

Food aid to fight food insecurity?

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While food aid is reserved for emergency situations at international level, in France it has become the main tool to fight food insecurity. Although this aid has an important social function, it has nonetheless been widely criticized for a number of reasons. This has led to experiments with other forms of solidarity based on greater food democracy.

Sharing or giving food to show solidarity with the most disadvantaged is a practice that has been documented since Antiquity. This form of family and neighbourhood solidarity supports people who are unable to meet their own needs: children, the elderly, the sick, the disabled or those in difficult situations. Beyond interpersonal relationships, this solidarity also takes on institutional forms through frameworks involving any or a combination of wealthy citizens, the state, religious groups, civil society organizations and, since the Second World War, international organizations (Clément, 2001). Relief, almsgiving, donations, charity, assistance or even food aid cannot be reduced to practices guided by pure generosity, with nothing in return.

For individuals, and depending on the era and society, giving increases one's social prestige and power, allows one to redeem one's sins or hope for divine support, and gives concrete expression to a desire to show solidarity or to reduce injustice. For private or public institutions, and here again depending on the era and society, organizing food aid can be a way to mitigate risks of uprising or migration that are difficult to manage, as well as a way to integrate beneficiaries into society, but also to dispose of production surpluses or open up new markets. But food aid has always been subject to criticism: the way it is implemented and the forms it takes raise questions about how society treats its poor.

From emergency food aid to budget support

Internationally, food aid developed as a way to address emergency situations: disasters, wars and massive population displacements. It relies on state or private company donations and is managed by humanitarian organizations such as the Red Cross or the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP). It takes on different forms depending on the context, from emergency aid, particularly in refugee camps, to food-for-work programmes.

International food aid has drawn criticism for the disruptive effects that free or subsidized food distribution can have on local markets, as well as the changes it can cause in eating habits, developing demand for foreign products and thereby generating food dependency. These criticisms led to the adoption of an international Food Assistance Convention in 2012 (Cuq, 2014). In particular, this convention encourages the purchase of local products rather than the use of surpluses from donor countries. It formalizes a practice that had been developing for a few years, particularly in the United States with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (the famous Food Stamp Program), aimed at providing monetary assistance to buy food rather than supplying food that is not always suited to local contexts. The WFP thus distinguishes between its former approach of providing food aid in the form of food donations, now mainly reserved for emergency situations, and its new 'food assistance' approach, which involves more or less conditional budget support for individuals.

This evolution reflects a desire to offer food-insecure people the possibility to choose what they want to eat and not be imposed what they receive. In Europe, and particularly in France, this shift remains very timid, and food aid is still the dominant form of food solidarity.

Rising food insecurity in France

In countries that do not suffer from food shortages, not having access to enough food of sufficient quality is a matter of lack of economic resources at individual level and relates to a problem of poverty (Clément, 2001). In France, in 2018, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE), 9.3 million people, or 14.8 per cent of the population, were living below the monetary poverty line, defined here as 1,063 euros per month. In April 2020, the country's Directorate General for Social Cohesion estimated that 8 million people lived in households that identified as food insecure for financial reasons.

According to the General Inspectorate for Social Affairs (IGAS), food aid was distributed to 5.5 million people in 2019 (Le Morvan and Wanecq, 2019). This figure only reveals part of the problem, as it does not account for the number of food-insecure people who, for various reasons, do not use food aid. Since 2020 and the COVID-19 crisis, part of the population has seen its income decline. This deteriorating situation has translated into increased demand for food aid, as reported by several non-profit organizations, such as the food banks and the Secours Populaire (CNA, 2021).

Food insecurity is however not limited to a lack of means. Approached through a social lens, it is characterized by processes that cause individuals to feel disaffected (Castel, 1991) and degraded (Paugam, 1991) and can lead to various forms of exclusion. This is evidenced by the difficulties that individuals in vulnerable situations face in accessing the labour market and decent working conditions (job insecurity). Exclusion affects groups of individuals suffering from different forms of economic and social vulnerability, such as single-parent families, large families, students, the elderly, the working poor and refugees, but also the middle classes whose living conditions have deteriorated in recent years. While some situations are accidental and temporary, a significant share of this vulnerability has become structurally embedded in society. French public institutions and actors in the field of social work thus speak of ‘food precarity’. This term differs from ‘food insecurity’ in that it equally encompasses the issue of social ties central to processes of exclusion and that of unequal access to food (Paturel, 2018).

