

# Food Charity: Why a critique is much needed.

## A conference report

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Vienna/Kiel, December 2025

In public and political debates, food charity institutions such as food banks and social supermarkets are often framed as solutions to urgent problems like food waste and food poverty and are thus linked to key socio-ecological issues in modern welfare states. Yet, what seems to be a solution at first sight, bears various problems at second sight. Against this background, the international conference “Food Charity, Welfare State Transformations, and Affective Economies: Critical Engagements”<sup>2</sup>, organized by *Brigitte Bargetz*, *Markus Griesser*, *Jessica Gasior* (WU Vienna), and supported by *Fynn Schröder* (CAU Kiel), gathered international researchers at WU Vienna between 21 and 23 May 2025, in order to discuss critical perspectives on food charity in European countries such as the UK, Germany, Italy, Finland, Switzerland, the Netherlands and Austria. Engaging with food charity appears increasingly relevant given the rapid expansion of food charity institutions in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and the recent cost-of-living crisis as much as the ongoing transformations of the welfare

state(s). In the following, we, as members of the organizing team, reflect on the conference, offering a tentative assessment of the numerous critiques of food charity that the conference has unfold in one roundtable, two morning lectures, and eight panel sessions.

In the spirit of critique, the conference started on Wednesday evening with a roundtable discussion between the moderator *Martina Nußbaumer* (Wien Museum) and *Fabian Kessel* (U Wuppertal), *Hannah Lambie-Mumford* (U Sheffield), and *Tiina Silvasti* (U Jyväskylä), three internationally renowned food charity researchers. Interrogating the situation in Germany, the UK, and Finland, they unfold how economic crises, crisis-driven policy shifts like cuts in social benefits, and a restructuring of the welfare state contributed to set up food charities as an “emergency-response” to rising food poverty. However, paradoxically, these institutions did not disappear, once these crises had been tamed. Instead, as Kessel, Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti *unisono*, yet with different references criticized, they have become institutionalized

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<sup>2</sup> The [conference](#) was part of the FWF project “New Charity Economy through the Lens of Affective Statehood: Volunteering for Food Banks and Social Supermarkets in Austria” (Project Number: P 35463).

and even normalised as integral parts of an emerging “post-welfare state”. Taking this critique as a point of departure for thinking about emancipatory perspectives surrounding food charity, Hannah Lambie-Mumford highlighted the potential of new participatory research practices and how they might contribute to challenging existing power structures. Tiina Silvasti emphasized that the multiple crises of the present may also offer a momentum for reframing food charity. Finally, Fabian Kessl called for remembering the democratic ideals of freedom, and even more equality: Not as an idealization of the welfare state of the 1960s and 1970s but as imaginary forces of more democratic futures yet to come.

The roundtable revealed a tension between the institutionalization of food charities and (un)likely future developments. This tension provided not only a substantial starting point of food charity’s critiques but also a recurring, though differently embraced topic throughout the conference. In this vein, in the first morning lecture on Thursday, *Silke van Dyk* (U Jena), criticized the exploitation of voluntary work in the context of recent welfare state transformations as an expression of “community capitalism”, thus stressing structural unreliabilities or the dismantling of social rights as characteristics of food charity systems. In order to counter such tendencies, she instead put forward a politics of commonfare. Referring to the new municipalism movement in Barcelona from 2015 to 2023, she elaborated on how such

politics of commonfare managed to establish a “right to paternalism-free food”.

Conceptualizing volunteering as a form of “post-wage work” and elaborating on its key role for community capitalism, van Dyk provided essential insights for the subsequent contributions. This is true, for instance, for *Hilje van der Horst* and *Thirza Andriessen* (U Wageningen). Referring to Theodore D. Kemper’s power-status theory of emotions, they interrogated the dominant food bank model in the Netherlands and alternatives like a social supermarket or a credit card system, which allows food insecure households to purchase food at regular shops. They could show how the different food aid practices involve a mix of neoliberal market dynamics and charity politics, fostering exclusion, inequality, deprivation, as well as the devaluation of work and food. Critically thinking food charity through affect was also *Carolyn Mauritz’s* (U of Applied Science Frankfurt) take. Focussing on volunteers’ feelings in two German food banks, she problematized how the volunteers became both the subject of affective governance and an instrument of affective social policy. While Mauritz had started by emphasizing an understanding of volunteering as ambivalent activity between order and care, her findings, ultimately, revealed the issue of order. In contrast, *Lisa Marie Borrelli* (HES-SO Valais-Wallis) and *Livia Schambron* (U Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland) explored in their co-authored paper with *Andrea Friedl* (HES-SO Valais-Wallis) food

