

## Do Challenges in the Accessibility of Welfare Services Explain the Need for Food Aid?

Joakim Zitting , Varpu Wiens , and Sakari Kainulainen 

RDI Services, Diaconia University of Applied Sciences, Finland

**Correspondence:** Joakim Zitting ([joakim.zitting@diak.fi](mailto:joakim.zitting@diak.fi))

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### Abstract

The accessibility of welfare services is important for vulnerable groups. Reliance on charitable food aid has increased markedly across Europe in recent years, largely due to austerity policies and gaps in the welfare state. One such gap is the non-take-up of benefits and services, which undermines the social policies' effectiveness. This short note presents findings from a Finnish survey of food aid recipients ( $N = 942$ ). The results indicate that many recipients never received the services they needed, such as social assistance, healthcare, or social worker support. Moreover, a substantial number reported needing a service but never applied for it. The findings are discussed in relation to the five dimensions of accessibility and existing research literature, suggesting that accessibility issues may be present across all five dimensions. These preliminary observations should be further examined in future studies to provide stronger evidence for improving the accessibility of welfare services. The public social security and welfare service system should be sufficiently accessible so that the need for food aid would not arise.

### Keywords

accessibility; disadvantage; food aid; welfare services

### 1. Introduction

Charitable food aid has spread and become established in the institutions of Europe's welfare states (Hermans et al., 2024). This holds true in Finland, where approximately 200,000 people annually, or about 3.6% of Finland's population, rely on charity-based food aid (Zitting & Kainulainen, 2023). Reliance on food aid offers deeper insight into hidden health and social problems and reflects poor performance and gaps in the welfare state (Loopstra, 2018; Ohisalo et al., 2015).

It is generally assumed that people facing difficulties seek help and support for their challenges. While the public sector offers various benefits and services, these may not be sufficient or may never be sought. For example, the non-take-up of social security benefits undermines the effectiveness and fairness of social policies, but the extent of non-take-up is considerable across countries (Bennett, 2024; Hermans et al., 2024). This is one factor leading to reliance on food aid.

While the non-take-up of social security benefits has been actively studied (e.g., Bennett, 2024), different services are also an important part of the welfare state. This speculative short note examines the use of public services among food aid recipients. The presented survey data provide an overview of the services food aid recipients felt they needed but did not seek. Based on this overview and other studies, service accessibility is discussed by structuring it through five accessibility dimensions: physical, economic, institutional, informational, and experiential (Vanjusov, 2022). This short note aims to explore service accessibility through the lens of one vulnerable group and presents hypotheses for future studies aimed at enhancing the accessibility of welfare services.

## 2. Rising Reliance on Charitable Food Aid

Charitable food aid has established its position in helping the most disadvantaged in Europe. The reasons for this include gaps in social security and service systems and a lack of political will to address poverty-producing gaps (Ghys, 2018; Hermans et al., 2024; Salonen & Silvasti, 2019). In high-income countries, a growing need for food aid has warned of economic downturn and gaps in social security systems and is linked to welfare reforms and austerity policies (Lambie-Mumford & Silvasti, 2020; Loopstra, 2018).

Austerity policies refer to the increasing role of the third sector and charitable organizations in welfare states (Hermans et al., 2024; Lambie-Mumford & Silvasti, 2020). This is also seen in Finland, where food aid is mainly charity-based, done by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and various religious or non-governmental organizations (Salonen et al., 2018; Salonen & Silvasti, 2019). In recent years, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has allocated funds to develop the food aid system, and this funding has now been institutionalized. This increase in the state's role as a funder reflects the gradual acceptance of charitable food aid as part of the Finnish welfare state.

At least 200,000 people in Finland rely on food aid annually, and the need for food aid continues to grow (Zitting & Kainulainen, 2023). The group of food aid recipients is diverse, among them individuals experiencing temporary financial difficulties, as well as those who have relied on food aid for several years. A large number are either unemployed or retirees, living alone in rental apartments, and earning very low incomes. Many recipients experience accumulated financial, health, and social difficulties (Ohisalo et al., 2015; Salonen et al., 2018). The problems of the welfare state are reflected in the fact that this group does not receive enough support from the public service system and must rely on charity.

## 3. Use of Services Among Food Aid Recipients

This short note utilizes survey data collected from Finnish food aid recipients in late 2021. The survey questionnaire explored the recipients' well-being, their reasons for seeking food aid, and their use of benefits and services. In total, 942 responses were collected from various locations across Finland.

The respondents' average age was 60 years. Most were women and recipients of disability or old-age pensions, but young people, unemployed individuals, and families with children also participated.

Table 1 presents the response distributions to the question about the use of services. A clear majority of respondents had received healthcare services. Nearly half had received services from the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela). The frequent use of church services is attributable to the fact that many food aid points are maintained by church organizations. One-third of the respondents had received basic income support, the last-resort financial benefit of the social security system. Nearly 30% of respondents had received social work and employment services.

**Table 1.** Response distributions to the question “Which of the following services have you needed, applied for, or used in 2021?” from the KoMa project's food aid survey ( $N = 942$ ).

