

The Danish Food Bank and Dan Church Social warn: Do not expect charity to cover welfare

For the past few months during the corona lock-down in Denmark, the Danish Food Bank has kept its cooling vans on the road. Just over half of our normal recipients - shelters, social cafés, and soup kitchens for homeless people and other vulnerable groups - keep the doors open on an emergency level so people can come for a daily meal. We also deliver food to a number of pop-up, temporary projects helping people keep hunger at bay from day to day. One of the Danish Food Bank's permanent partners is the social organization Dan Church Social, which helps homeless and people in need in 29 cities across Denmark. We feel it is important to convey what we see and hear among the most vulnerable citizens in these trying times.

First and foremost: We see that this crisis is hardest on those who are already in need. The few sources of income that homeless people rely on dry out quickly, and of the relatively few doors normally open to people of the street, about half are now closed. Fortunately, we have a strong civil society, and fortunately, about half of the usual shelters keep their doors open, if only for take away food.

Secondly, we see more people asking for help - people we usually do not hear from or perceive as part of the group of vulnerable citizens. They reach out to us, many of them on our social media platforms. We have received inquiries from citizens who at the end of the month must choose between buying food or medicine. The local places where you can usually get free (or at least very cheap food) are for the most part closed down. Dan Church Social's shelters have stayed open as emergency kitchens. It is quickly rumored that the Danish Food Bank and the shelters are still running, and then the inquiries roll in.

The Danish Food Bank turn potential food waste from the food industry into meals for the most vulnerable people in our society. We are by far the largest and most branched organization in our line of work in Denmark, and in recent years we have expanded our target group to include social housing areas and a number of schools where extra food is needed. However, we are having trouble keeping up with the societal development. About 100,000 households in Denmark have insecure access to food. To meet this need, we would need to multiply our activities by a factor 10. To be clear, that is neither a feasible nor a desirable solution in our view.

Dan Church Social works hard to create better structural conditions for the most vulnerable citizens in Denmark. Based on UN's Sustainable Development Goals, we are fighting to completely eradicate poverty and hunger in Denmark. In a welfare society such as ours, it is unheard of that 100,000 households are in such dire need that they are challenged on a regular basis to put food on the table. A problem of this magnitude cannot be solved with charity alone. The distribution of fresh surplus food makes good sense as part of the solution, but when we are in the hundreds of thousands of people, the problem of insecure access to food is too extensive for the Danish Food Bank and social organizations to handle alone.

Currently, because of the covid-19 crisis, the risk increases that the group of people with uncertain private finances will grow. If the group with insecure access to food grows by a few percentage points to e.g. 10 percent of the population, we are talking about roughly 580,000 people (Statistics Denmark, population figures, 1st quarter 2020). That is simply too many people to leave for charity in one of the world's richest and best welfare systems.

Worldwide, the United Nations Food Programme (WFP) reports on an increase in the number of people living in constant uncertainty of getting food on the table daily. The Global Foodbanking Network and FEBA (European Federation of Food Banks) concur with this general observation. Covid-

19 is more than a health crisis. It has become a social crisis pointing to imbalances in many communities and countries across the globe.

Solutions must be based on knowledge about the people who need help. It was 2015 when the latest study of this area was conducted in Denmark. The study is called *Food in Turbulent Times* and was carried out by researchers at the Department of Food and Resource Economics at the University of Copenhagen in collaboration with experts in nutrition and environmental sustainability at the Danish Technical University and *PlanMiljø*, an organization specializing in green solutions. The research project includes a questionnaire suitable for following up on the study to track development over time. A follow-up could be linked to other ongoing national surveys in Denmark, such as the National Health and Morbidity Surveys (SUSY), which is repeated periodically. We would be remiss to not seize the opportunity and follow up on the figures from 2015 as soon as possible to enable decision makers to act on complete and current data.

In recent weeks we have seen reports of thousands of individuals queuing at food banks in the United States. So far, we have not reached this level in Denmark. But we see a touch of it around the holidays – chiefly in the Christmas holidays – where there are queues at the food distributions at several voluntary initiatives. We cannot allow this to become an everyday scenario. And we should not kid ourselves that problems which run this deep can be overcome in the few days between Christmas and New Year. Action must be taken, and lasting solutions given, during all the many days between New Year and Christmas. It is painfully clear from the perspective of organized civil society that our welfare system needs an overhaul to address this issue properly. We stand ready with our volunteers, our insights into the issues at hand and with constructive ideas and solutions.

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