banks as spaces of care, or more explicitly of reciprocal care. Based on their study in Switzerland during the COVID-19 pandemic, they highlighted that volunteers often experience poverty themselves and demonstrated, how volunteers do not only give but also receive care. *Giorgia Previdoli*, in her co-authored paper with *Wendy Burton* (University of York, UK) and *Rachel Benchebkroun* (UCL), delved deeper into the field of care relations when outlining insights on transformations of community food support and its implications for families with children. Focusing on four cases from their ongoing ethnography in two UK cities they offered a mapping of food aid practices along two major axes: on the one hand the axe between rationalised and ‘chaotic’ organisational practices and on the other hand the axe between relational and transactional interactions.

Engaging with food banks as critical spaces of navigating world views and identity constructions was the take *Rosa Houtari* (U Helsinki) and *Marcus Böhme* (U of Applied Sciences & Arts Northwestern Switzerland) suggested in their presentations. Houtari elaborated on how different religious worldviews meet and sometimes even clash in the Finnish food charity system, which also allows these spaces to become a potential, albeit not necessary site of struggle for social change. Böhme set his attention on food aid users’ identity constructions, unfolding on what he called (non-)take-up strategies. While an intensive take-up of surplus food, he explained, is often invoking a ‘sustainability

label’ which goes beyond poverty attributions, selective (non-)take up strategies prove to be rather ambivalent in terms of identity constructions as ‘poor’. Nonetheless, as Böhme concluded, the possibility to manoeuvre between such strategies offers a choice and consequently provides feelings of independence among users.

While Böhme focused on food charities as critical sites of identity constructions, *Silvia Wiegel* (U Bayreuth) discussed them as chance for social inclusion. Looking at Germany and borrowing from a Luhmannian understanding of inclusion she showed how both traditional Food Rescue Organisations (FROs) like food pantries, and complementary FROs like food sharing initiatives, where people with different socioeconomic backgrounds meet, can provide opportunities for redistribution, and inclusion. Also, *Saskia Favreulle* (Austrian Academy of Sciences) emphasized the issue of redistribution, but from a different angle. She discussed the current food waste prevention in Austria and claimed that food charities might be a possibility for more efficient food redistribution.

From here it was only a short step to the question of (fighting) food poverty that completed the day. In her presentation, co-authored with *Franca Maino* and *Elisa Bordin*, *Illaria Madama* (all U Milan) offered a nuanced classification of literature on poverty measures targeting minors. A different form of critical systematization was presented by *Hanna Lichtenberger* (Volkshilfe Austria) and *Christina Lampl* (Austrian National Public Health

Institute) in their co-authored paper with *Marie Chahrour* and *Jeremias Staudinger* (Volkshilfe Austria) that critically situated food insecurity and food poverty in Austria within the intersections of food charity, social work, and social policy.

The third and final day of the conference started with *Kayleigh Garthwaite's* (U Birmingham) morning lecture. She suggested a “critical reparative approach” in order to highlight food charities as places that both perpetuate social inequalities and offer opportunities for social change. Presenting results of her “patchwork ethnographic fieldwork” in the UK, US, Canada, and different European countries between 2022 and 2024, her main critique revolved around what she termed the “corporatisation of care”. This expression refers to the growing importance of market-driven practices or managerial approaches in the context of food charity institutions, which also leads to “moral injuries”, since the volunteers’ caring practices are not in line with corporate logics. While Silke van Dyk had identified a tendency towards “post-wage work” in the context of food charity the previous day, Garthwaite offered an additional analytical perspective by highlighting the issue of “post-charitable work”. Yet, despite her critique of the corporatisation of care, Garthwaite also emphasized that this process opens up spaces for resistance and hope, since the daily contradictions that food charity volunteers potentially face may also lead towards systemic change.