A social support function

Food aid was initially managed by the public authorities (through municipal distribution points or free meals in restaurants). In the twentieth century, however, civil society gradually became involved (Retière and Le Crom, 2018). Since the mid-1980s and the explosion of unemployment in France, civil society organizations have taken over from the state – which has struggled to tackle the root causes of precariousness – by distributing meal parcels, vouchers, unprepared foodstuffs and meals to the most disadvantaged (Clément, 2001). The effectiveness of food aid, owed to its strong institutional roots and dense national coverage, means that it can rapidly benefit a large number of vulnerable people and thus meet an obvious moral imperative: ‘to give food to all those who are hungry’, to quote an expression attributed to the famous French comedian

Coluche. Moreover, through their commitment to the most disadvantaged, the volunteers of non-profits play an important role in maintaining social ties. During food distributions, they meet the 'beneficiaries', chat with them and help them with their non-food needs, providing them with various types of information, assisting them in administrative procedures or simply listening. According to Philippe Sassier (1990), giving is a form of attention to others that creates social ties and therefore differs from the aid provided by the state. With the COVID-19 crisis, this social function of aid was jeopardised, as volunteers found themselves overwhelmed by distributions and struggled to provide other forms of support.

Food aid thus appears to constitute an essential mechanism for meeting the food needs of individuals with limited economic resources, especially in times of crisis. Nevertheless, this system has been called into question, insofar as it does not address the root causes of precariousness – it was not initially intended to do so – and its operating methods can steer towards forms of aid that are degrading for the beneficiaries.

An adjustment variable of the industrialized food system?

In Europe, food aid became institutionalized from 1987, with the European Union Food Distribution Programme for the Most Deprived Persons (MDP). Backed by the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), this programme made agricultural raw materials from EU intervention stocks (cereals, milk powder, sugar etc.) available to Member States. Agricultural surpluses, which until then had been stored or destroyed to support prices and ensure adequate income for farmers, could be bought through a public intervention process. This provided a response to the growing challenges of food insecurity while maintaining the stability required on agricultural markets, which had become internationalized.

It is important to note that products from European intervention stocks were not redistributed as such. In France, raw materials were traded for finished products through public tenders with food manufacturers. The foodstuffs collected were then distributed to those in need. Thus, although the social goal of food aid was evident, it was initially organized as an adjustment variable for agricultural (over)production and the agri-food industry. On an international level, emergency food aid served the commercial interests of agricultural-exporting countries by providing a 'gateway' to new markets, sometimes leading to dumping by creating competition between emergency food aid and local production (Pinaud, 2016).

Due to the decrease in European intervention stocks, in 2014 the MDP was replaced with the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), on which food aid funding now partly relies. In France, the main vehicle for public support to fight food insecurity is the set of tax breaks available to companies and individuals for donations made to non-profit food aid organizations (Le Morvan and Wanecq, 2019). These financial incentives to donate, which have existed since the 1980s, were reinforced in the 2000s. Since 2010, due to the coupling of the fight against food insecurity and food waste within the framework of the food aid system,¹ food donations have further increased, particularly with the introduction of the Garot law (2016) and, subsequently, the ordinance of 21 October 2019 (in application of Article 15 of the Egalim Law). These laws require companies to sign agreements with authorized non-profit organizations to distribute their unsold food and thus reduce food waste.

This coupling anchors food aid in an industry ‘that does not speak its name’ and that relies on the long supply chains of the agroindustrial system to source agri-food products, with several consequences that are worth highlighting. First, food aid tends to encourage the exploitation of surpluses rather than their reduction (Chapter 14). It even facilitates their management, since products that are nearing their use-by date are now given to food aid non-profits, which thus become responsible for managing the food that can no longer be distributed because it has expired. Not only do supermarkets no longer have to manage unsold products, but they also benefit from tax breaks as a result.

