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Role of food waste as a resource of power: an ethnographic case study of food aid restructuring

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines how food donations are used as a power resource in Finnish food charity, and how the restructuring of food aid impacts the quantity and quality of the food distributed. It highlights changes at the organizational level and explains (un)expected outcomes of the restructuring.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected using ethnographic fieldwork in two independent case studies in Finland. These compare an independently operating food bank and a restructured surplus food terminal surrounded by a network of satellite points and were analysed through structuration theory.

Findings – The study reveals how closely power and food are interlinked in charitable food systems and how the power positions have changed during the restructuring. The restructuring significantly reduced the unwanted fringe effects of food charity and improved the safety of donations. However, it resulted in the loss of most donors and therefore failed to achieve its goal of recovering food waste.

Originality/value – The study makes a novel theoretical contribution by being the first to analyse food as a power resource through the lens of structuration theory, specifically in the context of the restructuring of food aid practices.

Keywords Charity, Ethnography, Structuration theory, Restructuring, Donation, Food waste

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

The provision of food aid in Finland has evolved in an exceptionally fragmented way, operating outside of the national democratic social policy process and decision-making and without coherent regulation. Run by various non-governmental or faith-based organizations and parishes, food charity is based on individual and local food banks that receive and distribute donations to needy people. In contradiction to the Nordic welfare state principles of equality, universalism and strong democracy, it has become a last-resort response to food insecurity and inadequate public sector services (e.g. Silvasti and Karjalainen, 2014).

Since 2015, food aid has been restructured in line with the German Tafel model (see Kessl and Schoneville, 2021), with the first centralized surplus food terminal being established in Vantaa, where the donations in the area are collected and then distributed to collaborative food banks (see Section 3.1). In addition to being affected by the national reorganization of social and health services, it faced mounting pressure due to various crises in the 2020s, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and inflation. The new government programme, published in the summer of 2023, proposes a wide range of cuts to social security, which are expected to significantly alter the direction of Finnish social policy (THL, Finnish Institute for Welfare and Health, 2023). Notably, the public sector is consolidating food aid funding for the first time. These ongoing changes in the political climate, which appear to be leading to a shrinking of the welfare state, form the background for this research.

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The sociopolitical framework of this study leans on the three primary goals established for food aid: poverty alleviation, food waste recovery and social inclusion promotion (Tikka, 2019). Food waste recovery and related environmental issues are integral to the public food aid debate, when commonly associated with a win–win structure, whereby food that would otherwise end up as waste is provided to people unable to obtain enough food from the primary market. However, the idea is ethically unsustainable and fails to address the root causes of inadequate livelihoods and overproduction of food (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2018; Salonen and Silvasti, 2019). In this research, food waste is considered an essential resource of power during the restructuring of food aid provision under a shifting political climate.

The research questions of the article are:

(1) How is food waste used as a power resource before and after the restructuring of food charity?

(2) What impact does the restructuring have on the quantity and quality of the food distributed?

I examine the utilization of food waste as a power resource through two ethnographic fieldwork periods, using participant observation and informal discussions carried out while volunteering, which offers a valuable perspective for examining the reform's impact on food aid. Data were gathered at two different food aid sites in a single Finnish municipality, one before the food aid restructuring and another after:

Case 1: In 2021, at a typical food bank in the Finnish food aid landscape. It operated independently, relying on its network of donors. Donated food was collected directly from donors and distributed to the recipients without intermediaries.

Case 2: In 2023, at a centralized surplus food terminal established in the same area as the food bank. All food donations were transported to the terminal, sorted, repacked and delivered to satellite points. The terminal also directly distributed food to recipients weekly on-site.

This ethnographic case study provides a thorough analysis, informed by structural theory (Giddens, 1979, 1984), of restructuring's outcomes in the local charitable food aid sector. Particular attention is given to the exercise of power through the control of resources, specifically, food. The quality and quantity of food distribution is also explored via the duality of structure and agency to understand the potential of food aid initiatives in addressing food waste recovery.

This article starts with contextualization of the position of food charity in Finnish society, followed by the theoretical framework and presentation of data and analysis. The results are presented chronologically following the process of restructuring, concluding within the concepts of domination, legitimation and signification, understood in the Giddensian sense as social structures.

