

*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<sup>†</sup>*

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Poor relief in the pre-industrial period is a much-investigated topic, but we still lack an idea of its quantitative importance and development, especially in a comparative perspective. This article estimates the magnitude of the various kinds of formalized relief for three present-day countries (Italy, England, and the Netherlands) in the very long run (1400–1850). The results show that in this period a substantial share of GDP, up to 3 per cent, could be spent on formal relief, offering subsistence to up to 8–9 per cent of the population, with a gradual rise over time and the highest figures being reached in the Netherlands in the eighteenth century. The three cases show a steep decline around 1800, a pattern found more generally in Europe. Next, these results are placed in a broader geographical perspective. This highlights the sharp differences within countries—which could be even larger than those between countries—and the high levels reached in the regions bordering the southern shores of the North Sea. In the last section, the results are used to discuss the possible causes underlying these long-run patterns and geographical differences, including urbanization, wealth, religion, and social-organizational features.

In the pre-industrial era, social spending could play a vital role in protecting people from the vagaries of life. Besides low income levels, pre-industrial societies were also marked by relatively high inequality, and their food markets displayed high price volatility, exposing many people to destitution and famine.<sup>1</sup> Was social spending in this period capable of mitigating these problems, or did it only take off later in developed, wealthier countries?

Given the importance of this issue, interest in poor relief and charitable organizations in the pre-industrial period has produced many historical studies. Some of these have placed poor relief in its wider, social context, or in the perspective of the development of labour markets and capitalism, or have linked it to changing

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<sup>1</sup> Milanovic, Lindert, and Williamson, 'Pre-industrial inequality'.

patterns of mortality.<sup>2</sup> However, because of the fragmentary and highly diverse nature of social assistance and the absence of statistical sources before *c.* 1850, most studies remain descriptive or lack a comparative aspect.<sup>3</sup>

Lindert's investigations of social spending since *c.* 1780 are an exception.<sup>4</sup> His starting point is England, where the relatively abundant source material, especially the Poor Law Commission's reports, allows Lindert to quantify relief at the national level. Focusing on state expenditures, supplemented with information on charities, he is able to make geographical comparisons and identify shifts over time. He concludes that social assistance before the late nineteenth century was very limited. England and the Netherlands stood out, but even here relief did not amount to more than a few per cent of GDP. In the rest of Europe this figure would be less than 1 per cent. Other studies, for instance by de Swaan, convey a similar picture. He characterizes social welfare in the late medieval and early modern period as fragile and unstable.<sup>5</sup> This implies that social spending became substantial only recently, when societies had become much wealthier, and that it was least generous where it was needed most—Lindert's Robin Hood paradox.<sup>6</sup>

Despite these efforts, no long-run quantitative analysis of social spending exists. Was social spending really universally low before the welfare state? What changes and discontinuities occurred in the long run? Lindert estimates relief expenditures in England developing from 1 per cent of GDP in the mid-eighteenth century to 2.7 per cent in 1820 and back again to 1.1 per cent around 1840. This already suggests that changes could be substantial and patterns found around 1800 cannot readily be generalized. Therefore we need greater insight into the developments of the pre-1800 period. Furthermore, we need a more encompassing approach to poor relief, which not only looks at government spending but includes other forms of relief that were important before 1800 and outside England, notably the relief offered by corporations, charitable institutions, and associations. Such a comprehensive overview does not yet exist.

Moreover, we know little about the driving forces behind levels of social assistance. Did rising levels of income translate not only into rising total assistance but also into a higher share of GDP being spent on social assistance?<sup>7</sup> Or was the level of social spending mainly influenced by the degree of access to political power? Lindert holds access to political decision-making in the period *c.* 1750–1900 responsible for the changes in English social spending. Woolf and, again, Lindert also suggest that religious factors played a role, with Protestant countries spending more on relief. Social assistance seems to have been lower in Catholic countries, as indicated by levels below 1 per cent in France and Italy in the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> These claims, however, should be supported by evidence encompassing a long period and a variety of societies in terms of income, politics, and religion.

This article seeks to address these lacunae. It places levels of spending in the nineteenth century in a long-run perspective, employs an encompassing approach

<sup>2</sup> For example, Mollat, ed., *Études*; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*; Boyer, 'Old poor law'; Solar, 'Poor relief'; and recently Kelly and Ó Gráda, 'Poor law'.

<sup>3</sup> King, 'Welfare regimes', p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> Lindert, 'Poor relief'; idem, *Growing public*.

<sup>5</sup> de Swaan, *In care of the state*, pp. 6–7, 21–51.

<sup>6</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16; Heerma van Voss, 'Embarrassment'.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, *Poor*, p. 33; Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 44.

to relief, and uses a selection of cases to identify geographical differences and divergences within Europe. Next, it uses this overview to discuss the causes underlying the long-term patterns and geographical differences.

In order to do this, we need estimates of social spending for the period from the late middle ages to 1850. These are difficult to construct because the organization of poor relief in this period was highly fragmented. Across Europe, there was a wide range of local customs as well as tens of thousands of organizations involved in poor relief. Most were privately funded and governed, making the source material highly diverse and dispersed. As a result, much research for the period before the eighteenth century consists of case studies of single organizations or individual towns.

The fragmentation and descriptive nature of many studies obstruct long-run analyses and comparisons. Moreover, a focus on impressive cases risks *overestimating* public assistance in this period. The large funds, the large numbers of poor relieved, the masses of food and drink distributed, and the grand buildings of the large hospitals and other charitable organizations can seem impressive.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, there is the risk of *underestimation* of public assistance when the figures for single organizations are implicitly taken as an indication of total support in a locality, while they were only one of many organizations there. The result is that the importance of poor relief in the pre-industrial period is assessed very differently in the literature, from very positive and important—especially in the older, religiously inspired literature—to negative, unimportant, and inadequate.<sup>10</sup> The true importance of relief is difficult to know because only a few general overviews and estimates of total sums exist.

After providing an overview of the organization of social spending and its development in section I, we will estimate total social assistance in the period 1400–1850, that is, including the period that has been hardly documented so far (section II). We investigate three cases: the centre-north of Italy, the Netherlands, and England. These three cases figure prominently in the literature on poor relief, and they display different patterns of economic success (Italy in the late middle ages versus the Netherlands and England in the early modern and modern periods), political organization (centralized England versus decentralized Italy and the Netherlands) and religion (Catholic Italy versus Protestant England and the Netherlands). This variety allows us to assess various possible causes of relief levels.

This investigation of social spending includes formal assistance offered by public authorities (local, cities, national), by religious institutions (parishes, monasteries, chapters), by charitable institutions (hospitals, almshouses, private foundations), and where possible by associations (village communities, commons, fraternities). Although we focus on relief by institutions, other formal entitlements of the poor will also be discussed and, as far as possible, quantified in order to arrive at a more inclusive picture. Included are rights of gleaning offered to poor people and, to some extent, the use of the commons. Here, we need to distinguish carefully. The rights included are those offered to the poorer segments of society and formalized by being embedded in customary law or local by-laws. Excluded here are rights to

<sup>9</sup> Discussed in Geremek, *Poverty*, pp. 22–3, 37–9; or for Venetian hospitals, Aikema and Meijers, eds., *Regno*.

<sup>10</sup> For a negative view, see, for example, Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 173–6.

the commons based on ownership of a farm or used by the more well-to-do rural dwellers. However, these forms of relief are often difficult to quantify. Also included, but only tentatively, is relief stipulated in wills. We exclude informal, direct assistance by family, kin, neighbours, and friends, direct alms, and *ad hoc* collections. Insufficient sources exist on informal assistance to allow assessment of its importance prior to the nineteenth century. Also disregarded are the indirect redistributive effects of government policies such as taxation. Their effects were generally regressive rather than progressive, as revenues came mostly from excises on consumption goods that weighed disproportionately on the poor, while public expenses mainly benefited government officials and bondholders.<sup>11</sup> We have also chosen to omit subsidies for education and insurance schemes (for example, for sickness or burial). The latter, when they existed, were mostly organized in a guild structure, and they were predominantly aimed at the middle classes who held guild membership and could afford to pay the contributions, rather than at the poor.<sup>12</sup>

After identifying the main patterns of total social assistance in the period 1400–1850, we will further explore regional variations and place them in a wider geographical perspective (section III). Next, we will discuss the causes of the differences in the scope of public assistance (section IV). Conclusions follow.

## I

In the middle ages a very diverse patchwork of poor relief had emerged. In the early and high middle ages, relief by kin and neighbours was an important part of the safety net. Institutionalized poor relief was principally provided by (semi-)religious institutions such as monasteries and parish funds. The introduction and formalization of tithing also offered a form of poor relief, since one-fourth to one-third of the tithe was theoretically meant for the poor, although it is questionable whether this happened in practice.<sup>13</sup>

In the wave of horizontal association and community formation in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, new charitable organizations emerged, mostly managed by laymen. This was a formative period of institutionalized poor relief, sometimes labelled ‘a revolution of charity’.<sup>14</sup> In the villages of the countryside, people organized poor boxes, and the formalization of commons and other organizations of communal agriculture offered the poor access to land or its fruits. Village by-laws across western Europe, in England from the thirteenth century onwards, formalized the right of the rural poor to forage on the common wastelands, to graze one or two animals on the common meadows, or to reap the leftovers or fallen grain after the harvest.<sup>15</sup> The latter practice, called gleaning, was important in grain-growing areas where open fields were predominant. To the extent that these rights were not directly connected to landownership they should be considered as part of relief.

<sup>11</sup> On the Dutch Republic: de Vries and van der Woude, *First modern economy*, pp. 100–29.

<sup>12</sup> On the Netherlands: van Leeuwen, ‘Guilds’, p. 82; and Gelderblom and Jonker, ‘With a view’, pp. 83–90. For an international perspective: Bos, *Uyt liefde tot malcander*, pp. 293–326.