Second, food aid fails to establish territorial cohesion between local producers’ supply and the demand of eaters in vulnerable situations, and instead favours long supply chains which, on the surface, are cheaper and have better-organized logistics:² logistical constraints drive non-profits to turn to the largest organizations rather than multiple smaller ones. The system thus tends to favour the largest players.

Finally, the tax break is not targeted based on the products supplied: this leads to an imbalance in the range of products received, with a prevalence of long-life processed foods at the expense of fresh products. As a result of these constraints, food aid is often deemed to be of insufficient nutritional quality (Darmon et al., 2020), which can worsen health situations already made fragile by recipients’ living conditions.

¹ In 2016, the website of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Forestry stated that ‘food aid both addresses social justice issues and contributes to the fight against food waste’.

² Ibid.

A degrading and moralizing framework?

For the past thirty years, French political discourse has tended to emphasize the individual responsibility of those in precarious situations. So-called welfare approaches are often denounced as being too costly and unable to sufficiently motivate individuals to take action to improve their situation (Chemin, 2017). From this individualizing perspective, people in precarious situations are considered in terms of deficits: of means, of skills, of will and so on. Such social representations weigh on these individuals and conceal the multiple steps they take to fight food insecurity (including resorting to food aid but not only): restricting consumption (particularly in the case of mothers prioritizing their children), establishing a hierarchy of spending, fragmenting purchases to avoid having stocks at home that are difficult to control, choosing products that are primarily filling and cutting out 'treats', identifying special offers requiring high mobility, choosing specific (discount) shops, preparing food at home and turning down invitations and avoiding restaurants (Masullo and Dupuy, 2012).

Although taking up food aid appears to be indispensable when the tactics implemented are no longer enough, it is generally not experienced positively. Many accounts reveal the degrading feeling that comes from resorting to food aid (Ramel et al., 2016). Moreover, the food aid received is not always enough or suited to the recipients' needs. When the products come from individual donations, collected at the doors of supermarkets, for example, they are often the cheapest products, of poor culinary or taste quality; donors implicitly consider that quantity should be prioritized over quality. The products may also simply not meet the customs (e.g. cultural practices) or preferences (e.g. tastes) of the beneficiaries.

Thus, individuals in precarious situations are not entirely free to use the aid they receive as they wish, at the risk of exposing themselves to a form of moral judgement. First, they are expected to take 'what there is' or, rather, 'what is left'. Second, what they receive 'belongs' to society, which intends to define its proper use (Colombi, 2020). There is claimed to be a hierarchy of needs to follow (Maslow, 1943), according to which biological needs, the most vital, must first be met before attending to those deemed less fundamental, such as the need for belonging, esteem or self-actualization. Thus, beneficiaries are expected to use food first and foremost to address their health needs, which are considered a priority precisely because they are more fragile, even if the food offered does not suit their habits or tastes. This primary focus on the health of the poor is also

reflected in the dissemination of top–down information on nutritional quality and how to prepare products, the relevance of which has been challenged given its potentially infantilizing nature (Le Morvan and Wanecq, 2019).

The ‘horse lasagne’ case offers a good illustration in this regard. After these lasagnes were withdrawn from the market for misleading consumers (they were sold as beef lasagnes), they were offered to food aid organizations on the grounds that they presented no health or nutritional risk, that no one had noticed a difference in taste and that it was important not to waste. If the product became unworthy of consumption by anyone, it could still be consumed by the poor, thus denying their right to eat like everyone else and depriving them of their dignity.