2. The goals set for food aid

2.1 Poverty alleviation and social inclusion promotion

Unlike in other wealthy Western countries, where food aid has been based on the aim of managing surplus food stocks and poverty relief (Riches, 1986), Finnish food aid has primarily been seen as a remedy to alleviate poverty since its inception during the country's deep economic recession in the early 1990s (Karjalainen, 2008). At the time, food aid was intended as temporary emergency assistance rather than as a permanent transfer of responsibility from the welfare state to the third sector. Simultaneously, Finland was the only Nordic country participating in EU emergency food distribution since 1996 (Riches and Silvasti, 2014), being one of the first signs that food aid had gained a firm foothold in Finnish society. However, the public sector has been unwilling to coordinate food aid, leaving the responsibility for organizing it to the third sector. Consequently, the field has expanded in a mostly unregulated and highly fragmented way, separate from statutory social services and without national guidelines (Salonen *et al.*, 2018).

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At the turn of the millennium, minimum supplementary benefits in Finland were repeatedly proven to be too low for longer-term adequate living (Finnish Government, 2023a). Charitable food aid was seen to provide emergency relief for immediate needs, but no real solution to the root causes of poverty (Riches and Silvasti, 2014). This criticism was quickly subsumed when the question of ecological sustainability as a form of food waste recovery joined the public debate (Silvasti and Tikka, 2020).

In the 2010s, the goal of promoting social inclusion began to emerge. Alongside food and other material assistance, food aid recipients increasingly started to be offered a range of social and health services and service counselling. This change followed the European-level development of the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) from a food surplus programme into a social inclusion programme, when it expanded its scope to the commonality, activation and agency of food aid recipients (see Greiss *et al.*, 2020; Ohisalo, 2017).

2.2 Food waste recovery

FAO (2013, 2015) defines food waste as food appropriate for human consumption removed from the food supply chain, regardless of whether it is kept beyond its expiry date or left to spoil. Mostly, food waste occurs at the retail and consumer level, occurring by choice or because of negligence due to oversupply of markets, poor stock management or consuming and eating habits. Surplus food refers to food produced beyond actual need, leading to food waste (Papargyropoulou *et al.*, 2014). The latter is often used in the context of food charities, but the terminology is overlapping and location-specific (e.g. EU-FLW, EU Platform on Food Losses and Food Waste, 2019).

The goal of combining food waste reduction with food aid became widespread in Finland in the early 2010s, much later than in other Western countries. Updated safety regulations made donating food a more straightforward process, and public discussions about food waste prevention as an environmental act became common (Tikka, 2019). It has been noted (e.g. Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2017; Riches, 2018) that the goal for food waste recovery has coincided with the policy shift from state-provided welfare to a more liberal welfare regime. Masking society's difficulties in providing for its citizens' basic needs as beneficial for deprived people and the environment distracts attention from the situation where food once defined as waste is deemed suitable for the charitable market and the poor. The problematic combination of food waste recovery and poverty alleviation corresponds to the "prevention paradox" (Messner *et al.*, 2020), where current practices of overproduction and overconsumption lead to prioritization of food waste management instead of its prevention.

In Finland, food chain operators have no legal obligation to donate their surplus food, nor do they receive tax deductions for donating, as they do, for example, in France or Portugal. At 1.3%, the food waste rates in Finnish grocery stores are low, but only a quarter is used for charitable purposes (Luke, Natural Resources Institute Finland, 2022). However, donating offers retailers an opportunity for brand empowerment in the name of corporate social responsibility and a route to eliminate unsaleable food. In addition, a relationship based on charitable donations can be skewed by the donor's right to donate poor-quality food and the limited right of food aid distributors to set standards for the quality of donations (Arcuri, 2019; Warshawsky, 2023).

The role of food aid has been challenging due to its reliance on volunteer work and charity alongside the withdrawal of the public sector from its statutory welfare responsibility (e.g. Doolan *et al.*, 2019). However, despite the overlapping sets of expectations and aspirations discussed in this section, food aid has gradually become institutionalized and socially accepted, even though it continues to face periodic criticism.