	Received the service (%)	Applied for but did not receive the service (%)	Would have needed but did not apply for the service (%)	Did not need the service (%)
Health services	74.1	5.7	6.4	13.8
Services of the Social Insurance Institution of Finland	47.7	9.1	7.6	35.7
Services of church social work	42.5	2.8	10.4	44.3
Basic income support	32.1	12.1	10.8	45.0
Services of social work	29.5	6.4	11.8	52.3
Employment services	28.7	4.5	3.3	63.6
Housing services	17.7	6.5	6.6	69.5
Mental health services	13.6	5.5	9.2	71.7
Financial and debt counseling	10.3	4.7	13.1	71.9
Services for substance abusers	5.9	1.8	6.8	85.4
Informal care support	5.5	1.3	3.9	89.3

The option “applied for but did not receive the service” reflects the difficulties experienced in applying for services. For example, over 10% of respondents had applied for but did not receive basic income support, highlighting its means-tested nature. Nearly 10% had applied for but did not receive customer guidance and counseling services from the Social Insurance Institution of Finland. This may reflect the timing of the survey during the Covid-19 period when counseling services shifted to digital formats. However, in 2021, the Covid-19 situation was significantly calmer than in 2020, and face-to-face transactions were easier compared to the previous year.

An interesting response option is “would have needed but did not apply for the service.” Of respondents, 13% indicated they would have needed financial and debt counseling, likely due to poor awareness of these services; 12% reported needing social work services. This may stem from Finnish discussions about social and health services that focus predominantly on health services, leaving social services less visible and less known.

Nearly 11% of respondents felt they needed basic income support but did not apply for it, reflecting the non-take-up of social security benefits (Bennett, 2024). Regarding church diaconal services, it is noteworthy

that slightly over 10% of respondents felt they needed these services but did not apply. This may be due to misconceptions that one must be a church member to access these services.

It is important to note that the respondents were able to complete a four-page paper form questionnaire. However, the questionnaire was available only in Finnish, leaving the situation of non-Finnish-speaking food aid recipients unaddressed. Based on other studies, non-Finnish-speaking food aid recipients face greater difficulties in applying for services compared to Finnish speakers (e.g., Zitting et al., 2024). Thus, the non-application for services is likely far more common than the survey results indicate. Future studies should address these issues with more inclusive data collection.

## 4. Problems With Service Accessibility

The food aid survey did not explore the reasons behind these results. However, other studies may offer insights into factors affecting the accessibility of services. In the following, the five dimensions of accessibility—physical, economic, institutional, informational, and experiential (Vanjusov, 2022)—are examined and considered in terms of how they may manifest among food aid recipients.

### 4.1. Physical Accessibility

The physical accessibility of services refers to the accessibility of facilities, the usability of digital services, and the distances one must travel to receive the service (Vanjusov, 2022). For food aid recipients, it appears that distances to services influence whether services are sought. The results of the food aid survey have been analyzed elsewhere in more detail (Zitting & Kainulainen, 2024a), and one explanatory factor for not applying for services was the rural nature of the municipality.

This highlights the poor availability and accessibility of services in rural areas compared to cities. Individuals in poor economic situations and living in rural areas have reported challenges in traveling to social and health services (Aalto et al., 2022, p. 237). Face-to-face customer service has been reduced in rural municipalities, often requiring reliance on digital services.

Digitalization of services also affects physical accessibility. In Finland, official advice and transactions in public administration, including social and health services, are becoming increasingly digitalized. The digitalization of services and benefits is one reason why those in the weakest positions often find social and health services inadequate (Jokela & Kivipelto, 2021; Vehko et al., 2022).

Digitalization creates challenges for older people who lack skills in using digital services (Kemppainen et al., 2023). The average age of the food aid survey respondents was 60, which may help explain their not applying for services. Digitalization is also challenging for individuals who do not speak Finnish fluently. Poor Finnish language skills, lack of online banking credentials, and the complexity of the service system can prevent the use of digital public services, even when individuals are otherwise capable of using the internet (Kemppainen et al., 2023).

#### **4.2. Economic Accessibility**

Physical accessibility of services is closely linked to economic accessibility. Economic accessibility refers to the costs associated with accessing services, such as customer fees, travel expenses, and devices required for digital services (Vanjusov, 2022). For example, food aid recipients may lack the financial means for digital devices needed to apply for services or pay for travel expenses required to visit a face-to-face service.

#### **4.3. Informational Accessibility**

Informational accessibility of services—how clearly and through which channels information is communicated (Vanjusov, 2022)—is closely related to the non-application of services. Difficulty understanding the information provided about available services is a key reason for not applying (Cortis, 2012). Lack of information is also usually the starting point in analyzing the reasons for non-take-up of benefits (Bennett, 2024). For example, in the case of retirees, the lack of information about basic income support is one reason for not applying for it (Laihiala, 2019).