<sup>13</sup> Arnoux, ‘Économie historique’; Boyd, *Tithes*, pp. 78–80, 120–4.

<sup>14</sup> Mollat, *Pauvres*, pp. 165–87 (for this label: p. 165); de Moor, ‘Silent revolution’, p. 186.

<sup>15</sup> King, ‘Gleaners’, pp. 139, 141–2; Ault, ‘By-laws’, p. 211.

In the emerging towns of the Low Countries and Italy, relief organizations were developed as a vital element of urban community building.<sup>16</sup> In the Low Countries and elsewhere, poor tables, often called Tables of the Holy Spirit, distributed alms to the poor. Funding, sometimes land but mainly annuities, was assembled by merchants and entrepreneurs, but many donations also came from the middle strata of society.<sup>17</sup> In many Italian cities, confraternities had taken on the responsibility of general poor relief since at least the thirteenth century. They took care of distributions and sometimes administered hospitals.<sup>18</sup>

Since the late twelfth century, larger towns could also have dozens of hospitals, which provided shelter and food, and made distributions to the poor.<sup>19</sup> It was mainly the urban elite who took the initiative in founding these institutions. Almshouses and orphanages were also founded by the hundred in the Netherlands from the late fourteenth century onwards.<sup>20</sup> They, like other institutions set up in this period, often survived for centuries. In late medieval England too, many almshouses provided free residence and stipends to the poor.<sup>21</sup> Other sources of poor relief in medieval England were monasteries, hospitals, and occasional poor rates. As on the Continent, English medieval relief was fragmented.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike modern welfare arrangements, the role of public authorities was limited to some degree of control over charities and hospitals, and they rarely financed poor relief. In Italy and in the Netherlands, governments offered very little direct assistance.<sup>23</sup> In England, forerunners of the first poor rates financed through local taxation probably existed before the late sixteenth-century poor laws, but these were not yet systematically collected and only supplemented other forms of relief.<sup>24</sup> Relief organizations were largely financed out of the revenues from their assets. A sample of charitable and religious foundations in the late medieval Low Countries showed they obtained on average two-thirds of their income from asset returns.<sup>25</sup> Other studies have uncovered similar funding patterns across the Continent in the pre-industrial period.<sup>26</sup> Direct donations and taxation played a small role in financing poor relief in this period.

Members of guilds and journeymen associations and their families could also count on assistance, particularly if they were struck by the death, illness, or disability of the breadwinner. Sometimes guild members made regular contributions to a common fund to meet such expenses, as a form of mutual insurance.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Lynch, *Individuals*, pp. 5–18, 103–10.

<sup>17</sup> Tits-Dieuaide, 'Tables', p. 570; Galvin, 'Credit', p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> Terpstra, 'Apprenticeship'; Henderson, *Piety*, p. 213.

<sup>19</sup> Maréchal, 'Armen- en ziekenzorg'; Henderson, *Renaissance hospital*, pp. 6, 341–55; McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 69–93.

<sup>20</sup> For example, see Looijesteijn, 'Funding and founding', p. 200, on Leiden's 47 almshouses.

<sup>21</sup> McIntosh, *Poor relief*, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8. For fragmentation in the early modern period, see Innes, ' "Mixed economy" ', pp. 141–3.

<sup>23</sup> For example, Haemers and Ryckbosch, 'Targeted public', pp. 222–3, on Flanders; Henderson, *Piety*, p. 241, on Florence.

<sup>24</sup> Dyer, 'English medieval village', pp. 415–16; *idem*, 'Poverty', pp. 45–8, on fourteenth-century poor rates, although McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 96–112, argues that medieval parochial poor rates and poor boxes were rare outside the south of England.

<sup>25</sup> Rijpma, 'Funding', pp. 90–3.

<sup>26</sup> Early modern Low Countries: Gelderblom and Jonker, 'With a view', pp. 74, 79, 84; Italy: Henderson, *Piety*, p. 172; Pullan, *Rich and poor*, pp. 157–67; France: Fairchild, *Poverty*, p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> van Leeuwen, 'Guilds'; Bos, '*Uyt liefde tot malcander*', pp. 149–97; Assante, 'Prophets of welfare'; Rappaport, *Worlds*, pp. 195–8.

All in all, poor relief was fragmented, and this fragmentation increased with the establishment of new organizations while the older forms of relief remained. Throughout the pre-industrial period, there were frequent attempts to counteract this fragmentation by reforming relief systems, albeit not always fundamentally. Around the middle of the fifteenth century, poor relief in many Italian towns was reorganized at the instigation of public authorities and urban elites. In towns such as Cortona (1441), Prato (1429), and Bologna (1490–1530), smaller hospitals and other organizations were consolidated into larger organizations.<sup>28</sup> This effort, aimed at increasing efficiency and at enlarging the urban elites' grip on the administration, remained incomplete, however, and left many autonomous organizations.

Calls for reform of poor relief grew at the beginning of the sixteenth century all over western Europe. The plans for reform were most clearly articulated by humanist Juan Luis Vives. Turning against the medieval tradition of alms-giving, charity, and the sanctity of poverty, he proposed more pragmatic solutions to poverty. In the second quarter of the sixteenth century some of his ideas were realized in the Low Countries and Italy. The reforms were aimed at rationalization, with the merger of smaller funds and the introduction of central control, though in the Low Countries the funding and management of charity remained largely unchanged. At the same time, the aims of poor relief changed, including stricter exclusion of the non-deserving poor, especially foreigners, beggars, and vagrants. Poor relief was increasingly also used to prevent voluntary unemployment and begging, forcing all able-bodied people to work.<sup>29</sup> This was a reinforcement of existing practices as poor relief always focused on the so-called deserving poor: vulnerable groups such as orphans, foundlings, the aged, the disabled, and widows. Although these groups were likely to be poor, the focus also reflected social preferences regarding relief recipients.<sup>30</sup>

England had similar poor relief reforms in this period. Catholic organizations were seen to hand out doles indiscriminately. Parliament legislated on relief organized at the parish level which was targeted only at the deserving poor, while strict laws against vagrancy were also introduced.<sup>31</sup> Protestantism was not the only driver of these reforms. Catholic cities in southern Europe also acted to suppress vagrancy and provide more systematic care for the deserving poor.<sup>32</sup> Even in the north many steps had already been taken before Protestant ideas really took hold.<sup>33</sup> The sixteenth century was not a break with the past, but rather an acceleration and more systematic implementation of developments which had begun as early as the twelfth century: the centralization and rationalization of charity, the role of laymen, and the influence of public authorities, as well as measures against the undeserving poor.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, the Reformation affected the religious sources of poor relief. In the Netherlands the properties of monasteries were brought under public

<sup>28</sup> Perol, *Cortona*, pp. 171–4, 184–8; Mollat, *Pauvres*, pp. 339–44; Terpstra, 'Apprenticeship', pp. 102–10.

<sup>29</sup> Geremek, *Poverty*, pp. 143–60; Lis and Soly, *Poverty and capitalism*, pp. 87–8, 194–214.

<sup>30</sup> Blockmans and Prevenier, 'Armoede', p. 532; Fairchilds, *Poverty*, pp. 73–4; Geremek, *Poverty*, pp. 25–6.

<sup>31</sup> McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 115–38.

<sup>32</sup> Pullan, 'Catholics, Protestants, and the poor', pp. 450, 456; Jütte, *Poverty*, pp. 100–5, for an overview of the debate.

<sup>33</sup> Parker, *Reformation*, pp. 65–6, 86–90; van der Heijden, 'Juan Luis Vives'; Alves, 'Christian social organism'.

<sup>34</sup> Tierney, *Medieval poor law*, pp. 128–33; idem, 'Decretists'.

administration and assigned to other purposes. This ended their relief spending, but occasionally the new goal was social spending, for instance when the assets of Amsterdam's Carthusian monastery were used to fund the civic orphanage.<sup>35</sup> In the early modern period the different religious denominations in the Dutch Republic, from different types of Protestants to Catholics and Jews, each established their own poor relief organizations at the local level, operating alongside the hospitals, orphanages, and relief agencies administered by the local public authorities.<sup>36</sup> The result was a mixed system of poor relief that endured well into the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

In England, the organization of poor relief took a fundamentally different direction in the sixteenth century. The transformation in the financing and management of poor relief and charitable foundations was more radical there, especially in the 1530s and 1540s, as religious institutions, chantries, and fraternities were dissolved.<sup>38</sup> Monastic properties were confiscated, as were about half of the hospitals and almshouses. Despite the creation of new foundations, the number of hospitals and almshouses around 1600 was only two-thirds of that before 1540.<sup>39</sup> Poor relief by hospitals and other foundations, however, was eventually surpassed by the nation-wide public assistance organized by the state, using the parish as the basic unit of administration. After some earlier experimentation, around 1600 poor relief funded by compulsory land taxes developed.<sup>40</sup> The private charities and charitable foundations remained, but their relative importance declined as poor relief became increasingly tax-based. Even though a mixture of different welfare provisions remained in England, from a European perspective the degree to which the English state succeeded in enforcing a nation-wide tax-based system of poor relief was exceptional.<sup>41</sup> The mixture of forms of formalized poor relief, and the division of responsibility between public or corporate and private organizations displayed clear differences by country and period.

