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Food poverty, food waste and the *consensus frame* on charitable food redistribution in Italy

Sabrina Arcuri

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Abstract

Food poverty and food waste are two major contemporary food system problems, which have (re)gained prominence amongst both scholars and policy-makers, due to recent economic and environmental concerns. In this context, the culturally dominant perspective portrays charitable food redistribution as a “win-win solution” to confront food poverty and food waste in affluent societies, although this view is contested by many scholars. This paper applies the notions of framings and flat/sharp keyings to unpack the different narratives entailed by public discourses on food waste and food poverty in Italy. The aim is to problematize the representation of the recent anti-waste/pro-donations law as the optimal policy measure to effectively rectify both food poverty and food waste. The paper argues that the widespread public support for the law reflects the interpretation of charitable food redistribution as a *consensus frame*, standing for the convergence between flat positions and is reinforced by confusion on terms and responsibilities.

Indeed, the strength of the law lies in the capacity to reconcile different positions and bring actors together around a short-term objective, whose foundations have deep roots in the common ethics. However, if the debate is to be moved forward, trade-offs between different framings of problems at stake should be explicitly navigated when designing policy instruments.

Key words

Food poverty, Food waste, Charitable food redistribution, Consensus frame, Discourse, Italy.

Abbreviations

CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
FBAO	<i>Fondazione Banco Alimentare Onlus</i> (Food Bank Foundation)
FEAD	Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived
LMM	Last Minute Market
PEAD	<i>Programme Européen d'Aide alimentaire aux plus Démunis</i>

sabrina.arcuri@unifi.it (corresponding author)

Department of Economics and Management, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Via delle Pandette, 32 – 50127, Firenze, Italy.

Introduction

Food poverty and food waste are two major contemporary food systems problems. Food poverty concerns have re-emerged in affluent countries since the Great Recession in 2008 (Bacon et al. 2017; Davis and Geiger 2016) and subsequent austerity measures, social security reforms and rising inequality, which have significantly affected people's living conditions (Loopstra et al. 2015). A rise in the use of charitable food aid has been observed in many European countries (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014; Caritas 2014; 2015a), where it has become a key response to rising levels of poverty (Cloke et al. 2016). Its effectiveness, though, remains contested (Lambie-Mumford 2017).

In the meantime, a combination of global food crises (McMichael 2009) and pressing environmental concerns (Alexander et al. 2017) have led to a “food waste momentum” and a shift in the position assigned to waste in the food regime. From the invisibility of the Post-WWII period, food waste has become a subject for scholars and a topic for public policy and discussion (Campbell et al. 2017; Griffin et al. 2009).

This also applies to Italy, where in September 2016 the Italian Parliament unanimously passed a law on food waste, in the wake of a revived interest, driven in part by a similar Bill adopted in France six months earlier (Loi n° 2016-138). Under Italian law – Law n. 166/2016, also called “Gadda law”, from the name of the MP Maria Chiara Gadda – it has now been made easier for companies to deliver excess food to charitable agencies, as it regulates “donations and distribution of food products and pharmaceuticals for the purposes of social solidarity *and* waste limitation” (author's own translation, emphasis added).

The law supplements the already existing Good Samaritan legislation which, although recognized among the best practices for food donations¹, has by now become insufficient to deal alone with complex food safety requirements (O' Connor et al. 2014; Azzurro et al. 2016). In fact, through the aim of increasing donations, in Gadda law there are clarifications provided to make food hygiene regulations homogeneous on a national scale. Donation procedures have also been

¹ Good Samaritan legislation equates non-profit organizations to the final consumer and is intended as an attempt to reduce the liability barriers for firms and companies with the aim of increasing donations: it essentially means that the liability of the company ends where the non-profit operations start (O'Connor et al. 2014). Good Samaritan legislation applications exist in Italy (Law n.155/2003), United States, Canada, New Zealand.

simplified. However, the potential of the anti-waste law is limited by the absence of any national target for food waste reduction, and by a lack of tools for quantification and monitoring of the measure itself (Segrè and Azzurro 2015).

During the Milan Expo 2015, in a commentary on the law under preparation, MP Gadda pointed out that “responsibility and gift are the keywords: these actions concern all citizens and donations must become part of modern welfare” (author’s own translation; EXPO 2015). Such a statement assigns a prominent role to charitable food redistribution, not only in food surplus management, but also in the provision of welfare services, thereby securing its institutionalization.

