

Miroslav Budimir

## Charitable food aid in the Slovenian welfare state

*Charitable food aid has been one of the most important responses to food poverty/insecurity in wealthy First World countries since the early 1990s. Exacerbation of the dual social-ecological crisis in the following decades served as the main justification for the institutionalization of the ecosocial policy programme of charitable surplus food redistribution (CSFR) in the EU member states. The focus of this paper is the impact of charitable food aid/surplus food redistribution on the welfare state in Slovenia. The paper is based on the primary empirical data collected from the major CSFR institutions and organizations in seven social work regions in Slovenia. The author finds that institutionalization and entrenchment of charitable food aid pushes the Slovenian welfare state further in the direction of a residual (neo)liberal welfare regime. In general, this ecosocial policy programme, strongly supported by the major EU funding instruments, proves that universalistic social model based on the principles of social solidarity and human rights has been abandoned in favour of charity-based short-term band-aid solutions that don't tackle the root structural causes of poverty.<sup>1</sup>*

**Key words:** poverty, food insecurity, social-ecological crisis, ecosocial policy, charity, surplus food.

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### Dobrodelna pomoč v hrani v slovenski državi blaginje

*Dobrodelna pomoč v hrani je bila že od devetdesetih let 20. stoletja eden najpomembnejših odzivov na revščino/prehransko negotovost v bogatih državah prvega sveta. Poslabšanje dvojne družbeno-ekološke krize v naslednjih desetletjih je bil poglavitni razlog za institucionalizacijo programa ekosocialne politike dobrodelne redistribucije presežkov hrane v državah članicah EU. Članek se osredotoča na vpliv dobrodelne prehranske pomoči in preraždeljevanja presežkov hrane na socialno državo v Sloveniji. Prispevek temelji na primarnih empiričnih podatkih, zbranih v glavnih institucijah prehranske dobrodelnosti v sedmih regijah socialnega varstva v Sloveniji. Ugotovljeno je, da institucionalizacija in utrditev dobrodelne pomoči v hrani potiskata slovensko državo blaginje še bolj v smer preostalih (neo)liberalnih socialnih režimov. Na splošno program ekosocialne politike, ki ga močno podpirajo glavni finančni instrumenti EU, dokazuje, da je bil univerzalistični socialni model, ki temelji na načelih družbene solidarnosti in človekovih pravic, opuščen v korist kratkoročnih rešitev, ki temeljijo na dobrodelnosti in ne rešujejo temeljnih strukturnih vzrokov revščine.*

**Ključne besede:** revščina, prehranska negotovost, socialno-ekološka kriza, ekosocialna politika, dobrodelnost, presežki hrane.

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## Introduction

In the academic disciplines of social policy and social work, charitable surplus food redistribution from food industry to the poor people in wealthy First World countries has been primarily researched in the context of structural change to the welfare state in the last four decades (Riches, 1986; Poppendieck, 1998; Riches and Silvasti, 2014; Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020). Charitable food aid is a strong indicator of retrenchment of the universalist welfare state models and their replacement with a more residual

<sup>1</sup> The primary research for this article was conducted within the framework of the EU-funded project Applying Sustainability Transition Research in Social Work tackling Major Societal Challenge of Social Inclusion (ASTRA, 2021–2024).



and (neo)liberal one. The correlative trend of restricting social rights, relegating responsibility for providing social security from the state to civil society sector and the rise of food charity is common to the development of welfare states in Germany, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland, Slovenia, Italy and Spain (Kessl *et al.*, 2020; Van der Horst *et al.*, 2020; Silvasti and Tikka, 2020; Leskošek and Zidar, 2020; Arcuri *et al.*, 2020; Inza-Bartolomé and Escajedo San-Epifani, 2020).

Since the 2010s, interest in charitable food aid as a means to reduce food waste in the name of environmental protection has increased. Framing food aid as a means to recover otherwise wasted food, that is, as an environmental act, provided a positive frame for interpreting charitable food assistance. This line of discussion celebrates a win-win(-win) situation where overproduction, food waste and poverty are allegedly addressed, and surplus food is delivered to people afflicted with food insecurity. This has been presented as a form of legitimization for charitable responses to poverty (Tikka, 2019; Silvasti and Tikka, 2020).