Poor relief in the countryside in all three areas underwent further changes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of new ideas on agricultural improvement and liberal attacks on communal agriculture. After a long process starting in the late middle ages, there was now an acceleration in the enclosure process in which land became privatized and remaining commons and open fields were split up.<sup>42</sup> Access for poor people to common wastelands and their gleaning rights were reduced or even abolished.<sup>43</sup>

In Italy, the decades around 1800 presented a discontinuity for the urban charitable system. The ideal of the period was centralization of poor relief and stronger state involvement. Independent corporations providing relief were to be abolished or consolidated. Through the intervention of eighteenth-century enlightened absolutists such as grand-duke Leopold of Tuscany, confraternities were suppressed and their properties transferred to diocesan committees to support

<sup>35</sup> McCants, *Civic charity*, p. 157.

<sup>36</sup> Heerma van Voss and van Leeuwen, 'Charity', pp. 176–7; van Leeuwen, 'Giving', p. 305.

<sup>37</sup> Heerma van Voss, 'Embarrassment', pp. 24–7.

<sup>38</sup> Rushton, 'Monastic charitable provision'.

<sup>39</sup> McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 225–69; Slack, *Poverty*, on the poor laws; Dyer, 'Poverty', on medieval antecedents.

<sup>41</sup> Slack, *Reformation*, pp. 158–66; Solar, 'Poor relief', p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Neeson, *Commoners*, pp. 81–109, on England; Perol, *Cortona*, p. 92, for an Italian example.

<sup>43</sup> King, 'Gleaners', pp. 146–50; Humphries, 'Enclosures', pp. 19–21.

priests and the poor, while the suppression of religious orders benefited the hospitals. However, properties were also reassigned to fit the needs of the state, and the restructuring of public debts likewise injured charitable institutions.<sup>44</sup> These policies were continued during French rule, which also saw the consolidation of relief institutions in the Bureaux de Bienfaisance. Still, consolidation remained incomplete, as separate institutions proved resilient and continued their operations alongside the Bureaux de Bienfaisance. The Restoration and subsequent Catholic revival in Italy fuelled private charity again and charitable foundations were able to recover somewhat from the previous turbulent period. State funding of poor relief, however, was kept to a minimum.<sup>45</sup> In the Netherlands, discontinuity was less severe and the segments of the relief system affected by Napoleonic reforms were largely restored after 1815.<sup>46</sup>

Poor relief in England was obviously not directly affected by the French conquests, but relief there was at an all-time high to meet the subsistence crises during this period. The high costs eventually generated pressures for reform. Under the influence of intellectuals such as Malthus and Ricardo, the new poor law was passed in 1834 to rein in spending.<sup>47</sup>

## II

In this section we calculate total expenditures on formal poor relief for Italy, the Netherlands, and England. We express relief expenditure as a percentage of GDP to give insight into the share of resources a society devoted to helping the poor.<sup>48</sup> However, this leads to lower percentages when GDP is high, thus lowering the figure for wealthy societies that may have needed less relief. Therefore, by using data on the cost of living, we also provide an estimate of how many people could have been supported by total relief.<sup>49</sup>

Our relief estimates are taken from an extensive literature. This includes earlier calculations of shares of GDP spent on relief. We try to improve upon the work of these previous scholars by using the latest estimates of GDP and the cost of living to make the figures comparable between countries. Using these new GDP estimates typically implies lower social spending estimates, as the more recent round of historical national accounting indicates higher incomes than previously thought, especially for the late medieval period.<sup>50</sup> Improvement on previous figures is also achieved by providing new estimates for the late medieval period to obtain a long-term perspective, and offering a more comprehensive overview by including alternative sources of assistance.

Several types of sources underlie the relief estimates. Apart from nineteenth-century statistical works, most sources were not compiled to assess total relief, but

<sup>44</sup> Cavallo, *Charity and power*, pp. 183–99. For Tuscany: Woolf, *Poor*, pp. 78–80, 134–6.

<sup>45</sup> Farrell-Vinay, 'Welfare', pp. 276–9; Woolf, *Poor*, pp. 86–8.

<sup>46</sup> Prak, *Republikeinse veelheid*, pp. 309–10. On successful centralization: Kort, *Geen cent te veel*, pp. 67–78. On more common failed attempts: van Leeuwen, *Bijstand*, pp. 84–7; and Pot, *Arm Leiden*, pp. 156–7.

<sup>47</sup> On the contemporary debate, see Boyer, 'Old poor law', pp. 114–15; however, Boyer also shows economic reasons behind the development of English poor rates.

<sup>48</sup> See online app. S1 for a discussion of the GDP estimates used here.

<sup>49</sup> See online app. S1 for a discussion of the data on the cost of living.

<sup>50</sup> Bolt and van Zanden, 'Maddison Project', using data from Malanima, 'Long decline', pp. 205–17; van Zanden and van Leeuwen, 'Persistent'; Smits, Horlings, and van Zanden, *Dutch GNP*; Broadberry, Campbell, Klein, Overton, and van Leeuwen, 'British economic growth', pp. 21–9, 39–40.



for administrative or fiscal purposes. They usually give insight into the total budget of the charitable foundations and organizations, while only a few directly give the net expenses of poor relief proper, that is, excluding overhead costs and other non-relief expenses. Around 1800 in western Europe, overheads were between 10 and 30 per cent of the total budget.<sup>51</sup> At the beginning of our research period this was little different: late medieval welfare institutions spent some 10–15 per cent on overheads and another 15 per cent on religious obligations.<sup>52</sup> Some charitable organizations became focused on activities other than poor relief, however, and relief could be as little as half of total expenditures.<sup>53</sup> Based on scattered figures like these, we estimate 70 per cent was spent on relief if no direct estimates are available. Conversely, religious organizations which did not have relief as their prime goal, such as monasteries in the middle ages, could nonetheless spend substantial amounts on charity, and we try to include them.<sup>54</sup>

### *Italy*

The earliest estimate for Italian social spending can be derived from the famous 1427 Catasto census. Its estimates of the wealth of religious and charitable organizations in Florence have been converted to incomes using a 7 per cent rate of return.<sup>55</sup> The spending shares reported in the literature were used to convert incomes to social expenditures: 13 per cent of the income of confraternities and 55 per cent of hospitals.<sup>56</sup> This leads to a social spending estimate of 6,000 florins in 1427. This means social spending by religious and charitable organizations in the city stood at 1.0 per cent of GDP. The Catasto also included the countryside of the diocese of Florence, but to facilitate comparisons with the next set of relief estimates, which almost exclusively concern the towns, the countryside is excluded here. Including the populous *contado* with its meagre social spending would halve the share of social spending in regional GDP.

Another indication of relief in Italy is available for Genoa in 1591. Here, the consolidated relief organization called the Ufficio dei Poveri had 115,000 lire in expenses and in 1696 the newly formed Albergo dei Poveri spent 128,000 lire annually, about 1.9 per cent (1591) and 1.6 per cent (1696) of local GDP.<sup>57</sup> For Florence, figures are again available for the 1790s. Woolf reports that the Congregation of S. Giovanni Battista, when it was subsumed in the Bureau de Bienfaisance, provided 33–45 per cent of outdoor relief in the city. Based on its average expenditures for the period 1791–1800 and assuming its share in total relief remained the same, total outdoor relief in the city was 117,000–160,000 lire. Indoor relief by hospitals should be added to this figure. The Congregation helped 8,600 people, and there were 1,600 people in Florence's hospitals at any given time. Assuming similar expenditures per recipient and correcting outdoor relief by this 20 per cent provides a figure of 140,000–192,000, or 0.8–1.1 per cent of

<sup>51</sup> Lindert, 'Poor relief', pp. 121–2.

<sup>52</sup> Rijpma, 'Funding', pp. 196–204; Henderson, *Piety*, pp. 182, 201,

<sup>53</sup> Pullan, *Rich and poor*, pp. 128–9 (the *scuole* in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Venice); Henderson, *Piety*, pp. 370–2 (confraternities in fifteenth-century Florence).

<sup>54</sup> Rushton, 'Monastic charitable provision'.

<sup>55</sup> The data are from Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, 'Catasto study'. For the conversion, see online app. S2.

<sup>56</sup> Henderson, *Piety*, pp. 102, 107, 182–3, 201, 371; idem, *Renaissance hospital*, p. 64.

<sup>57</sup> Grendi, *Repubblica*, pp. 242–3.

GDP.<sup>58</sup> For Venice, the figure was higher, even after the difficult Napoleonic period, when many relief organizations lost assets and neglected their administration. In 1815, the reorganized *Pubblica Beneficenza* in Venice still had 1.2 million lire in expenses, representing 1.8 per cent of local GDP.<sup>59</sup>

An important caveat is that this information for Genoa, Florence, and Venice covers only cities. Generally speaking, little is known about social spending in the Italian countryside, making total estimates difficult to calculate. Some villages did have formal relief funds and smaller, family-controlled charities, mainly created through legacies. A late sixteenth-century survey from Bergamo found institutional charities (*Misericordia*) in 143 out of 249 villages. Many villages in the Tuscan countryside, too, had religious confraternities that supported the poor.<sup>60</sup> In eighteenth-century Piedmont, Santo Spirito confraternities with a similar function were active in rural areas.<sup>61</sup> Like many of the charities discussed here, they were governed by community officials and funded from endowments. Funds could be substantial, as the Napoleonic regime in Tuscany observed when making an inventory of relief organizations in 1810.<sup>62</sup> Abbeys and other religious organizations probably did not play a major role in rural charity, at least not from the fifteenth or sixteenth century onwards.<sup>63</sup>

In the countryside *monti frumentari*, or 'grain banks', could be key in allowing peasants to acquire food and seed in times of grain shortage. These rural versions of the *Monti di Pietà* made grain available on favourable terms, and their below-market interest rates were social transfers as well. At the end of the sixteenth century, 20–40 per cent of rural communes had these lending facilities, though the number had declined to 10 per cent by the start of the eighteenth century. State grain supply agencies throughout Italy could provide similar services. Traditionally, these *annone* policies were aimed at getting enough food from the countryside into the city, but from the sixteenth century onwards they began looking after both town and countryside.<sup>64</sup> The expenses of these institutions varied widely from year to year, since in times of need their spending could increase dramatically. More particularly, in Italy, during periods of dearth, the fact that public organizations intervened in the market may have resulted in more volatile expenditures than in parts of Europe where expenses were more fixed. This may lead to underestimation of Italian expenditure on charity.