The aim of this paper is to problematize the representation of Italian law against food waste as the optimal policy measure to effectively rectify food waste and food poverty as a charitable ‘win-win’ option. In doing so, the paper argues that widespread public support for the law reflects the interpretation of charitable food redistribution as a *consensus frame*, according to Mooney and Hunt (2009). A consensus frame signifies an issue or debate where there is general consensus and open public support, but it potentially engenders opposition in terms of how it should be translated into action. Assuming that ‘food waste’ and ‘food poverty’ are distinct although connected problems, the analysis unpacks the different framings behind the consensus, following Mooney and Hunt’s elaboration of Goffman’s *keying* concept (1974). This notion is useful in this context, in that the consensus frame stands for the convergence between flat interpretations of the food poverty and food waste problems respectively, and these are in turn reinforced by the consensus frame on charitable food redistribution. As frames result from actors’ discursive practices (Candel et al. 2014), the position of charitable food redistribution in the Italian public discourse is observed, with the aim to investigate:

- (1) how the consensus has been formulated in terms of the perception that charitable food redistribution is the optimal policy instrument to rectify both food poverty and food waste in affluent societies; and
- (2) what interests and positions – i.e. problem framings – are identifiable behind this consensus and the policy implications of this.

In answering these questions, the objective is to reveal how ambiguity in relation to terms and definitions, as well as to the responsibilities involved, has the potential to influence policy formation in terms of the law against food waste. In essence, the paper argues that the way problems are framed determines the inclusion of certain solutions at the expense of others.

Conceptual framework: Framings and consensus frames

Frames are mechanisms through which to organize experience and guide action (Kirwan and Maye 2013, p. 92) and are crucial to understand how people make sense of a particular phenomenon and how they in turn communicate about it. As Entman (1993) observes: “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation (Entman 1993, p. 52). By selecting, frames call attention to particular facets of reality, thus diverting it away from others (Entman 1993).

Framings are socio-political constructs (Benford and Snow 2000; Kirwan and Maye 2013) that enter the public discourse and emanate from actors’ discursive practices (Candel et al. 2014). Through the conscious mobilization of certain values and beliefs, framing processes have the potential to influence policy formation and change, although, in this respect, they need to interact with powerful institutional forces and political actors (Béland 2009).

In the last decade or so, framings have been gaining ground in multiple academic disciplines, especially in studies that deal with complex contested concepts, such as ‘sustainability’ (Van Gorp and Van der Groot 2012), ‘food (in)security’ (Candel et al. 2014; Brunori et al. 2013; Kirwan and Maye 2013; Mooney and Hunt 2009), and ‘food justice’ (Moragues-Faus 2017). Mooney and Hunt’s (2009) seminal study was the first to undertake a conceptualization of food security as a “consensus frame”, a specific type of frame previously defined by Gamson (1985) as being broadly supported and having a wide resonance. The key insight from their consensus frames perspective is that they may also engender diversity in terms of how they should be put into practice, how the goals might be best achieved, and what potential solutions should look like. This, they argue, is because they may encompass many different – and sometimes diverging – meanings and claims (Mooney and Hunt 2009). Hence, although many actors refer to food (in)security to frame their activity, the values and meanings they attach to the problem, causal interpretations and relative courses of action may differ greatly.

Mooney and Hunt (2009) explain such differences – the internal normative variations of collective action – through what Goffman (1974) calls “keying”. According to this concept, within each framing they distinguish a flat keying, which reinforces extant dominant and conservative interpretations and practices, and a sharp keying, which provides critical alternative interpretations and practices (Mooney and Hunt 2009, p. 471). Sharp framings are usually put forward by those in opposition to more conservative, flattened approaches. This distinction allows an approximate separation between ‘outsider’ and ‘insider’ actors, in turn reflecting the differential power and ability to mobilize resources (Mooney and Hunt 2009). The use of the keying concept is also useful to highlight the contested nature of framings rather than placing discrete boundaries between them

(Kirwan and Maye 2013). In fact, several authors recognize the potential for bridging mechanisms between distinct framings. In addition, and to emphasize the dynamic nature of framings, Mooney and Hunt (2009) also intend keyings as tendencies towards the sharpening and flattening rather than either/or dichotomies. In an even more fluid and dynamic interpretation of framing, Callon (1998) uses the concept of overflowing to account for the negotiated nature of framing processes, wherein permeability and leakage between collective action framings are the rule, and static, bounded, discrete frames are unfit to represent the messiness of reality.

Context and methods

Framings and keyings

In order to understand how the Italian public and institutional discourse around charitable food redistribution has developed, this paper examines framings for food waste and food poverty, including sharp and flat keys for each. The framings as delineated have several characteristics: a problem, a concept around which they revolve, moral bases and potential solutions (or non-solutions).

Dealing with charitable food redistribution implies concurrently approaching two interconnected problems. However, the representation of food waste and food poverty in this section portrays them as separate, polarized framings, in line with conditions required by Tinbergen's rule. According to this basic rule of political economy, policy goals must be well defined, targets measurable and, in order for policy to be effective, at least one policy instrument must be defined for each policy target.

