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The Growth of Food Aid in Sweden – How Demand and Supply are Transforming Charitable Organisations

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to describe and analyse the growth in food aid in Sweden, and how it affects the non-profit organisations providing it. The particular type of food aid in focus is large-scale collaborations between charitable non-profit organisations and the food industry, through which food surplus is turned into food aid for people in food insecurity. The first examples of such food aid emerged less than 10 years ago in Sweden, but it has since experienced a dramatic growth. The development in Sweden follows a pattern known from many other European countries, with the exception that it is going faster, as if Sweden is catching up. This makes food aid in Sweden an interesting case for an empirical study. The article is based on an interview study performed in 2022. Staff and managers at two large, national organisations were interviewed about how the rapid growth in food aid has affected their work and the institutional logics of their organisations. They also provided their thoughts on the role of food aid in Swedish society. One of the main findings is that the growth in food aid bring both the benefit of more people in need receiving help, and the challenge of strain as well as concerns regarding ethics and mission drift in the organisations. Another finding is that the growth is driven by both a growth in demand for food aid, but also by a growth in supply of food from the charities and their corporate partnerships.

Keywords: food donation; food charity; charity organisation; philanthropy; Sweden

1 Introduction

To distribute food to those in need is one of the most elementary and oldest types of charity work. It is also a type of charity that has grown and spread across Europe in recent decades, becoming an integral part in the welfare states of the continent

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(Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2021). The Financial Crisis of 2008, the Refugee Crisis of 2015, the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the recent economic and cost of living crisis have all further exacerbated the demand for food aid, and all indications are that charitable food donations will continue to grow in importance in the coming years. One country in Europe where the development has been particularly dramatic is Sweden. Although old organisations like the Church of Sweden and the Swedish City Missions have always distributed food to hungry people, recent years have seen the emergence of a distinct new type of food aid, growing to an entirely new scale. Collaborations between such organisations and large corporations in the food industry have established new methods and systems for turning potential food waste into food aid for a rapidly growing group of people in need. The Swedish example follows patterns that were established much earlier in many other European countries. The feature that stands out is the pace by which food aid has grown and found its place in Swedish civil society. In just 5–10 years, food aid has gone from primarily being a short-term relief for the most marginalised people in society, to a more established long-term type of economic assistance for low-income individuals and families. The development has, of course, also changed the organisations that provide the food aid, which are some of the oldest and most established organisations in Swedish civil society.

This article will identify and examine some of these rapid changes, to understand why this type of aid is growing so fast. Have they affected how staff and managers in the organisations view their own role and the mission of the organisations? What can these changes tell us about the role of food aid, during the economic crisis and beyond? Findings from an interview study conducted with representatives of several food charities at different locations in Sweden are presented in this article. These findings suggests that the growth in food aid offers both great potential as well as great challenges for the charitable non-profit organisations delivering it.

2 Background

The economic crisis that began in 2022 and its dramatic inflation have led to higher food prices, higher electricity prices, and rising interest rates on mortgages, in Sweden as in many other European countries. Even before this, there was an increasing need for food aid and other emergency relief in Sweden, which has prompted a growing importance of aid provided by charitable organisations (Herz 2021; Karlsson and Vamstad 2020). One reason for this is that some groups of people in need, like poor EU-citizens and undocumented migrants, have limited or unclear rights to public welfare in Sweden (Karlsson and Vamstad 2020). This is,

however, not the only reason, there seems to be a growing need for non-profit services from much broader groups of people in poverty (Vamstad and Karlsson 2022; Vamstad 2022). The growing need is also documented in the observations and statistics collected by the charitable Civil Society Organisations (CSO) themselves.

The Swedish City Missions have seen a steady surge in demand for food aid in recent years. Their 2019 report on food poverty showed that about two thirds of their interactions with users consists of food aid and that the largest group of food aid recipients are people on long-term social welfare (Sveriges Stadsmissioner 2019). This group is mainly made up of struggling families that are included in the public welfare system, further showing that the growing needs are not "imported" through refugees and undocumented migrants, as is sometimes suggested (Sveriges Stadsmissioner 2019). A report from 2023 shows that the economic crisis and inflation have further broadened the group of food aid recipients, which now increasingly include working low-income earners and pensioners (Sveriges stadsmissioner 2023). In 2022 alone, the city mission increased the amount of food they distribute by 70 percent (Sveriges stadsmissioner 2023). The development described by the city missions is consistent with macroeconomic indicators showing a steady increase in income inequality in Sweden since the 1990's (Swedish Fiscal Policy Council 2024).

Growing demand is, however, not the sole cause of the growth of food aid in Sweden and Europe (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2021). A milestone in the process was the city missions' strategic decision in 2015 to enter a collaboration with the food industry, as an active partner in redistributing food surplus (Sveriges stadsmissioner 2021). This move significantly increased their supply of food and marked the initiation of a new stage in their growth development, leading to food aid at a new scale. This change has spread to other non-profit organisations in Sweden, in some cases through cooperation with The Swedish City Missions. This novel approach has often been characterized by a narrative that presents it as a sustainable win-win solution, mutually benefiting those in need and the environment. This narrative is spread both by media stories, social media, and the organisations themselves.

