

# Subsidies to the Rescue

*The Funding of Poor Relief in Flemish Village Communities during the Crisis of the 1840s, a Comparative Analysis\**

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## Abstract

This article questions changes in the funding of local poor relief during the 1845-1848 food crisis in Flemish village communities. This will be studied comparatively between three distinct regions in Flanders: inner-Flanders, coastal Flanders, and the Waasland. In all three regions it was local relief institutions that increased their financial capacity in order to accommodate rising poverty, despite the long-term advance of nationalized welfare in the background. However, considerable regional differentiation could be detected in the nature and degree by which the funding strategies were adapted. This is explained by three interrelated factors: the direct impact of the food crisis, structural economic developments and the political organization of poor relief.

## Introduction

Local relief practices are increasingly stressed in historical debates on the long-term rise of social spending towards the late twentieth century welfare states.<sup>1</sup> As such, the point of departure has considerably been put forward in time, from the late nineteenth century to the pre-

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1 On the expansion of poor relief: A. de Swaan, *Zorg en de staat. Welzijn, onderwijs en gezondheidszorg in Europa en de Verenigde Staten in de Nieuwe Tijd* (Amsterdam 1989); P. Flore and A.J. Heidenheimer, *The development of welfare states in Europe and America* (New Brunswick 1981); C. Lis, H. Soly and D. Vandamme, *Op vrije voeten? Sociale politiek in West-Europa (1450-1914)* (Leuven 1985).

industrial period. Whereas in his two-volume book *Growing public*, Peter Lindert stated that social spending in Europe only really advanced from the 1880s onwards, Bas van Bavel and Auke Rijpma recently concluded that the levels of poor relief or social assistance realized in the pre-industrial period were already considerably higher than is often presumed.<sup>2</sup> Building on previous research by Maarten Prak and Marco van Leeuwen, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Daniëlle Teeuwen also stressed the increased capacity of poor relief on the local level in the pre-industrial Dutch Republic.<sup>3</sup> These scholars indicate the centrality of support offered by various private corporations, religious institutions and community networks, funded especially on voluntary terms within the local community and without the help of uniform national regulation. By contrast, in most nineteenth-century historiography the focus is on the progressive growth of public poor relief that is organized by the national government and especially financed by state taxes. By studying poor relief in Flemish village communities during the 1845-1848 food crisis, this article raises the opportunity to nuance the divide between the gradual growth of national social spending and the remaining importance of local poor relief practices in the nineteenth century. The article questions and explains the ways in which local poor relief institutions in Flanders financed rising poverty due to the impact of the crisis. By zooming in on a limited time frame, it becomes clear that, despite increasing national involvement, the financing of poor relief was still firmly embedded in local communities in the middle of the nineteenth century. Local authorities proactively adapted their poor relief institutions to the impact of the crisis and, more precisely, increased their financial capacity considerably, as opposed to assistance from the national government which was of minor importance.<sup>4</sup>

2 P. Lindert, *Growing public. Social spending and economic growth since the eighteenth century* (Cambridge 2004); B. van Bavel and A. Rijpma, 'How important were formalized charity and social spending before the rise of the welfare state? A long-run analysis of selected Western European cases, 1400-1850', *Economic History Review* 69 (2016) 159-187.

3 E. van Nederveen Meerkerk and D. Teeuwen, 'The stability of voluntarism. Financing social care in early modern Dutch towns compared with the English poor law, c. 1600-1800', *European Review of Economic History* 18 (2014) 82-105; M. Prak, 'Goede buren en verre vrienden. De ontwikkeling van onderstand bij armoede in Den Bosch sedert de Middeleeuwen', in: H. Flap and M.H.D. van Leeuwen (eds.), *Op lange termijn. Verklaringen van trends in de geschiedenis van samenlevingen* (Hilversum 1994) 147-170; M.H.D. van Leeuwen, 'Amsterdam en de armenzorg tijdens de Republiek', *Jaarboek voor Economische, Bedrijfs- en Techniekgeschiedenis* 59 (1996) 132-161.

4 On the importance of local relief practices as opposed to national support during the 1845-1848 crisis: E. Vanhaute, 'So worthy an example to Ireland. The subsistence and industrial crisis of 1845-1850 in

The analysis of periods of crisis can offer new insights in the development of poor relief since they tend to bring processes of change to the surface. Although far from being the only option, poor relief often plays an essential role as a coping strategy and its functioning and capacity can change considerably when dealing with rising pressure.<sup>5</sup> These shifts in the organizing of poor relief are no uniform process, however. Through a more complex understanding of crises scholars increasingly indicate that the characteristics and effectiveness of coping strategies such as poor relief could differ according to specific regional and local political, social and economic structures and institutions in place.<sup>6</sup>

Although research remains limited, some historians have already questioned how poor relief institutions reacted to crises with regard to their financial policies. In most studies, England serves as an exemplary case. Due to the work of Peter Solar, amongst others, it is presumed that the English poor relief system was exceptionally stable during times of rising poverty because it already relied on a uniform and tax-financed relief system during the pre-industrial period.<sup>7</sup> This is contrasted with poor relief on the continent where finances were more volatile and vulnerable since they relied mostly on voluntary or charitable donations. Recently, this stance has been criticized by several researchers in the Low Countries. Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Teeuwen have indicated for several Dutch cities that local poor relief institutions were able to strengthen their finances during periods of crises as well, even given their fragmented and unregulated character.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Thijs Lambrecht and Anne Winter stated that local poor relief institutions' highly divergent policies and practices were more developed and robust than is often presumed.<sup>9</sup> These

Flanders', in: C. Ó Gráda, R. Paping and E. Vanhaute (eds.), *When the potato failed. Causes and effects of the last European subsistence crisis, 1845-1850* (Turnhout 2007) 123-148.

5 J. Dijkman, 'Bread for the poor – poor relief and mitigation of the food crisis of the 1590s and the 1690s in Berkel, Holland', in: D. Collet and M. South (eds.), *Famines during the 'Little Ice Age' (1300-1800)* (Cham 2017) 171-193; Van Leeuwen, 'Amsterdam en de armenzorg'; J. Kelly, 'Scarcity and poor relief in eighteenth-century Ireland. The subsistence crisis of 1782-1784', *Irish Historical Studies* 28 (1992) 38-62.

6 D. Curtis and B. van Bavel, 'Better understanding disasters by better using history. Systematically using the historical record as one way to advance research into disasters', *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 34:1 (2016) 143-169; J. Dijkman, 'Coping with scarcity. A comparison of dearth policies in three regions in Northwestern Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries', *TSEG* 14:3 (2017) 5-30; E. Vanhaute, 'From famine to food crisis. What history can teach us about local and global subsistence crises', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 38 (2011) 47-65.

7 P. Solar, 'Poor relief and English economic development before the Industrial Revolution', *The Economic History Review* 48 (1995) 1-22.

8 Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Teeuwen, 'The stability of voluntarism', 82-84.

9 T. Lambrecht and A. Winter, 'Migration, poor relief and local autonomy. Settlement policies in Eng-

new insights remain limited to the pre-industrial period, before scholars generally describe the rise of centralized public social spending in the nineteenth century. Therefore, this article aims to indicate that, even during a period when national welfare was gradually developing in the background, it was still local communities that severely adjusted their financial policies in order to take care of rising poverty during the 1845-1848 crisis. Hence, clear parallels can be drawn with research on earlier periods.