3. The current status of food aid

In the following sections, I delve into contemporary shifts within food aid. I examine the latest practical developments, the evolving political landscape and the changing funding

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mechanisms of food aid, while offering insights from two critical stakeholders regarding the future trajectories.

3.1 Charitable food provision in change

A recent report by Foodaid.fi (2024) states that more than 1,000 associations, organizations, parishes and other actors are estimated to distribute food aid in more than two-thirds of municipalities in Finland, and between 100,000 and 200,000 people receive aid annually. Due to recurrent states of emergency, food aid operators reported increased recipient numbers for the fourth consecutive year. Food prices and other living costs have risen significantly, pushing 60,000 new households into poverty by 2022 (Kela, Social Insurance Institution of Finland, 2022). The EU's material assistance FEAD ended in 2022, causing the termination of food aid provision in the smallest municipalities, along with a reduction in the availability of surplus food from local donors (Foodaid.fi, 2023a, b). In addition, the national restructuring of social and health services in 2023 has led to changes in how food aid providers previously worked with or received funding from the public sector.

The food aid providers have also restructured their operations. Today, there are about 15 surplus food terminals, mainly in the largest municipalities. In the centralized model, which is standard in Europe (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020), donated food is transported to a terminal to be sorted, repacked and sent to satellite points for recipients. Terminals are considered to offer better access to food aid, when even small providers can easily and safely access food for distribution (FRC, Finnish Red Cross, 2022). This restructuring is fundamentally changing the nature of Finnish food aid by making it a more consolidated extension of inadequate social security.

Without national cooperation or formal policies, food aid continues to be implemented using various approaches, from individually operating small-scale food aid providers to highly organized networks between 85 satellite points (e.g. the Shared Table in Vantaa). Some food banks set products visible by categories so that recipients can choose a certain number of them. Others offer their recipients pre-packed food parcels without any opportunity to choose. In this case study, food distributors used a hybrid model for these practices. Therefore, regional variation is high, which is exceptional compared to other Western countries. Being so dependent on external variables, the unregulated field is characterized by high volatility and uncertainty, making it difficult to guarantee continuity (e.g. Edmiston *et al.*, 2022).

3.2 Changing political climate

Food aid funding has been fluctuating and unstable, consisting of separate short and complementary grants from the private and public sectors. Municipalities commonly provide indirect forms of financial support, such as covering the costs of facilities and logistics (Foodaid.fi, 2023b). This uneven and location-specific practice changed in the spring of 2023 when a new government programme (Finnish Government, 2023b) proposed consolidating state-based financial support for third-sector food aid, for the first time in history. In 2023, €1,831,000 was allocated to organize food aid activities, and later increased to €2,900,000 for the following years (Finnish Government, 2023c; THL, Finnish Institute for Welfare and Health, 2024).

State-based funding is labelled as a tool to "strengthen social justice" by "ensuring permanent funding for food aid to help the most deprived and secure sustained development of such aid through Finnish parishes and organizations" (Finnish Government, 2023b, p. 248). Other expectations are also set for the consolidation of food aid funding (Finnish Government, 2023c).

(1) Organize food aid activities as widely as possible nationwide.

(2) Improve target-oriented cooperation between municipalities and food aid operators to develop the field and reduce food waste.

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(3) Strengthen the link with regional welfare work to promote inclusion and reduce inequality, poverty, exclusion and discrimination. Cooperation with the well-being services counties is considered a requirement for funding, for example, via outreach or community social work.

(4) Respond to the Parliament's request for a more precise definition of food aid activities and improve the coordination of food aid to ensure continuity of services.

The goals presented in Section 2 can eventually be seen layered together to justify food charity. The consolidation of funding is considered an improvement for food aid's potential to help the deprived, despite the lack of coherence about its future development. The link between financial support and achieving the objectives presented is ethically challenging, as food aid does not address the root causes of deprivation.