3 Research on Food Aid

The large-scale, centralised, and increasingly professionalised food aid described in this article is only recently emerging as a significant aspect of civil society in Sweden. Consequently, there is very little Swedish research on the phenomenon, but research from other countries documents and analyses operations functioning as food banks as early as the 1980's (Riches 2002). These are primarily other economically developed countries, the demand for this type of food aid is, perhaps counterintuitively, associated with high income countries (Mook, Murdock, and Gundersen 2020). Much

of the international research takes a critical perspective on food aid (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti 2021; Middelton et al. 2017). Providing food for hungry people may instinctively be considered as something positive, but several negative consequences have also been identified in social research. A profound concern is that food aid may contribute to relieving or absolving the government of responsibility for providing food for its citizens, hence enabling governments to ignore poverty (Lambie-Mumford 2019; Parr, Hawkins, and Dayson 2021; Riches 2002). Another way of describing this is that it "depoliticise hunger" (Caraher and Furey 2017). One of the strengths of food aid is that it serves the dual purpose of reducing both food waste and food insecurity (Galli, Hebinck, and Caroll 2018). Caraher and Furey (2017) however argue that food aid is counterproductive for both purposes; food aid undermines both calls for reductions in the overproduction of food and for social rights to basic needs. Leo Sandberg, Angelin, and Vamstad (2022) also challenges the description of food aid as a win-win solution, in a rare study of food aid in Sweden. Working with food surplus as sources for food aid also makes the organisation dependent on surplus instead of reducing it from the start (Galli, Hebinck, and Caroll 2018; Tikka 2019). This last point is of particular interest to this study, as it examines how the growth in food aid affects the organisations.

These critical perspectives question whether food aid actually is sustainable, or whether it institutionalises the use of food relief in a way that crowd out welfare rights, long term solutions and social work for change. A practice paper by Denning (2019) suggests a few ways in which food aid could be made more sustainable. The key to sustainability lies in combining short-term relief with long-term work for change. This involves building knowledge about the issue and making plans for the next ten years, rather than just getting swamped by the overwhelming day-to-day need (Denning 2019).

4 Food Aid and the Charity Economy

To distribute food surplus from industry to charity organisations can be described as a strategy to complement traditional business practices with a charitable element that expands their reach to include people unable to buy their food independently. Kessl (2018:37) defines this new charity economy as a distribution system in which basic goods are distributed for free or sold at discount prices to "the poor" or "the needy" through voluntary helpers or low-paid staff. Donations either supplement or replace public welfare provisions (Kessl, Oechler, and Schöder 2020). The concept of charity economy emphasizes that the novelty is the transformation of the welfare state where charities, through a much more visible and rapidly growing sector, provide necessities like food and clothes to those in need. Charities are often

supported by political approval and allocation of public resources, one of them being the essential provision of free labour through municipal, sometimes mandatory, work activation programs (Kessl, Oechler, and Schöder 2020). This development towards welfare pluralism can be interpreted as a public and political acceptance of charity as an indispensable provider for vulnerable households, which may be perceived as an anomaly and disgrace that contributes to the institutionalisation of charitable food aid in a welfare state that aspires to be comprehensive and based on social rights. CSOs increasingly constitute a last resort and replacement when austerity measures are implemented and during retrenchment processes of comprehensive welfare states (Kessl 2015). The distributed charity predominantly consists of goods discarded by consumers on the primary and ordinary market and then redirected to an increasingly established secondary market as a poverty reduction strategy. The organisation of the divided market for primary and secondary consumers is likely to cause stigma for the latter. Sweden is relatively late in seeing the establishment of charity economy practices, like food aid, as CSOs are only now becoming significant actors in poverty relief (Leo Sandberg, Angelin, and Vamstad 2022).

5 The Charity Economy and Institutional Logics

While CSOs now hold an increasingly prominent position as distributors of food aid for poverty relief, it also constitutes a challenge to adapt to a very different practical reality. Handling thousands of tons of food that needs to be chilled, stored, distributed, and sold within pressing time constraints, as the durability of the food often is considerably limited, requires substantial allocation of resources. In addition to this, CSOs also need to closely collaborate with the donating wholesale and food industry stakeholders in an inter-related dependency that departs from different institutional logics and rationalities (Friedland and Alford 1991). The secondary market organised through a CSO-based charity economy is in constant connection and dependence on the primary market and its indispensable donations of surplus products (Kessl, Oechler, and Schöder 2020). As an organisation in need of resources provided by other actors, there is a drive to be recognized as legitimate and a likeliness to accept control or influence from the providers that are most essential as well as adapting to norms, values, and beliefs from the dominant logic (Friedland and Alford 1991; Garrow and Hasenfeld 2010; Johansson 2002). The market logics of the donating for-profit organisations are based on other, and at times even incompatible rationales than the guiding logics of CSO operations which may create tensions and involuntary adaptations as well as dynamic developments as a result of institutional complexity (Cherrier, Paromita, and Subhasis 2018; Greenwood et al. 2011). In short, entering into

food aid collaborations with corporate businesses in a charity economy will inevitably affect the way CSOs operates. This is therefore an expected consequence of the growth in food aid on the organisations providing it.