Historians have already discussed Flanders in the 1840s in regard to the development of poor relief. Most important is the article 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community', written by Eric Vanhaute and Thijs Lambrecht.<sup>10</sup> However, the authors laid bare a general shift from relief based on informal supportive community relations in the middle of the eighteenth century to officially regulated poor relief institutions during the 1840s. They did not zoom in on internal institutional developments within local poor relief as a direct reaction on the food crisis. Moreover, they did not include regional differentiation within Flanders in their analysis. In the last decade the conviction that region-specific social and economic characteristics are crucial in determining the specific ways in which communities deal with crises and organize poor relief is gaining ground.<sup>11</sup> Two decades ago Dominique Vanneste already suggested a link between the diverse economic characteristics of rural regions in Flanders and the poverty levels registered during the 1840s.<sup>12</sup> However, her article remains very descriptive and poor relief is analysed only by means of one parameter, the total number of registered poor. Therefore, regional differentiation in the Flemish countryside is included in a more systematic and extensive manner in this analysis. The financing of poor relief is studied comparatively for three different regions for which previous research has mapped the diverse socio-agrarian fabrics (see Map 1). The first is the centre of rural linen industry in inner-Flanders, which uses the districts of Kortrijk, Roeselare and Tielt as test cases. The second region consists of the polders in coastal Flanders, which are spread over Veurne and Oostende.

land and the Southern Low Countries in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present* 218 (2013) 105-106.

10 E. Vanhaute and T. Lambrecht, 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community. A comparative analysis of the subsistence crises of the 1740s and the 1840s in Flanders', *Continuity and Change* 26 (2011) 155-186.

11 S. King, *Poverty and welfare in England, 1700-1850* (Manchester 2000); P. Warde, 'The origins and development of institutional welfare support in Early Modern Württemberg, c.1500-1700', *Continuity and Change* 22 (2007) 459-487; Lambrecht and Winter, 'Migration, poor relief and local autonomy'.

12 D.A.G. Vanneste, 'Rural economy and indigence in mid-nineteenth-century Belgium', *Journal of Historical Geography* 23 (1997) 3-15.

The last region is the Waasland, which corresponds to the district of Sint-Niklaas. The first two regions are situated in the province of West-Flanders, while Sint-Niklaas is part of East-Flanders.

Both quantitative and qualitative sources are used throughout the paper. Mortality rates and harvest statistics expressing the direct impact of the 1845-1848 food crisis were gathered from the LOKSTAT database that contains nineteenth-century population and agricultural censuses.<sup>13</sup> Numbers on the financing of poor relief are derived from a series of annual reports from the provinces of East- and West-Flanders and the Belgian ministry of internal affairs.<sup>14</sup> Qualitative material is mostly derived from reports and letters from boards of poor relief institutions, village councils and aldermen from a total of 45 communities. Sixteen of these communities were situated in the Waasland, eight in coastal Flanders and 21 in inner-Flanders.<sup>15</sup>

The first section of the article commences by recapitulating the main socio-economic characteristics of the rural regions in Flanders: inner-Flanders, coastal Flanders and the Waasland. Then, it explores the direct impact of the 1845-1848 crisis on the different regions. After an introduction to regional differences in the political organization of poor relief in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the second and largest part of the article questions and explains the funding of local poor relief during the crisis years by means of a regional comparison. Regional divergences in financing strategies are explained by the combined effect of 1) the direct impact of harvest failures, 2) structural economic developments, and 3) the political organization of poor relief.

## Regional rural systems and the impact of the 1845-1848 crisis

The region of intensive linen production in inner-Flanders was part of what Erik Thoen calls a 'commercial survival economy'. A majority of households combined agrarian activities for self-sufficiency on family-held land with marked-oriented activities. The earnings from these ac-

13 *Historical Databases of Local and Cadastral Statistics* (LOKSTAT-POPPKAD), Ghent University, Quetelet Center. Data on village level, for all Belgian communities. See: [www.lokstat.ugent.be/en](http://www.lokstat.ugent.be/en). Many thanks to Sven Vrielinck and Torsten Wiedemann.

14 *Exposé de la situation de la province de la Flandre-Orientale* (Ghent 1846-1849); *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale* (Bruges 1846-1849); *Statistique générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la situation du Royaume* (Brussels 1852).

15 E. Vanhaute, Database 'Arm Vlaanderen', Ghent University.

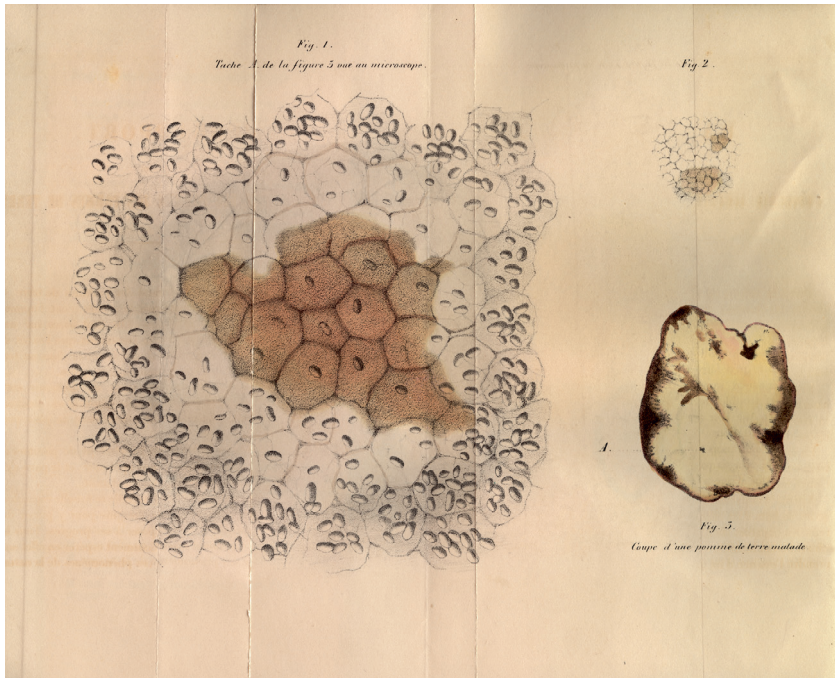


Illustration 1 A potato affected by the fungal disease *Phytophthora infestans* (source: Collection Central Library KU Leuven, CAG 00002086, also on: [www.hetvirtueleland.be](http://www.hetvirtueleland.be), Centrum Agrarische Geschiedenis (CAG)).

tivities, for example the rural flax industry, were essential for securing their survival.<sup>16</sup> Towards the 1840s, the rural system in inner-Flanders experienced increasing difficulties due to swift population growth and changing property relations. The lands of many households were subject to the combined burden of ever higher rents and extreme fragmentation whereby a majority of holdings was smaller than two hectares, a minimum to be self-sufficient. On top of that, the regional linen industry declined rapidly during the 1840s. Increasingly involved in international competition with cheap English cotton, thousands of Flemish rural households saw their incomes in the burdened flax industry decline.<sup>17</sup> Given these changing conditions, Vanhaute and Lambrecht ar-

16 E. Thoen, 'A "commercial survival economy" in evolution. The Flemish countryside and the transition to capitalism (Middle Ages-19th century)', in: P. Hoppenbrouwers and J.L. van Zanden (eds.), *Peasants into farmers? The transformation of rural economy and society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages-19th century) in light of the Brenner Debate* (Turnhout 2001) 102-157.

17 E. Thoen and E. Vanhaute, 'The "Flemish husbandry" at the edge. The farming system on small holding in the middle of the nineteenth century', in: E. Thoen and B. van Bavel (eds.), *Land productivity and*

gue that informal community networks between peasant households and large farmers that used to function as social safety nets were thrown out of balance.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the impoverishment of the inner-Flemish countryside continued.

By contrast, Thoen describes the rural system of the polders in coastal Flanders as a commercial business economy in which many economic activities evolved towards commercialization and specialization in the pre-industrial period.<sup>19</sup> Crucial to this process was a gradual concentration of land in the hands of a limited number of farmers as opposed to fragmentation in inner-Flanders.<sup>20</sup> In 1846 large farms with more than 20 hectares occupied more than half of the cultivated soil in coastal Flanders. This social polarization created a class of full-time wage labourers (servants, day labourers and seasonal workers from inner-Flanders and the Waasland) that were employed on large commercial farms.<sup>21</sup> So, regional labour relations started to be commercialized early on, unlike the informal community networks of inner-Flanders.

