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FOOD ASSISTANCE / FOOD CHARITY

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Synonyms

Breadlines; Charitable Food Assistance; Emergency Food; Food Banks; Food Donations; Food Pantries; Food Poverty; Food Security; Hunger; Soup kitchens

Introduction

Food assistance and food charity refer to practices where public, private, or third sector actors provide food (or resources to acquire food) to individuals or households that face hunger or food shortage. The food is provided for free or for a minimal cost and the provision is conducted through varying services like food banks. Domestic food assistance practices are realized in relations between a collective (the provider or donor) and individuals (the recipients of the assistance). For those international practices of food aid that take place between collectives, typically nations or global food aid organizations and recipient countries, see the entry for **Food aid**.

Currently, approximately 800 million people in the world are undernourished and even more lack food security. According to FAO (2015), food security exists when “all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”. The practice of providing food or resources to acquire food to needy individuals or households is probably almost as old as the history of the civilization yet its institutionalized forms are relatively new. Nowadays, the organized forms of food assistance are widespread. Numerous international, national, and regional organizations participate in the food provision activities and there is a great variation in how, where, and by whom the food is provided for those in need.

In this entry, food assistance refers more specifically to the social and public policy measures exercised by the public sector, whereas food charity denotes those activities that are conducted by third sector organizations (including religious communities) or business enterprises. The main difference between the two is that the public sector may have obligations that are

determined and regulated by formal, usually democratically negotiated norms related to social security. In contrast, the third sector and business actors decide their practices and norms on their own (within the limits of allowed practices), and the third sector practices are based on voluntary participation. From the ethical viewpoint, the difference between the public and non-public actors is important.

Many of the ethical aspects regarding food assistance and food charity are closely related to the fundamental points of morality: the equal dignity of all human beings and the idea of universal human rights that includes the right to food due to its vitality for human life. This entry begins with a characterization of the relation between some general moral principles and the provision of food for hungry people. After that, the entry focuses in more details to the ethical considerations that regard food assistance (provided by the public sector) and food charity (provided by the third and private sector) in its different forms. For further ethical considerations on the latter, see the entry for [The Ethics of Food Charity](#).

Universal needs and the right to food

Adequate nutrition is necessary for staying alive and living a worthy human life. The central principle that lies beyond the provision of food to needy people is the idea that all human beings have an equal right to live a dignified life, which necessitates freedom from hunger and undernourishment. This imperative forms one of the grounding principles for theorizing ethics and it is endorsed in different approaches to morality and justice in the context of food and hunger. These approaches include, but are not limited to, utilitarian ideals that aim for the maximum aggregate of preference satisfaction (Singer 1971), the human rights approach (Pogge 2002; Ziegler et al. 2011), various theories of social justice (e.g., Pogge 2002; Nussbaum 2011) and Kantian theories that emphasize our obligations (O'Neill 1987). In whatever way the equality of humans is understood in detailed terms, the satisfaction of a biological basic need like adequate nutrition is an essential element of equality because it is a precondition for the exercise of any other capacities and autonomy in one's life.

The equal dignity of humans and the right to food have been institutionalised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (for more details, see [Human Rights and Food](#)). The right to food is, then, one of the globally agreed fundamental (non-negotiable) human rights. The right to food means “the right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensures a physical and mental,

individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear” (Ziegler et al. 2011, 15). Although there are some differences in details, the core of this definition is essentially similar to food security. By definition, rights should also invoke corresponding obligations: the right-bearers are entitled to certain goods and can express related claims to the obliged parties. The right to food is interpreted to invoke the corresponding obligation to states to ensure that all citizens have the capacity to feed themselves in dignity. The obligation involves the duties to respect, protect, and to fulfil this right (Ziegler 2011, 15-20).