6 Method and Materials

This article is based on 24 semi-structured interviews with staff and management at CSOs in different locations in Sweden. Interviewees were recruited from two of the largest organisations in Swedish food aid, the Swedish City Missions, and the Church of Sweden. Both organisations are faith-based, but they differ in that the City Missions are traditional charity organisations while the Church of Sweden is the former state church. The Swedish City Missions act as an umbrella organisation for 10 local city missions. The Church of Sweden act both in rural and non-rural areas and about half the Swedish population are members. Some of the food aid is carried out together with other CSOs, such as the Salvation Army and Hela Människan ["The Whole Human"], organisations that also perform social work from a Christian standpoint. The interviews were performed in the autumn of 2022.

The interviewees in all organisations can be categorised into three groups:

1. They have a leading position within the organisation.
2. They are organising and hands-on working with food charities.
3. They have both roles at the same time.

Fifteen of the informants were women, and nine were men. All had a university education; the most common was a bachelor's degree in social work (12 people), and most social workers also had a deacon's degree (nine people). Four people were born in a country other than Sweden. Geographically the informants are spread from north to south of Sweden, they work in different locality types, and the food charity is supplied as food baskets, food banks or social supermarkets. Food baskets, in practical terms, refer to pre-packaged bags of groceries, food bank is a broad term for an organisation distributing food and social supermarkets are stores selling surplus food to low-income customers, who are often members in the store. The authors of this article have conducted the interviews, half of the interviews were conducted in situ, and half of them were conducted through video call. Using an interview guide and opening for other questions, the interviews took 45–90 min. All interviews are transcribed to verbatim transcripts with the names of the interviewees kept confidential, the total length of the transcripts was 567 pages.

The transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted in several stages. *Firstly*, the transcripts were scanned for blocks of text that was relevant for the aims of this article. These were, *secondly*, re-read to identify

meaningful passages essential to the interpretation of the text. *Thirdly*, these passages were elaborated and interpreted in comments to the text, with the help of theory and previous research. *Fourthly*, the interpretations were shared and discussed with two additional researchers, to come to a shared understanding. *Fifthly*, the passages, with their interpretations were organised in categories and *sixthly*, the categories were grouped in eight, broader themes. The broader themes were later identified as belonging to three approximate levels, the micro (2 themes), the meso (4 themes) and the macro (2 themes). The results are here structured in accordance with these eight themes at their three levels. The different stages of the analysis were documented in a variation of a framework analysis (Goldsmith 2021).

Formal Ethical Approval was secured from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority on the 1st of July 2022 (Ref. No. 2022-02413-01). Ethical research principles, like information, consent and pseudonymisation, have been followed. Even if the theme of the research itself would not be seen as sensitive for the representatives, the orientation of the organisations as faith-based opened for reflections on faith, and Ethical Approval was therefore assessed. All the informants have signed an agreement to participate.

7 Findings

The categories and themes identified in the thematic analysis paint a picture with many layers. The presentation of themes and categories is organised as they appear in three clusters roughly representing a micro, meso and macro level. The organisation in levels is approximate, and themes at different levels are clearly not entirely separate from each other. At the micro or individual level, there are personal thoughts and often concerns about the rapid growth of food donations as a charitable activity. At the meso, or organisational, level, interviewees share their observations about how the growth in food aid has affected their organisation, for better or worse. Finally, at the macro, or societal level, there are descriptions of how the dominant media logic plays into the development. Starting at the micro level, the presentation will gradually widen the scope over the two following levels, and end in a concluding discussion.

7.1 Individual Thoughts and Concerns at the Micro Level

The interviews provided personal reflections at the micro level that in the text analysis created two themes with several categories in each. The first theme, the nature of the social work provided by the organisation, grouped several categories of

concern, particularly the balance between emergency relief work and social work for lasting change of social and economic conditions. The second theme captured what is best described as moral ambiguity. The interviewees, in various ways, expressed concern and discomfort about having to be the ones providing the most basic of essential needs – daily food – in a supposedly rich country like Sweden, while at the same time recognising that the need exists and that they must work with food donations. The themes will here be presented individually, starting with the nature of the social work provided by the organisation.