The countryside near Sint-Niklaas, the Waasland, is rarely studied as a separate rural economic system. According to Wouter Ronsijn, there are important differences between the Waasland and the traditional inland-coastal division. The group of independent, middle-sized farms with between five and 20 hectares retained a stronger presence than in the flax region and the polders.<sup>22</sup> The agrarian labour relations, in which peasant households participated in order to gain extra income, were more directly integrated in the market through seasonal labour in the

*agro-systems in the North Sea area (Middle Ages-Twentieth Century). Elements for comparison* (Turnhout 1999) 271-296.

18 Vanhaute and Lambrecht, 'Famine, exchange networks and the village community', 175-180.

19 E. Thoen, '“Social agrosystems” as an economic concept to explain regional differences. An essay taking the former county of Flanders as an example (Middle Ages-19th century)', in: P. Hoppenbrouwers and B. van Bavel (eds.), *Landholding and land transfer in the North Sea area (Late Middle Ages-19th century)* (Turnhout 2004) 59. T. Soens and E. Thoen, 'The origins of leasehold in the former county of Flanders', in: B.J.P. van Bavel and P. Schofield (eds.), *The development of leasehold in northwestern Europe, c. 1200-1600* (Turnhout 2008) 32-34.

20 T. Lambrecht, 'Agrarian change. Labour organization and welfare entitlements in the North Sea area, c. 1650-1800', in: S. King and A. Winter (eds.), *Migration, settlement and belonging in Europe, 1500-1930s. Comparative perspectives* (New York 2013) 205-208.

21 E. Karel, E. Vanhaute and R. Paping, 'The Low Countries 1750-2000', in: E. Vanhaute, I. Devos and T. Lambrecht (eds.), *Making a living. Family, income and labour* (Turnhout 2011) 185-208.

22 The following paragraph is based on: W. Ronsijn, *Commerce and the countryside. The role of urban weekly markets in Flemish rural society, 1750-1900* (Ghent 2011); W. Ronsijn, 'Mediated and unmediated market dependence in the Flemish countryside in the nineteenth century. Two paths of rural development', *Continuity and Change* 28 (2013) 89-120.

polders, amongst other places. This can be explained by the regional scarcity of large farms and the dominance of middle-sized farms, which reduced the need for agrarian workforces within the local community. In both coastal Flanders and the Waasland, the rural flax industry was of minor economic importance. Consequently, its decline did less harm to these regional economies, especially when compared to the destructive effects of the flax crisis in inner-Flanders.

Around mid-July 1845, Flemish rural economies were hit by potato harvest failures. The origin of this widespread destruction was the potato fungus, *Phytophthora infestans*, which was imported from America and was first encountered in the Flemish region of Kortrijk.<sup>23</sup> As most potato fields were almost completely destroyed that year, the Flemish rural economies were heavily shaken up. In previous decades the countryside had shifted its agricultural production increasingly to potatoes as the high yields they reached fed the rapidly growing and mostly poor population in the countryside.<sup>24</sup> Potato production fell drastically in all three Flemish regions in 1845. In inner-Flanders, where 15 per cent of all the cultivated soil was covered with potatoes, yields per hectare were an average of 94 per cent lower than normal: 16 hectolitres as opposed to the expected 255 hectolitres. In coastal Flanders 10 per cent of the cultivated area was used for potatoes and the loss was only slightly less, 88 per cent, enabling farmers to yield only 26 out of 223 hectolitres per hectare. The same area was covered with potatoes in the Waasland where farmers could yield 30 hectolitres per hectare or 86 per cent of the 218 hectolitres under normal conditions. These were among the worst results in Belgium.<sup>25</sup> Over the next couple of years, the blight caused less destruction, but harvests remained poor and yields remained low until 1850.<sup>26</sup>

The food crisis culminated in 1846 when the grain harvests also failed due to a combination of abnormally high temperatures in March and April and relative humidity during the winter months.<sup>27</sup> The loss of rye, the most important bread grain, was particularly problematic. In all three regions farmers reached on average yields of 22 hectolitre per

23 C. Ò Gráda, R. Paping and E. Vanhaute, 'The European subsistence crisis of 1845-1850. A comparative perspective', in: C. Ò Gráda, R. Paping and E. Vanhaute (eds.), *When the potato failed*, 23.

24 C. Vandenbroeke, *Agriculture and alimentation* (Ghent-Leuven 1975) 620-630.

25 *Rapports au Ministre de l'Intérieur sur l'enquête relative à la maladie des pommes de terre, en 1845* (Brussels 1846) 96-97.

26 G. Jacquemyns, *Histoire de la crise économique des Flandres (1845-1850)* (Brussels 1929) 255.

27 *Ibidem*, 256.



hectare in normal years. Yet, regional differences in the surface used for rye cultivation and in the harvest failures were somewhat larger in 1846 than the diverse potato yields registered the year before. Inner-Flanders, where rye covered 26 per cent of all cultivated land, registered a decrease in the yields of rye of around 58 per cent. The decrease was 51 per cent in the Waasland region where 20 per cent of all arable land was covered with rye. With more than 60 per cent yields compared to a normal year, losses were relatively small in coastal Flanders where only five per cent of all arable land was used for the production of rye.<sup>28</sup> Harvest failures in inner-Flanders, where the production of potatoes and rye was slightly more important, were somewhat more drastic. However, compared to the rest of Belgium, regional differences in harvest failures remained rather limited within Flanders.

In the remaining part of this section it is analysed to what extent the direct impact of the harvest failures, which differed only slightly between the Flemish regions, resulted in regional variation with regards to the short-term social consequence of the crisis. In general, the subsequent harvest failures had severe consequences for the majority of Flemish families. Market prices rose to a peak in 1847, doubling the prices in 1844, and the average diet fell from 2,850 kilocalories to 2,450.<sup>29</sup> Previous research on the nineteenth-century Flemish countryside suggests there to have been higher social risks for the lowest social groups in the commercial coastal area, as opposed to the inner region. Volatile groups such as landless agricultural workers and unmarried women experienced insecure living conditions due to a relatively high market dependence and social polarization.<sup>30</sup> Along these lines and based on the measurement of heights in the prisons of Ghent and Bruges, Ewout Depauw suggests a bigger drop in overall nutrition levels in coastal Flanders than in inner-Flanders during the years of crisis. However, since the countryside around Ghent and Bruges did not stand out as centre of linen production, almost no textile workers were included in Depauw's sample.<sup>31</sup> This selectivity is problematic with regard to the food crisis

28 LOKSTAT, Ghent University, Quetelet Center, from *Statistique de la Belgique. agriculture. Recensement général (15 octobre 1846)* (Brussels 1850).

29 Vanhaute, 'So worthy an example to Ireland', 131.

30 S. De Langhe, 'To thrive, on must wive? Subsistence strategies of single women in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century rural Flanders', *The History of the Family* 17 (2012) 199-219; S. De Langhe, M. Mechant and I. Devos, 'Regionale verschillen in het leven van ongehuwde moeders op het platteland in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 1730-1846', *TSEG* 8:1 (2011) 2-28; E. Depauw, 'Tall farmers and tiny weavers. Rural living standards and heights in Flanders, 1830-1870', *TSEG* 14:3 (2017): 56-84.

31 Depauw, 'Tall farmers and tiny weavers', 79-82.

since the crisis affected especially the tens of thousands of families active in the textile industry. They were already impoverished due to the economic downturn in the linen industry and now lost most of their income from agricultural activities as well.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, mortality figures that are available for the entire Flemish population give a more accurate image for the proto-industrial centres within inner-Flanders, particularly the region around Kortrijk, Roeselare and Tielt.

