



The Role Of Food Assistance In High Income Countries: A Critical Literature Review

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Abstract – The recent financial crisis, in conjunction with austerity policies, has brought an increasing number of people to seek food assistance. Food assistance is often delegated by governments to charitable organizations and food poverty is in general peripheral to the work of policy makers. There is need for an enhanced understanding of food poverty in HIC to rebalance the interaction between charity initiatives and the aid provided by the State through the welfare system. What are the main drivers and vulnerabilities of food assistance? To what extent should food assistance be addressed with social protection measures and economic policies, or by looking into the specificities of the food system? We review available scientific literature on food assistance in HIC to characterize how it is handled and by which actors. This allows to analyse the role of food assistance in addressing food insecurity, by highlighting food assistance activities in relation to the food system and/or other systems (e.g. social security, labor, health) facing external factors of change (drivers).

Keywords – food assistance; charity; welfare system; High Income Countries.

INTRODUCTION

“Food poverty” is defined as the “inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Riches, 2002). The term is commonly used as a synonym for “food insecurity”. Since food availability is not a real problem in High Income Countries (HIC), food insecurity is firstly addressed as a matter of income inadequacy (Riches, Silvasti, 2014).

The recent financial crisis, in conjunction with austerity policies, has brought an increasing number of people to seek food assistance (Lambie-Mumford, Dowler, 2015; Caraher, Cavicchi, 2014). The profile of individuals in need has also changed, more and more including the “new poor” (Dowler, O’Connor, 2012), struggling every day with low wages, unemployment or insecure jobs and rising costs of living. Thus, when other demands, such as rent and utility bills, are pressing, food expenditure is compressed. These conditions have steered an increasing effort by charitable organizations in the absence of a clear response by governments. For example in the US, despite the large federal expenditure on food assistance, the effort of a relatively small amount of private charity tends to prevail in the nation’s con-

sciousness (Poppendieck, 2014). Or in Italy, where a large part of food assistance is managed by the non-profit sector and social enterprises based on volunteer work, with donations from the productive and commercial system to the European public subsidies to the most deprived. This necessary intersection between the private initiative and the public sphere can be explained by the partial failure of policies in engaging into a relationship with the most vulnerable actors.

Responsive policies are hindered by the lack of a universally agreed definition of the problem. Food poverty is in general peripheral to the work of most policy makers, although they are aware that many of their actions could have impacts on food poverty, both positively and negatively. There is need for an enhanced understanding of food poverty in HIC to rebalance the interaction between charity initiatives and the aid provided by the State through the welfare system.

This paper aims to answer the following questions: How does food assistance develop in HIC? What are the main drivers and vulnerabilities of food assistance? To what extent should food assistance be addressed with social protection measures and economic policies, or by looking into the specificities of the food system?

METHODS

We reviewed the scientific literature on food assistance in HIC to characterize how it is handled in the different countries and by which actors. This allows to analyse the role of food assistance in addressing food insecurity, by highlighting food assistance activities in relation to the food system and/or other systems (e.g. social security, labor, health) facing external factors of change (drivers) (Figure1).

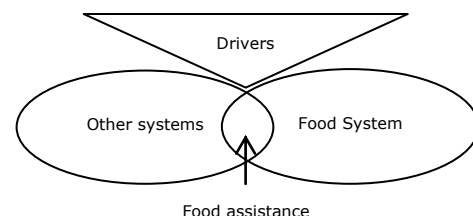


Figure 1. Drivers and solutions of food poverty. Source: adapted from Brunori et al. (2015).

A keyword research on Scopus has been made, using as search terms “food assistance” (AND) “food security” (OR) “charity” (OR) “welfare”. The search

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has been limited to the disciplines of social science and humanities and resulted at first in 481 hits. Further refinements have been made, in order to select those results pertaining to HIC. We obtained 206 results, that have been subsequently screened for their relevance, according to the question "does the article explicitly refer to food assistance programs or initiatives undertaken in HIC by the State or by charities?". We complemented the search with additional literature selected through Google Scholar. Eighty papers were chosen for the review. The time frame ranges from 1977 to July 2015. The main geographic areas of reference are USA, followed by Europe, Canada and Australia.

Table 1. Number of papers reviewed per subject and geographic area of reference.

Area	Charity	Welfare	Both	Total
Australia	3	-	-	3
Canada	8	-	-	8
Europe	14	3	-	17
HIC	1	-	-	1
USA	7	33	9	49
NS	-	2	-	2
Total	33	38	9	80

^aNS means Not Specified, not explicitly referred to a precise geographic area by the authors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The papers we analysed variously discuss the topic of food assistance. Although country-specific differences must be accounted for, a set of cross cutting issues emerges. Firstly, the increasing number of those demanding for food aid is linked not to a food emergency in the strict sense, but to an economic emergency. Secondly, there is a continuum between welfare and charity initiatives, as food assistance lies at a midpoint between welfare and the food system. Prime example is the case of European Union, where the Food Distribution programme for the Most Deprived Persons (MDP) was embedded into CAP and delivered food from intervention stocks to member states until 2013. From 2014 on, the new Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) is intended as social policy. In both cases, although there is a coordination at a national government level, charitable organizations represent the last link in the chain that distribute food to the needy. In the USA, the SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, former Food Stamps) is managed by the US Department of Agriculture and administered by local welfare offices: food assistance is intended as a social protection measure, providing financial assistance for food purchase to low-income households.

By exploring relevant literature on food assistance, we have identified four main narratives around which the discourse on food assistance revolves: 1) charity, analysed with respect to stigmatization, control over donations, nutritional aspects, emergency relief and philanthropy; 2) surplus food recovery, that is strictly related with food banks' activities and combines objectives of reducing hunger and food waste; 3) welfare, whose safety net is more

and more reshaped by budget cuts and decreasing levels of provision; 4) right to food, alternative to the gift approach and based on social justice and political and legal commitment by the State.

CONCLUSION

Food insecurity and inadequate diet are central to the experience of poverty. However, food and nutrition security is not always addressed in the policy discussions. The hybridization between welfare and charitable system reveals the inadequacy of social protection measures in covering the basic needs and charitable food programs attempt to supplement its shortcomings. However, food charities are not intended, by design, to fully meet clients' needs, but only to provide a temporary relief. In fact, they are dependent on unpredictable levels of supply and can't assure the nutritional quality of food. Furthermore the stigmatizing nature of food charity makes it the last option, so much that food banks statistics are likely to provide an underestimate of food insecurity. Shortcomings of food assistance, both led by charitable organizations and governments, call for an increased understanding of the drivers and vulnerabilities of food poverty and how it is handled in HIC.

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