7.1.1 Relief vs. Change: Sustainability in the Long and Short Perspective

A common concern among the interviewees was that food relief works one-way, turning the user into a passive recipient, a passivity that can be demeaning and difficult to break out of (I2). This was considered particularly concerning when it comes to pre-packaged food baskets that some organisations use. One interviewee asks rhetorically how the interviewer would react to receiving such a food parcel:

> *Imagine going on a Sunday for your weekend shopping and standing in the store you get a grocery bag and a "Here is your food for the week, goodbye". How would you take that? (I15).*

While there are differing opinions about the best way to distribute food, several interviewees argue that this particular argument speaks in favour of social food stores, where users can choose and shop for themselves.

This raises the issue of stigma, a recurrent topic among the individual reflections. Several interviewees reacted to the membership requirement in the social food store which, in their opinion, could be perceived as stigmatising "poverty clubs" since the customers must prove a low income, equivalent to social welfare or less, as a condition to become approved as members (I1; I2; I4). Although they recognise that people receiving social assistance from the government are registered in a similar manner, they are uneasy about their organisation keeping a register of poor people that are subjugated to consuming food discarded by others (I4). The issue of the food being discarded by the regular market is, by some, considered contrary to the dignity and relationship they wish (but sometimes cannot) maintain with their users. In the words of a diaconal worker: "Is it, what is the word? Respectful? To have to go and receive a bag of old food?" (I9). The food is usually of good quality and not old, but the stigma is still there. Things are made worse by the food donations sometimes being public, like when hundreds of users are gathered around food centres and social stores, invariably leading to attention and social media posts (I9).

A recurring concern in the interviews was that food donations are not considered a sustainable long-term solution, and that it, in a worst-case scenario, could

crowd out solutions that are more sustainable. These concerns are expressed, but there also seem to be a sort of pragmatic resignation and understanding of short-term solutions being necessary. As expressed by a person in a leading position at a city mission:

> *…but if people are hungry, if you are hungry. And you want to change your life. But you are not full, then it's like … if we should start somewhere, that is it (I4).*

A diaconal worker in the Church of Sweden similarly concludes that food will not solve the long-term problems of the users, and also not the climate crisis, but that it is at least "a small contribution" (I17). The positive view of food donations being a start, or a small contribution, is balanced against the fear of short-term solutions becoming institutionalised and turned into long-term relief that replaces activities for long-term change (I14). A question raised in the internal discussions within the Swedish City Mission is whether the growth of food aid is "legitimising a system that is not ok" by contributing to or even reinforce making social welfare checks a liveable income through lower costs for groceries (I22). An interviewee at the Swedish City Missions reasons:

> *It is back to "relief and change", which are words from our code of ethics. This [food aid] is emergency support, we bring relief to a difficult situation. We may be doing it for a very long time, and it has a great effect on the user, to know you can buy cheap food or receive a food parcel each week, and exactly the long-term [aspect], that you can do it for a long time, has great importance for the individual (I22).*

The argument seems to be that short-term relief becoming long-term is not necessarily a problem, to the contrary, it could provide a sense of security through which change can be achieved. To expediate this change, both the city missions and the Church of Sweden are trying to combine relief-oriented food aid with other interventions for long-term change. The informant continues:

> *We have had a lot of focus on viewing food aid as a point of entry for more holistic support, to work with fewer people, and work for personal change. But the way that the situation is now … then we are thinking of simply focusing on getting more food out there … because that is what is needed (I22).*

The development towards more food aid is here described as clearly demand-driven, as the strategies of the city missions are gradually replaced by the apparent need for food support among a rapidly growing group of users. The city missions also appear disappointed and self-critical about their unsuccessful work to combine food aid with other types of social work. The head of food aid at a city mission concludes:

> *Something we have completely failed at, despite our best efforts, is to offer something other than food. We have tried [offering] financial advice, nutritional guidance and […] neutral information about democracy, "this is where you vote", "this is how you vote". Everything like that: Zero interest (I24).*

It seems, in other words, that the rapid expansion of food aid is not driving an expansion of other, associated, services, even though the city mission would have liked to see the growth spread to other service areas.

The willingness to integrate food aid into other types of services could be described as a failed attempt to transform operations towards becoming more socially sustainable. The organisation is straining to keep up with demand, and the one-sided growth in food aid requires growth in other areas to allow the organisation to offer well-rounded and change-driven social work. Interviewees ask themselves if the growth and the collaboration with the food industry are sustainable. These are questions like what happens if the industry comes up with a better method for food waste, what if the waste goes away, and is the interest of the industry really genuine in helping people (I1)? There are, in other words, concerns that the organisations are changing too much, too fast, and perhaps irreversibly.