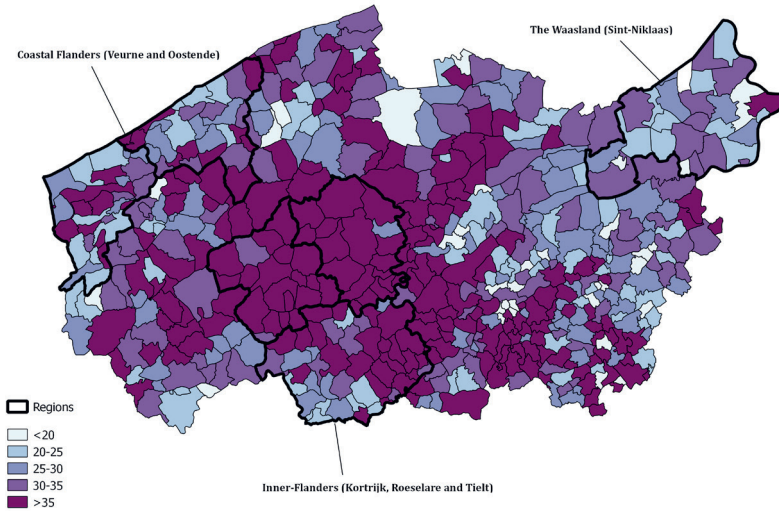
Expressed in mortality figures, the impact of the food crisis seems to have been most severe in the latter region. Mortality was caused by nutrition-related diseases such as dysentery and typhus, but many people simply died as a result of undernourishment.<sup>33</sup> Map 1 illustrates this regional variation in mortality rates for 1846-1847. In inner-Flanders, mortality increased from 26 per 1000 inhabitants in 1845 to 33 in 1846 and peaked at 44 per 1000 inhabitants in 1847. In coastal Flanders, the number declined slightly from the relatively high number of 29 in 1845 to 28 in 1846 to increase slightly to 31 deaths per 1000 inhabitants in 1847. In Sint-Niklaas, the impact of the crisis was almost negligible in terms of mortality; between 1845 and 1847 mortality rates balanced between 26 and 27 per 1000 inhabitants. Hence, the undernourishment that struck many families during the crisis years caused considerably greater losses in inner-Flanders than was the case in the coastal area and the Waasland. The provincial government of West-Flanders linked the high numbers in inner-Flanders to the declining linen industry, which weakened many peasant families from the early 1840s on. '*La mortalité a été considérable; déjà la décadence de l'industrie linière avait successivement réduit une foule de personnes à la misère, lorsqu'à ces infortunes est venue se joindre, en 1846, la mauvaise récolte.*'<sup>34</sup> Expressed in mortality rates, the heavy impact of the food crisis on inner-Flanders articulated the structural weakening of its local economies – most prominently the rural flax industry – throughout the preceding decennia. As the existing economic structures remained more firmly in place in the coastal area and the Waasland, the effects of the food crisis were less drastic.

32 E. Ducpétiaux, *Mémoire sur le paupérisme dans les Flandres* (Hayez 1850) 66-95; Jacquemyns, *Histoire de la crise économique*, 230-249.

33 Vanhaute, 'So worthy an example to Ireland', 135-136.

34 Mortality has been considerable; the decline of the linen industry had already pushed an enormous amount of people in misery, when these misfortunes were joined by the bad harvest of 1846, in: *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale* (Bruges 1848) 452.

**Map 1 Mortality rates in East- and West-Flanders in 1847 (averages, per thousand inhabitants). With indication of the three selected regions**



Sources: LOKSTAT, Ghent University, Quetelet Center, from *Statistique de la Belgique. Population. Mouvement de l'état civil pendant les années 1841-1850* (Brussels 1850).

## The local organization of poor relief in Belgium

Before delving into the funding of local relief institutions during the subsistence crisis, this section gives a brief overview of the general organizational characteristics of poor relief in Belgium around the middle of the nineteenth century. It also questions to what extent previous researchers already indicated regional differentiation in the organization of poor relief.

In the eighteenth century, poor tables in present-day Belgium, called '*Tafels van de Heilige Geest*', were organized by local parishes. A strong local welfare infrastructure thus existed already before the French annexation. Consequently, the French authorities converted the old poor tables into '*Burelen van Weldadigheid*', but overall they preserved strong continuities in the organizational patterns of local poor relief. The French stipulation was again reinforced by the Belgian Municipality Law of 1836 that compelled each village to organize its own welfare institution governed by a small board composed of members of the local elite. Village boards remained closely connected to the welfare institutions since

they were responsible for supervision and, if necessary, for sustaining the institutions financially.<sup>35</sup> As will become clear, this was also the case during the 1840s. In his study of Belgian state financing and the growth of the welfare state, Piet Clement clearly illustrates that municipalities, rather than the national government, still covered almost all expenses for poor relief around the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> Private charity was continually organized in close relationship with local poor relief throughout the nineteenth century. These private initiatives were, however, only of minor importance when compared to the social support offered by the *Burelen van Weldadigheid*.<sup>37</sup> In this article, the latter institutions are therefore studied in their own right.

Despite the existence of uniform poor relief institutions throughout the Belgian territory, previous historical research has exposed considerable regional differences in the local organization and importance of poor relief, both in the pre-industrial period and in the nineteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Most recently, Van den Broeck, Lambrecht and Winter managed to make a detailed regional comparative analysis of the income and distributional characteristics of local relief institutions in 1807.<sup>39</sup> Their observations offer a point of reference and comparison for the research results of this article. By linking relief patterns as expressed in income and distribution to regional economic structures, the authors were able to detect three so-called 'relief regimes' in Flanders. Firstly, poor relief in the coastal area was characterized by the largest incomes due to a combination of high fixed revenues from capital assets and the willingness to raise additional incomes, particularly from taxes. This is explained by the regional economic development towards agrarian capitalism. The large group of wage labourers created a structural need for poor relief

35 E. Vanhaute, 'De armenzorg op het Antwerpse platteland, 1750-1850. Onderzoek naar een instelling tijdens de schamiereeuw', in: Gemeentekrediet (ed.), *Machtsstructuren in de plattelandsgemeenschappen in België en aangrenzende gebieden (12de-19de eeuw)* (Brussels 1988) 632.

36 P. Clement, 'De Belgische overheidsfinanciën en het ontstaan van een sociale welvaartsstaat 1830-1940', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 1-2 (1996) 364-383.

37 W. Depreeuw, *Landloperij, bedelarij en huisloosheid. Een socio-historische analyse van repressie, bijstand en instellingen* (Antwerp 1988) 257-380; L. Van Molle, 'Social questions and Catholic answers. Social reform in Belgium, c. 1780-1920', in: L. Van Molle (ed.), *Charity and social welfare. The dynamics of religious reform in Northern Europe, 1780-1920* (Leuven 2017) 104.

38 Vanhaute, 'De armenzorg op het Antwerpse platteland'; E. Van Onacker and H. Masure, 'Unity in diversity. Rural poor relief in the sixteenth-century Southern Low Countries', *TSEG* 12:4 (2015) 59-88.

39 The following paragraph is based upon: N. Van den Broeck, T. Lambrecht and A. Winter, 'Pre-industrial welfare between regional economies and local regimes. Rural poor relief in Flanders around 1800', *Continuity and Change* 33 (2018) 255-284.



Illustration 2 'Misère des Flandres' – Poverty in Flanders (source: Etching by Vandekerkhove, Collection Central Library KU Leuven, CAG 00001861, also on: [www.hetvirtueleland.be](http://www.hetvirtueleland.be), Centrum Agrarische Geschiedenis (CAG)).

early on. Moreover, by means of selective distributional policies, local elites directed their support to small groups of inhabitants.