Simultaneously, the government have promoted unprecedented austerity measures for social protection. The cuts will impact the unemployed, students and the already vulnerable the most, increasing the number of people eligible for minimum supplementary benefits by around 100,000 (THL, Finnish Institute for Welfare and Health, 2024). Reforms focusing on expenditure adjustments rather than tax increases and on the transfer of responsibility to the third sector emphasise the responsibility of individuals and families for their livelihoods. Poppendieck (2014), Riches and Tarasuk (2014) and Bruck and Garthwaite (2021) have illustrated the consequences of using food aid as a substitute for social security as being unfavourable. The institutionalization of food aid creates an image that solutions for food insecurity and insufficient livelihoods have been found and draws attention away from the policy programme or policy failures (Lambie-Mumford and Silvasti, 2020; Riches, 2011). Consolidating food aid funding marks a shift in the direction of social policy in Finland, a country typically included in the social democratic welfare regime (see Esping-Andersen, 1990).

4. Theoretical framework, methods and research venues

4.1 Data collection and analysis

In this case study, ethnographic fieldwork was used to investigate the interface of the institutionalization of charitable food aid and statutory last-resort livelihood support. It requires the researcher to participate, observe, question and collect available documents, by finding a role that suits the researcher as well as the subject (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). During both fieldwork periods, I played the dual role of volunteer and ethnographer (Augusto and Hilário, 2019), with access to the public and behind-the-scenes sides of the research venue.

As a volunteer, I participated in daily activities, including sorting donations into cold storage, repacking wholesale donations into smaller parcels, preparing food parcels to be sent to satellite points, checking client vouchers, distributing pre-packed parcels and providing free-choice items to recipients. As a researcher, I examined these everyday activities with a curious, open and critical mind, asking questions and taking notes. As a result of the spontaneous conversations, I identified key informants whose willingness to share their experiences proved invaluable. Their insights and my rigorous participant observation enabled me to gather unique material that would have been unattainable through other data collection methods. The research data consist of observations and written notes made during long-term fieldwork, which allowed me to build a narrative of the outcomes of restructuring. In addition, during Table 1, quantitative data on non-distributable donations were collected over two weeks.

Drawing on structuration theory, the analysis centres on the duality of structure and agency, with particular emphasis on the exercise of power through the control of resources (Giddens, 1979, 1984; Stones, 2005) – in this case, food. An individual's autonomy and collective actions are influenced by structures which are maintained and adapted through the exercise of agency, and simultaneously, agency has the power to change structures. Hence, structuration, that is the

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Table 1. Amount of non-distributable donations, by number of products and kilograms

Category	No. of products	Weight (kg)
1. Meat, chicken, fish	317	125.5
2. Ready meals	265	93.1
3. Salads and sandwiches	200	46.4
4. Cold cuts	183	46.2
5. Sausages	94	37.2
6. Vegan and vegetarian products	59	14.2
Total	1,118	362.8

Source(s): Authors' own work

creation and reproduction of social systems, lies in the interface of agency and structure. Power is understood as the transformative capacity that human agents possess based on their control over material or authoritative resources (Giddens, 1979, 1984; see also Dowding, 2008).

By studying the processes between the food donors and food aid providers as actors and the donation network as structures, I will expose how the restructuring of food distribution aligns with the goal of food waste recovery and assess the impact of this restructuring on the quantity and quality of the food distributed. Inductive analysis (e.g. O'Reilly, 2009), where the interpretations of the data were refined repeatedly during the study as knowledge of the field increased, is based on Giddens (1984)' presentation of social structures as signification, legitimation and domination. The focus is on exercising power through the control of resources, including the quantity and quality of donated food, and on the structuration of a centralized surplus food terminal. Food aid has enjoyed a strong halo effect in the public debate while being associated with previously described positive aspirations, partly without justification. Careful consideration has been given to ethical issues and reporting to avoid harming or hindering the food aid distributors or donors.

4.2 Description of cases

4.2.1 Case 1: food bank. The first fieldwork period occurred from February to June 2021, during which I spent about one day a week at the venue. In addition, I spent a two-week intensive period in May collecting data on non-distributable donations. The food bank was a typical Finnish food aid actor, organizing both the reception of food from donors and its distribution to the recipients. The food bank was run by a non-profit association, which employed a small paid staff, several vocational rehabilitation workers and volunteers. It had a network of around 20 donors, mostly grocery stores and wholesalers. Donations were collected by the food bank directly from the donors one to five times a week. At the food bank, donations were sorted into distributable and non-distributable goods; some were frozen for later use; and some were put out for immediate distribution. To receive a food parcel that cost two euros, recipients had to obtain a voucher from the social worker after explaining their economic situation. It was later found that some people had even incurred debts to pay for the parcels.