7.1.2 Moral Ambiguity: Doing what Is Right and Doing what Is Needed

Almost all of the interviewees witness to at least some level of conflict between what they think of the growing food aid and their own part in it. An interviewee in a leading position at a food centre holds grave reservations against the poorest in society being the ones solving the industry's problem with food waste. Still, he also says:

> *But it is still very difficult when we MEET these people. When we see. We do not want this to grow in Sweden, but it is. It is the way it is, and this food is available. Should we not make something good out of it? (I2).*

There seems to exist moral grounds for rejecting the model based on food waste but simultaneously a moral obligation to go through with it, leading to a catch 22 situation. This particular ambivalence exists both among staff meeting the users at the local level and those leading the expansion of food aid at the national level. An interviewee at a leading position at the Swedish City Missions considered it a challenge that the growth potential for the social food store concept is almost incalculable. She and other leading representatives of the city missions also conclude, however, that since they have found a concept that seems to work for people, they should pursuit growth in order to help as many as possible (I22; I23). There is an

element of moral obligation in this argument; how could you not aim to help as many as possible?

A parish deacon questioned if the food aid is really helping the user, arguing that they should be given proper help from social services instead, but also concluding that users have often already tried that and been rejected when they come to the church (I3). This serves as an example of the many references to the legal responsibilities of the local authorities and their social services, where charity fills the residual function and becomes the actual last resort. Another representative of the food aid of the Church of Sweden voices the opinion of colleagues that argue that food aid is not the mission of the church, it is the legal responsibility of the social services and other government agencies like the Swedish Migration Agency (I6). It seems, therefore, that the change caused in the organisations also challenges the established roles and responsibilities of public and non-profit welfare organisations.

7.2 Developments at the Meso Level – Changes in the Organisations

For the meso level, we found four themes. These themes represent different ways in which the organisations are changing as a result of the establishment of this new type of food aid. The four themes are, even more than those on the micro and macro level, in part overlapping.

7.2.1 Mission Drift: New Roles and New Directions

The changes in how the organisations work and how the individual managers and staff members perceive their roles, naturally also cause organisational change. The expanding food aid has, according to some interviewees, institutionalised a role for the organisations as responsible for the most basic welfare needs of a growing group of people, leading them to drift in partly new directions. Many interviewees expressed hesitation and regret concerning the organisations taking on responsibilities they considered to belong to the municipal social services. A leading representative from the Church of Sweden reflected that not only are they taking on the tasks of social services, but they are also starting to emulate how they work as an organisation (I1). Neither the Church nor the city missions used to means-test the people they assisted, but now they do, in the social food stores and for subscribing to a weekly or monthly food basket. The new practices put an emotional and ethical strain on staff, who must send people away if they earn even just a little more than the fixed amount set for membership. They are also concerned about social stigma caused by means-testing. Users also used to be able to seek help more or less

anonymously, which for many was a necessity, but now they cannot (Leo Sandberg and Panican 2022:35f). Interestingly, several interviewees reason about the users becoming passive from receiving food aid, and perhaps less inclined to seek gainful employment, if it means that they would lose their right to receive food charity (I1; I15; I19). This is, of course, an argument very similar to the idea that passive welfare checks lead to passivity, disincentives, and lower chances of employment.

The Church of Sweden and the city missions have always been closely associated and they have all distributed food to those in need, in different forms. However, the establishment of the new type of food aid has revealed some fundamental differences between the organisations, and what they do. Simply put, our empirical data suggests that the city missions have proven to be much more comfortable with the expansion, while the church is more ambivalent (I3). Some church representatives mean that they should only work with food aid in collaboration with the city missions or other charity organisations, to avoid mission drift away from their central congregational work (I7). Still, despite these efforts, the work the church does has in some parts of the organisations shifted because of the food aid expansion. One church deacon, now working exclusively with people in poverty and food charity, illustrates this:

> *The idea was, when I started here, that I would have training for parents, talks with teenagers, talks about marriage, such [activities] for well-being, and I did, for about two years. But that group did not get a lot of time [resources] and it was sometimes difficult to, how should I put it, get sufficient numbers [of attendees] (I13).*

What she describes is that the type of services that the organisation intended to do, did not gain the type of traction they had hoped for, while there was seemingly endless, demand-driven, energy in the food aid. This led the church to shift focus from what it wanted to do, to what was needed. As already noted, not all members of the church staff agreed with this shift:

> *But sure, especially from deacon colleagues, you often get these comments about working with the elderly and how it is … the real diaconal work and … having sermons at elderly care homes, that is the right and true diaconal work. While this [the food aid] is a bit more questioned. (I13).*

Other interviewees have confirmed that it is particularly the deacons that are "reflecting and questioning" about the food aid. In contrast other categories of church staff seem to find it easier to follow the organisation as it refocuses on food. This is perhaps not surprising given that deacons have a clear and independent mission and a strong identity as deacons, not just church employees. It is also along the lines of the diaconal work that some divisions within the organisation seem to be appearing.