Other semi-formalized forms of relief were the practices of gleaning and access to the commons offered to people in need. In Italy, many commons were already privatized to a large extent by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the remaining commons mainly situated in the mountainous areas of the Apennines and the Alps, in the north.<sup>65</sup> Access to the commons, by way of written regulations, was granted there to the residents with membership rights, including most of the

<sup>58</sup> Woolf, *Poor*, pp. 162–4.

<sup>59</sup> de Kiriaki, 'Opere pie', pp. 513–14.

<sup>60</sup> de la Roncière, 'Place des confréries', pp. 38–44.

<sup>61</sup> Farrell-Vinay, 'Welfare', p. 257.

<sup>62</sup> Woolf, *Poor*, pp. 87–8.

<sup>63</sup> Kindly suggested by Guido Alfani (personal communication, 25 Aug. 2012). An example is the hospital of Altopascio explicitly not supporting the local poor: McArdle, *Altopascio*, pp. 184–7.

<sup>64</sup> Alfani, *Calamities*, pp. 72–8; Rosolino, 'Justice', p. 194; Reinhardt, *Annona*, pp. 428–73; McArdle, *Altopascio*, p. 187, on the Tuscan *Abbondanza* agency.

<sup>65</sup> Corona, 'Proprieté', p. 165.

poor, and the access was not related to private ownership.<sup>66</sup> In line with our inclusive definition of social assistance, the share that was used by the poor is considered relief. The commons came under further pressure from *c.* 1770, as a result of liberal policies, and again during the Napoleonic period. Finally, many commons were privatized after Italian unification.<sup>67</sup> By 1861, the commons represented an income for the poor of 3.2 million lire, no more than 5 per cent of relief provided by institutions.<sup>68</sup>

In the grain-growing areas, commons were virtually absent, but here the practice of gleaning existed. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, the prohibition of the right of gleaning on the lands of major landowners in Basilicata led to rural unrest, involving thousands of wage labourers, day-workers, and the rural poor.<sup>69</sup> Lack of information, however, prohibits us from quantifying its importance. All these relief efforts were probably lower than urban relief, as is also suggested by the rural poor flooding Italian towns in times of scarcity.<sup>70</sup>

If formalized poor relief in the countryside was indeed lower, this would put poor relief in Genoa and its countryside in 1696 below the 1.6 per cent of GDP calculated for the town of Genoa alone. The decline of Italian towns between 1500 and 1650, and the associated reduction of the share of the population living in towns, will have strengthened this effect.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the figure for Florence and its rural surroundings in the 1790s would be lower than the 0.8–1.1 per cent calculated for Florence alone. This is also suggested by one of the few sets of figures that does include rural relief, the figures for Piedmont in 1750. The charities there, including confraternities, had 1.2 million lire in revenues, which meant poor relief came to 0.4 per cent of GDP. In the Napoleonic period, policies aimed against confraternities reduced relief in Piedmont. After a period of restoration and recovery, Piedmont in 1861 had 149 hospitals, with 3.8 million lire per year in revenues.<sup>72</sup> Assuming the share of hospitals in overall social spending was still about half, total relief would have amounted to 7.6 million lire: 0.7 per cent of GDP.

In 1868, total assistance by 17,718 data-providing charities in Italy was 70 million lire, or 0.7 per cent of GDP, and in 1881 this was 0.8 per cent.<sup>73</sup> As pointed out by Lindert, this is a low share. However, the charitable expenses of religious organizations should be added to this figure. These foundations were not included in the Italian survey of 1868. They are, however, included in a list based on a mortmain tax on corporations (*Corpi morali*). Assuming that these corporations (bishops, parishes, religious houses, schools, and confraternities) spent 5 per cent of their 69.1 million lire income on charity, we should add another 3.5 million lire, increasing formalized poor relief to around 73.5 million lire, or 0.8 per cent of GDP.<sup>74</sup> Adding the very small and hard to quantify contributions of other types of relief would perhaps push this up to 0.9 per cent. This amount was sufficient to

<sup>66</sup> Tagliapietra, 'Threshold', pp. 45–8, 60–1, 72–5.

<sup>67</sup> Zamagni, *Economic history*, p. 67.

<sup>68</sup> Maestri, *Italia economica*, p. 189; see app. II for details.

<sup>69</sup> Lisanti, *Movimento cooperativo*, p. 38.

<sup>70</sup> Pullan, 'Support', p. 179.

<sup>71</sup> Malanima, 'Urbanisation', pp. 103–4, 108.

<sup>72</sup> Farrell-Vinay, 'Welfare', pp. 259, 261, 268, 276. For the following calculation, see online app. S2.

<sup>73</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 42. The original data are in Maestri, *Italia economica*, pp. 153–8.

<sup>74</sup> Maestri, *Italia economica*, p. 158. See below, section III, on geographical differences within Italy.

cover the consumption needs of a little over 2 per cent of the Italian population (see table 1). This was less than the 3.5 per cent of the population in central and northern Italy that could be fully relieved by formalized poor relief in the seventeenth century and the late middle ages.

### *The Netherlands*

Formalized social spending by all recorded religious and charitable organizations in the western provinces of the Low Countries around 1530 is estimated by using taxation records from religious and charitable foundations that provide an overview of their revenues. Using a broad sample of accounts of foundations, the amount spent on relief by each type of foundation was retrieved to convert these revenues into relief expenditures, leading to a figure of 92,000 guilders for Holland (1.2 per cent of GDP). Three other provinces that were investigated in the same fashion (Brabant, Flanders, and Utrecht) had similar shares of social spending, but differences between cities were large, with expenditures ranging from 0.1 to 1 guilder per capita.<sup>75</sup>

This estimate captures formalized poor relief through a wide variety of charities, including hospitals and poor tables and the many small contributions from ecclesiastical organizations such as monasteries and parish churches. However, forms of relief such as the use of commons and gleaning by poor villagers are not included. In the west of the Netherlands, after the great reclamation era of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the importance of the commons was virtually nil. Inland, on the other hand, the commons remained extensive, as in sandy Drenthe, Overijssel, and the Campine. Access to them was potentially important to the poor, although in some regions access was reserved to the owners of the farms in the village and thus linked to private ownership.<sup>76</sup> Anecdotal evidence shows gleaning was also practised in various parts of the Netherlands, up to the mid-twentieth century. The value of this form of relief is difficult to quantify, but, again, it was probably low in the pastoral Holland countryside. There is also the possibility that tithes were used for relief, although the many tithes owned by monasteries and chapters—and their expenses on poor relief—are already included in the 1530 sample.

For the early modern period, van Nederveen Meerkerk and Teeuwen have used the accounts of relief organizations to estimate social spending in the Holland towns of Delft in 1742 and Leiden in 1750 at 122,000 guilders (4.5 per cent of local GDP) and 91,000 guilders (1.6 per cent) respectively. These are lower-bound estimates because not all charitable organizations are included. At the same time, however, these estimates cover only a limited number of cities. Above all, they exclude the countryside where relief may have been lower.<sup>77</sup>

Although these figures thus seem high, they are in line with the estimate made by de Vries and van der Woude, who used early nineteenth-century government reports on charities to estimate social spending in all of the provinces of the former Dutch Republic. By correcting the 1815–29 average of 5 million guilders for the effects of

<sup>75</sup> Rijpma, 'Funding', pp. 236–52. Previous estimates suggested relief could feed only 1% of the population: see van Bavel, 'Zorg', p. 81, on Utrecht; and Blockmans and Prevenier, 'Armoede', pp. 519–27, on 's-Hertogenbosch.

<sup>76</sup> van Zanden, 'Paradox'.

<sup>77</sup> van Nederveen Meerkerk and Teeuwen, 'Keeping up the good works', p. 202. They calculated local GDP from city population figures and GDP per capita for Holland.

Table 1. *Tentative reconstruction of various types of formalized poor relief per country as a percentage of GDP and the share of the population it could support*

	Northern and central Italy, 1430	Northern and central Italy, 1640	Northern and central Italy, 1790	Italy, 1868	Western Netherlands, 1530	Western Netherlands, 1760	Netherlands, 1820	England, 1500	England, 1700	England, 1790	England, 1850
Institutions	1	1.8	1.1	0.8	1.2	2.9	1.3	1.1	0.4	0.4	0.1
Direct bequests	[0.1]	[0.2]	[0.1]	[0.1]	[0.1]	[0.3]	[0.1]	0.2	[-0]	[-0]	[-0]
Taxes or poor rates	[0]	[0]	[0]	[0]	0	[0]	[0.3]	~0	0.8	1.5	1.1
Commons	[-0]	[0.1]	[-0]	[-0]	[0]	[0]	[0.1]	[0.3]	[0.3]	0.3	[0.2]
Gleanings	[-0]	[-0]	[-0]	[-0]	[0]	[0]	[-0]	[0.1]	[0.1]	0.1	[0.1]
Tithes	[0]	[0]	[0]	[0]	0	0	0	[0]	[0]	[0]	[0]
Total (% GDP)	1- [1.1]	1.8[-2]	1.1[-1.2]	0.8[-0.9]	1.2[-1.3]	2.9[-3.3]	1.3[-1.8]	1.4[-1.8]	1.2[-1.6]	2.1[-2.3]	1.2[-1.5]
Total (% population)	3.8[-4.4]	3.3[-3.8]	2.0[-2.3]	2.1[-2.3]	5.7[-6.3]	8.9[-9.9]	4.9[-6.8]	2.9[-3.8]	2.9[-3.8]	7.3[-8.1]	4.5[-5.5]

Notes: Interpolations and guesstimates for missing observations are placed in square brackets. Sources: See section II. For details of GDP and population estimates, see also online app. S1.

the 1810 Dutch government bond default, they arrive at 8–10 million guilders for the late eighteenth century (2.4 per cent of GDP).<sup>78</sup> Half the social spending took place in the province of Holland, representing 2.5 per cent of GDP there.