In normal conditions, people are supposed to have capacity to feed themselves on their own or with the help of other family members. In those circumstances, the state obligations are mainly limited to respecting and protecting the right to food: that is, the states must support and protect conditions where people can acquire means to purchase food, or produce food on their own if they choose to do so. However, the ability of an individual to feed oneself or one’s family may fail for various reasons, such as economic uncertainty, unemployment or old age. In those cases, the right to food gives rise to the obligation to the state to provide those people with either food or other resources for acquiring food. Food assistance is the publicly governed measure used to ensure the food security of households or individuals who cannot secure it on their own. Sometimes larger groups of people face food insecurity simultaneously due to unexpected acute circumstances like natural disasters. This entry does not address such cases specifically because they are largely different from the cases discussed here and the same ethical considerations cannot be applied to both situations.

Public food assistance

Food assistance can be considered as an obligation of the state to ensure the fulfilment of universal human right to food (Ziegler et al. 2011). This obligation is based on the view of states as actors that can, and ought, to ensure the fulfilment of the rights of their citizens, as a counterpart to their rule-making authority over the same people. States have responded to this obligation in different ways (and, arguably, many states have not responded to it in any active way). The obligation to respect and protect the right to food means two things. First, the government should not impede the **Access to Food** or erode the availability of food by its own actions, Second, the government must pass and reinforce laws to prevent other actors (like powerful people or collectives) from violating any person’s right to food. These two obligations are general duties to ensure that the rights are not violated; they do not require active measures in normal conditions. In contrast, food assistance relates to the obligation to fulfil the right to food and requires active measures that are targeted to those in particular need. In the poor and developing countries with a

relatively high prevalence of hunger and food insecurity, a common approach to the challenge of feeding people is international cooperation. Other countries or international organizations provide food and/or development aid and cooperate with the local actors in the recipient country to provide people with food or means to acquire it. The ethical questions that relate to the food provision for highly food insecure regions are discussed in the entry for **Food aid**.

In the industrialised welfare states, the standard approach to food security and the right to food is to view it as a central element of the basic subsistence and social security. Food assistance is in those cases covered by the broader package of welfare state measures and subsistence security network, which usually involves financial support (for acquiring food and other necessities) rather than in-kind food assistance (assistance in the form of food itself). Food services for disabled and elderly people are a common exception for this, since in those cases the access to food is restricted due to physical rather than economic factors. In some cases, food assistance can be provided in the form of vouchers or debit cards (granted by a social welfare officer) that are particularly targeted for purchasing food products and other daily necessities. They cannot be used for buying other things like alcohol or tobacco products but the cardholder can usually exercise consumer sovereignty by making individual decisions about how and what kind of food she wishes to purchase with the provided support (some debit card systems may involve stricter consumption limits even regarding the food purchases, though).

The financial support is supposed to provide individuals with the resources needed to avoid food insecurity, given that the availability of food or physical access to food is not limited. The monetary forms of social security promote effectively positive freedom, the actual opportunity of a person to do different things and make choices between them. Positive freedom promotes the sense of consumer sovereignty and individual autonomy. A citizen who receives income support has, even if within the financial limits, a freedom to choose between different ways to acquire food and to realize at least some personal food preferences. In contrast, the direct provision of in-kind assistance only ensures that the assisted individual does not suffer from malnutrition.

In political philosophy, the equality of citizens – a fundamental precondition for justice – is argued to require their equal autonomy (O'Neill 1987) or equal opportunities (Nussbaum 2011) for a dignified life, rather than equality merely in terms of biological need satisfaction. From this viewpoint, the public provision of food assistance through financial measures and as a part of broader social security framework is promotes justice more efficiently and is hence superior to in-kind food assistance, even though both measures can be used to secure basic needs. The provision of food assistance in a financial form also goes in line with the fact that food insecurity is closely associated with the broader issue of economic inequality and poverty, and the two cannot be separated (Nagel 1977).

There are also other normative arguments about why publicly provided food assistance should be financial rather than in-kind. Although human needs for nutrition can be defined biologically, the notions of food security and the right to food emphasize the importance of an adequate regard for food preferences. Food is not only a source of nutrition but a socially and culturally important matter, and the possibility to follow one's own ethical values and cultural traditions regarding food is important for the sense of self-respect and autonomy. In-kind food assistance does not usually leave much room for choice and, in the worst case, a person relying on such assistance has to 'choose' between eating food that goes against one's personal moral principles (on ethical or religious grounds) and staying undernourished.