The charitable food aid/surplus food redistribution is an ecosocial policy programme that operates within the welfare state. It emerged as a reaction to the dual social-ecological crisis that is being driven by the capitalist system of production (Hickel, 2023). This dual crisis – now, the water we swim in every day with the cost-of-living crisis, unpredictable weather conditions, and massive air, land and water pollutions – is a social-political context in which “the ecosocial question” (*Die ökosoziale Frage*) was raised (Opielka, 1985). Mass poverty of the unemployable, unemployed and socially excluded people, including the increasing swathes of the working population, is synonymous with the ecosocial question just as it was with the social question in much of the 19th and the first three quarters of the 20th century. Translation of the empirical knowledge from the environmental sciences into the major UN and EU social policies, reinforced by the conceptualization and advocacy of “the ecosocial transition of societies” in the academic social policy and social work literature (Matthies and Närhi, 2017), have an increasing impact on the welfare states in First World countries. This paper explores the nature of that impact through recent developments of charitable food aid/surplus food redistribution in the Slovenian welfare state.

Approaching the problem from the perspective of materialist structural analysis, the purpose of the article is to answer the following research question: What is the impact of the ecosocial policy programme of charitable food aid/surplus food redistribution on the welfare state in Slovenia? The structure of the article is divided into five sections. The second section lays out a short historical context of fragmentation of the social question, the correlation of this process with the appearance of professional social work, and, finally, reformulation of the social question in the course of the ongoing social-ecological crisis. The third section presents the methodology and the fourth section is a result of primary empirical research on which the article is based. Section five concludes this paper, summarising the key findings.

## From (eco)social question to the charitable surplus food redistribution - a historical perspective

The social question of poverty, existential insecurity and social exclusion is the *raison d'être* of social work. Since it was first publicly expressed and formulated around 1830 in France (*la question sociale*) and a few years later in Germany (*die soziale Frage*), acknowledgment of the “social question” entailed no thoroughgoing change but the problem that is thoroughly difficult to manage (Schwartz, 1997). The social question required fundamental reconstruction of the social organization of production, (re)distribution, and consumption of goods and services in the society. Having been suppressed by force and coercion, the “manufacture of consent” (Herman and Chomsky, 2008), and mute compulsion of the economic power of capital (Mau, 2019; Chibber, 2022), the societal transformation required by the fundamental social problem (the other name of “the social question”) of poverty was abandoned in favor of plurality of manageable “social problems”.

This shift from the singular to the plural can be explained as ...

one means by which sociologists and social workers, emerging as professionals between 1885 and 1915, could lay claim to a practicable terrain upon which to prove their expertise and improve their occupational standing. The more diffracted the diverse ‘social problems’, the more practical and expert could seem the effort to analyze and attack each ‘problem’. (Schwartz, 1997)

Although mandated to raise the social question, social work accommodated to the cancellation of the social question through techniques of “activation” and individualized care (Lorenz, 2016).

After the global ecological crisis caused by the capitalist political-economic organization of society, finally became widely recognized in the 1970s, the social question was reformulated to include ecological dimension. Answering the new “ecosocial question” (Opielka, 1985) demanded modern academic and practical social work approaches that were soon conceptualized as “environmental social work” (Krings *et al.*, 2020), “ecological social work”, “sustainable social work” (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017), “green social work” (Dominelli, 2012), and “ecosocial work” (Närhi and Matthies, 2018) with blurry boundaries among them (Shackelford *et al.*, 2024).

In the course of this social-ecological shift, poverty in various forms and manifestations – food, housing, energy, transport, educational, health, digital, environmental poverty – has remained the fundamental ecosocial problem even in the richest countries in the world to which Slovenia belongs. Across the European Union, around 95 million people (21% of the population) live at risk of poverty or social exclusion, in extraordinary economic insecurity (Eurostat, 2024). The dual social-ecological crisis is also reflected in the main goals of the UN and actual EU policies: “ending poverty in all its forms everywhere; ending hunger and achieving food security and improved nutrition” are the first two goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development (UNSDG, 2015); while “a just green transition” and “making Europe climate neutral by 2050” are one of the main goals of the European Green Deal (European Commission, 2024a). This is the ecosocial-political context in which charitable surplus food redistribution has been developing as a branch of “charity economy” (*Mitleidsökonomie*: Kessler and Schoneville, 2021; 2024) with its impact on the welfare state.