The same reports also shed light on social spending after the French period. In 1822, relief spending by charity-houses, relief offices, poor schools, orphanages, hospitals, and outdoor relief to the poor was 10 million guilders for the entire Low Countries (including present-day Belgium), with 5.6–6.0 million guilders (1.4–1.5 per cent) spent in the provinces of the former Dutch Republic. The decline compared to the eighteenth-century figures stems from de Vries and van der Woude's assumption that the 1810 bond default (*tiërçering*) had a marked effect because late eighteenth-century Dutch charities relied heavily on government bonds for their income.<sup>79</sup>

Of the 5.6 million guilders of revenues remaining in 1822, 2.5 million originated from asset returns, 1.3 million from collections, and 1.8 million from subsidies by municipalities and provinces. Differences between the Dutch provinces were great. With over 3 million guilders, Holland was the province with the most social spending.<sup>80</sup>

Detailed information available on poor relief in the countryside and outside Holland suggests a similar decline of relief in the decades around 1800. For example, the coastal area of Groningen, in the north of the country, had developed a dense network of Calvinist poor-relief organizations in the early modern period. However, economic growth in the early nineteenth century did not translate into higher poor relief, as rising food prices and growing proletarianization put the relief system under pressure. Real expenditure per capita declined from 2 guilders in 1770–90 to 1.4 guilders in 1800–60, amounting to 1 per cent of regional income.<sup>81</sup>

The decline of poor relief in the decades around 1800 and the difference in levels of relief between the western and eastern parts of the Netherlands stand out (table 1). These show a total of 1.3–1.8 per cent of GDP for the Netherlands as a whole in 1820 compared to a much higher level of 2.9–3.3 per cent in the western parts of the Netherlands in 1760 (figures for the Netherlands as a whole in 1760 are difficult to calculate). These amounts could cover the consumption needs of 9–10 per cent of the population in 1760, returning to late medieval levels of 5–7 per cent in 1820.

### *England*

Thanks to a number of recent investigations, total formalized charity in England for the period around 1500 can be estimated. Monastic charity probably stood at £13,000 per annum, based on the discovery that more of their revenues was spent on charity than assumed before, up to 7–9 per cent.<sup>82</sup> The 617 hospitals and almshouses in England had 5,347 and 1,645 inhabitants respectively. Hospitals

<sup>78</sup> de Vries and van der Woude, *First modern economy*, pp. 654–664, esp. p. 660.

<sup>79</sup> van Nederveen Meerkerk and Teeuwen, 'Stability', pp. 89–90; McCants, *Civic charity*, pp. 156–79.

<sup>80</sup> Mokyr, *Industrialization*, p. 196; Porter, *Progress*, p. 113, using *Verslag betreffende het armwezen*. For regional differences, see section IV.

<sup>81</sup> See Paping, *Werken*, pp. 271–98, 360–1, for the 139 guilders GDP per capita figure in 1831/50. Regional income is from de Vries and van der Woude, *First modern economy*, p. 58; Mokyr, *Industrialization*, p. 196, gives a similar estimate.

<sup>82</sup> Rushton and Sigle-Rushton, 'Monastic poor relief', p. 215.

provided full board, so we use Dyer's subsistence estimate of £1.5 per person annually.<sup>83</sup> Almshouses usually did not provide full board and are estimated from McIntosh's data on their stipends at £0.325 per annum in 1550, or £0.18 in money of 1500.<sup>84</sup> Total expenditure on poor relief by hospitals and almshouses in England thus comes to £8,221. Dyer's estimates of the various other sources of relief in the countryside show that the total of funeral doles and alms, alms stipulated in wills, vicarage, parochial, and fraternity alms, and common boxes amounted to £4.8 per year for an average village of 300 inhabitants.<sup>85</sup> With a rural population of 2.1 million, these other sources of relief could come to about £34,000 per year.<sup>86</sup> Projecting Archer's estimate of similar relief sources for London in 1570–3 back to *c.* 1500 gives £1.7 per 100 persons per year.<sup>87</sup> With an urban population of 68,200, urban relief is thus estimated at £1,100. Total social spending was about £57,000 (1.4 per cent of GDP).

From the late seventeenth century onwards, several, roughly similar estimates of mandatory and voluntary contributions to poor relief exist.<sup>88</sup> Slack puts the poor rates between 1685 and 1696 at £400,000–£665,000, judging the lower figure by the Board of Trade in 1696 to be the most reliable. He adds an approximate £150,000 spent by endowed charities to this figure.<sup>89</sup> Innes gives a similar figure of £440,000 for the poor rates, but a higher figure of £210,000 for hospitals.<sup>90</sup> This estimate excludes spending by London corporations that turned out to make substantial contributions by 1738. Therefore, we use a slightly higher figure than suggested by Slack: £650,000 (1.2 per cent of GDP).

Lindert uses a parliamentary report from 1839 and figures collected by Porter to estimate relief from 1749 onwards. When we combine these figures with the new GDP estimates of Broadberry et al., which are higher than the older estimates used by Lindert and Slack, we see the steady rise of poor rate expenditures to a peak of 2.4 per cent in 1818 and a sharp decline after the introduction of the new poor law in 1834 (figure 1). Lindert further mentions that expenditures by private charities in England and Wales in 1819/37 came to an additional 0.4 per cent of GDP, which declined to 0.1 per cent in 1861/76.<sup>91</sup>

A potentially important contribution to poor relief came from direct bequests—charitable gifts that did not end up in institutional endowments. Hadwin's recalculations of Jordan's data on English wills in diocesan Prerogative Courts show

<sup>83</sup> Dyer, 'Poverty', p. 48.

<sup>84</sup> McIntosh, *Poor relief*, p. 75, online app. 7, available at <http://ebooks.cambridge.org/ebook.jsf?bid=CBO9781139057547>; the CPI deflator is from Allen, 'Great divergence'.

<sup>85</sup> Dyer, 'Poverty', p. 77. Of this £5, £3.5 consisted of returns on endowments and is included under *Institutions* in tab. 1; the remainder consisted of direct gifts and bequests.

<sup>86</sup> Population from the app. to Broadberry et al., 'British economic growth', available at <http://www.basvanleeuwen.net/Data.htm> ('Historical data, GDP, prices, wages, human capital'; datafile 'GDP, GDP per capita, population, and sectoral indices and price indices for England and Great Britain 1270–1870'); urbanization from de Vries, *European urbanization*.

<sup>87</sup> Archer, *Pursuit*, pp. 167, 181; the deflator is from Allen, 'Great divergence'. Arguably, using the CPI to deflate late sixteenth-century relief figures leads to an underestimate since McIntosh, *Poor relief*, pp. 79–80, 202, claims that inflation eroded real social spending.

<sup>88</sup> For example, Slack, *Poverty*, p. 171; Colquhoun, *Treatise*, p. 36.

<sup>89</sup> Slack, *Poverty*, pp. 170–2, relying on Hadwin, 'Problem of poverty', pp. 237–40, for the endowed charities.

<sup>90</sup> Innes, '“Mixed economy”', pp. 147–9. Similar figures lie at the basis of the estimate by Lindert, 'Poor relief', p. 114: 1.2% of GDP.

<sup>91</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, pp. 41–2; Porter, *Progress*, p. 78; Innes, '“Mixed economy”', p. 148. Charities here include only truly private charities, not the corporate charities and hospitals, which seem to be included in Lindert's figures on government-related poor relief.

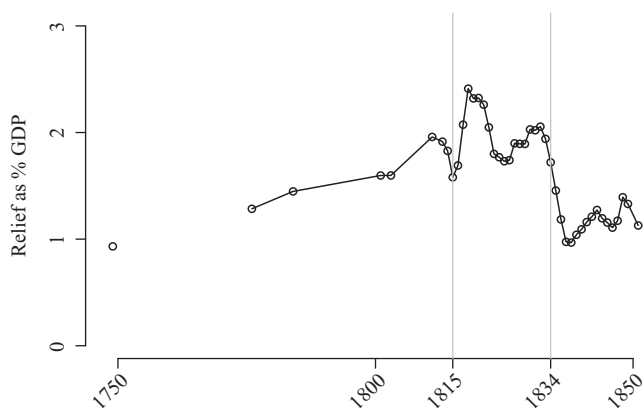


Figure 1. *Poor relief in England as a percentage of GDP*

Sources: See n. 91.

that direct bequests grew from £1,000 per annum in the first decades of the sixteenth century to about £5,000 per annum in the middle of the seventeenth century.<sup>92</sup> Dyer's figures at the basis of our estimate for *c.* 1500 are much higher. He suggests that relief through direct bequests around 1500 came to about £1 6s. 8d. per village, amounting to some £9,000 for all of rural England.<sup>93</sup> These figures show that English relief through bequests in the late middle ages was 3–20 per cent of relief provided through endowments. Archer's breakdown of poor relief in London between 1570 and 1597 shows that charity through bequests came to 10–18 per cent of endowment-based relief.<sup>94</sup> Here, we use a midpoint of 10 per cent of relief through bequest in cases where no direct estimates are available. Compared to the institutional relief and the poor rates, direct bequests indeed became less important after the middle ages. Ben-Amos observes that small bequests and funeral doles declined, while more formalized relief through poor rates, endowments, mutual aid, and guilds increased in early modern England.<sup>95</sup>

In certain regions of the English countryside the poor also benefited from gleaning and access to commons. These practices had become more important in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as population growth led to a much more intensive use of these resources by the poor.<sup>96</sup> As the enclosure movement gathered pace in the second half of the seventeenth century, however, attacks on common lands, wasteland, and traditional usage rights also increased.<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, around 1800 gleaning still accounted for £2–£3 per poor family per year in parishes where it was a customary right.<sup>98</sup> Based on the share of parishes reporting gleaning in 1834 and assuming that the poorest third of the households there actually gleaned, we find that some 74,000 out of 1.6 million rural households

<sup>92</sup> Hadwin, 'Deflating philanthropy', p. 111; Jordan, *Philanthropy in England*, pp. 22–3.

