

Financing Poor Relief through Charitable Collections in Dutch Towns,
c. 1600-1800

AMSTERDAM STUDIES IN THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

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Financing Poor Relief through Charitable Collections in Dutch Towns, c. 1600-1800

Daniëlle Teeuwen

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	9
	Poor relief in the Dutch Republic	10
	Research design	14
2	Organizing poor relief	23
	Reforming medieval social care	23
	Poor relief in a Golden Age	31
	The system under pressure	36
	Conclusion	39
3	Financing outdoor poor relief	41
	Income	42
	Collections and alms boxes	44
	Testamentary bequests and <i>inter vivos</i> gifts	49
	Income from capital and real estate	50
	Subsidies	54
	Developments in the financing of poor relief over time	56
	Tolerated religious charities	59
	Expenditure	61
	Financial management	62
	Balancing income and expenditure	65
	Crisis management	66
	Conclusion	71
4	Organizing collections	73
	Types and frequency	74
	Regulation and control	82
	Between nudge and obligation	90
	Conclusion	96
5	The rhetoric of giving	99
	Perceptions of poverty and charity	99
	Civic exhortations to give	102
	Charity as a civic and religious duty	103
	Methods of persuasion	106

Religious exhortations to give	110
Preaching in the early modern period	112
Views on wealth and poverty	114
Charity as a Christian duty	116
Guidelines for giving	118
Conclusion	120
6 Donating to collections	123
The donors	123
Collection gifts	132
Effective policies	132
The boundaries of voluntarism	136
Paying for poor relief	142
Conclusion	146
7 Conclusion	149
Financing poor relief in the Dutch Republic	149
Encouraging charitable giving	151
Donating to collections	154
Differences between localities and developments over time	156
Explaining the success of charitable collections in the Dutch Republic	159
Notes	161
Appendices	195
A Financial administration of poor relief institutions	195
B Income of poor relief institutions	200
C Income of poor relief institutions corrected for inflation	205
D Sermons and religious writings	210
Bibliography	213
Index	227

1 Introduction

With the development of European welfare states from the late nineteenth century onwards, and especially with their rapid expansion in the period after World War II, charity seemed to become a phenomenon of the past. In this period, tax-financed welfare programmes set up by national governments brought substantial advancements for European citizens such as income security, a more equal distribution of wealth, and universal access to education and health care, thereby marginalizing the activities of religious charities, urban relief institutions and voluntary associations. However, from the 1980s onwards, changes in economic, social and political circumstances, such as slackening economic growth, population ageing, and globalization, put welfare arrangements under pressure. Structural reforms have since then been considered necessary to keep these provisions financially sustainable for future generations. National governments, seeking to reduce the dominance of the state in organizing social welfare, advocate a larger role for the voluntary sector and community activism.¹

In Great Britain, for example, the discussion on a more significant role of individuals and voluntary groups in delivering public services, concentrates on the concept of a 'Big Society', launched by Prime Minister David Cameron in 2010. In the society that Cameron envisages, 'people [...] don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central governments for answers to the problems they face, but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities'.² In the Netherlands, on which this book focuses, the newly demanded role to be played by individual citizens as well as civil society has also fostered much public debate.³ In the last few years several advisory and research reports discussing both the opportunities and difficulties accompanying the retrenchment of the state in organizing social welfare have appeared.⁴ According to the current government, we are now in the middle of a transitional period in which the classic welfare state is slowly but surely evolving into a 'participation society', in which '[e]veryone who is capable of doing so, is asked to take responsibility for his or her own life and environment', and in which 'society's power comes from the people', '[w]ithout being enforced by the state or another authority'.⁵

Based on historical research, several scholars have argued that politicians and policymakers wrongly expect citizens to take initiative themselves in the organization and financing of social care, and that in contrast civil society only flourishes within the context of a governmental and regulatory

framework encouraging community-based provision of public services. Simon Szreter, for example, states that '[h]istory indicates that volunteering and charitable activity can only function effectively to improve the social welfare of the poorer sections of society when such volunteers are working within the context of vigorous, responsive local government'.⁶ Thus, in the light of welfare state retrenchment, it is interesting to study how the poor and needy were cared for in past societies. Firstly, it can demonstrate the role of local governments, charitable institutions, voluntary associations, and social networks in offering relief to vulnerable groups in society before national governments took up this responsibility. Secondly, now that charity is back on the political agenda, the question arises how relief was financed before the development of the welfare state, and how important charitable giving was in this respect. Lastly, historical research can reveal the circumstances under which people were willing to donate to charitable causes, and which factors helped civil society to flourish. This book deals with these topics for the Dutch Republic.

Poor relief in the Dutch Republic

The early modern Northern Netherlands is an interesting case study for research on charity and philanthropy. In its 'Golden Age', a long period of economic growth between roughly 1580 and 1670, the Dutch Republic (1588-1795) became famous for its relatively generous and well-organized poor relief arrangements. Foreigners visiting the country expressed their admiration for the charitable provisions they encountered, of which Sir William Temple's remark about the early modern Dutch that 'Charity seems to be very National among them' is the best-known example.⁷ This English diplomat who visited the Northern Netherlands in the late 1660s and early 1670s as ambassador of the English crown, was amazed by the 'admirable Provisions' for the poor that existed, and the 'many and various Hospitals', which were according to him 'in every Man's curiosity and talk that travels their Country'.⁸ Jean de Parival, a Huguenot living in the Holland town of Leiden, wrote in 1662 that in Amsterdam yearly 'eighteen tonnes of gold' were set aside to be distributed to the poor, which was 'an immense sum that is afforded by the great riches of the city and the infinite number of merchants, the great affluence of the people, and which testifies to the charitable inclinations of the Dutch'.⁹