Understanding critique as a matter of ambivalence was also at the centre of *Francesca Benedetta Felici's* (U Rome, La Sapienza) presentation, which she developed around the Foucauldian concept of biopower. Referring to her ethnographic research in Rome, Felici outlined the neoliberal welfare state as a restrictive disciplinary regime which aims to exercise control over the poor population and the ways they eat and conduct themselves. Nonetheless, as Felici claimed in line with Foucault, wherever there is power, there is also resistance and agency. Providing a similar analysis of power and agency, but without drawing on a Foucauldian approach, *Ville Tikke* (Helsinki Deaconess Institute) presented his visual discourse analysis of the framing of food charity in Finnish newspapers and journals and could, thus, thoroughly illustrate a basic mechanism of the social construction of food poverty and food charity. Doing so, his perspective also offered insights into possible spaces of critical interventions.

Looking for possibilities of emancipatory transformation while engaging in critique(s), was a major concern in many presentations. Emphasising political possibilities and visions as well as alternative practices of solidarity has further been spelled out by Friday afternoon’s presentations. *Meike Brückner* (HU Berlin) discussed the kitchen as a space of relationality and as a key site for communal provisioning and care. Presenting public kitchens as a way to de-privatise and potentially de-gender care work, she asked how public food initiatives can foster

food autonomy, dignity, and social cohesion. Rethinking the reproductive and affective site of the kitchen as political emancipatory space was also a goal of *Hannah-Maria Eberle* (FH Campus Vienna). Her presentation focused on “solidarity kitchens” and foodsharing initiatives that aim to co-create a political agenda while providing food. At the same time, Eberle cautioned against romanticizing these initiatives, since they also operate as substitutes for lacking social welfare structures.

Searching for futures visions *Milja Pollari* and *Anna Sofia Salonen* (U of Eastern Finland) interrogated food aid recipients and revealed that their imaginaries were severely limited due to the affects involved. Their presentation showed that humbleness and gratitude towards the food aid system dominate, ultimately restraining users from developing worldviews beyond the existing food aid system. *Anu Laino's* presentation, which was co-authored with *Marjukka Laiho* and *Ana Sofia Salonen* (all U of Eastern Finland) provided another perspective on the (im-)possibilities of rethinking food charity. Taking students as future professionals and enhancers of democratic institutions, they conducted with them so-called “alternative futures workshops” as a critical and speculative tool for questioning the current food charity system. Their utopian method, then, also tied in with the roundtable at the beginning of the conference. While Fabian Kessl had called for re-imagining the past for rethinking the future of a more democratic welfare state, Laino's, Laiho's and

Salonen's speculative method of imagining alternative futures was set up to reclaim the future based on a critique of the here and now – and thus also of the (vanishing) welfare state.

The presentations of the conference raised important critiques of food charity in modern (neoliberalized) welfare states. Many analysed and further criticized, how contemporary welfare states continue to recede, and, consequently, are delegating the responsibility for combating poverty increasingly to individually and privately organized food distribution institutions. This visualized the issue of ‘instrumentalizing’ volunteers and their unpaid affective labour, thus raising important political, social, and ethical challenges. Likewise, many presentations critically examined the pervasive influence of neoliberal strategies, while emphasizing the need as well as some ways how to counteract them. All these critiques further suggest that what initially appears to be a solution at first sight, may reveal itself as problematic at second sight. When it comes to food charity, it becomes apparent how neoliberal thinking is invisibly underlining the social structures we live in. Food charity institutions, for some, may, undoubtedly, offer an everyday solution to menacing poverty. However, they do not provide solutions in the long run as they hardly bring meaningful structural changes. On the contrary, as many presentations could unfold, food charities add to consolidate structural inequalities and social hierarchies, they foster dependencies as well as the depoliticization,

responsibilization, and moralization of poverty. Here, mechanisms such as affective attachments, moralizing practices, the celebration of community or the legitimation via public discourses among others are at work. Insofar, the conference could also expose the impact of the social sciences for better understanding the political, social, and economic role of food charity, welfare state transformations, and affective economies. In this vein, the conference papers did not only address a wide range of critical aspects but also brought to light that further research and further critiques of the capitalist (post)welfare state and its mechanisms are much needed – including, among others, the gendered, racialized, and class-based dynamics in food charity. We therefore look forward to seeing these issues further developed in the future.