<sup>93</sup> Dyer, 'Poverty', p. 77.

<sup>94</sup> Archer, *Pursuit*, pp. 166, 181.

<sup>95</sup> Ben-Amos, *Culture of giving*, pp. 116–22, 140–1.

<sup>96</sup> Woodward, 'Straw', p. 45.

<sup>97</sup> Neeson, *Commoners*, pp. 81–109.

<sup>98</sup> King, 'Customary rights', pp. 462–5; Humphries, 'Enclosures', p. 35.



supplemented their income in this way. This makes £196,000 (0.08 per cent of GDP).<sup>99</sup> In the nineteenth century, as a result of technological changes in harvesting, gleaning declined. Farmers also pressed for abolition of the right of gleaning and increasingly found the law on their side.<sup>100</sup>

The rights of the rural poor to common lands were also under pressure by the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, even at this time the income derived from this source could be substantial. The most valuable resource provided by the commons was the right to pasture up to two cows. Data from Northamptonshire around 1800 suggest that 12 per cent of the dwellings had a right of access to common lands and were owned by poor groups.<sup>101</sup> If these shares held for England as a whole, some 200,000 poor households possessed these rights. With the annual value of grazing a cow at around £4,<sup>102</sup> pasture of one cow for the poor had a total value of £800,000 or 0.3 per cent of English GDP. This is a maximum figure, since some regions did not have these rights, or had them to a lesser extent, and some poor households may not have possessed livestock.

In total, in 1850, some 1.2–1.5 per cent of English GDP was redistributed through formalized poor relief, a share more or less similar to the figures calculated for 1500 and 1700 (table 1). The eighteenth century, however, witnessed higher levels, with the figure calculated around 1790 standing at 2.1–2.3 per cent. At the very peak of poor rates expenditures in 1818, this figure may have been a percentage point higher, though we have not calculated the additional sources of social assistance for this year. This period also stands out with respect to the share of the English population that could be supported, as total spending was sufficient to cover the consumption costs of 7–8 per cent of the population, much higher than the 3–4 per cent found for 1500 and 1700, but also higher than the 5 per cent calculated for 1850.

The share of GDP transferred through (semi-)public social assistance in these three cases thus fluctuated between less than 1 per cent and more than 2 per cent, with the highest levels found in seventeenth-century Italy, the eighteenth-century Netherlands, and England around 1800 (figure 2). After this high point, levels in the first half of the nineteenth century fell back to those reached in the late middle ages. The share of the population that could be sustained by poor relief reveals similar patterns, but with higher amplitudes, ranging from 2 per cent in late medieval and early nineteenth-century Italy to about 8 per cent in the eighteenth-century Netherlands and England.

These totals may seem low by the standards of today's welfare states. However, the highest shares of GDP were as high as government social transfers would be until the twentieth century. Only from around 1930 would such transfers surpass these levels in north-western Europe, while private charity added little.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, in view of low income levels, there were fewer surpluses in pre-industrial societies to be redistributed, so the effort made by these societies to allocate resources to relief was large relative to wealthier societies. Furthermore, low

<sup>99</sup> County population from Eden, *State of the poor*, p. 230; Broadberry, Campbell, Overton, and van Leeuwen, *British economic growth*. See also online app. S3.

<sup>100</sup> King, 'Gleaners', pp. 143–5.

<sup>101</sup> Shaw-Taylor, 'Parliamentary enclosure', pp. 651–2. For the underlying assumptions, see online app. S3.

<sup>102</sup> Humphries, 'Enclosures', pp. 26–7, using her lower bound of one cow. See also online app. S3.

<sup>103</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, pp. 61–3, 171–6; idem, 'Rise', p. 11.

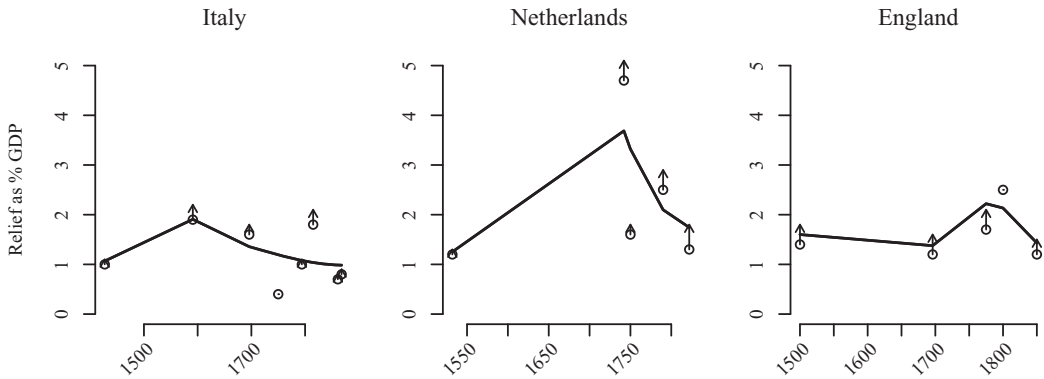


Figure 2. *Tentative reconstruction of various types of formalized poor relief per country as a percentage of GDP*

Notes: Circles indicate lower bound, arrows heads indicate our upper bound estimates. Trend is constructed by LOESS smoothing based on lower and upper bounds.

Sources: Based on tab. 2.

incomes and the precarious situation of many people at the lower income end, meant small amounts could be important.

### III

There are striking geographical differences in these figures. By the late eighteenth century the Netherlands and England spent far more on public assistance than Italy. Differences in per capita social spending between towns or regions within these countries could be just as large. This section aims to bring a sharper perspective to geographical differences in public assistance. It will first discuss the regional differences within the countries already covered, followed by a cursory look at other western European countries (figure 3).

In Italy, the figures for 1868 bring the sharp regional difference within the country clearly to light. The social expenses in the northern and central regions ranged from 2.5 to 5 lire per thousand inhabitants, whereas southern regions such as Apulia, Calabria, and Basilicata were at a third of that level or even below (0.2–1.0 lire).<sup>104</sup> Our more fragmented findings for earlier periods suggest that similar differences existed before the nineteenth century. Differences within the Netherlands were equally large, with by far the highest share spent on social relief in the western parts. Expenses on poor relief per inhabitant in 1822 were highest in the western province of South Holland (4.5 guilders per person). The poorer eastern and southern regions of North Brabant (0.9 guilders) and Drenthe (0.8 guilders) were far below the national average of 2.5 guilders.<sup>105</sup>

Relief figures in England have also been broken down by county. Here too poor relief per head of the population displayed substantial discrepancies. Southern counties such as Essex, Sussex, and Buckinghamshire spent over £0.20

<sup>104</sup> Maestri, *Italia economica*, p. 156.

<sup>105</sup> Mokyr, *Industrialization*, p. 196.

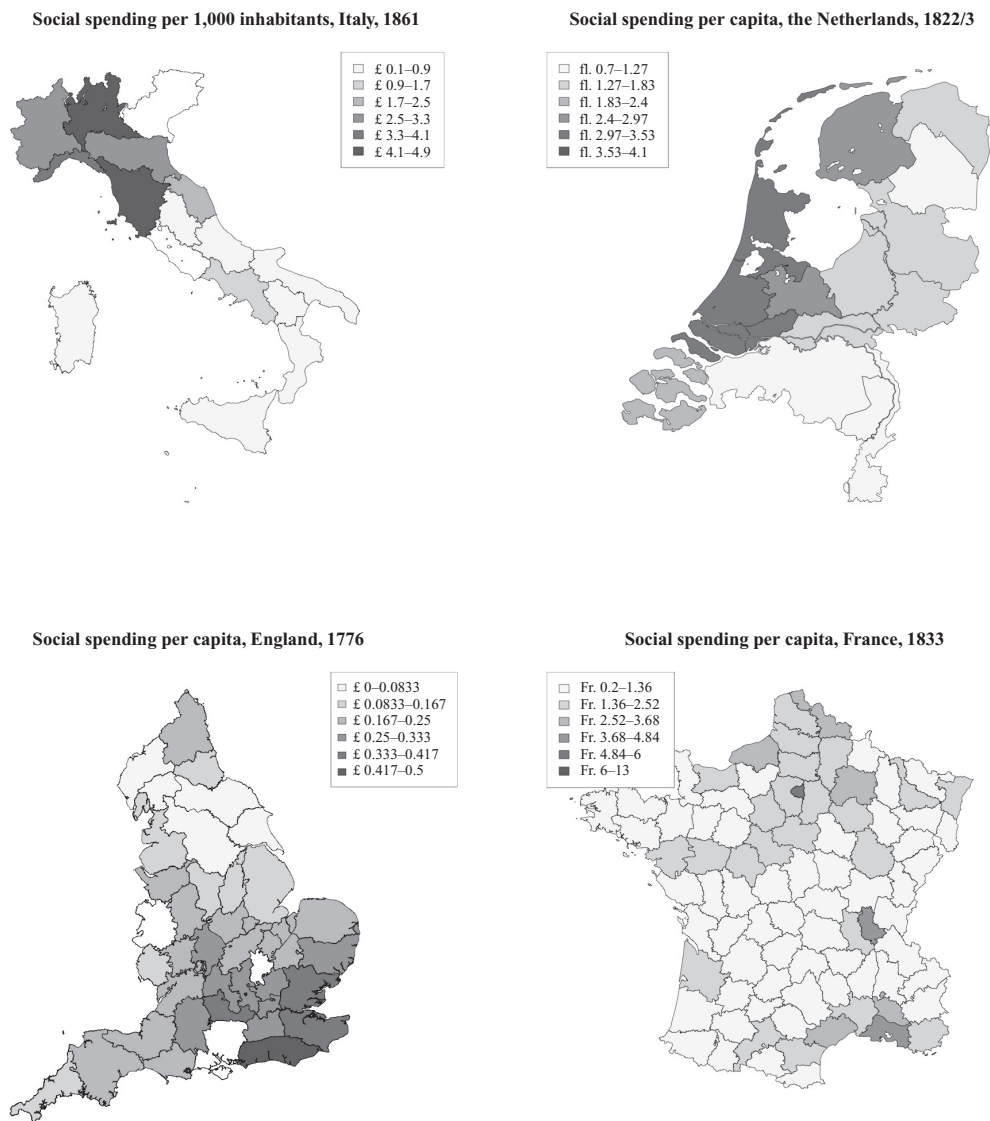


Figure 3. *Relief spending per capita in Italy, the Netherlands, England, and France, late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries*