Since the early 1990s, charitable food aid has been one of the most important responses to food poverty – in the USA and Canada (Poppendieck, 1998; 2014; Riches and Silvasti, 2014), and the European Union countries (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020) – that can be defined as “inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints” (Tarasuk and Mitchell, 2020). Charitable surplus food redistribution is essentially a poverty alleviation strategy of last resort (Silvasti and Tikka, 2020). The whole food charity economy is heavily reliant on volunteer labour and industry donations of surplus food or edible food waste – the final discarded product of the food value chain (Riches, 2020). Surplus food occurs when the supply, availability and nutritional requirements of food exceed the demand for it. It leads to food left unsold at supermarkets or restaurants, or piling up in farms and storages, ultimately resulting in food waste and loss. Surplus food is the step before food waste, where producers and consumers consciously and actively discard food (Lai, 2022). Food waste refers to the discard of edible foods (appropriate for human consumption) at the retail and consumer levels, whether or not after it is kept beyond its expiry date or left to spoil, mostly in rich developed countries (FAO, 2013). Food charity means that “leftover, surplus or waste food is given to the left-behind, surplus or wasted people” (Riches, 1997; 2014), as one of the world pioneers in this research area has repeatedly stressed in the last several decades.

Given that main donors are private food industries while majority of charitable surplus food redistribution operations are civil society organizations, this branch of charity economy (Kessler and Schoneville, 2021; 2024) is a (secondary) business for itself that, in its purely economic part, operates without social workers. Social workers become involved in the charity business because most of the “customers”, i.e. charitable food aid receivers are their potential or actual clients. Social workers in the public social protection institutions either refer clients to the nearest charitable food aid organizations; when necessary, do means testing to check if the user is eligible for the food aid; and participate in the charitable food redistribution process in an attempt to detect other social, physical and mental health problems that generally go with food poverty.

## Methodology

The primary research on the charitable surplus food redistribution (CSFR) in the Slovenian welfare state is conducted within the framework of the EU-funded project Applying Sustainability Transition Research in Social Work tackling

Major Societal Challenge of Social Inclusion (ASTRA, 2021–2024). In the field research that was carried out during the winter and autumn of 2023, I interviewed fifteen CSFR organizations. The qualitative research method used in this study is the semi-structured open-ended question interview with major public and civil society charitable surplus food redistribution organizations in seven social work regions in Slovenia: seven social work centers, two government ministries, one intermediary CSFR organization that facilitates food redistribution by provision of material support, logistics and services to the frontline CSFR organizations, and five frontline CSFR organizations that deliver food to the final users. Research participants, i.e. representatives and staff of the CSFR organizations, were recruited by the technique of snowball sampling starting with references from the researchers in the field.

Interviews were conducted individually in person and, when that was not possible, online, and occasionally with two or more people. The interviews were done in Slovenian language with the help of an interpreter. The recorded interviews were then transcribed and translated in English. Cited answers to the interview questions are anonymized with a capital letter P and a number for the quoted research participants (for example, P2, P7, P11, etc.). I conducted a thematic analysis of the responses which provided me with an exploratory tool for inquiring into the structure and workings of the charitable surplus food redistribution in the Slovenian welfare state. The major themes derived from the primary and secondary data analysis are: (1) the extent of the problem of (food) poverty; (2) organizational structure of charitable surplus food redistribution; (3) major problems and contradictions of charitable surplus food redistribution; (4) general demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of charitable food aid receivers. The findings derived from the primary data thematic analysis positively correlate with the most important and critical aspects of the current knowledge on charitable food aid in First World countries.

## Results

### *The extent of the problem of (food) poverty in Slovenia*

From 2008 to 2017, percentage of people living below at-risk-of-poverty rate in Slovenia ranged from 12.3 to 14.5 percent, with the highest number between 2013 and 2015 when it fluctuated from 14.3 to 14.5 percent of Slovenia's population of 2.06 million, which amounts to about 300,000 people (Leskošek and Zidar, 2020). In the same period, approximately half of the people living below at-risk-of-poverty rate in Slovenia turned to charitable food assistance programmes.