As summarised in Table 1, the fight against food waste can be played either in a flat key, as a problem of efficiency within the food system, or in a sharp key, which challenges the view of efficiency as an end rather than a means for food waste reduction. Similarly, food poverty alleviation can be given a flat interpretation, very popular among governments and supported by socially responsible donors, and a sharp interpretation, oriented towards the recognition of legally enforceable rights. Whereas surplus food recovery and redistribution constitute a common solution for supporters of the flat keyings, they are inadequate as long-term response for sharp interpretations food poverty and food waste.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

While it is important to make this analytic distinction at the outset, the framings identified within the discourse are intricately linked and sometimes overlapping. However, the framings and

keyings described in this section constitute the analytical framework to examine discourses, as they provided a set of codes for the analysis and the boundaries for the framings expected within the discourse.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection for this research started from a keyword search on the websites of institutions, events and campaigns, as well as public and private actors engaged in food waste and/or food poverty discourses. In a second step, policy documents, press releases, position papers and reports of sources mentioned by previous webpages were included. Key terms for the selection of the text units were: food poverty (*povertà alimentare*) and/or food waste (*spreco alimentare*). Public institutions include Italian ministries and MPs, as well as the European Commission and European Parliament, whereas private actors range from charities and NGOs to industry and retailers whose activities revolve around food. Given the variety of topics potentially covered by these sources, the inclusion criterion implied that text units from these web-sources had to directly engage with food waste and/or food poverty discourses.

Media outlets were excluded, with the exception for *ilfattoalimentare.it*, an Italian online magazine engaged in the debate on food-related issues. When available, the English version of the same text units was preferred. No specific time restrictions were made for the selection, in that the time span resulted automatically from the availability of sources. The documents selection ended in August 2017 and is summarized in Table 2.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

A deductive frame analysis was applied using the software NVIVO to code selected sources. Codes were defined according to the problem definition, solutions proposed and moral bases underpinning the framings theoretically derived from prior reading. Main codes were: food poverty as hunger/lack of food; food poverty as poverty/lack of entitlements; food waste as (in)efficiency; food waste as sufficiency.

Unfolding discourses on food waste and poverty

The analysis of documents provided considerable insights into the place of charitable food redistribution in the public discourse. Results are broken down following the same chronological order as when the discourses were unfolding and are summarized in Table 3.

[TABLE 3 HORIZONTAL LAYOUT]

Food waste reduction – sharp keying

This frame identifies the root causes of food waste in the current industrial food system, founded on overproduction and unsustainable under ecological, social and economic dimensions, as it generates vast amounts of waste while being unable to feed all the people on the planet (Slow Food no date). Waste results from the loss of value attached to food, nowadays relegated to a generic commodity (Slow Food no date; BCFN 2012).

Proponents of this frame call upon the necessity to reduce pressures on land and water resources and appeal to food justice principles, championing global food waste reduction ahead of the necessity to increase production. A system more oriented towards small-scale agriculture and short supply chains, as well as fair farmers' remuneration, would provide upstream solutions to the food waste problem (Slow Food no date). The frame urges the institutions to shed light on current uncertainty over the entity and nature of the phenomenon, by measuring and monitoring it (European Commission 2017; Azzurro et al. 2016). Factors moving the risk up and down the food chain, e.g. cosmetic standards, must be examined thoroughly (Slow Food no date). Nonetheless, consumers need to assume more responsible behaviors, and specific marketing initiatives are potentially able to steer action, as with the discounted selling of ugly and expiring products (ilfattoalimentare 2014). Prof Andrea Segré, founder of the LMM, asserts prevention rather than just recovery is key to the fight against food waste (ERE 2012). LMM campaigns informed the European Parliament Resolution of 19 January 2012 on how to avoid food waste (Spreco Zero 2017), as well as the National Plan for the Prevention of Food Waste (PINPAS) established at the Ministry of Environment. Among the Plan's priorities were awareness raising, clearer definitions and methodology and legislation on food donations (PINPAS 2014).

As regards non-solutions, the lack of reliable data on amounts of food recovered by charities determined the exclusion of such sector from the Fusions assessment, which also acknowledged recovery relative weight over total food waste (Azzurro et al. 2016).

Food poverty alleviation – flat keying

The focus of this frame lies on the “food emergency” (FBAO 2014) and follows a harsh phase of the economic crisis, when more than 4 million people, almost doubled compared to 2010, turned to charitable food aid in Italy (AGEA 2013). Proponents of this frame call for “concrete and immediate action” and urge everyone to overcome individualism and do their part to help feed “millions of Italians in need” (MIPAAF 2013). Much of the rhetoric revolves around solidarity and

the ethics of sharing (COOP 2015; Bandera 2015), with food donations championed as a necessity and a duty (MINAMB 2015). To increase donations, charities and food system stakeholders plead for the removal of legislative obstacles (Frigo 2014; FBAO 2015).