Secondly, the authors observed relief practices in the south-east of Flanders near the city of Aalst. Revenues were considerably lower than in the coastal area, particularly because no additional income was raised through taxation. Surprisingly, limited finances were linked to inclusive social policies oriented to large groups of recipients. Although most households could still secure direct access to a small holding, some extra support was necessary to keep them out of poverty. The third regime covered the entire middle area of Flanders and ranged between two regions that are studied separately in this article: inner-Flanders near Kortrijk, Roeselare and Tielt in the south-west and the Waasland near Sint-Niklaas in the north-east. Poor relief in this middle area was characterized by low overall incomes and limited groups of impoverished households receiving support. Indeed, regional economies in this area created the least need for poor relief due to a relatively strong presence of both small and medium sized farms in combination with a range of additional income strategies, particularly informal exchange relations

within local communities and proto-industrial activities in the flax industry. Due to the impact of the food and proto-industrial crises of the 1840s larger internal differences became visible. Poor relief practices in the south-west partly shifted towards the second regime. The Waasland in the north-west and the coastal area showed more continuities with the situation at the start of the nineteenth century.

To summarize, structural regional economic developments in Flanders influenced both the direct impact of the 1845-1848 food crisis and long-term changes in the political organization of local poor relief institutions. In the remaining sections these developments are taken together by carefully illustrating how the simultaneous interaction of three factors – the direct impact of the food crisis, regional economic developments, and political practices of local poor relief – caused regionally divergent changes in the funding of poor relief during the crisis of the 1840s.

## Total relief income

De onderhoudskosten der armen zullen onmogelijk door de Gemeente kunnen afgedragen worden en indien het Gouvernement geene kragtdaedige maetregelen neemt om de Gemeente te redden [...] zullen alle pogingen welke door de Gemeente- en Armbestueren aangewend worden om het [armoede] te beteugelen, vrugteloos wezen.<sup>40</sup>

The foregoing citation from the village of Wingene in Tielst offers a glimpse of the financial problems that village communities in inner-Flanders faced. In June 1845, the village council of Wingene predicted that, without the support of the government, the village would not be able to hinder rising poverty during the harvest failures of the summer months. The case of Wingene was not exceptional; several other communities in inner-Flanders reported financial troubles from 1840 onwards, with a peak during the 1845-1847 famine.<sup>41</sup> In its annual re-

40 'The Municipality will not be able to cover its poor relief expenses and in case the Government does not take effectual measures to save the Municipality [...] all attempts of the Municipality- and Poor-Relief Boards aimed to reduce poverty, will prove fruitless' as quoted in: J. Deguffroy, 'De jaren van rampspoed: 1836-1858 crisis Wingene', *Ons Wingene* 2 (1999) 51-72, 63.

41 For more cases: E. Beeckaert, *Gemeenschap onder druk: Macht en sociale interventie. Sociaalhistorische en comparatieve microstudie van Vlaamse dorpsgemeenschappen tijdens de crisisjaren 1840* (Ghent 2016) 61-78.

port of 1844, the province of West-Flanders stated that expenses were already increasing before the actual food crisis due to the decline of the rural flax industry.<sup>42</sup> The following section regionally compares the financial records of the poor relief institutions that underpinned these citations. Before delving into the exact numbers, it must be stressed that the effect of the relief budgets was always less in reality than the initial incomes suggest at first sight. The money was not fully distributed to poor inhabitants, as some of it was spent on operating costs such as fuel and administration. Van Bavel and Rijpma estimated that overheads must have been between 10 and 30 per cent around 1800.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, this research did not explore how the income was precisely divided among the indigents, as it only had access to total numbers of recipients. In practice, revenues were unevenly divided among various sorts of indigents. Most of them did not even receive support on a permanent basis.<sup>44</sup> However, general tendencies in income and distributional strategies will become clear in the following section.

In general, rural relief income per capita was higher in the 1840s than at the start of the nineteenth century. While Flemish institutions registered a yearly income of 1,32 francs in 1807, they could almost triple this number to an average of 3,1 francs in 1845 and even 5,4 in 1848.<sup>45</sup> However, as the Flemish rural population was impoverished at a high speed, the number of registered indigents had increased from an average of 9,5 per cent in 1807 to 26 per cent in 1846. Consequently, poor relief institutions could spend only 12,1 francs per indigent at the start and 21,6 francs at the end of the food crisis, not more than at the start of the century. A double conclusion on the impact of the crisis on the funding of poor relief is, thus, necessary. Relief institutions did not see the effect of their incomes (related to the number of indigents) rise in comparison to the start of the century. However, between 1845 and 1848 they were able to increase their total income on short notice. A more detailed and regionally comparative analysis is possible for the years of crisis themselves (see Table 1).

Expressed as income per inhabitant, the institutions in the coastal area almost doubled their budgets between 1845 and 1848: from 4,1 to 7,5 francs. While institutions in inner-Flanders already started with

42 *Mémorial administratif de la Province de la Flandre Occidentale* 9 (Bruges 1845) 531.

43 Van Bavel and Rijpma, 'How important were formalized charity and social spending', 167.

44 Ducpétiaux, *Mémoire sur le paupérisme dans les Flandres*, 21-27.

45 The numbers on 1807 are taken from: Van den Broeck, Lambrecht and Winter, 'Pre-industrial welfare', 262.

lower incomes at the start of the crisis – 3,4 francs per capita – the difference became somewhat more pronounced towards the end – 6,3 francs per capita. The largest divergence, however, occurred in the Waasland area where the 1,7 francs per capita earned in 1845 only slightly increased to 2,4 francs in 1848. Since the total poor relief budgets in the Waasland were unusually low, the region deviates from a general north-south division in nineteenth-century Belgium whereby poor relief institutions in Liège, Luxembourg and Namur spent around half of the money distributed in Flanders and Brabant.<sup>46</sup>

When the total budgets are recalculated as income per indigent, differences are more pronounced and clearly indicate the distributional differences between the three regions. At the start of the crisis the institutions in coastal Flanders could spend 17,8 francs per indigent and at the end up to 28,7 francs. Although the gap became smaller towards the end of the crisis, these numbers were higher than the budgets available per indigent in inner-Flanders: 10,1 francs in 1845 and 23,5 francs in 1848. While poor relief institutions in coastal Flanders registered on average 23 per cent of the total population as indigent in 1846, welfare institutions in inner-Flanders counted 35 per cent. It becomes clear that local poor relief in the coastal area could rely on relatively large incomes that were selectively aimed at a small number of indigents. As such, continuity with the situation at the start of the century, as illustrated before, is confirmed. Moreover, the relief institutions could increase their already high income even further during the years of crisis to react on its devastating consequences. Poor relief in inner-Flanders had become more inclusive than at the start of the nineteenth century as it distributed its modest incomes among the largest group of recipients in Belgium at that time. The regional necessity for poor relief was indeed much higher in the 1840s due to the combined effect of gradual fragmentation of farms, loss of property and collapse of the flax industry on the one hand and the sudden effects of the food crisis on the other. Particularly, the large group of spinners and weavers that were forced to call upon the help of poor relief almost tripled between 1818 and 1848 in inner-Flanders.<sup>47</sup> In the Waasland, poor relief budgets could only be raised from 8,5 francs per indigent in 1845 to 12,6 francs in 1848 and, consequently, remained far behind those in the other regions. Moreover, less than

46 A. Moureaux-Van Neck, 'Assistance publique 1856-1956', in: *Recherches sur l'histoire des finances publiques en Belgique*, Actua Historica Bruxellensia, 1, 1967, 167-171.

47 Ducpétiaux, *Mémoire sur le paupérisme dans les Flandres*, 85.



20 per cent of the total population was registered as indigent. Hence, in the Waasland, poor relief was neither inclusive, nor could rely on high revenues. As such, income and distributional practices in the Waasland still showed strong continuities with its characteristics at the start of the century and, thus, were adapted only limited to the impact of the food crisis.<sup>48</sup> In order to understand how these significant regional differences in the growth levels of the local welfare funds were realized during the crisis years, the budgets must be analysed more closely.

