultural Policy

ELCF Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland

FBO Faith-Based Organization

FEAD Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived

FEBA European Federation of Food Banks

MSAH Ministry of Social Affairs and Health

MDP Food Distribution Programme for the Most Deprived Persons of the Community

NGO Non-Governmental Organization

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