This frame deploys a narrative of food poverty and food waste as “two sides of the same coin” (Secondo welfare 2016), parallel with frequent mention of the juxtaposition of food waste and food poverty reduction objectives (MIPAAF 2015).

Flat(tened) food waste reduction

This frame revolves around the narrative of “making waste a resource”, which prevailed among food waste discourses in consequence of the food emergency frame. Under this frame, “normal” inefficiencies can be addressed through initiatives of food recovery by industries and retailers, with the precious help of charitable organizations. While improving efficiency, retailers are committed on one hand to ensuring the highest quality and freshness to (paying) customers, and on the other to promoting social cohesion (Coop 2015). The main solution championed by proponents of this frame is therefore to adjust the regulatory framework on surplus donations (Azzurro et al. 2016; FBAO 2015). However, the punitive approach of the French law on food waste is seen as a non-solution, whereas fiscal incentives and simplification are broadly supported by donors (FEBA, FoodDrinkEurope and EuroCommerce 2016).

(Food) poverty alleviation – a sharpened perspective?

This frame conceptualizes food poverty as a component of poverty (OXFAM 2017). The non-food nature of the emergency is emphasized (Caritas 2014), along with the experience of multiple forms of destitution (“poverties”) for an increasing number of vulnerable individuals (Caritas 2015).

This frame aims at establishing the root causes of the problem on a case by case basis. However, insufficient income from work, arising inequalities, austerity-led cuts to social expenditure are identified as crucial drivers of arising levels of poverty (Caritas Food for all Campaign 2014-2015). The role of charitable food provision is interpreted as a temporary solution: new initiatives such as Emporia of solidarity “have been opened to close” (Lodi Rizzini 2015). Rather, the proponents of this frame envisage the establishment of a universal measure against poverty, for which a group of Italian organizations, ranging from trade unions to faith-based charities, have joined together in the “Alliance against poverty”, advancing a concrete policy proposal of minimum income (Alleanza contro la Povertà 2013).

The link with food waste is emphasized at the global level, as a result of the food system's social and environmental unsustainability (Slow food no date; Caritas Food for all Campaign 2014-2015).

Situating charitable food redistribution: state of the art

Many scholars question the culturally dominant perspective which portrays charitable food redistribution as a win-win solution to hunger and food waste (Vlaholias et al. 2015). Taken together, these studies suggest that the general ambiguity in definitions and allocation of responsibilities plays a major role in facilitating this position.

In the first place, there is a degree of uncertainty around terminology in the food poverty and food waste debate. For instance, on the food poverty side, there is “typification” of the problem as ‘hunger’ (Poppendieck 1998, p. 85), and terms such as ‘food insecurity’ and ‘food poverty’ are often used interchangeably and without precision (Dowler and O’Connor 2012). A wide variety of definitions of food security have been suggested in the last few decades (Maxwell 1996), but the term is broadly acknowledged as “a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (FAO 2001). However, such a multifaceted term has yet to translate into public discourse (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014) and has only recently started to gain legitimacy at the policy level (MacMillan and Dowler 2012).

Food poverty is deemed to be more intuitively understood than food (in)security in affluent countries (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014), so even though it is difficult to define precisely, the former is more commonly-used in the public discourse (in Italy, see Caritas 2015; Maino et al. 2016). Dowler (2002) stresses the social acceptability of access to food and defines food poverty as “the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Dowler 2002, p. 709).

Moreover, no indicators are currently available in Europe for food insecurity, apart from the food-related component of material deprivation, measured within the European Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). According to this, European citizens who cannot afford a protein meal every second day are (relatively) food insecure (Eurostat 2018). This figure, which reached 11% in 2012 for EU-28, decreased to 8.3% in 2016, although this conceals considerable regional differences. Italy, for example, shows higher rates: after the 17% spike in 2012, in 2017 the percentage of individuals reporting such levels of deprivation were 13.4% (Eurostat 2018).

Some authors argue that hunger in affluent societies is a political question and time has come for addressing the root causes of food insecurity and abandoning the emergency-based, charitable food assistance approach to adopt a specific, entitlement-based instruments against (food) poverty (Riches 1999; 2011; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2015; Riches and Silvasti 2014).