Food charity

Charitable food delivery, or food charity that is practiced by third sector and private actors, can be organized in different ways and there are great regional variations in the practices. For example, in North America and in the UK there are national umbrella organizations that coordinate operations and the delivery sites may be established as franchise chains. There are plenty of private NGOs and faith-based actors in the field. At the street level, the distribution takes multiple forms: giving handouts to beggars, breadlines, soup kitchens (see also [Emergency Food System: Soup Kitchens and Food Pantries](#)), food banks or even community shops for poor people, where the idea is to offer low-income customers heavily discounted food. Essentially, charitable actors do not compete with enterprises that operate on the primary market. Rather, they distribute food to the needy for free or with a price below the production costs.

Moral philosopher Peter Singer (1971) argues in his famous article "*Famine, Affluence, and Morality*" that we are morally obliged to alleviate the suffering of other people (by for example giving to charity) when we can do so without comparable costs to ourselves. For anyone who does relatively well, it would simply be wrong not to help a hungry person, since food is such a basic need and helping in that regard would not require much or risk the helper's personal food security. People who operate in the food charity organizations meet this kind of individual moral obligation through the charity action. However, despite the apparent individual obligation to help a hungry person, the overall practice of food charity as a way to meet such obligations involves many ethical issues that require further consideration. The major conundrums of food charity are next discussed, first with regard to the different ways of practicing food charity and then as a bigger question that relates to the whole idea of charitable food delivery.

One of the ethical concerns regarding various food charity practices is their relation to human dignity. Although charity acts are basically benevolent, their nature as gifts or alms from the

well-off to the poor people stigmatizes the recipients, and some delivery practices may reinforce this impression. A stigmatizing division emerges where a group of people is viewed as relying on the noble-mindedness of the individuals who are well off. The dignity of those who have to (literally) stand in a breadline to receive handouts is suspended, and the experience of having to wait in the line to receive basic necessities (of sometimes inferior quality) when others wander freely in abundant grocery stores can be a humiliating experience in itself. Moreover, the practices of giving charity do sometimes involve humiliating elements such as unfriendly or condescending behaviour (that indicates the moral superiority of those who give), denial of assistance, or discrimination by race or religion. Some organizations also require the recipients to make an account of their economic situation (to prevent the misuse of donations), which deprives the clients their economic privacy and signals mistrust. The stigmatizing effect often relates to the unspoken assumption that the need for food is caused by the person herself and signifies failure as the member of a society.

Another potential problem concerns the background of the charity providing organizations. At present, faith based organizations and churches are active operators in the field of charitable food assistance. This is consistent with their moral principles that often emphasize the importance of charity practice. However, it also means that the recipients of food charity often have to expose themselves to religious activities (such as praying, services or spiritual music) or religious symbols whether they want it or not. For the members of the same church this is not problematic but it may create the feelings of oppression or anxiety for those who belong to other religious groups. Charity recipients have made up different strategies to get through the religious contents attached to food provision (Salonen 2016).

Framing the food provision as a matter of charity is also misleading. Those who are asked to give charity still have the freedom to decide when the given help is sufficient (or whether one wishes to give it at all). In general moral terms, it is praiseworthy to give charity but not morally wrong to *not* give it. The acts of charity enjoy the quality of voluntariness that moral obligations do not: if we have an obligation to do something, it is wrong to not do it. Moreover, charity does not question the legitimacy of the status of charity givers as the well-off who *can* give for those who *do not have enough*, or the legitimacy of the system that creates and maintains such inequalities. In other words, the framing of charity does not question the legitimacy of the present situation characteristic of great inequalities (Nagel 1977; Pogge 2002).