In 2022, more than 100,000 people in Slovenia received food aid in the Slovenian Caritas, and around 110,000 persons in the Red Cross Slovenia (data reported by the representatives of these humanitarian organizations).

Since people might receive food aid from both humanitarian organizations, these data cannot be simply added up to calculate the total number of recipients. Moreover, the data don't include figures of other humanitarian organizations that redistribute donated surplus food in Slovenia. Based on the available data, we can infer that the number of charitable food aid recipients is significantly higher than in presented approximate figures.

The basic goal of the ESF+ funded "Programme for Addressing Material Deprivation in Slovenia for the period 2021–2027"<sup>2</sup> is to provide continuous food aid to around 164,000 people per year (7.9% of the total population), and to involve at least 70% of beneficiaries in various "accompanying measures to promote their social inclusion." Accompanying measures include psychosocial counselling and referral to other social services, informing beneficiaries about their rights, information and counselling on healthy living habits, food management, household budget management, informing beneficiaries about other forms of assistance and encouraging them to join other programmes aimed at promoting social inclusion and social activation (Gov. Si, 2022).

The key target groups of the programme are households with no working members and with dependent children, households with partially working adults and dependent children, non-working households without dependent children, the unemployed, retired women (especially those aged 75+) and one-person households (especially if the person is aged 65+) (Gov.Si, 2022). These are people at the highest level of risk of severe poverty.

### ***Organizational structure of charitable surplus food redistribution***

On the macro level, main stakeholders in the intersectoral CSFR system in Slovenia have been: (1) the EU's Food Distribution Programme for the Most Deprived Persons of the Community (MDP, 1987–2013) that was transformed into the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD, 2014–2020) and then integrated into the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+, 2021–2027), which is the main EU instrument for investing in people and supporting the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR, 2023); (2) Slovenian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food; Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities; and Ministry of the Environment, Climate and Energy.

On the mezzo and micro levels, main CSFR actors in Slovenia are: (1) food donors engaged in the production, processing, distribution or sale of food in the food supply chain, that donate their surplus food to the intermediaries (frontline CSFR organizations) for humanitarian purposes as part of their business strategy; (2) humanitarian organizations of public interest,

<sup>2</sup> Out of €32.6 million budget for the implementation of the programme, €29.4 million (90%) will be contributed by the ESF+, and the rest (10%) by the Republic of Slovenia; €27.1 million is allocated for the purchase of food that will be redistributed, and €3.8 million will cover the costs of the food redistribution and implementation of accompanying measures (Gov.Si, 2022).

disabled persons' organizations, public social protection institutions and social work centres as the central welfare state institutions in Slovenia (*Law on Agriculture of the RS*, 2023).

Major surplus food donors in Slovenia are food retail companies that operate like supermarket chains (Lidl, Hofer, Mercator, SPAR, TUŠ, and E. Leclerc), followed by farmers, dairies, bakeries and the meat-processing industry, smaller grocery shops, public institutions (homes for the elderly, schools and kindergartens), small restaurants and large cafeterias (Leskošek and Zidar, 2020). Supermarket chains are incentivized with a tax deduction by the Ministry of Agriculture to donate surplus food. Depending on the amount of donated food, they pay 0% of Value Added Tax on the total sum of all goods they sold over the year. The tax deduction can go up to 2% of the total annual sale of a donor company.

Red Cross of Slovenia, Slovenian Caritas, Lions Club, Slovenian Philanthropy (the association for the promotion of volunteering), and Kralji ulice (Street Kings, the association helping the homeless people) are "the humanitarian organizations of public interest" (Gov.Si, 2023). Slovenian food bank SIBAHE is the only CSFR organization in Slovenia that is a member of the European Federation of Food Banks (FEBA). The other types of humanitarian organizations, like some institutes, citizen associations, NGOs, social enterprises and foundations, are also allowed to redistribute surplus food, but important difference between them and legally recognized humanitarian organizations of public interest is that only the latter are eligible to compete for and win public bonuses like technical equipment, money or food distributed to the humanitarian organizations through the FEAD, i.e. ESF+ programme. Red Cross of Slovenia and Slovenian Caritas are the only humanitarian organizations of public interest in the country that are authorized by the government to distribute food from the FEAD programme which is now integrated into the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+).