On the other hand, it was not until the last decade that food waste gained prominence amongst supply chain studies (Alexander et al. 2013). For instance, the magnitude of waste and losses occurring every year in the global food system has constituted approximately one-third of food produced for human consumption, that is about 1.3 billion ton (FAO 2011). In the Global North, food waste occurs mostly at the retail and consumption level, suggesting lifestyle influences; however, poorer countries often lack essential technologies and infrastructures, and the production and post-harvest phases lead to major losses (FAO 2011). At the EU-28 level, the supply chain is estimated to generate approximately 88 million ton of waste², which equates to 173 kilograms of food waste per person (Azzurro et al. 2016). Notwithstanding, the EU does not yet have an officially agreed definition of food waste (EU Parliament Resolution 2012; 2017). The Fusions project, which has undertaken the first EU-wide attempt to estimate food waste (Azzurro et al. 2016), confirms that ambiguity on data and methodologies still persists. For instance, Garrone et al. (2014, p. 1461) define surplus food “as safe food that for various reasons, at any stage of the supply chain, is not sold to or consumed by the intended customer”, and food waste “as surplus food that is not used for feeding people”. Other authors have gone further, including overconsumption (Blair and Sobal 2006) and obesity (Smil 2004) within the food waste concept.

Mourad (2016) shows that dominant visions of food waste and solutions promoted are mostly centred on managing existing surplus, by recycling and recovering it. She distinguishes between weak and strong actions of prevention. Prevention based on optimization is weak, as it often relies on voluntary schemes and is based on the premise that efficiency would not challenge current patterns of production and consumption. It is in addition a competitive element in a corporate social responsibility perspective. Strong prevention calls into question overproduction, consumption levels and market power in the food chain, aiming at long-term food system’s sustainability. However, it is hardly measurable and is the least promoted solution (Mourad 2016, p. 9).

Food waste is often represented as a mere food system inefficiency (Lorenz 2012) and food charity appears as a moral and “politically correct” opportunity (Silvasti and Kortetmaki 2017), as the recovery of surplus food is central to the activities of the so-called “emergency food system”.

² This estimate is for 2012 and includes both edible food and inedible parts associated with food. Figures of food waste in Azzurro et al. (2016) must be interpreted with caution, as the authors themselves point out (p. 3).

This is constituted by the full range of non-profit organizations – either second-level, logistical actors or front-line social agencies – that collect, store and distribute food to people in need (Lambie-Mumford 2013; Riches 2011).

For the last 20 years or so, a number of studies have addressed questions linked to charitable food provision in affluent countries (Riches 1999; Poppendieck 1998). Overall, these studies highlight several traditional issues affecting food charity. The main conclusions are that its operations are mostly based on voluntary work and donations, as well as on different eligibility criteria for recipients. The outcome is that these services do not result in social rights and, moreover, they remain largely undocumented in the absence of systematic monitoring (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015; Riches and Silvasti 2014). In addition, the stigmatization associated with receiving food aid has been pointed out (Van der Horst et al. 2014), also with reference to the negative terminology of food waste, believed to be a deeply demeaning solution, despite being referred to as ‘surplus food’ (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford 2015).

Even in the context of charitable redistribution, food waste becomes a rather nebulous term. Lorenz (2014, p. 392) observes how “[t]he structural problem with food waste is that, while it should be ‘fought’, it is at the same time the resource to be distributed”. For retailers, for instance, surplus food becomes waste as soon as it loses monetary value. For those who distribute food to the disadvantaged, such food is still fit for purpose and its value is higher the earlier they receive it (Alexander et al. 2013; Alexander and Smaje 2008). This distinction generates organizational tensions between the conflicting aims of the different actors participating in food recovery activities (Alexander and Smaje 2008). Therefore, although non-profit organizations may have a role in food waste governance, in that they are able to bring the problem to the fore, the logics behind practices of surplus food redistribution are the same that have given rise to the problems of food poverty and food waste and are therefore unlikely to solve them (Warshawsky 2015; Midgley 2014). Surplus food recovery remains an accommodation of over-production in the food system, offering little incentive to change industry behaviours (Midgley 2014, p. 1889). In fact, the food waste hierarchy – which informs European legislation on waste since the 1970s – considers recovery for human consumption as second best after prevention, which is the most favourable option for food waste reduction. Finally, recovery for animal consumption and for energy purposes are also recommended before disposal (Papargyropoulou et al. 2014).

When dealing with food waste, the role of consumers and education are of utmost importance, as a considerable, although uncertain, share of food gets wasted at the household level (Azzurro et al. 2016). However, there are structural, economic, material, environmental and/or cultural reasons for food wastage, that come into play at different stages of the supply chain

(Alexander et al. 2013). For instance, commercial advertising, big portion sizes and two-for-one meals (Stuart 2009) represent structural incentives for consumers to waste food. Similarly, for food wasted at the agricultural stage, reasons may arise from noncompliance of the produce with cosmetic standards (Grant 2012).