**Table 1 Total income (1845-1848) and number of recipients (1846) of relief institutions in rural villages per region**

	Total income in franc per capita 1845	Total income in franc per capita 1848	Total income in franc per indigent 1845	Total income in franc per indigent 1848	Percentage of registered poor on total population 1846
Inner-Flanders	3,4	6,3	10,1	23,5	35,0
Coastal Flanders	4,1	7,5	17,8	28,7	23,0
Waasland	1,7	2,4	8,5	12,6	19,0
Average	3,1	5,4	12,1	21,6	25,7

Sources: *Exposé de la situation de la province de la Flandre-Orientale (Ghent 1846)* 60; LOKSTAT, Ghent University, Quetelet Center, from *Statistique de la Belgique. Population. Recensement général (15 octobre 1846)* (Brussels 1849); *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale (Bruges 1846)* 626; *Statistique générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la situation du Royaume* (Brussels, 1852) 254-255.

## Primary income: Property and charity

To what extent could institutions internally adapt their primary income strategies to the impact of the crisis? The notion of primary income is used to refer to the variety of income sources that poor tables were able to collect by themselves, without external help. Historically, moveable and immovable goods (houses, land, rents ...) were very important, yet inflexible sources of income. They were often obtained through gifts and bequests from the past.<sup>49</sup> These incomes were supplemented with collections among the villages' wealthy inhabitants. Traditionally, all the

<sup>48</sup> Van den Broeck, Lambrecht and Winter, 'Pre-industrial welfare', 263-266.

<sup>49</sup> T. Lambrecht en A. Winter, 'De vele gezichten van zorg. Armoede en armenzorg op het platteland in het graafschap Vlaanderen tijdens de achttiende eeuw', *Tijd-Schrift* 7 (2017) 50.

well-to-do inhabitants of a village were registered on a list that served for collections, which remained voluntary. The frequency and relative importance of collections could vary from place to place, however.<sup>50</sup> Provincial reports on 1845 enable us to assess how much of the primary poor relief incomes were derived from the institution's possessions and how much from collections at the start of the food crisis in the different regions (see Table 2).

**Table 2 Primary income (franc per capita) of relief institutions in rural villages per region, 1845**

	Moveable and immoveable goods	Collections	Direct income in total
Inner-Flanders	0,63	1,67	2,30
Coastal Flanders	1,87	1,44	3,31
Waasland	1,02	0,37	1,39
Average	1,17	1,16	2,33

Sources: *Exposé de la Situation de la Province de la Flandre-Orientale (Ghent 1846) 60*; *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale (Bruges 1846) 618*.

In general, poor relief institutions in all three regions gained similar income from their assets and from voluntary collections, 1,17 and 1,16 francs respectively. As such the Flemish rural relief institutions deviate from a general mid-nineteenth century pattern whereby poor relief was still largely financed with revenues from assets in Belgium.<sup>51</sup> However, important regional differences can be detected. In coastal Flanders and to a lesser extent also in the Waasland, fixed revenues from assets were high: 1,87 francs and 1,02 francs respectively. In coastal Flanders they counted for 57 per cent of the total primary incomes while this was even 73 per cent in the Waasland. Therefore, the minority was earned through collections. With 1,44 francs per capita the coastal relief institutions also gained high revenues from collections. This combination of high revenues from possessions and donations constituted the basis for the coastal relief institutions' large total incomes discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, more than two thirds of their total revenue consisted of primary income in 1845. Poor relief in inner-Flanders had far lower income from moveable and immoveable possessions, on average 0,63 francs per capita. By contrast, the incomes from charitable donations were 1,67 francs per

<sup>50</sup> See for example differences between cases in the Dutch Republic and England: Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Teeuwen, 'The stability of voluntarism', 88-89; B.A. Krausman, *The culture of giving. Informal support and gift-exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge 2008) 86-88.

<sup>51</sup> Van Bavel and Rijpma, 'How important were formalized charity and social spending', 178.

capita, even slightly more than the revenues from collections in coastal Flanders. Therefore, these charitable donations counted for 73 per cent of the relatively low total primary incomes in inner-Flanders, considerably more than in the Waasland and the coastal area. These observations resemble the situation in inner-Flanders in 1807 as described by Van den Broeck, Lambrecht and Winter who recorded the relative importance of revenues from collections compared to the overall low fixed revenues.

Income from collections among the villages' wealthy inhabitants, thus, was far more important in inner-Flanders than in the other two regions. This explains the vigorous way in which village authorities complained about insufficient amounts collected via voluntary donations.<sup>52</sup> For example, at the beginning of the 1840s, the village council of Wingene worried that many of its wealthy inhabitants were not willing to contribute voluntarily: '*sommige ingezeten schenken niet meer de giften die ze beloofd hebben en anderen hebben hun giften verminderd*.'<sup>53</sup> During the winter of 1842-1843 the village authorities, who aimed to increase contributions proportional to the community's rising needs, noticed the same problems once again. The fact that 571 families were registered as poor and only 615 households paid taxes illustrates why the wealthy recoiled to make any more contributions.<sup>54</sup> They were outnumbered and traditional stability was thrown out of balance. Wingene's local elites specifically indicated an increase in mendicancy during the crisis years as the reason for refusing to donate more money.<sup>55</sup>

However, collections probably remained more or less stable over the long-term and could even be increased throughout the years of crisis (see Table 3). Complaints can, therefore, better be perceived as a political strategy implemented by village authorities to stimulate and encourage wealthy inhabitants to donate more money. This was also demonstrated by Teeuwen for local poor relief in a series of Dutch towns throughout the pre-industrial period. Relief institutions consciously and actively pressured inhabitants to donate certain amounts of money.<sup>56</sup> To different degrees, relief institutions in all three regions could

52 For more cases: Beeckaert, *Gemeenschap onder druk*, 155-156.

53 'Some inhabitants no longer donate the contributions they promised and others have reduced their contributions' as quoted in: J. Deguffroy, 'De jaren van rampspoed', 51-77, 76.

54 J. Devogelaere, *De slechte jaren 1840-1850 in het arrondissement Roeselare-Tielt* (Roeselare-Tielt 1982) 107-108.

55 Deguffroy, 'De jaren van rampspoed', 76.

56 D. Teeuwen, *Financing poor relief through charitable collections in Dutch towns, c. 1600-1800* (Amsterdam 2016) 99-121.

boost their primary income in reaction to the impact of the crisis. In the Waasland increases were most modest, from 1,4 francs to two francas per capita between 1845 and 1848. Raises were more pronounced in inner-Flanders where local poor relief increased its revenues from 2,3 to 3,7 francs. Yet, the advance was most considerable in coastal Flanders where welfare institutions were able to raise their incomes from 3,3 francs to 5,9 francs.<sup>57</sup> As the institutions' assets were too inflexible to make increases possible on short notice, these increases were most probably realized by means of voluntary collections.<sup>58</sup> As such, it can be concluded that local poor relief was still able to react internally on the consequences of the crisis by means of collections that were more flexible financial strategies than is often presumed. However, the large discrepancy between the coastal area on the one hand and inner-Flanders and especially the Waasland on the other indicates that the relief institutions in the latter regions reached their limits with regards to primary income.

## Secondary income: Village subsidies and taxes

Given the limited possibilities to increase their income on their own, Flemish relief institutions started looking for external funding to deal with swiftly rising poverty during the years of crisis. Therefore, it is questioned in what ways and to what extent secondary income could be raised and whether regional differences can be detected. As such, secondary income is used to describe all revenues that were not raised by the poor relief institutions themselves. The poor relief institutions' requests for support were not sufficiently met by national and provincial governments. These authorities only covered minor expenses during the crisis by distributing potatoes and subsidies for the local flax industries, especially in the second half of the 1840s.<sup>59</sup> Large-scale central regulation and national subsidies for poor relief were impossible at that time. In its annual report of 1846, the province of West-Flanders summarized

57 *Exposé de la situation de la province de la Flandre-Orientale* (Ghent 1846), 60; *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale* (Bruges 1846) 618; *Statistique générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la situation du Royaume* (Brussels 1852) 254-255.