The Federation of Lions Clubs, that unites 57 Lions Clubs with around 1,500 members, is the major facilitating CSFR organization in Slovenia. In line with their basic global mission of helping people and communities in hardships, and in a situation where lots of food suitable for human consumption have been discarded every day while many people live in hunger and poverty, Lions Clubs started off the Surplus Food Project in 2013 that is later renamed the Donated Food Project. It is the biggest CSFR project in the whole country with Lions Club as the coordinator and logistical link between surplus food donor companies and frontline CSFR organizations (Lions.Si, 2024). The project runs in such a way that volunteers, consisted of members of Lions Clubs, regional associations of the Red Cross of Slovenia, dioceses of Slovenian Caritas, employees of public institutions and members of other humanitarian organizations, collect surplus food prepared for redistribution from grocery stores every day. The surplus food is redistributed to the receivers the same day or next morning, within the time window of 14 hours since it has been collected.

Social work centres function as the major state social protection institutions that do means-testing of the charitable food for aid recipients and as the frontline organizations that redistribute surplus food to them. Some social work centres have within their own organization a local unit called food distribution center. Centres issue certificates for the recipients of charitable food aid when it is required by the humanitarian organizations. This certificate is not an absolute requirement for charitable food aid. Any person in need of food aid can approach the humanitarian organizations and get a food parcel or a hot meal without any certificate. Volunteers or workers of the humanitarian organizations usually ask that person about the reasons why he or she needs food aid. They get familiar with the user, so that next time when the same person asks for food assistance staff would recognize and ask the user for some proof that he or she needs charitable food aid. If the recipient is unable to produce any evidence, or they suspect that the user is not in genuine need for food assistance but wants to manipulate the system, they contact the local social work centre to check if the person belongs to one of the categories of eligible recipients of charitable food aid. Social work centres staff can do the control quickly as they were given direct online access to more than 40 databases containing recipients' information (including their bank account details).

According to the Slovenian Law on Agriculture, persons eligible for charitable food aid are: (1) recipients of financial social assistance and social security supplement; (2) recipients of cash grants and social services in accordance with the regulations of local authorities on the co-financing of humanitarian organizations; (2) disabled persons with a type of disability that causes social deprivation, or (3) persons assessed by a CSFR organization as being in need of assistance (*Law on Agriculture of the RS*, 2023).

### ***Major problems and contradictions of charitable surplus food redistribution***

With an increasing number of poor people receiving food aid, charitable organizations need an increasing amount of surplus food to redistribute, which means that even more surplus food has to come from the food industry. The greater part (up to 90%) of redistributed charitable food in Slovenia is purchased through the ESF+ programme and with the money collected in the Red Cross of Slovenia and Slovenian Caritas campaigns, while the rest comes from the food industry donations. At the same time, the EU food waste reduction policy requires permanent reduction of surplus food generated at the source, i.e. in the food production, distribution and primary consumption. Redistribution of the surplus food for human consumption is done by the food industry only if the food surpluses cannot be avoided (European Commission, 2024b). The data collected in the interviews with major frontline charitable food aid organizations in Slovenia shows that the amount of

surplus food donated by the food industry (wholesalers, retailers, factories, foodservice) has been steadily decreasing due to the more restrictive environmental regulations on food waste reduction. The result is a major contradiction in which charitable organizations operate with an increasing number of users and less and less surplus food to redistribute.

Constant decline in the amounts of donated surplus food in the situation where the number of poor people in need of food aid is steadily rising means that the deficit of the charitable food for distribution must be compensated with the food purchased through the ESF+ programme. The frontline redistribution organizations report that the amount of food purchased through the ESF+ programme is not enough to cover all the basic food needs of their users. Fresh perishable surplus food, mainly fruit and vegetables and some dairy products, are the most valuable part of food industry donations in terms of adequate nutrition. It is precisely these micronutrient-dense perishables that are missing in the ESF+ food which is mainly comprised of energy-dense dry goods, canned or processed foods (pasta, sugar, flour, rice and other cereals) that can be stored and transported easily.