7.2.2 Division on the Issue of Food Aid

So far, we have seen how the new food aid is leading to uneasiness among both managers and staff, as well as a shift of focus and mission drift in some of the work of the organisations. The interview study also revealed that the food aid issue cause tensions between different parts of these large organisations. Some of these tensions seem to follow the division between large and small parishes and, not least, rural and urban parishes. One deacon working with food aid in a large city retells meetings with colleagues in "traditional countryside parishes" (I12). While the urban parishes face a growing demand for essential aid from people with severe social problems, the country parishes focus on "day centre meetings, entertainment and quizzes" (I12). There seems to be a mutual lack of understanding of the other party's priorities. The diaconal workers from the rural parishes ask their colleagues "not to forget the elderly", meaning primarily social activities like house calls and outings (I12). One interviewed deacon considers comments like that to illustrate the fact that even within the church, there is a lack of information about just how severe the need for food aid is (I12). This shows that the divisions over which type of social work to prioritise do not just cause a mission drift of the entire organisation, it also seems to pull different segments within the organisation apart.

Another apparent division is between the business-like social food store concept and other, more traditional types of social work. The manager of the social stores in one large city mission explains:

> *Then there are always differing opinions about what social work is. We are run as a social enterprise, because we are convinced that our concept produces a very, very great effect for our users in the end. And we are purpose-driven, and as long as … if we compare us with a for-profit corporation, they work as effectively as possible to maximize profits. We work as effectively as possible to maximize the effect for our target group (I22).*

He goes on to conclude that "it is sometimes considered dirty to be too business-minded" and that their entrepreneurial model is considered a less "noble" type of social work (I22). He describes a culture divide within the organisation, where a group of professionals with "very impressive CVs" have established themselves at the top of the organisation, using the rapidly growing food aid as a springboard (I22). The new management has brought in a new business culture for which the food aid serves as a vehicle and a model for how effect maximising can be achieved. This transformation has made some members and staff uneasy. Another interviewee at a leading position at a large city mission mentions that there has been some "grumbling" caused by all the attention that the food aid is getting, both in the media and in relation to the business sector (I24). He wishes that some other parts of the organisation could share some of the positive feedback that the food aid is getting (I24).

7.2.3 Growth and Professionalisation

The recent growth in food aid has led the church and city missions to perform food aid in new ways, and the process has been reshaping the organisations. A deacon responsible for a food basket service recalls the food aid of the past and concludes that there is no need to romanticise the small-scale methods they used then. The church used to have a cabinet with food that could be distributed whenever the deacon met someone who seemed to need it. This spontaneous way of working made the deacon uneasy, and the method is called "very ad hoc and inconsistent" (I3). The more systematic approach with large-scale delivery of food baskets is considered both more practical and less stigmatizing (I3). Another deacon also recalls improvised food aid practices from the past, when there was no follow-up on who had received what and when food sometimes led to littering and negative responses from the public (I18). Littering would occur when desperate people would take more food than they were able to bring with them (I18).

The professionalisation of the food aid is a development that coincides with more people and more groups of people receiving food aid. Before this expansion period, many of the recipients were in an acute state of homelessness, and food aid users were typically the most marginalised people imaginable. The aid has, in recent years, shifted character from being emergency assistance for these groups of people to become a support system for a broader group of people with low income. The head of the social food stores in a large city mission explains:

> *If you want to work with food waste as an aid for reducing the effects of social and economic problems […] then you must move towards a target group who still have a roof over their heads and who have the means to cook the food. There are problems with homelessness and addiction and other such problems in Sweden, but there are not enough people in that situation to eat all the food waste (I23).*

Turning the food waste from emergency relief to more long-term financial support for poor people requires an upscaling and professionalisation of the aid. Most of the new groups of people come in through the social stores, as these have much greater capacity than the other types of food distribution. The changing characteristic of the users has created new challenges for the organisations. One such change is that the users are not necessarily as grateful and easy to work with as the recipients of emergency relief in the past, which has had an adverse effect on the work environment (I14).

7.2.4 Growing Pains: Work Environment and Services Being Overwhelmed

The interviewees express a mix of excitement about the success and potential of the food aid charity, and weariness about the amount and type of work the growth of it

demands and encourages them to do. The expanding food aid charity allows them to help more people, making it "good and important work" (I17). It also brings legitimacy, awareness and public support for their organisations, which leads to donations, more volunteers and a sense of satisfaction for those already volunteering (I15). The injection of goodwill, support and resources are by almost all interviewees described as almost only positive, although most also recognise how it reflects a mostly negative development of society as a whole. There is also near agreement that the growth comes with new challenges and that it has caused some growing pains in the organisations.

One deacon exemplifies this mix of marvel and worry about the growth in food aid. She says that "one difficulty is, according to my own experiences, that there is no limit to how big this can become" (I12). Those experiences include how a very positive article in a large newspaper caused an outpouring of public support for their food aid. Along with all the positive aspects of this came the challenge of handling a lot of well-meaning but misguided donations, not least clothes that they did not know what to do with (I12). This made the church cautious, and some interviewees describe how they now try to "ration" the media coverage (I10; I12; I14). This story is also one of several that shows the power of social media (I17). Interviewees describe how posts on social media bring a lot of support, but that some of it is difficult to channel into something productive, especially since the church and city mission staff had little experience of this. In the words of the deacon:

> *…we did not even have an Instagram account; I had to sit down and make one that same Saturday. How much should I make of it? What is a content calendar? (I12).*

Along with the challenge of navigating social media, many question if it is the right thing to do. "There is a giant playing field we can use for the benefit of our families", one deacon concludes, but like many, she is uneasy about her diaconal work being reduced to asking for food on social media (I12).