4.2.2 Case 2: surplus food terminal. After the first field period, the municipality where the research was conducted restructured food charities from individual food banks to the centralized terminal around which so-called satellite points are linked. The municipality and parish invited food aid providers to negotiate for taking the lead in establishing the new model. As the leading role was not given to the organization running the food bank in Case 1, and they were not willing to collaborate with the new terminal, the food bank closed.

The fieldwork for Case 2 started in the summer of 2023. From August to November, I usually spent two days every 2 weeks at the terminal. During the autumn, I also visited satellite points to better understand the area's current food distributor network. A similar

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association as in Case 1 runs the terminal, employing a few paid workers and more vocational rehabilitation workers, but no volunteers worked there during the fieldwork. The significant difference from the previous model is that the terminal does not offer pickup services for all donors, so donors mainly deliver food to the terminal, where donations are sorted, pre-packed and transported to the satellite points. The parcels are also distributed to recipients directly from the terminal weekly. A voucher needed to be obtained from a local deacon to claim a food parcel, which became free after the restructuring.

5. Case 1: food waste recovery before restructuring

To answer research questions on food waste as a power resource before and after the restructuring and that process's subsequent impact on the quantity and quality of the distributed food, I systematically observed and later compared the content and amount of the food distributed to recipients, both in the food bank of Case 1 and the surplus food terminal of Case 2. To explain the differences, I utilized a step-by-step inductive analysis of details to identify major changes occurring in the data. The results are presented chronologically below. Structural theory and especially viewing resources – in this case, food – as power offered a theoretical starting point for the interpretations. Changes included the practice of donating food in non-distributable condition and the loss of food donors, which eventually led to a decrease in food waste donations, and therefore, food waste recovery.

5.1 Distributed food in the food bank

In Case 1, in 2021, the food bank received both surplus food and food suitable to be sold on the primary market as donations. The latter type came from a retail company looking to participate in charity work but was not willing to have their name visible on the food distributor premises or social media. To respect this wish and minimize the inconvenience to participants of this research, no identifiers will be published in this article. The products were delivered to the food bank directly from the company's distribution centre, bypassing the retail market. Around three to four Euro-pallets were donated to the food bank once or twice a week. These contained saleable batches of highly processed, low-cost products with long expiry dates, mainly ready meals, meat and dairy products, all of which did not seem to be food waste. The company's sustainability report confirmed the donation of edible but no longer saleable products to local food charities without mentioning that it also donated products still suitable for the retail market. Even for the food bank, it was unclear on what basis products were donated, who ultimately made decisions about donations, and when the donations differed from the rest of the logistical chain.

In Case 1, the recipient obtained a pre-packed parcel usually consisting of six to eight saleable donation products: for example, a ready meal, a package of stuffed tortellini, a tub of margarine, a small block of cheese, two yoghurts and two salami snacks. The parcel was complemented with free-choice products from other donors. These supplementary products came from around 20 donors, consisting of an unforeseen assortment of food waste products, such as bread, fruits, vegetables, dairy and non-perishable products like dry and canned food. Some donated frozen meat products or ready meals, which were set aside and distributed to recipients once or twice a month. Often, there were enough products from each product category to distribute. The amount of bread was often excessive, and recipients could take as much as they needed. These products usually doubled the pre-packed parcel's content, allowing recipients to supplement it according to their preferences. All these products were donated as food waste since the best-before date had passed or the package was damaged, making them inappropriate for the retail market.

5.2 Non-distributable donations

The Finnish Food Authority (FFA, Finnish Food Authority, 2017) published the first food donation guidelines in 2013 and updated them in 2017 and 2024 to clarify donation practices

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and responsibilities to reduce food waste. Considering Giddens' structuration theory (1984), where social structures are presented as signification, legitimation and domination, the FFA was positioned in a hierarchical structure, above donors and food aid distributors (i.e. in a dominant position), and exercises its power over these actors by introducing guidelines intended to structure and formalize unregulated practices of surplus food donation. Guidelines cover self-monitoring, food transport, storage and facility requirements to ensure donations are suitable for human consumption, do not risk human health or mislead the consumer. Each actor in the donation chain is responsible for the safety of the products. Products marked with expiry dates should not be donated to or received by food banks after expiration since the date refers to the time until which the product is safe to consume. The exception is if the product is frozen by the latest expiration date and distributed to a recipient within two months. Despite the guidelines, the food bank in Case 1 received many donations that were past their expiry date but not frozen and, therefore, in non-distributable condition for food aid recipients.