Sources: Maestri, *Italia economica*, p. 156; MPIDR and CGG, 'MPIDR Population History'; Mokyr, *Industrialization* p. 196; Boonstra, 'NLGis shapefiles'; Eden, *State of the poor*, p. 370; *Abstract of the Answers* (P.P. 1812, XI), p. xxviii; Friendly and Dray, 'Guerry'.

in 1690 and £0.30 per person in 1776, whereas northern counties like Durham and Cumberland spent under £0.08 in 1690 and under £0.10 in 1776.<sup>106</sup>

Similar differences existed in the southern Low Countries, present-day Belgium. Here, in Flanders and Brabant (the Dutch-speaking, northern parts) the

<sup>106</sup> Eden, *State of the poor*, pp. 229–30; population estimates for 1700 are from *Abstract of the Answers* (P.P. 1812, XI), p. xxviii. For the regional pattern, see also King, *Poverty and welfare*, pp. 256–62.

expenditure on formalized charity was 1 per cent of their regional GDP *c.* 1500, similar to spending in Holland.<sup>107</sup> By 1822, total social spending stood at 2.7 million guilders in Flanders and Brabant, against 1.2 million in the southern, French-speaking parts of Belgium (Luxembourg, Liège, Hainault, and Namur). Per inhabitant, expenses on poor relief in Belgium were on average 1.3 guilders, compared with 2.5 in the Netherlands. The only provinces where Dutch levels were reached were South Brabant and Antwerp (2 guilders), while the lowest levels were in Liège, Limburg, and Luxembourg in the south-east.<sup>108</sup> By 1853–6, most social spending was still funded through asset returns and the distribution by region had hardly changed. The combined relief expenditure by the hospitals and the Bureaux de Bienfaisance in Brabant and Flanders was around five francs per capita, whereas the poor of Liège, Namur, and Luxembourg had to make do with half of that amount.<sup>109</sup>

In France, around 1764, total revenues of hospitals were some 14 million livres, while royal expenses on relief amounted to several million per year and separate funds were dispensed for foundlings. In total, some 25–30 million livres were spent on relief along these lines, which amounted to 0.5 per cent of GDP.<sup>110</sup> Figures for around 1790 indicate that the share of GDP spent as formalized poor relief at that point was likewise around 0.5 per cent.<sup>111</sup> This low figure is not due to incompleteness of the data: the sources encompass most sources of relief, at least for the towns. In 1833, according to the full overview of charitable institutions offered by the *Documents Statistiques sur la France*, the sums devoted to charitable purposes and foundling hospitals in the towns are estimated at 10.5 million francs.<sup>112</sup> There were also the Bureaux de Bienfaisance, outdoor relief organizations, which spent another 9 million francs. Finally, spending by hospitals and almshouses amounted to about 50 million francs. The total is approximately 70 million francs, which corresponds to the 2.2 francs per person used by Lindert to calculate that 0.63 per cent of French GDP was spent on formalized relief in 1833.<sup>113</sup>

The level of formalized poor relief in the north of France, however, was much higher than in the south. In 1791 the Comité de Mendicité's survey shows that the level of relief was around 1 livre per inhabitant in the Nord/French Flanders and some other regions in the north of France, and 0.5 to 0.9 livres in Artois, Picardy, the Île-de-France, and the eastern parts of the country, compared to 0.2 to 0.4 livres in the south and less in central France.<sup>114</sup> The picture in 1833 was little different. Most departments spending more than 1.5 francs per inhabitant were in the North or along the Rhône, while low social spending occurred in the centre and south of France.

Until their abolition in 1790, tithes may have provided additional poor relief in the countryside. This possibility is put forward by Arnoux, based on the small

<sup>107</sup> Rijpman, 'Funding', p. 249.

<sup>108</sup> Mokyr, *Industrialization*, pp. 193–7.

<sup>109</sup> Moureaux-Van Neck, 'Assistance publique', pp. 167–71, and its appendix: map 2.

<sup>110</sup> Figures are derived from Bloch, *Assistance*, pp. 260–9, 281–8.

<sup>111</sup> Lindert, 'Poor relief', p. 107.

<sup>112</sup> Porter, *Progress*, p. 99. For the original *Documents Statistiques*, see <http://books.google.nl/books?id=mMFBAAAAcAAJ>.

<sup>113</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 8.

<sup>114</sup> Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 173–6.

amount of qualitative information available on this topic.<sup>115</sup> The extent of this type of poor relief is hard to measure, however. If the formal one-fourth to one-third of tithes was indeed given to the poor, this would mean that 20–45 million livres out of the total tithe revenues of 60–130 million livres in the eighteenth century were spent on relief. This is probably an overestimate, but it could bring social spending before the Revolution up to 1 per cent of GDP. However, most of this relief would be in the grain-growing regions of the north where tithes were more important, further accentuating the difference between the north and south of France.

In eighteenth-century Denmark, poor relief was financed by town rates, and at the end of the century by excise and income taxes. Nonetheless, nineteenth-century figures suggest that the level of poor relief was not very high. In the second half of that century, government poor relief amounted to 0.6–0.9 per cent of GDP.<sup>116</sup>

For Spain, general figures exist for *c.* 1800. In 1798–1808, the disentailment policies of Prime Minister Godoy also affected the properties of hospitals, almshouses, poor relief offices, orphanages, confraternities, and foundations. They held 15 per cent of the religious immovable property and almost 3 per cent of total immovable property in Spain. This means they owned roughly the same share of immovable property as the hospitals and confraternities of Tuscany in 1427, and this will not have amounted to a much larger share of GDP than found there: 0.5 per cent, including the countryside.<sup>117</sup> Critical reports, moreover, suggested that only one-third of the confraternities' annual expenditures of 11.5 million reales in 1770 was actually spent on poor relief.<sup>118</sup>

These reconstructions display a clear geographical pattern of high shares of national income spent on poor relief in England, the west of the Netherlands, and the west of Belgium, and to a somewhat lesser extent the north of France and the north of Italy. Much lower shares are found in the centre and south of France and the south of Italy. The core area of social spending is therefore located around the southern shores of the North Sea. It has been suggested earlier that this was an area of high social spending.<sup>119</sup> The Scandinavian countries were not yet part of the welfare club. It is also striking that the pattern holds not so much on a country-wide basis, but at a regional level.

Overall, between-province inequality in social spending per capita was highest in Italy (a Gini of 0.51 in 1868) and France (0.38 in 1822) and lowest in the Low Countries (0.30 in the northern Netherlands; 0.33 in the Low Countries as a whole in 1822) and especially England (0.23 in 1803). As a result of the additional support provided by commons and gleaning in the countryside and the absence of a strong urban bias in relief, English public assistance was, besides its relative generosity, also characterized by a lack of regional inequality in poor relief.<sup>120</sup>

#### IV

We now turn to the causes of differences in levels of social spending. To this end, we will discuss the implications of our findings for the main causes suggested in the

<sup>115</sup> Arnoux, 'Économie historique', and personal communication on 27 July 2012.

<sup>116</sup> Woolf, *Poor*, p. 83. For the figures, see Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 113.

<sup>117</sup> See Rijpma, 'Funding', pp. 120, 123, on Tuscan charitable institutions' ownership of immovable property.

<sup>118</sup> Marcos Martín, 'Carità e società', p. 410.

<sup>119</sup> Heerma van Voss, 'Embarrassment'.

<sup>120</sup> Solar, 'Poor relief', p. 4; Smith and Solar, 'Old poor law', pp. 468–9.

Table 2. *Relief as a percentage of GDP and urbanization rates*

<i>Region</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Relief as % of GDP</i>	<i>Urbanization rate</i>
Northern and central Italy	1430	1.0–1.1	20
Northern and central Italy	1640	1.8–2.0	18
Northern and central Italy	1790	1.1–1.2	17
Italy	1868	0.8–0.9	16
Western Netherlands	1530	1.2–1.3	45
Western Netherlands	1760	2.9–3.3	50
Netherlands	1820	1.3–1.8	29
England	1500	1.4–1.8	3
England	1700	1.2–1.6	11
England	1790	2.1–2.3	24
England	1850	1.2–1.5	40

*Sources:* Malanima, 'Urbanisation'; van Bavel and van Zanden, 'Jump-start'; de Vries and van der Woude, *First modern economy*, p. 527; de Vries, *European urbanization*. Further urbanization rates kindly provided by Eltjo Buringh (personal communication, 22 April 2013).

literature, that is, income, demand for relief, religion, and urbanization. Since the estimates obtained here are not sufficient to test multi-factor explanations, we will limit ourselves here to discussing these factors separately (table 2).