The consensus frame on “fighting food waste and hunger” in Italy

In Mooney and Hunt’s account, the high resonance given to a consensus frame does not immediately engender oppositional claims, making it difficult to mobilize opinion and action in favor of alternatives, but this consensus is mostly apparent, as multiple collective action frames and keyings lie behind it (Mooney and Hunt 2009). However, as Brunori et al. (2013) highlight, “the strength of a consensus frame is the capacity to respond to emerging societal problems with solutions that resolve possible conflicts” (2013, p. 24).

In the case under review, food emergency discourses emerged with the crisis have flattened the discourse around food waste, common issue since the early 2000s and which had originally received a more critical examination. Owing to the immediate need to address food poverty, the commonalities between the two flat keys have prevailed over the diversity of interests, and actors with different agendas and power have aligned behind this consensus, contributing to further the more conservative interpretations of problems and solutions. Eventually, the expected consensus frame has its policy capstone in the Italian law against food waste (Law n. 166/2016), which is basically framed as a pro-donation law expanding previous Good Samaritan legislation.

However, a discrete separation between framings and keyings is less evident than hypothesized at the outset. The discourses analyzed tend to be “overflowing” (Callon 1998) and epitomized by permeability. Most notably, the insider/outsider categories have revealed unsuited for the actors’ positioning, as the development, only very recently, of a sharper (food) poverty frame seems to suggest.

Several circumstances have fostered the bridging between the flat framings towards the eventual consensus frame on the law.

The mobilization and resonance of certain prominent actors and events

As Béland (2009) suggests, several factors affect the capacity of certain ideas to trigger political change: specific ideas tend to become more politically influential when powerful/high-profile actors decide to promote them. A remarkable number of projects and initiatives in the last few years have been sponsored and implemented by businesses, non-profit organizations, local governments. Actors proactively committed to surplus food recovery and redistribution – such as the LMM,

FBAO and Coop Italia – have been crucial to shape the terms of the debate and common practices. The high-visibility of EXPO Milan 2015 also contributed to the pathway which ended up enshrined in law against food waste.

Resources available to these actors, in terms of symbolic and normative values

Retailers and charitable agencies have been able to define the problems around their values and normative structures. The comparison with the French approach to food waste is emblematic: Italian operators tend to highlight its punishment traits in opposition to Italian law, which simplifies and provides opportunities for incentives. Mandatory donations and fines for non-compliant retailers established in France are therefore compared with the voluntary nature of donations promoted by Italian law. In so doing, Italian charitable operations are framed according to values of social responsibility, solidarity, embeddedness in the local communities.

The crucial role of charitable organizations in meeting the basic needs of vulnerable groups in Italy (Madama et al. 2013).

Charitable food distribution as a remedy for food poverty has been consolidated by long-time practices and policies, such as European food aid programs, which have recently been affected by a temporary crisis.

The PEAD made agricultural surplus from the CAP available to European food charities for redistribution to the disadvantaged for almost 30 years (European Commission 2016). In the years 2011-2014, the program went through a period of uncertainty about its continuance. During such transition, manifold Italian organizations joined in a group – Together for food aid – with the aim of lobbying at the EU level for maintaining such program (Frigo 2013; MINLAVORO 2014). Food parcels, soup kitchens and new forms of food aid distribution, like Emporia of Solidarity, until then reliant on EU resources, had to be supplied through additional donations, food drives and food recovery initiatives to face growing demand (Caritas 2014). Such temporary shortage of food resources experienced by food charities has contributed to shape the terms of the debate within the food emergency frame. The transition eventually led to setup a new program, the FEAD, embedded in social policy, compulsory and co-funded by all the Member States. The FEAD is the only food-related program available in the EU. In Italy, it relies on a network of 219 charitable partners and 11.554 front-line agencies distributing food to the poor (Relazione POI 2015).

Ambiguity permeating the discourses has been a crucial factor for the consensus.

Brunori et al. (2013, p. 21) describe consensus frames as “general and ambiguous enough to be interpreted in different ways and to lead to very different courses of action [but] they still have the capacity to create a commonality, a space of exchange between fields”.

Confusing use of data and definitions, as well as unclear statements of objectives by some of the actors involved, reinforce this ambiguity. For instance, initiatives of surplus food recovery are presented by retailers and industries as social rather than environmental activities, which includes them in the food poverty flat frame. The same activities, though, are elsewhere portrayed within a food waste framing, but allow to claim a commitment against hunger. Moreover, in recent years retailers have started to sell expiring products directly to consumers and at discounted price. In so doing, supermarkets pursue environmental objectives of food waste reduction by carrying out a practice consistent with making profits. However, surplus food remains the resource underpinning all such practices, so that tensions between different uses of the same resource might potentially arise in the long term.