For two weeks, I collected data on non-distributable donations, including products (a) that were marked with an expiry date, (b) for which the expiry date had passed and (c) that had not been frozen. Products with a best-before label (bread, dry, and dairy), without labelling (fruits and vegetables), or that were frozen were excluded since they were generally distributable to recipients. I classified non-distributable products into six categories, presented in Table 1. The total number of products over ten consecutive working days was 1,118, weighing a total of 363 kg.

The main part of the non-distributable donations comprises meat, chicken, and fish, which are relatively high-value economically and nutritionally but not highly processed. The second largest category is ready meals, which are easy to consume, especially for recipients who might not have the resources to prepare food from scratch. The food bank had a written contract with every donor, mentioning FFA's donation guidelines for products labelled with an expiry date. In addition to non-distributable items, a large amount of inedible food, especially fruit and vegetables, was donated to the food bank. Staff had noticed that the amount of inedible donations correlated with certain employees at the donating retailers. One day, consumable donations would be packed neatly, and the next day, everything would be squashed by unorganized packing and smeared with rotten fruit.

Therefore, the donors, as actors, did not perceive the FFA's guidelines as legitimate in practice and knowingly choose to disregard them. However, excessive pressure on donors and criticism of them was avoided to guarantee that collaboration continued, and the inconsistent practice persisted despite cautious proposals from staff for improvements. In the end, ownership of the critical resource, food, gave donors a dominant position over food banks, to act against the guidelines, knowing that food would not end up with food aid recipients. Due to the lack of legitimation of guidelines, these non-distributable products formed a kind of "black market" as a fringe effect behind the scenes at the food bank by being free for staff to take. Unfortunately, it led to a slippery slope, and staff often took products suitable for food aid recipients as well. The staff's access to donations also had an occasional impact on the output of the food bank, with more products being distributed to recipients known to the staff. This practice created an unequal setting between the staff and the recipients, as the staff members were in position to use food as a power resource for themselves, for near friends and relatives or chosen recipients.

A substantial amount of food was available for staff, who were working part-time and most likely receiving the social services they were entitled to, while parcels for food aid recipients in the most vulnerable situations might be meagre. Eventually, some non-distributable products were discarded, meaning the food bank ended up indirectly covering part of the donor's waste management fees. From the perspective of food aid staff, non-distributable products were not considered only to be problematic in the venue. Most food bank staff were volunteers or rehabilitation workers, so receiving high-value goods was considered acceptable compensation for their efforts. This might decrease the staff's willingness to ensure the food bank receives fewer non-distributable products. If these products were donated in

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distributable condition, for example, at their expiry date or frozen by then, they would make for 70–90 more food parcels per week and 3,600–4,700 more per year to deliver to the recipients in need.

This description of the non-distributable donations explains the baseline situation before the restructuring. The terminal's decline in non-distributable donations after the restructuring is one factor why many donors were later lost, affecting the content of the food parcels distributed from the terminal. In addition, non-distributable food plays a major role in the fringe effects occurring at the research venue. Thus, these food donations as power resource fundamentally shaped the food bank's operations, even if they were not publicly visible to recipients at the venue.

6. Case 2: loss of food waste after restructuring

In 2023, two years after the first fieldwork period, the restructured surplus food terminal aimed to gather all the area's donations and distribute them equally to collaborative satellite points. Weekly, the terminal also distributed food directly to recipients. In this section, I provide an analysis grounded on structural theory, based on ethnographic observation, to examine how the content of the distributions differed from that of Case 1.

6.1 Loss of donors

Soon after the food aid was restructured around the surplus food terminal, most donors who had been working with the food bank in Case 1 ended their collaboration. Fieldwork, including participant observation and informal discussions with terminal staff, proposed several reasons for this outcome.