The evidence seems to suggest that the link between income and social spending, the Robin Hood paradox, was weak in the centuries before the welfare state. On the one hand, the wealthier western part of the Netherlands spent higher shares on relief than the eastern part. On the other hand, Tuscany did not have very high social spending during its medieval apogee. Moreover, neither Holland's decline in the eighteenth century nor England's growth in the nineteenth century translated into the expected changes in social spending. The funding of relief can partially explain this. On the Continent, a large share of total social spending was financed through the asset returns of charitable institutions. Even if donations to these institutions dwindled when per capita income declined, the fact that most revenues were fixed returns from relatively safe assets such as land and government bonds could have prevented large absolute decreases in the short run. If revenues held up during economic decline, the share of charity in GDP could even increase. This may have been the case in Italy, where a relative rise in social spending coincided with declining per capita GDP in the early modern period.

The demand for relief could also drive relief spending. If a society had more people in need of support, and the resources and willingness existed to provide it, social assistance would be higher. Arguably the most important group to look at in this respect is the elderly. The small amount of evidence on age distributions, however, does not suggest that the size of this vulnerable group mattered for social spending. Tuscany had a very large number of elderly people (20 per cent) in 1427 yet little relief spending. Moreover, the proportion of the elderly in England between 1541 and 1871 followed a trend opposite to our relief estimates: it was lowest in the sixteenth century, peaked around 1700, and declined in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>121</sup>

It is possible that care for the needy was performed more informally and therefore not included in our survey of formal relief. In many areas, the family

<sup>121</sup> Wrigley and Schofield, *Population*, pp. 443–50, 528–9; Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber, *Tuscans*.

would have supported the elderly. Formal poor relief may thus have increased as a result of the declining role of family and kin in the provision of welfare, as arguably happened in early modern England.<sup>122</sup> A larger role of family and kin can also partially explain low levels of formal poor relief in Italy. Similarly, it is possible that an increase in begging compensated for lower levels of formal poor relief there.

As for religion, both Woolf and Lindert suggest that Catholic countries had lower shares of social assistance than Protestant ones.<sup>123</sup> Not much investigation has been undertaken so far on this subject for the pre-industrial period.<sup>124</sup> Although differences developed between Protestant England and the Netherlands on the one hand and Catholic Italy on the other, other observations challenge the theory that religion had a crucial role. For instance, relief levels in pre- and post-Reformation England and the Netherlands changed only gradually. Also, there are large regional differences within each of our cases, despite religious homogeneity. Striking also are the low levels of charity observed for Protestant Denmark and Norway at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Next is the factor of urbanization. Again, our figures do not suggest a straightforward relation. Social spending was relatively high in the highly urbanized North Sea provinces of the Low Countries.<sup>125</sup> However, urban Tuscany had only modest social spending. Furthermore, the famous poor rates of England reached impressive figures in the countryside prior to 1834. Finally, we emphasize that the rural poor enjoyed rights to commons, gleaning, and tithes that have so far not been given attention in the analysis of poor relief at the country level.

This brief discussion shows that single-factor explanations by themselves cannot fully account for levels of social spending. Analysing them jointly would be a next step, but the number of observations here is not sufficient. Instead, we explore another way of offering an explanation by returning to the qualitative discussion of the organization of poor relief in section I. The characteristics of this organization, their regional differences observed, and the changes over time may offer further insights into the quantitative patterns reconstructed here. By combining these elements we observe the following settings in which levels of formalized poor relief were relatively high.

First, in a situation of *decentralized organization* and voluntary funding of poor relief, the presence of strong associations and corporations could lead to high levels. In rural areas including the Italian Alps, the eastern Netherlands, and parts of England this was the case, with relief offered by well-developed poor boxes and other charities, as well as rights to commons, gleaning, and tithes. In urban areas, decentralized poor relief at relatively high levels was offered where hospitals, poor boxes, fraternities, and guilds were strong (especially in central and northern Italy, and in the western Netherlands). Town governments had only an indirect role in this. They had an interest in poor relief, in view of the need to deal with labour migration issues as well as to prevent unrest in the densely populated cities, but to this end they relied on corporate organizations and funds rather than financing this

<sup>122</sup> Lambrecht, 'Welfare paradox'.

<sup>123</sup> Woolf, *Poor*, p. 33; Lindert, 'Poor relief', pp. 107–8.

<sup>124</sup> Pullan, 'Catholics, Protestants, and the poor', considers the social and economic aspects of Protestant and Catholic relief to be similar. Parker, *Reformation*, discusses organizational changes of poor relief, but not the scope.

<sup>125</sup> Heerma van Voss, 'Embarrassment', pp. 21–4.

themselves. As in the English countryside where smaller rate-paying farmers subsidized elite labour policies, part of the financial burden in the cities was thus shifted to middling groups who supported the charities.<sup>126</sup> Decentralized relief came under pressure at the end of the *Ancien Régime*. While the rural forms of relief were already in decline from the late middle ages, and were hit hard especially in the eighteenth century, the urban relief systems remained intact longer, up to the Napoleonic era, but then also declined.

Second, high levels of relief were found through a more *centralized, mandatory organization* of poor relief in cases where groups holding power had strong incentives to provide relief. While the implementation of relief in England was at the level of the parish, the uniform and mandatory character of the poor law stemmed from legislation and enforcement from London. Large, labour-hiring landowners in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England were thus able to use their political influence to quell rural unrest and keep agricultural labour in the countryside to compete with urban employers through poor relief, something which became all the more important with the increasingly seasonal character of arable agriculture in this period.<sup>127</sup> With large landowners having to share political power with urban elites due to franchise reforms, this effect declined in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>128</sup>

Another context in which centralized poor relief became important was when governments wanted to placate the population or when political power became accessible to a large proportion of the population, and the poor majority could decide in favour of social spending.<sup>129</sup> Limited franchise and a lack of state capacity meant this factor began to matter substantially only from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards. Up until this moment, the ideas and policies associated with the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and classical liberalism resulted in a low point in social spending. The old decentralized system was severely damaged, while the willingness and capacity to set up a more centralized system were still lacking. These explanations found for more centralized settings are in line with Lindert's work, and also that by Boyer, while the explanations for more decentralized settings highlighted in this article are complementary to them.<sup>130</sup>

## V

To conclude, several parts of western Europe spent relatively high shares of GDP on formalized relief before the welfare state: the west of the Netherlands, England, and the west of Belgium. These societies could spend over 2 per cent of GDP on relief. In the north of France, the north of Italy, the east of the Netherlands, and the east of Belgium this share was between 0.5 and 2 per cent, and in the rest of

<sup>126</sup> van Nederveen Meerkerk and Teeuwen, 'Stability', pp. 87–8.

<sup>127</sup> Boyer, 'Old poor law', pp. 126–7, 132; Snell, *Annals*, pp. 40–9; on suppressing unrest, see Greif and Iyigun, 'Old poor law'.

<sup>128</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, pp. 71–2; Snell, *Annals*, pp. 121–3.

<sup>129</sup> Persson and Tabellini, 'Political economics', pp. 1556–64; Lindert, *Growing public*, pp. 187–8.

<sup>130</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, pp. 67–85; Boyer, 'Old poor law'.



Europe it was lower. This geographical pattern had sharpened in the course of the early modern period, but our findings suggest that it was already present in the late medieval period.

We also find two possible avenues towards high social spending in the pre-industrial period: through corporations and associations (in the Netherlands, Italy, and late medieval England) and through central organization (in early modern England). Where social spending was provided by corporations, path dependency in spending patterns was strong. As social spending in these cases was largely financed through the fairly static revenues of endowments, the extent of spending was only to a limited extent sensitive to political and economic changes. The exception was England, where the changes in the financing and management of poor relief in the sixteenth century increased the influence of local and central authorities over the relief system.

After *c.* 1800, poor relief increasingly became the domain of government, as did decisions in the political arena in other countries too. This initially caused a drop in the share of GDP spent on relief. In the period *c.* 1750–1850, the combination of French conquests with Enlightenment and liberal ideas about poverty resulted in policies directed against corporations, the abolition of guilds and confraternities, secularization, and general criticism of poor relief. With few initiatives by governments to replace the old systems, social spending on the Continent around the middle of the nineteenth century was lower than before. For this reason, the nineteenth century can give a misleading picture about the pre-history of the welfare state. For instance, Lindert correctly shows low levels of poor relief around 1800 and a slow rise only from the late nineteenth century on.<sup>131</sup> However, the long-run view of this article shows that the first half of the nineteenth century was an exception and had lower levels of poor relief than before.

Moreover, pre-industrial figures are not necessarily much lower than those for 1850–1950. The real break in social assistance only came about with the development of the modern welfare state in the second half of the twentieth century. The industrial revolution and the associated rises in productivity in themselves did not cause a fundamental shift in this regard.

In comparing and assessing the preceding pre-industrial figures for the share of GDP that societies devoted to charitable purposes, we also have to take notice of much higher income levels in the modern period. At the low income levels of the period, a relatively large share was spent on subsistence and could not be redistributed at all. Even in the relatively advanced and wealthy cases of Italy and the Netherlands, this share was about a quarter of GDP, and elsewhere it was even higher. Arguably, social spending in pre-industrial societies is no less impressive than in many of the far wealthier societies today.

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<sup>131</sup> Lindert, *Growing public*, p. 14.

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## Supporting information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

- Appendix S1.** GDP and consumption basket estimates.
- Appendix S2.** Estimates for Italy.
- Appendix S3.** Estimates for England.