58 See for example Eric Vanhaute who indicated that income from the possessions of welfare institutions generally remained stable between 1834 and 1850 in Antwerp: Vanhaute, 'De armenzorg op het Antwerpse platteland', 645-646.

59 Jacquemyns, *Histoire de la crise économique des Flandres*, 270-294.

the perilous financial situation that local poor relief faced because of a lack of national support: *'Le Gouvernement de son côté, est intervenu, par des subsides [...], mais ces ressources, réunies à celles des bureaux de bienfaisance, ont été loin de suffire à tous les besoins.'*<sup>60</sup> Consequently, relief institutions turned to village funds to cover their financial needs. Village councils were compelled to transfer substantial portions of their own funds to local poor relief institutions via subsidies. In turn, these subsidies were increasingly realized via local taxes: *'Les caisses communales sont venues à leur secours, par de nouveaux sacrifices; on n'a pas reculé devant l'augmentation des rôles de cotisation personnelle.'*<sup>61</sup>

In inner-Flanders, poor relief institutions were able to increase their primary income considerably by means of external village funding (see Table 3). Municipalities contributed around 1,1 francs per capita or 32 per cent of the total income of local welfare institutions in 1845 and even double with 2,6 francs or 41 per cent in 1848. Because local welfare institutions were not at all capable of sustaining such a large group of indigents themselves, village authorities were left with no other option than to intervene directly. On short notice they were able to raise the total income considerably whereby the primary poor relief income became relatively less important. In the coastal area, subsidies were less essential for increasing welfare budgets because poor relief institutions had relatively large primary incomes as illustrated previously. Still, village subsidies increased modestly as a reaction to the crisis, from 0,8 francs per capita in 1845 to 1,6 francs in 1848, reaching 21 per cent of the total incomes. In the Waasland, the total income available for poor relief was only slightly higher than the income that welfare institutions collected independently in 1845 and 1848. Indeed, village subsidies reached no more than 0,4 francs per capita or 17 per cent of the poor relief budgets. Given the passive financing by village authorities in the Waasland, welfare institutions ultimately distributed the lowest income per indigent registered in Flanders in 1848. In all three Flemish regions, external funding by means of village subsidies, thus, became more important due to the abnormal conditions of the crisis. Relief institutions received on average 1,5 francs as external support in 1848 while this was only 0,2

60 *'The Government has intervened by means of subsidies [...], but even together with the incomes from the "bureaux de bienfaisance", they do not cover all the current needs;* in: *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale* 11 (Bruges 1847) 747-748.

61 *'The village funds came to the rescue by means of new sacrifices; we did not recoil from tax increases;* in: *Ibidem*, 747-748.

francs in 1807.<sup>62</sup> However, relative increases were by far the largest in inner-Flanders as opposed to the overall low subsidies in the Waasland.

**Table 3 Primary income and village subsidies for poor relief (franc per capita) in rural villages per region, 1845-1848**

	Direct income, 1845	Direct income, 1848	Subsidies, 1845	Subsidies, 1848	Total income, 1845	Total income, 1848
Inner-Flanders	2,3	3,7	1,1	2,6	3,4	6,3
Coastal Flanders	3,3	5,9	0,8	1,6	4,1	7,5
Waasland	1,4	2,0	0,3	0,4	1,7	2,4
Average	2,3	3,9	0,7	1,5	3,0	5,4

Sources: *Exposé de la situation de la province de la Flandre-Orientale (Ghent 1846)* 60; *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale (Bruges 1846)* 626; *Statistique générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la situation du Royaume (Brussels, 1852)* 254-255.

Not much is known about nineteenth-century municipality taxes, officially called ‘*cotisations personnelles*’, and their relationship to poor relief. This can largely be explained by the fact that local offices were more or less free to organize and collect taxes, which resulted in very different tax bases. At the outbreak of the food crisis, almost every Flemish community raised taxes. The capitation was spread among all inhabitants except those with insufficient financial strength, a very large group during the 1840s.<sup>63</sup> Since eighteenth-century poor taxes were abolished during the French period, the village tax was initially raised to support poor relief.<sup>64</sup> After a while, however, this was expanded to more general communal expenses and villages were no longer obliged to distribute the income to welfare institutions. This makes it very difficult to trace which portion of the taxes was distributed to poor relief through subsidies.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, as Vanhaute illustrated, it is unlikely that local taxes were di-

62 Van den Broeck, Lambrecht and Winter, ‘Pre-industrial welfare’, 267.

63 Vanhaute, ‘De armenzorg op het Antwerpse platteland’, 647-651.

64 On the eighteenth-century poor tax: T. Lambrecht and A. Winter, ‘An old poor law on the Continent? Agrarian capitalism, poor taxes, and village conflict in eighteenth-century coastal Flanders’, *The Economic History Review* 71:4 (2018) 1173-1198.

65 S. Van de Perre, ‘La dîme du plaisir: het “droit des pauvres” in het licht van de financiering van de armenzorg in de lange 19de eeuw (1796-1914)’, in: S. Van de Perre et al. (eds.), *Recht in geschiedenis. Een bundel bijdragen over rechtsgeschiedenis van de Middeleeuwen tot de hedendaagse tijd. Aangeboden aan prof. dr. Fernand Vanhemelryck* (Leuven 2005) 379-398.

rectly reflective of the needs of poor relief.<sup>66</sup> For the crisis years there are, however, clear indications that the already existing local taxes were increased to finance village subsidies in order to respond to the growing demands of poor relief in inner-Flanders. On 28 March 1843, the authorities of Pittem (Tielt) announced plans to grant a large subsidy to the local poor relief institution. They were, however, compelled to finance the subsidy by means of an increase in local taxes since they had no other financial resources at their disposal.<sup>67</sup> During the 1840s the village officials of Wingene (Tielt) more than doubled local taxes from 11,000 francs in 1840 to 14,500 in 1842, 22,800 in 1846 and eventually 23,142 in 1849. These increases were used to pay for the rising financial support that the village was forced to provide for public poor relief: from 44 per cent of its funds in 1845 to 70 per cent in 1847.<sup>68</sup>

Table 4 contains a regional comparison of local taxation levels in 1846 and 1849. Although no direct link can be established with the village subsidies mentioned before, a similar divide in public financing between coastal and inner-Flanders on the one hand and the Waasland on the other becomes clear. In 1846, when the crisis peaked, taxation pressure was comparable in coastal and inner-Flanders. The villages in inner-Flanders collected 2,1 francs per capita while villages in the coastal area collected 2,3 francs. However, in 1849 taxation levels were still high in the latter region while they decreased to 1,7 francs per capita in the inner Flemish area. Although this needs more analysis, the results seem to confirm that coastal Flanders already knew a long and relatively stable evolution towards high local taxes from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards. By contrast, the rapid decrease in taxation levels between 1846 and 1849 suggests that they were not yet similarly normalized in inner-Flanders where taxes were still of little importance at the start of the century and still partly served as a temporary reaction to the food crisis. With an average of 1,1 francs per capita in 1846 and 1849, the Waasland remained behind taxation levels in inner and especially coastal Flanders. So, both taxes and village subsidies remained stable and were not used to respond to the consequences of the crisis. It must be noted that taxation pressure as a percentage of gross national product remained relatively limited before the twentieth century.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the share that taxes acquired from the incomes of average day labourers was

66 Vanhaute, 'De armenzorg op het Antwerpse platteland', 647-651.

67 Vanhaute, Database 'Arm Vlaanderen', Pittem, Ghent University.

68 *Ibidem*, Wingene, Ghent University.