According to the EU food safety standards, fresh perishable surplus food necessitates specific storage facilities in which this food can be stored. The charitable organizations have either limited or no capacities for storage of fresh perishables, which is the reason why this kind of donated surplus food must be delivered to the final users in the quickest possible time upon receiving. The organizations distribute fresh perishables to the people in need either the same day when they receive it from the donors or the next morning. Logistical aid in the distribution process is provided by the Lions Clubs of Slovenia as part of their national Donated Food Project (Lions.Si, 2024), and through the ESF+ programme managed by the government authorities.

However, operating costs for the logistics and necessary equipment in the charitable redistribution of all kinds of food, including dry goods, canned and processed foods, are always higher than the charitable organizations' budget allocations intended to cover these costs. That is a permanent problem which is partially alleviated by the recent small increase in the rate for financing the costs related to the distribution of food aid and the implementation of accompanying measures for the organizations that distribute food purchased through the ESF+ programme.

### ***General demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of charitable food aid receivers***

In the Red Cross of Slovenia, about 20 percent of the charitable food aid recipients are older than 65, have extremely low pensions and receive social security supplement intended for persons who cannot provide material social security due to the circumstances beyond their control. The number of widows and widowers who live alone is increasing in this demographic

group. About 20 percent of the recipients are children under the age of 15 who mostly live in single-parent families. It is also noticed that number of long-term food aid recipients has been increasing, which is correlated with a problem of generational poverty when a family lives in poverty for at least two generations.

Among the Red Cross of Slovenia's and Slovenian Caritas's charitable food aid recipients are citizens and non-citizens of Slovenia, migrants, migrant workers, asylum seekers and refugees. Priority is given to those refugees who live in private accommodations unlike those who are accommodated in one of the asylum and refugee centres in Slovenia.

The number of working poor has been rapidly increasing among the food aid receivers in recent years. These are employed people who work for minimum wages that are not enough for a decent living. Tenants, people who rent their homes, are the majority in this group. Some reasons of the rise of working poor people among food aid receivers relative to the unemployed users are indicated in one of the responses:

Unemployment is currently not a fundamental factor in poverty. In the past, unemployment was a serious problem in Slovenia, but the chance of finding a job is very high now. It is more a question of people's ability and motivation to get a job. Compared to many other countries, Slovenia has relatively generous cash social assistance that sometimes disincentivise people to work. (P11)

However, the problem perhaps doesn't lie with the level of social assistance benefits that could reduce employment, but in the level of low wages that keeps many workers beneath or around the poverty line:

Even the minimum wage today is not enough, and some other wages are probably also not enough. Maybe the salaries of some employees of social work centres aren't enough, probably not now with these prices. We all already feel them. When you go to the store, you realize that you have just been to the store, and right away you had to pay 100 euros, and you didn't buy a lot. So, we actually think and wonder how people survive. And also, how do people with low pensions survive – some people have full pension of about 600 euros – if they are renting a room or a flat somewhere, or if they basically only pay expenses for food and electricity, not to mention transport or something else in addition? (P7)

About a third of our recipients are the people who live on the edge of poverty and occasionally recourse to charitable food aid. These are people who just come and go, that is, there is a sudden event that happens to them, they need some help as a stopgap measure, and they move on. And some of them come back later, because that's how they live, at the edge of poverty: they fluctuate above and below the poverty line. However, for two thirds of the recipients, material hardship is a symptom of something deeper. Because just giving food parcels means nothing if there isn't some insight into the deeper problems of these people. We try to empower our volunteers and

workers to somehow feel the responsibility in other areas as well, not only in this material sense. (P2)

The frontline organizations recognize the urgent need to help people who are not eligible for public assistance. These are people and families whose income is just a little bit above the poverty line but can have unpaid debts, or a sick child, or some other expenses for physiotherapy and medicaments. Another specific demographic group in need of charitable food aid are renters, people who have problems with covering housing expenses, high electricity and heating bills. There are also many people who receive cash social assistance, who would survive without charitable food aid but ...

Would not survive without our community and what they have with us. In short, we are the only place where they go every month or a week. They don't go anywhere, they just come to us. And, of course, this food parcel can improve their budget, but it is not the essential part of our help. We also try to help these people in other ways. We try to help them with paying their bills, managing their debts, negotiating with their creditors, etc. Of course, FEAD food is our stability. We know what food we will get and when, and people also know and count on it, too. We add to this food all these other aspects. It is something meaningful to these people. So, these other aspects are very important. (P15).