Such an ambiguous role of surplus food is therefore the lynchpin of the alignment between the two flat framings, but also the key to unveil different interests and positions behind the consensus frame. Consistently with the literature, while in the context of the fight against waste, surplus is the target to be reduced, in a food assistance perspective it is a resource which utility must be maximized. It goes without saying that pursuing both the objectives through a single measure cannot function in a long-term perspective. On the one hand, improving the efficiency of processes means reducing the amounts of food donated to charitable organizations. On the other hand, counting on donations as the main channel for waste reduction would imply, at a time of lesser need from charities, that the problem of excess food will return, since underlying causes have not been adequately tackled.

The overflowing between flat and sharp discourses and actors.

While flat discourses tend to merge in the identification of problems and solutions, considering food poverty and waste as one, the two problems are generally dealt with separately when played in a sharper key. Sharp discourses are rather clear in terms of the long-term ineffectiveness of food recovery and the necessity of upstream actions for tackling food waste and poverty. However, by including – or, at least, non-excluding – food recovery as short-term solution, they reconcile sharp and flat positions and link the two problems, favouring the overflowing and consensus.

Nevertheless, the recent elaboration of a sharper discourse on poverty by the very key actors of charitable food aid might be considered a side effect of permeability. If it is true that the categories of insiders/outsideers are no longer suitable, it is remarkable that the same who, on a daily

basis, carry out charitable practices intend to raise awareness and advocate for a more critical approach and long-term solutions.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to problematize the representation of Italian law against food waste as the optimal policy measure to effectively rectify both food waste and food poverty by means of the ‘win-win’ option offered by charitable redistribution.

Although sub-optimal, surplus food recovery is proposed as a solution for pursuing food waste reduction objectives and, in the same way, is championed as immediate response for addressing food poverty. The juxtaposition of food poverty and food waste in many actors’ statements, along with the powerful idea of the paradox of hunger and waste, contribute to often merge the two themes within the discourse, as if they were not two separate issues. However, findings revealed that not only have several – often contingent – factors promoted the conservative stances and the genesis of the consensus. “Alternative” actors and discourses played, as well, a role that has reinforced the consensus frame underpinning Gadda law.

Indeed, it is difficult not to agree with the principle that, in the face of excess food and hungry people, the right thing to be done is to give them that food rather than wasting it. This rationale appeals to the moral obligation of feeding the poor and translates into a deeply-rooted ethic, shared by many churches and secular institutions (Bane et al. 2000). The strength of Gadda law lies in the capacity to refer to such principle, reconcile different positions and bring actors together around a short-term objective.

Nevertheless, when dealing with complex policy problems, there is the risk that limited engagement with research literature and fuzziness in meaning attribution to the terms of the debate (Moragues-Faus 2017) can lead to a reductionist conceptualization of the problems and to potentially inadequate solutions. If the debate is to be moved forward, trade-offs between different framings of problems at stake should be navigated in an explicit manner when designing policy instruments. Instead, in the case of Gadda law, the ambiguities and permeabilities behind the consensus frame have possibly lessened its potential effectiveness. Although providing a response supported by many, the anti-waste/pro-donations law has arguably wasted the opportunity provided by the great deal of public attention towards food waste. Therefore, the objectionable result of the great resonance assigned to the law, language used, and emphasis put on such a pivotal role of food recovery in “feeding millions of hungry people”, is to neutralize alternative and more targeted policy instruments.

Nevertheless, potential side effects of permeability leave space for a sharpening of the discourse, at least on the (food) poverty side, as suggested by the recent commitment of charitable actors towards critical interpretations of the problem and alternative, long-term solutions.

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Table 1 - Summary of the food poverty and food waste framings and keyings. Source: author's own elaboration

Frames (hp)	Food poverty	Food waste
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Key concepts	Hunger/Lack of food; surplus food as a resource	Poverty/Lack of entitlements	Efficiency; surplus food as a target	Sufficiency
Problems definition	People are hungry	People experience food poverty amongst many forms of destitution	Food system inefficiencies result in surplus food formation; Consumers are unaware and responsible	Food waste intrinsic to the industrial, unsustainable food system
Solutions proposed	Voluntary food recovery and redistribution to feed hungry people	Investigating the root causes of need; Advocacy and awareness-raising	Streamlining food chain operations; Recovery for human consumption	Preventing the causes of food waste; Shift towards a sustainable food system
Non-solution	-	Charitable food aid distribution as an end	-	Recovering surplus food downstream; Efficiency as an end rather than a means of waste reduction
Policy instruments	Fiscal incentives to donations; Good Samaritan legislation; CSR	Entitlements-based forms of support; Adequate social safety nets	Incentives to surplus food recovery; Packaging and technologies for shelf-life extension	Regulations and limitations; Rebalancing power relations along the food chain; Loosen standards restrictions
Moral bases	Moral obligation; Individual social responsibility	Right to food	Efficiency	Ecological and human limits to consumption

Table 2 - Summary of sources for the discourse analysis. Source: author's own elaboration.