69 Lindert, *Growing public*, 7-8.

modest, albeit with regional differences. In 1846 an agricultural labourer in inner-Flanders had to work four days to pay his/her taxes, in coastal Flanders two days and in the Waasland only one day.<sup>70</sup>

**Table 4 Local taxes (franc per capita) in rural villages per region, 1846-1849**

	1846	1849
Inner-Flanders	2,1	1,7
Coastal Flanders	2,3	2,7
Waasland	1,1	1,1
Average	1,8	1,8

Sources: *Exposé de la situation de la province de la Flandre-Orientale* (Ghent 1847) 59; LOKSTAT, Ghent University, Quetelet Center, from *Statistique de la Belgique. Population. Recensement général (15 octobre 1846)* (Brussels 1849); *Mémorial administratif de la province de la Flandre Occidentale*, 11 (Bruges 1847) 722; *Statistique générale de la Belgique. Exposé de la situation du Royaume (période décennale de 1841-1850), titre 3* (Brussels 1852) 96.

However, the case of the Waasland illustrates how even a limited raise in taxes and social spending could cause great controversy in the context of the nineteenth century. While ordinary taxation levels were the lowest in the Waasland, more villages decided to levy extraordinary taxes such as special taxes on consumption or property.<sup>71</sup> A couple of local authorities reported on the reasoning behind their support of alternative taxation. They hoped to spare their inhabitants who were already taxed quite heavily. For example, in 1843 the village of Vrasene decided to impose additional surcharges on national land taxes instead of raising the local taxation. This choice was motivated by the will to relieve their own inhabitants without immovable property, who were actually taxed the most, as opposed to rich proprietors from outside of the community.<sup>72</sup> The village of De Klinge undertook similar measures after having received negative responses to its request for a national subsidy.<sup>73</sup> Both in 1847 and 1848 the village council of Waasmunster rejected a proposal to raise the capitation by describing how the inhabitants had already contributed so much to poor relief that some of them started leaving the village.<sup>74</sup> These cases suggest the reluctant position of local villages to-

<sup>70</sup> LOKSTAT, Ghent University, Quetelet Center. Data from *Statistique de la Belgique. Agriculture. Recensement général (15 octobre 1846)* (Brussels 1850).

<sup>71</sup> For more cases: Beeckaert, *Gemeenschap onder druk*, 159.

<sup>72</sup> Vanhaute, Database 'Arm Vlaanderen', Vrasene, Ghent University.

<sup>73</sup> K. Colleman, *Clinge/De Klinge. Dorp(en) aan de grens (1815-1919)* (Ghent 2004).

<sup>74</sup> Vanhaute, Database 'Arm Vlaanderen', Waasmunster, Ghent University.



wards levying taxation in the Waasland, even if taxation pressure was significantly lower than was the case in inner- and coastal Flanders.

The regional differences in the levels of external funding by means of village subsidies and, indirectly, taxes confirm the previously observed differentiation in the primary incomes of poor relief institutions. In coastal Flanders, the already high primary incomes had to be supplemented only modestly by means of subsidies to reach the highest total incomes registered in Flanders. Moreover, these subsidies pressured relatively little on the village funds with access to relatively high and stable taxes. By contrast, in inner-Flanders incomes for poor relief were considerably lower at the start of the crisis. Village authorities had no other choice than to supplement them with disproportionately high subsidies. Poor relief in the Waasland changed the least in reaction to the consequences of the crisis as its modest primary incomes were supplemented very little by means of village subsidies. Consequently, due to the passive financing of village authorities, recipients received even less money than in inner-Flanders. Whereas public authorities in inner-Flanders considerably expanded the resources of their local institutions during the 1840s, this transformation occurred with more difficulty in the Waasland.

## **Conclusion: Explaining regional variation**

This article illustrated the lasting importance of locally based poor relief within the context of the 1845-1848 food crisis, despite the rise of centralized public poor relief in the nineteenth century. The article questioned and explained 1) in what ways local relief institutions in Flanders financed rising poverty due to the impact of the crisis, and 2) to what extent regional differences existed between inner-Flanders, coastal Flanders and the Waasland. In comparison to relief incomes registered at the start of the nineteenth century, poor relief institutions in all three regions increased their revenues as a reaction on rising poverty due to the food crisis. However, the degree and specific patterns by which they adapted their funding strategies cannot solely be explained by the direct impact of the harvest failures. Two additional explanatory factors were used throughout the article: structural economic developments and the political organization of poor relief.

Although the direct consequences of the food crisis were less severe than in inner-Flanders, the coastal region registered the highest total relief income. This strong financial basis is explained by coastal Flanders'

early transition towards commercial agriculture necessitating a gradual and continuous extension of poor relief from the eighteenth century onwards. Moreover, the distribution of income to a selective number of recipients reduced pressure on financial matters. By contrast, relief institutions in inner-Flanders could only limitedly increase their already low primary income throughout the years of crisis. Their financial capacity was eventually boosted by means of subsidies granted by village authorities. Until the early nineteenth century the regional economy of inner-Flanders had reduced the need for poor relief. However, its gradual dismantlement in the first half of the century combined with the sudden impact of the harvest failures caused the number of poor to rise quickly and the relief institutions to become the most inclusive of Flanders. Lastly, poor relief institutions in the Waasland collected almost no additional income. Consequently, at the end of the crisis the institutions distributed relatively lower income than in the more troubled region of inner-Flanders. The status quo in the Waasland paralleled its regional economic organization in which poor relief remained less necessary than in coastal and inner-Flanders. This can partly be explained by the strong economic and political presence of a middle class of farmers. It is possible that they were less interested in sustaining local impoverished families since both groups were less interconnected by means of local labour relations than was the case in inner- and especially coastal Flanders. However, in the context of the sudden food crisis, the limited financial capacity of poor relief became problematic.

As such, this study adds empirical and historical evidence to the theoretical stance that the consequences of crises – whether expressed as mortality rates or poor relief finances – can only be evaluated correctly by complementing the assessment of the direct impact with in-depth analyses of social and economic structures and political institutions. Only from this perspective it can be observed that inner-Flanders was simultaneously a highly affected and resilient region throughout the years of crisis. Furthermore, this research on the mid-nineteenth-century food crisis is relevant in two ways for future studies on the long-term development of poor relief. On the one hand, strong continuities with research results on earlier periods became clear. Relief practices remained primarily locally based and assets and voluntary collections were still the most important sources of income, while external funding by means of subsidies was only applied as a last resort due to the crisis. On the other hand, the levels of village subsidies, which were at least partly financed by means of taxes, were far higher than in previous periods and gradually became a more

permanent factor in the funding of poor relief in the following decennia. A first chronological comparison of the West-Flanders province clarified that while in 1838 village subsidies for local poor relief amounted to 0,8 francs per capita, at the end of the food crisis this was already 2,2. In 1865, when the economic situation was normalized, village subsidies still contributed around 1,5 francs per capita to poor relief in the province of West-Flanders.<sup>75</sup> By contrast, in the same period the support offered by the national government to poor relief remained less important than the financial contributions of village communities themselves.<sup>76</sup> Future research must confront this in-depth analysis of local poor relief during the exceptional conditions of a crisis with its long-term and gradual development between the pre-industrial period and the late nineteenth century.

## About the author

**Esther Beeckaert** (1994) studied history at Ghent University and graduated in 2016 on a MA dissertation on the crisis of the 1840s. She questioned regional differences in the coping strategies organized by village communities in Flanders. From 2016 to 2018 she worked at Ghent University on a collaborative research project, GINI (Growth, INequality and Institutions), that investigates inequality and economic growth in premodern Europe. Since October 2018 she works as a doctoral researcher on a FWO funded research project at Ghent University and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel: 'Community, control and commons. Access to land, use rights and social power relations in the Belgian Ardennes between 1750 and 1900'.

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<sup>75</sup> *Documents statistiques sur le Royaume de Belgique* (Brussels 1841) 114-115, 190-191; *Statistique générale de la Belgique: Exposé de la situation du Royaume* (Brussels 1852) 108-109; *Documents statistiques publiés par le Département de L'Intérieur* (Brussels 1865) 139-144.

<sup>76</sup> *Documents statistiques publiés par le Département de L'Intérieur* (Brussels 1865) 183.