The explosive growth of food aid and the yet limited capacity of especially the social food stores, has led to a difficult work environment for staff and volunteers. A director of a city mission describes how 95 percent of all customers are understanding and considerate, while the rest are more demanding (I19). The customers are registered members who must book a time slot for their weekly shopping, using an app on their phone. Staff says that most members understand and respect the system but not all. An interviewee at leading position reasons that:

> *I do not think people do it out of meanness, but because of their own despair. "I need to buy this; I need to buy yogurt now […] I need it now" (I19).*

One of the benefits of the social food store is that it allows the users greater agency, which perhaps makes the restrictions in the shopping more apparent. Regardless of

the reason, the sometimes tough climate in the stores can be challenging for the staff (I10; I16; I19; I20). This problem is accentuated by the fact that the regular staff and management is stretched thin because of the expansion. At the same time, much of the work force is made up of volunteers and people assigned the position as part of a public programme for work activation. The latter groups provide valuable work, but they also require guidance and supervision from regular staff. Other types of food aid also have their own issues with work environment. One is that staff and volunteers simply get too involved and work too much, an apparent downside to the gratification of being able to help and the seemingly endless need for more food aid (I6; I14; I19).

7.3 Developments at the Macro Level – The Media Logic

The organisations receive mostly positive reactions from the public, which is naturally connected to the overwhelmingly positive media response that almost all interviewees bring up. The favourable newspaper articles and the rosy TV-appearances have helped the organisations to get attention, support, legitimacy and, ultimately to grow even further. Some representatives of the organisations also appreciate the positive reinforcement, like the manager at a city mission who compares his present role with when he worked at the public social services, a time when he "was afraid to tell people where I work" (I4). The media attention is almost one-sidedly positive, and therefore does not reflect any of the moral ambiguity expressed by the organisations themselves. One manager at a food centre compares their own ambiguous discussion about their role in the welfare state with heartfelt media stories about how hungry people are being fed by them (I2). One deacon described how she really tried to problematise the situation in an interview with a reporter:

> *So, I tried to turn and twist the reporter to bring out some talk about the negative, but there is not much left of that in the actual article (I15).*

Her argumentation about the need for raising the minimum social benefits went unheard, instead she got another "cute" article (I15). Several interviewees reflect on the media logic behind the one-sidedly positive reporting. A food aid worker at a city mission is one of those who conclude that basic needs like food are valuable in communication:

> *It is something understandable, because everyone needs to eat. It is very easy to put yourself in that situation, "I can't feed my children" (I5).*

The interviewee goes on to say that the social and economic situation of their users can be very difficult to grasp for people who have not experienced it. However, the

hunger and food aspect of it is simple and understandable (I5). Several interviewees also bring up how their food distribution becomes a media-friendly illustration of society's situation. Media outlets wanting to report on the economic crisis choose stories about food charity as a very visible and clear-cut example of growing basic material needs. These stories are especially attractive since they also have a positive angle, these food charity organisations are working hard at providing relief, and the narrative thus also have "heroes" (I5; I9; I17). Being the "heroes" is, of course, also in the interest of the organisations and the symbiotic interests of the media industry and the charity organisations seem to have created a feedback loop powering some of the seemingly endless growth of food aid. Another actor that appreciates the positive media response is the food industry, and other businesses that collaborate with the city missions and the church. Being associated with the food aid raises their CSR profile in what is today essential issues for almost any business. One reaction the organisations get from companies that want to work with them is that "this checks every box of our sustainability agenda", both social and environmental (I24).

8 Discussion

The rapid expansion and establishment of a new type of food aid service in Sweden is in part demand driven. The numbers describing rising memberships in social food stores and other statistics illustrate this, as do the descriptions of a seemingly endless need in the interviews. The interviews have also shown, however, that the development is not purely demand driven. There are also factors driving an expansion of the supply of food aid that seem to originate from within the organisations, as seen in the findings. One such factor is the formalised collaboration with the food industry, which has provided the organisations with incomparably more food than they could have collected with traditional methods. The new food aid is directed towards broader, partly new groups of aid recipients like low-income earners and pensioners, not just people in homelessness and other severely marginalised groups. This is a result of growing demand and need from broader groups, but also of the fact that the industrial supply of food requires a larger target group, in other words greater demand. This finding could serve as a textbook example of what is known as the charity economy, an economy in which charity becomes a way to include more people in the market economy by creating a secondary market that interact with the primary market (Kessl 2018).