Firstly, food waste in the retail market decreased between the two fieldwork periods. Retailers nationally renewed their ordering systems to make their order quantities more accurate. Buying soon-to-expire products with discounted prices has become popular among consumers in all income brackets due to inflation and increased food prices (PTYFinnish Grocery Trade Association, 2023). This development is nationwide in Finland, with 71% of 195 food distributors across the country reporting that the amount of food waste or surplus donations has decreased (Foodaid.fi, 2023b).

Secondly, the logistics of donations changed after restructuring. In Case 1, the food bank collected donations from the donors according to their preferences, from one to five times a week. In contrast, the terminal did not offer a donation pickup. Delivering donations to the terminal would require time and a suitable vehicle from the donor, which might be considered too labour-intensive and unprofitable.

Thirdly, according to the FFA's guidelines, the terminal refused to receive non-distributable or inedible products. Moreover, donations are expected to be packed properly during transportation and handling to improve the usability of donations. The new criteria set by the terminal differ remarkably from the practice in Case 1. The poor usability of donations is a common challenge in food aid (see also Mossenson *et al.*, 2024; Tarasuk and Eakin, 2005), and the terminal's strict policy was exceptional compared to the previous model.

Fourthly, terminating the pickup service and setting higher requirements for the quality of donations reduced the economic benefit donors received from the collaboration. Discussions with food bank staff during Case 1 suggest that financial benefit is an essential motivation for donors. The opportunity to donate non-distributable and even inedible products, without having to use resources for transporting the donations, was an efficient way for retailers to decrease their waste management fees. The reduction of economic benefits, combined with other reasons, had led to the decision to end the collaboration.

As a result of these external and internal changes, the amount of donors decreased from approximately 20 regular donors to around five, regardless of the increased number of recipients due to the growing network of satellite points. This has led to a decrease in food

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waste donations, which are crucial for the food charities' goal of food waste recovery. The terminal's strict policy represents a significant departure from practices in Case 1, yet the power to donate food rests entirely with the donors, with profit taking precedence over charity.

6.2 Distributed food in the surplus food terminal

The food retail company presented in Case 1, which donated saleable food as a charitable act, continued donating after restructuring as well. By delivering as many as 12 pallets weekly to the terminal, the company compensated for the decline in food waste donations. However, the number of pallets fluctuated, and there were times when the food parcels distributed to recipients were extremely sparse. At the terminal, saleable donations were placed on tables instead of in pre-packed parcels. Recipients packed the parcels themselves, meaning they could leave behind anything they found unsuitable or choose between, for example, different flavours. The content of these saleable company donations has remained unchanged from Case 1. The parcel included five to eight products, mainly ready meals, and meat or dairy products with long expiry dates.

The terminal regularly received food waste products from around five donors, and erratically from a few more. Bread and fresh products were provided by only two donors, meaning the available amount was significantly lower than it was in Case 1. The supplementary products, which previously doubled the content of food parcels, were typically limited to one fresh item and one to two loaves of bread per recipient. Sometimes, the quantity of these products was insufficient to provide one for each recipient. Food waste donations of dairy, non-perishable or frozen goods were so meagre that they were distributed erratically, mainly to replace products that ran out during food distribution.

To summarize, the chain of fringe effects through the lens of food as a power resource began in Case 1 when donors collaborated with the food bank by providing non-distributable and inedible products, which were accepted to maintain the partnership, and as such donations were perceived to benefit the food bank staff. However, the movement of power along with the donated food created an unequal dynamic both within the food bank and with the food aid recipients.

In Case 2, following a restructuring, the food terminal attempted to shift the power dynamics by requiring donors to comply with the guidelines set by the FFA. Although the terminal's requirement was legitimate, the donors ultimately ended the collaboration when their conditions for donating were not met. The decline in economic incentives contributed to the termination of the partnership, and donors will likely seek new collaborations outside of the food terminal to retain more power. Interpreting food as a resource of power suggests that financial benefit is a key motivator for donors, not charity as an intrinsic value.