In summary, critics of food aid stress its consequences on health (deficiencies, malnutrition), socialization and self-esteem (loss of dignity, parental guilt). In fact, once minimum nutritional needs are met and hunger is quelled, other needs, especially the need for belonging and social interaction, become crucial. As a Senegalese proverb says, ‘the poor are not those who have nothing, but those who have no one’. Eating like everyone else, that is, what everyone else eats, is fundamental, even if not all nutritional needs are met, as shown in refugee camps (Reed and Habbicht, 1998) and, more broadly, in the case of food aid in severely food-insecure countries (Barrett and Maxwell, 2007).

It is important to note that the strong sectorization of aid through places and frameworks ‘dedicated to the poor’ further exacerbates the stigmatization of ‘beneficiaries’. Likewise, the mode of functioning and the training of volunteers in food aid organizations have also been challenged. This is not to stigmatize these individuals in turn, nor to question their generosity and willingness to help, but to highlight the social relations and the relations of domination at work in society that inevitably play out in these spaces, and which can further contribute to recipients feeling degraded.

Towards new forms of food solidarity

As it stands, food aid does not generally promote people’s dignity, citizenship and autonomy. It would thus benefit from shifting towards a more horizontal way of operating, capable of implementing forms of ‘food justice’ (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). Beyond the transformation of food aid, fighting food insecurity therefore involves developing new forms of solidarity. In France, these are

enshrined in the *Code de l'action sociale et des familles* (Social Action and Family Code), which emphasizes emancipation, autonomy, social change, citizenship and the involvement of the persons concerned. Food solidarity can be rethought in light of these principles, in line with currents promoting social intervention in the collective interest to escape the biases of individualization (which is now largely prevalent in social work). If these are collective problems, the solutions must also be collective and inclusive in order to restore or foster individuals' agency. Based on this perspective, alternative ways of fighting food insecurity are multiplying in France, particularly within certain civil society networks, as well as among more activist and self-managed initiatives.

The fight against food insecurity must place the issue of the right to food at the centre to its thinking. This right, recognized by international law, is the right of every human being to feed themselves with dignity, whether by producing their own food or by buying it. Olivier De Schutter, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food from 2008 to 2014, defines this right as '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 ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear'. Although citizens' demands and initiatives surrounding food are multiplying as part of a movement known as 'food democracy' (Paturel and Ndiaye, 2020), research has shown the difficulty of articulating these emancipation movements with social justice issues, thereby sidelining the most economically fragile populations to the benefit of those with high social capital. The question of democracy therefore appears to be crucial for reflecting on access to food for people in precarious situations (Paturel and Ramel, 2017) but also for thinking about and promoting equal access to sustainable food for all, upstream of food aid.

Since the law for balanced trade relations in the agricultural and food sector and healthy, sustainable food accessible to all, known as the 'Egalim Law' (2018), the subject has started to be addressed politically through bodies, programmes and frameworks dedicated to the fight against food insecurity, with a view to ensuring access to quality food. However, these frameworks are often limited to food aid modernization processes (Paturel and Bricas, 2019). They are certainly necessary but not sufficient. Changing the way we respond to the problem of food insecurity is a necessity and is one of the levers likely to influence the evolution of food systems, economic models, modes of social intervention and social protection mechanisms.

Conclusion

Inequalities in access to food and the food insecurity to which they give rise thus appear to be a complex problem, which ought to be approached in connection with various issues: the right to food, the evolution of the food system towards greater sustainability, the reduction of inequalities and access to income, modes of social intervention and social protection frameworks and citizens' participation and democracy. Fighting food insecurity therefore involves mechanisms to restore people's freedom to choose, in socially mixed settings that do not stigmatize them and reintegrate them into the life of neighbourhoods or villages, where food is approached as a medium for relationships and not just as a source of nutrients. For example, community food centres are emerging in Canada and France. They are managed by local residents and combine various group purchasing, grocery and catering facilities with easy and solidaristic access to food chosen collectively. They also allow people to learn food-related trades, gardening and cooking. Food social security, a credit system for all allowing access to democratically chosen products financed through social contributions (Chapter 22), is also an avenue under consideration for the implementation of a true right to sustainable food (Paturel and Ndiaye, 2020). These new forms of solidarity could lead to food aid becoming a marginal supplement reserved for emergency situations only.

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