Reflecting on the question of the role of food aid posed in the introduction, it seems likely that the new food aid will not only be sustained, but continue to grow when the economic crises of the early 2020's have passed. The demand created by the crisis is only part of the success story and the infrastructure of the charity economy

that is being created will most likely remain long term. Whether or not this will lead to incremental institutionalisation of charity food aid and absolving governments from taking less responsibility for food security, or the "depoliticising of hunger", as suggested by some scholars, remains to be seen and researched (Caraher and Furey 2017; Lambie-Mumford 2019; Riches 2002). The results from our study indicate that the professionals actually operating large scale food aid services anticipate this scenario and are aware of its associated risks.

Distributing such large quantities of food also requires professionalisation. There is the daunting task of transporting and handling large quantities of food, but also health and safety requirements, as well as an eagerness to act professionally and in adherence with the institutional logics of the corporate food donors. The process of professionalisation is in many ways a success-story, especially the city missions have taken great leaps in professionalisation through their development of a social food store concept and brand, its logistics and digitalisation in the industrial food supply chain, and in their formalised relations with many of the large businesses in the food industry. The success has inspired more success, particularly the top management, according to our interviewees, wants to be successful in expanding more, to help more people. Professionalisation in this form is the result of a mutual exchange of institutional logics between businesses and the CSOs, which is reflected in the business-like goals of quantitatively maximising output, as well as attracting positive attention for contributions to social and ecological sustainability to the brands of each of the collaborating organisations (Garrow and Hasenfeld 2010).

The successful expansion of food aid attracts more demand, as the positive public reactions and media attention spread awareness to more people in economic need. The successful expansion also attracts more supply making the charitable economy grow as more individuals and businesses want to contribute with volunteering and donations (Kessl 2018). The expansion of charity economy is in part self-propelling, or at least it has been up to this point. The are some indications in the interviews that the drive in the expanding food aid also could power other types of aid and social work, by acting as a "flag ship" and rousing the support from volunteers and donors. The organisations are, however, quick to admit that they have a poor record in their efforts to combine food aid with other activities focusing more on long term aid aiming at social change. On the contrary, staff and volunteers seem to be transferring from less successful, often more traditional, activities to the new, dynamic food aid. Although the organisations wish to have a well-rounded and sustainable repertoire of services, they also realise that expanding food aid is a better investment. Resources diverted to food aid will multiply through influx of both supply and demand, while resources spent on some other types of social work remain just a cost and not as sought after. There is therefore a good possibility that the expansion of food aid primarily leads to more expansion of food aid. Such an

outcome would be in line with what we know from research from other countries, where the institutionalisation of food aid, in some cases, has crowded out education and advocacy (Riches 2002). This is a reason why in the UK there has been a coordinated effort to ensure that the food aid offer "more than food", something we are now starting to see in the Swedish organisations in this study (Lambie-Mumford 2019; Parr, Hawkins, and Dayson 2021).

The expansion of food aid in Sweden seems to be driven not only by a growth in demand and supply, but also by factors entirely external to the work of the organisations. The dominant one is clearly the media influence, which fuels the expansion of food aid according to its own logic, for its own purposes. The media narrative emphasises the economic hardships and growing needs in society, and organisations visibly alleviating those needs naturally come out as one-sidedly positive. Media outlets even reject more balanced narratives provided by the organisations themselves. The attention and framing provided by media lead to more public awareness and more support, but it must also influence how staff and management at the organisations think about their work and what its mission and priorities should be.

One of the questions this article set out to answer was how the growth of food aid has affected how staff and managers in the organisations perceive their own role and the mission of the organisations. For many working in the organisations the growing food aid is a situation of moral ambiguity, leading to sincere personal ambivalence. They resent the fact that the need is growing and that they and not the government have to address it, they would rather be doing other things, but they are ultimately guided by a calling to help in the way they can, which in the present situation is through food aid. The ambivalence at the individual level is transformed into organisational strain, as different parts of the organisations grow at different paces. The individual and organisational struggles with the development raise the question whether it is socially sustainable. The question is present in the efforts to balance relief and social work for durable change. The organisations seem to have accepted that food aid is a relief effort that will be important also in the long-term, and they are looking for ways to make it more sustainable by associating it with individual change. This development is very similar to that identified by research in countries, like the UK (e.g, Denning 2019).

9 Conclusions

The reason why food aid is growing so fast in Sweden is the powerful dynamic of a growing demand meeting a growing supply in the new, business-like collaboration between charitable organisations and the food industry. This new style of professional food aid represents a departure from more traditional forms of aid and social

work provided by charities in Sweden. The transformation from the traditional to the new has affected how staff and managers at the organisations see their own roles and the mission of the organisations. The growth in food aid has offered relief to growing numbers of people in need during the economic crisis. It has also laid the foundation for a charity economy that will remain significant well beyond the end of the crisis.

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