7. Conclusion

In this ethnographic case study, I examined how food waste is used as a power resource before and after the restructuring of food charity, as well as how restructuring has impacted the quantity and quality of the food distributed, to highlight the complex dynamics and bidirectional outcomes that emerged after the restructuring of food aid provision.

From the perspective of structuration theory (e.g. Giddens, 1984), the interaction between food aid actors is a dynamic process in which social structures are both the medium and the outcome of agency. Here, the concept of food as a resource of power comes into play in multiple ways. First, donors bypassed the Finnish Food Authority's (FFA) donation guidelines to offload unsalable products, and most likely, to reduce their waste management fees. Second, non-distributable goods, which often consisted of valuable and sought-after products, created a form of internal "black market", while being not fit for distribution and were made available for staff consumption. Over time, this blurred boundary allowed staff to take distributable products as well, effectively redirecting aid from its intended recipients. Here, food became a

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mechanism of control and privilege, not just over logistics but over vulnerable recipients. Third, the food bank, being dependent on donor goodwill, hesitated to enforce regulations or criticize the donors, fearing both the loss of donations and restricted access to the informal "black food market". This multilevel dynamic can be seen as an exploitation of the charity-based relationship, echoing concerns raised by De Boeck *et al.* (2017) about the potential misuse of such partnerships.

The actors in Case 2 were willing to detach themselves from these fringe practices. The terminal's attempt to restructure donation practices, combined with several simultaneous external changes, led to the end of cooperation with most donors. Thus, the aim to increase legitimacy and regulation ironically undermined operational effectiveness by alienating key stakeholders, and control over food as a resource of power remains with the donors. The loss of donors led to a significant reduction in both the quantity and qualitative diversity of food available at the terminal. The nutritional quality of food aid declined as fewer perishable and protein-rich items were available.

Some significant benefits also emerged from the restructuring. This study underscores the improvement in food safety, made by the terminal as it implemented stricter quality control measures to reject non-distributable or inedible donations, while simultaneously accepting the risk of losing the donors. This also reduced fringe effects that previously plagued the system, making operations more equitable and transparent. The transition away from pre-packed parcels allowed recipients collecting food directly from the terminal to make more personalized choices, being highly valued by recipients and linked to increased dignity and autonomy (e.g. Caspi *et al*., 2021). Moreover, the accessibility to food aid had improved due to the satellite points. The restructuring aimed and to some extent succeeded in creating new significance; a new narrative of signification (Hermwille, 2016), which redefined the meaning and guiding principles of food aid delivery.

In summary, while FFA exercises domination by standardizing food donation practices with guidelines, donors, as agents, do not internalize these rules as legitimate and act according to their interests and acquired narrative, a signification, of acceptable practices. Donors, in turn, exercised domination by occupying a hierarchically superior position relative to charitable actors. This power dynamic was intended to be transformed when the surplus food terminal seized the opportunity to legitimize the FFA's guidelines to restructure the relationship between donors and charitable organizations and reform the signification. Similarly, staff members, as agents, will either challenge or reinforce existing structures through their everyday practices. In this case, they lost the power delivered to them with non-distributable food due to the restructuring.

A key shift between Cases 1 and 2 was the increased reliance on charitable donations rather than waste food, making the system more unstable as the expanding food aid network came to depend on fewer donors. Future research is needed to examine how the government's goal of ensuring the continuity of food aid services will be achieved, as the restructuring is a recent development. Food charities' foundation on food waste becomes insecure if new forms of donations, such as surplus from public catering, e.g. school meals, are not better utilized. Overall, the current goals of charitable food aid will prove unsustainable if it lacks the resources to effectively alleviate hunger and poverty.

Achieving the goals set for food aid demands a critical reassessment of how restructuring is implemented. As food waste decreases and donors withdraw, food aid risks drifting away from its original purposes of poverty relief and waste recovery. Food aid resembles a bar of soap: just when it seems to be within reach, it slips away. The restructured model may be fairer and more transparent, but it no longer aligns with the goal of food waste recovery. And while food aid was never meant to replace public social protection, the introduction of state funding marks a turning point. Though recipient numbers in Finland remain low by international standards, the shift carries significant symbolic weight, as it undermines one of the most fundamental social rights at the core principles of the social rights: the human right to food.

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