## Conclusions

The key target groups of the ESF+ programme for addressing material deprivation in Slovenia are unemployed, families with dependent children, and retired women, while the CSFR organizations repeatedly emphasize the increasing number of working poor and people caught in the cycle of generational poverty among their users. In a particularly difficult situation are employed people whose income is tested as a little bit above the cut-off poverty line and who are thus not eligible for cash social assistance. Although the welfare state professionals and humanitarian workers have discretion to help these people with one-time allowances and food aid parcels, such band-aid solutions do not address the structural causes of poverty. However, even when they are eligible for cash social assistance, its amount is not enough to meet the basic needs of chronically poor people, let alone for their decent living. Financial social assistance is insufficient and difficult to get when the arbitrary cut-off income threshold is too low to include all the people in need, while socioeconomic life conditions are such that even the fully employed social workers who are non-homeowners and rent a place of living are struggling to make ends meet in major cities in Slovenia.

Without exception, social workers complain about the ever-increasing amount of time they spend in front of computers managing the data, that prevents them from the fieldwork and face-to-face contact with the users. The redistribution of donated surplus food in the premises of social work

centers facilitates direct contact between a social worker and a food aid user putting both of them in a situation to reveal other social, physical or psychological problems that naturally go with the low food poverty status.

It is empirically proved that food poverty is a more sensitive measure of serious material deprivation than income is (Tarasuk, 2023). As a reliable indicator of severe material deprivation, food poverty is the product of income, assets, savings, access to credits, expenditures and debts of the charitable food aid user. All these causes and consequences of severe poverty reveal themselves to the social and other humanitarian workers when they directly meet with the people in need of charitable food aid.

However, enforced neoliberal policy of cutting the public spending, combined with chronically tight budgets of humanitarian organizations, create a situation where there are not enough social and humanitarian workers to dedicate appropriate amount of their time and energy to direct work with the users. This is in contradiction with a stipulation of the ESF+ programme to involve great majority of beneficiaries in various “accompanying measures to promote their social inclusion” including “information and counseling on healthy living habits.” With regard to health, the food purchased and distributed through the ESF+ programme is energy-dense and micronutrient-deficient, which makes it impossible to plan for a healthy and nutritionally balanced diet.

The consumer subject that satisfies their needs for food and nutrition in the local markets, grocery stores, supermarkets, restaurants, and other food services and retailers, is the primary integration figure in the contemporary capitalist society. However, the charitable food aid users must satisfy their basic need for food as the receivers of charity of others. They are excluded from the “primary commodity cycle” of capitalist distribution and consumption, but nevertheless included in its “secondary commodity cycle” of charitable surplus food redistribution and consumption. This “integration under conditions of exclusion” (Kessl and Schoneville, 2021) is the fundamental contradiction of charitable food aid brought about by the long-term transformation of the welfare state in the direction of more charity-based “short-term band-aid solutions to more deep-rooted problems of poverty” (Caraher and Furey, 2017).

The trend of normalization and institutionalization of charitable food aid that started off in Slovenia in the 1990s, has been reinforced by the EU funding earmarked to enable charitable organizations to purchase food on the primary market. It reveals a dynamic that changes the structure and function of the welfare state in its response to poverty, and is part of the general political thrust in social policy and social work to managing more and more fragmented “social problems” (food poverty, energy poverty, housing poverty, digital poverty, etc.) without a serious attempt to give a holistic answer to the main ecosocial question of our time from the systematic and systemic ecosocial perspective.

This answer has to include expanded and decommodified universal basic services in housing, childcare, adult social care, transport, healthcare,

education, information and nutritious food, as well as the living wage and social benefits adjusted to the inflation (Riches, 2014; Hickel, 2023). The entrenchment of charitable food aid certainly indicates moving the Slovenian welfare state further away from the universalistic social model in the direction of a residual (neo)liberal welfare regime. In fact, the “charitization” of the welfare state drives it back to times before the establishment of modern social policy based on the principles of social solidarity and human rights derived from the universal basic human needs.

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