Food charity is often insufficient for meeting the right to food or food security because it satisfies the need for energy intake but less often the conditions of adequacy and acceptability of the food. The problem is similar to the one regarding the provision of in-kind food assistance: charity entails the deprivation of opportunities to make choices. Yet, the problem is in one sense

greater with charity, since charity does not involve an idea of *rights*: there is no possibility to *claim for* something one would be entitled to have. People who rely on food charity rely on whatever is available in the food banks, soup kitchens or breadlines. Selections of available foodstuffs are often unexpected and occasional. Even their nutritional value is sometimes highly questionable (Poppendieck 1998) due to their origins. In addition, charitable food assistance is not accessible for all people in need, yet no one can claim it should be. For example, in rural areas the distribution of food is often limited and, on the other hand, physically disabled or elderly people may have poor accessibility to food assistance even in urban areas.

Charitable food assistance may be the solution to the acute problem of hunger but does not address the root causes of poverty and food insecurity. The most common reason for hunger and food insecurity is income poverty. At its best, charitable food distribution offers a temporary band-aid for the acute, short term lack of food. The basic problem from the viewpoint of ethics is that charitable operations do not guarantee the right to food, a right that is derived from the Declaration of Human Rights. In her examination of the ethical approaches to world hunger, Onora O'Neill (1987) pointed out that talk about rights is often incomplete due to the neglect of the question of who bears the corresponding obligations to fulfil those rights. Charity organizations are not obligated "to respect, protect, and to fulfil" the right to food (Ziegler et. al 2011) as the states are.

Summary

Food assistance is a practice of helping people or households who cannot obtain food on their own. With reference to universal human rights and the right to food, states can be held responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling this right. Since household-level food shortages often indicate broader economic or social problems, states typically conduct their food assistance practices as a part of the broader social policy framework and it is common to provide this assistance in a financial form.

There are also new ways to approach and organize the food assistance practices. In Brazil, for example, there are public food banks run by municipalities as public institutions and supported by a federal government program. These public operations include subsidized popular restaurants and community kitchens and they act as a part of a government policy to fight against hunger. The public food bank model differs from charitable food delivery. State-based public food banks could be obligated to help all the needy equally and the quality and amount of delivered food as well as environment and accessibility of distribution sites can be controlled. Some practices, especially the community kitchens and restaurants, also promote the inclusion and agency of the people who use the services, so that the food assistance recipients are not merely passive recipients but active

citizens. (Riches & Silvasti 2014.)

Often the state policies fail to guarantee the food security of all citizens and there are food insecure households both in developing and developed countries. These people rely on the existence of food charity, food deliveries conducted by private or non-governmental actors like charity organizations or the church. There are various ways to exercise food charity, and the relevant ethical considerations depend on the practices in question. The argument that we have a moral obligation to alleviate the suffering of others when we can is a common one in ethics. For the well-to-do people, participating in the food charity activities is one way to meet that individual obligation. On the other hand, the whole (need for the) existence of a food charity practice based on voluntary acts is something that can be criticized from a more systemic normative viewpoint.

The right to food is a human right. Charity food, by contrast, is not an entitlement but a gift: recipients have no legal rights to donations and charities do not offer legitimate access to all citizens equally. It has also been argued that the positive cultural status of charitable work normalises poverty and legitimates personal generosity as an answer to major social, political and economic disorder manifesting as hunger or food insecurity (Riches & Silvasti 2014). This implies that the flip side of charity is decreasing social justice (Poppendieck 1998). Food charity does not eliminate the structural root cause of food poverty, income poverty. The moral tragedy is that while the provision of food for hungry people can be considered an individual level moral obligation, it also easily leads the attention aside from the elimination of the root causes of food poverty. As a result, the ethical considerations regarding food assistance and food charity can and perhaps should take place at two different levels: one that acknowledges the existing realities and the other that aims for steering the societies in a direction where food charity practices would not be needed in normal circumstances.

Cross-references

- Access to Food
- Food Banking
- Food and Poverty in High Income Countries
- Food Donation/Emergency Food
- Emergency Food System: Soup Kitchens and Food Pantries
- Food Security
- Human Rights and Food
- Hunger
- The Ethics of Food Charity

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