The service system cannot assume that everyone has the opportunity or energy to search through various channels for information on how to apply for different benefits and services. For example, immigrants may lack familiarity with the service system (e.g., Zitting et al., 2024). Attention to informational accessibility is crucial, as studies show that poverty and economic scarcity impair cognitive processing abilities. When individuals are preoccupied with acute financial difficulties and struggle to cover essential expenses, they have fewer resources to manage other matters. Economic scarcity weakens problem-solving abilities, information acquisition and assimilation skills, and future planning capabilities (Mani et al., 2013; Zhao & Tamm, 2018).

From this perspective, a complex support and service system can exacerbate challenges. People may recognize their need for a service but perceive the application process as overly difficult, or they may not even be aware of the service. Navigating the complexities of the system requires energy that many lack, and relying primarily on digital communication channels excludes some individuals. There is a need for clearer communication about the purposes and application processes of different benefits and services, as well as about individuals' rights to them.

#### **4.4. Experiential Accessibility**

Informational accessibility is partly linked to experiential accessibility, which refers to the reputation of services and individuals' previous negative experiences with them (Vanjusov, 2022). Individuals may avoid seeking services due to prior bad experiences or preconceived notions based on others' accounts (Salonen, 2023). Additionally, a service may have a poor reputation overall, leading individuals to avoid it out of fear that their use of the service will become known to others (Cortis, 2012; Vanjusov, 2022).

Experiential accessibility is likely a significant factor in the underuse of social services and income support. For example, retirees may find applying for basic income support more stigmatizing than seeking food aid, which can lead to non-take-up of the benefit and increased reliance on charity instead (Laihiala, 2019). In small towns, many individuals may feel ashamed to seek help from a social worker. By contrast, food aid

often allows individuals to act anonymously without having to justify their need for assistance, which lowers the threshold for seeking help. However, in small towns, even seeking food aid may carry a stigma, as it can be more conspicuous than in larger cities, where blending into large food queues is easier (e.g., Caplan, 2016).

#### **4.5. Institutional Accessibility**

Institutional accessibility refers to aspects related to the organization of services, such as the adequacy of staff, financial resources, and the structural organization of services (Vanjusov, 2022). For food aid recipients, how services are organized is particularly significant, raising questions about the cooperation between social and health services and other service providers. In a fragmented service system with many different actors, the specific needs of certain groups and the importance of multi-actor cooperation may go unrecognized (e.g., Cortis, 2012).

This issue cannot be left to the responsibility of those in need of services. As mentioned earlier, individuals may lack awareness of available social services or the energy to navigate the complexities of the system. If different services, such as health and social services, operate in silos, individuals are not guided from one service to another, and critical information about their challenges does not flow between providers.

Disadvantaged groups often require support from multiple sectors. Among food aid recipients, there is a high prevalence of multidimensional disadvantage, creating a need for diverse services (Ohisalo et al., 2015). An analysis of the food aid survey highlights that health services, rather than social services, are often crucial in the survival strategies of food aid recipients (Zitting & Kainulainen, 2024b). This finding underscores the importance of cross-sector collaboration.

### **5. Conclusion**

Interestingly, food aid is more accessible form of assistance than public services in certain aspects. It is distributed in almost all municipalities in Finland (Zitting & Kainulainen, 2022) without a complex application process or identification (e.g., Salonen & Silvasti, 2019). Additionally, the times and locations for food aid distribution are widely communicated through local media, store, and community bulletin boards, social media, and various websites. Food aid users also feel their encounters with food aid organizations are respectful and humane, unlike their experiences with faceless, remote public services (Salonen, 2023).

Food aid provides a simple and quick way to address acute crises. However, it does not permanently improve the situation. Conversely, the public service system has the potential to increase its accessibility by reaching out to food aid points. Outreach social work has been suggested as one way to connect with hard-to-reach groups who do not utilize available services (Cortis, 2012; Grymonprez et al., 2017). In some places, social workers and benefit advisors have been at food aid points offering information and help. Also, volunteers at food aid points can offer guidance for services and assist with complex paperwork (Caplan, 2016; Ghys, 2018; Hermans et al., 2024).

Still, it is crucial to promote the accessibility of the service system so that the need for charity-based food aid does not arise in the first place. Mapping the needs and reasons for food aid use can give valuable information

for enhancing the accessibility of the service system. This means that the considerations presented here should be tested empirically in further research combining both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Service use—and the potential reasons for not applying for services—should be more thoroughly examined through interviews with food aid recipients and others facing challenging life situations. These interviews could also help refine the questions used in future surveys, offering more detailed information about the prevalence of non-application and the background factors related to various aspects of accessibility. Future surveys should also consider different language groups and respondents with reduced physical ability to complete paper-based questionnaires. Not only services but research surveys as well should be as accessible as possible.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability

The research data are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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## About the Authors



**Joakim Zitting** (MSSc) works as a specialist at Diaconia University of Applied Sciences. He is interested in researching social and regional disadvantages and the integration of social and healthcare services.



**Varpu Wiens** has a PhD in Health Sciences and is interested in youth well-being, promoting inclusion and reducing inequalities, and the well-being effects of nature.



**Sakari Kainulainen** is an adjunct professor in sociology and social policy. He has studied the subjective well-being of different populations as well as regional disadvantages.