Type of source	Nr.	Selected sources
Italian Government	22	Press releases database
Ministry of Agriculture MIPAAF	15	Press releases database
Ministry of Environment MINAMB	8	Press releases database
Ministry of Labour MINLAV	16	4 guidelines + 12 reports
Reports from charitable organizations	6	Azzurro, P. (2015); Slow Food (no date); PINPAS (2014); Caritas-CIDSE G20 Network (2012); FBAO (no date); Action Aid, Oxfam and Slow Food (2015)
Position papers	7	BCFN, Coop, Selex
Industry/retail documents	17	Caritas Italiana; Caritas Internationalis; Food for All Campaign; FBAO; Croce Rossa; Comunità Sant'Egidio; Banco delle Opere di Carità; Associazione Banco Alimentare Roma; Associazione Sempre Insieme per la Pace; LMM; Spreco Zero; Maria Chiara Gadda; EXPO 2015; Conad; Alleanza contro la povertà-REIS; Action Aid Italia; Oxfam Italia.
Websites	8	European Commission documents and regulations; European Parliament resolutions and briefings; Eurobarometers.
European Union institutions	5	
Italian institutions (other than Ministries)	48	Ilfattoalimentare.it
Ilfattoalimentare.it	54	2WEL - Secondo Welfare
2WEL - Secondo Welfare	8	Other sources
Other sources	Tot.	214

Table 3 - Frames emerging from Italian discourses on food waste and food poverty. Source: author's own elaboration.

Frames	Sharp food waste	Flat food poverty	Flat food waste	Sharp food poverty
Problems definition/key concepts	Food has lost its value to become a commodity Food waste is not an accident: it is functional to the industrial food system unsustainability and overproduction Marketing standards Definitions poorly defined Measurement and evaluation instruments absent or non-comparable	People are hungry Food emergency Bureaucratic obstacles to donations	Food system inefficiencies Surplus food Bureaucratic obstacles to donations Unaware consumers	Inequalities, injustice and poverty (global, national, local level) Root causes intrinsic to the economic system that maintains inequalities Economic emergency Austerity and cuts to social expenditure Absence of national measure against poverty Vulnerabilities
Solutions proposed	Common methodology for measurement and monitoring at EU level Prevention, upstream solutions (food waste hierarchy priority) Use of waste as by-products within the food chain Discounted sale of products next to expire Produce less with more attention Food recovery for human consumption (food waste hierarchy 2 nd best)	Encouraging food donations Encouraging initiatives of food recovery and redistribution Simplification of donation procedures for surplus food	Encouraging unsold food recovery: providing donors with incentives for donations Packaging technologies	Adequate social safety nets Advocacy for the right to food Awareness-raising campaigns Regulation of financial markets Food aid as immediate, emergency response
Non-solution	Downstream recovery without prevention Fix a wrong system	-	Punishment and fines for non-compliant retailers (French Law n. 328/2016)	Assistance without exit-strategy
Word choices/framing devices	“Reduce to recover less” “It would be like saying: feel free to waste, as there will be someone who will recover that food for you” “Surplus is not the cure, it is the symptom of food systems’ unsustainability”	Concrete actions, immediate response “Fight against food poverty and food waste”, “Two sides of the same coin” “We have made donations more convenient than waste” “Everyone must do their part”	“Making waste a resource” “We have made donations more convenient than waste” “Irreplaceable work of charitable organizations” “The law against food waste is the most concrete legacy of EXPO 2015” “Two sides of the main coin” “Surplus is a consequence of high service standards towards consumers”	“Poverties” “We have opened [the Emporium of Solidarity] to close” “Root causes of social, economic and environmental unbalances within the food system” “Economic emergency rather than food emergency: there is no lack of food”

“giving food is the easiest thing for us to do in the very short term”

Moral bases	Ethics, sustainability, food justice We need to rethink our food system with a view to reducing the pressure on resources and to balancing power along the food chain	Solidarity, generosity, culture of sharing, ethical commitment Civic engagement, community, social cohesion, relational value, CSR, responsibility Pragmatism	Ethics, moral duty, moral paradox of food waste and food poverty Involvement, individual engagement, solidarity, responsibility Hunger reduction goals	Food is a human right Food sovereignty Sustainable human development Justice, responsibility
Actors	Slow Food, Barilla, LMM/Segrè, MIPAAF, MINAMB (PINPAS plan), Fusions, EU Parliament, EU Commission	Gadda MP, FBAO, MIPAAF, MINAMB, Coop, EXPO 2015, Caritas, Food Drink Europe, Banco delle Opere di Carità	Gadda MP, FBAO, MIPAAF, COOP, Banco delle Opere di Carità	Caritas, Food for all Campaign, Action Aid, Oxfam, Slow Food, Milan Charter, Alliance against poverty