Modern historical research confirms that social care in the Dutch Republic was of a relatively high level. Peter Lindert has estimated that

per capita expenditure on poor relief in the Northern Netherlands was among the highest in early modern Europe, and that probably only in England social care provisions were of a comparable level.¹⁰ Arguably, the high dependence on wage labour in Dutch society increased the population's vulnerability to economic hardship.¹¹ Moreover, as the Dutch tended to live in nuclear households, or did not have a large social network due to migration, institutionalized care was of great importance.¹² In the last few decades, extensive research has been done on the different charitable institutions that existed in the Dutch Republic, as well as on the care that they provided.¹³ Although this literature amply demonstrated that even in Dutch towns the support from charitable institutions was never enough to make a living, most researchers do agree that the provisions for those at the bottom of society were an essential element in their survival and were of a relatively high level, compared to most other European countries at the time.¹⁴ Jonathan Israel goes so far as to state that 'few aspects of the Dutch seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were more striking than the elaborate system of civic poor relief and charitable institutions'.¹⁵

Not only the multitude and munificence of organizations offering assistance to those in need have been qualified, both by contemporaries and present-day historians, as characteristics of early modern Dutch welfare, but also the level of influence and control exercised by secular authorities. For example, James Howell, a seventeenth-century Anglo-Welsh historian and writer who visited the Dutch Republic, noted that 'It is a rare thing to meet with a beggar here', which he explains not only as a result of 'the strictness of their laws against mendicants', but also due to the 'hospitals of all sorts for young and old, both for the relief of the one and the employment of the other' that existed, as a result of which 'there is no object here to exercise any act of charity upon'.¹⁶ Although the near absence of beggars on the streets of early modern Dutch towns must have been an exaggeration, Howell here suggests that charity was not much practiced by giving alms to poor people on the streets, but in fact highly regulated by local authorities who not only combated begging, but also established poor relief institutions, and ordered the population to contribute to the financing of these charities. Also, Temple's observation about charity being a national trait of the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic is followed by the assertion that 'it be regulated by Orders of the Country, and not usually mov'd by the common Objects of Compassion'.¹⁷ Israel has even qualified 'the overall control from the town hall and highly regulated character of civic welfare' as 'the key feature' of this social care system.¹⁸

As in the Dutch Republic, due to its decentralized political structure, national legislation on social care was almost absent, the precise role of

municipalities in organizing relief differed per locality. While in some towns urban authorities were actively involved in establishing and managing relief institutions, in other localities they limited themselves to monitoring the existing secular or religious charities. Overall, besides the municipality, the main provider of social assistance was the Dutch Reformed Church, which was the privileged 'public church'.¹⁹ Additionally, Catholics, Lutherans, Mennonites and other religious dissident communities, who were not officially allowed to organize themselves, but whom the authorities often tolerated as long as their gatherings remained under the radar, usually also organized assistance for indigent church members.²⁰ Moreover, in some localities relief institutions existed which operated with limited interference of town governments and which also did not target specific religious groups.²¹ Charitable provisions were thus part of what has been described as a 'mixed economy', in which responsibilities were divided between public, private and religious organizations.²²

In the last few decades, several studies have appeared on how the various charitable institutions providing relief to the old, poor and sick in early modern Dutch towns financed their activities.²³ What becomes clear from this literature is the importance of charitable gifts for the institutions' income structures. Although charities often had a variety of means at their disposal, in many localities, such as in Delft, Zwolle, Groningen and Sneek, charitable collections made up the single largest source of income of relief institutions.²⁴ Collection bags were passed around in church during service, or deacons requested alms at the church doors. Moreover, frequent door-to-door collections were organized, either for local charities or for communities in need in other parts of the country or outside the Dutch Republic. Lastly, a large number of poor boxes was located at strategic places, such as inns and the town hall, which could be used for more spontaneous donations. The gifts from these different charitable appeals combined often formed the backbone of the income structures of relief institutions.

Thus, in the Dutch Republic poor relief was organized and regulated at the local level, and financially the institutions depended on the population's benevolence. In contrast, the English welfare system, which was, as stated above, also of a relatively high level within early modern Europe, was based on national legislation, and for a large part financed through a compulsory poor tax.²⁵ Although the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1598 and 1601 made the parishes responsible for organizing assistance within their locality, the state came to provide the legal framework, making English welfare provisions more coherent than in any other European country at the time.²⁶ All parishes in England and Wales were ordered to introduce annual rates on

landed property, a progressive taxation to fund the charitable distributions. Although initially charitable gifts continued to be of great importance, the parishes increasingly began to implement the rates, funding the major part of relief at the end of the seventeenth century, and thereby forming the financial backbone of the English relief system.²⁷

Within early modern Europe, the Elizabethan Poor Laws were exceptional. Only in England and Wales did extensive national legislation underpin the welfare arrangements, and was donating to charity a legal and fiscal obligation. International comparative literature on the English welfare system often emphasizes the contrast between the uniform and tax-financed relief found in England, and the variety of arrangements financed by voluntary giving which existed on the Continent. These differences in organizational and financial arrangements supposedly also had an impact on the effectiveness and durability of poor relief in the different regions. Peter Solar, for example, has argued that the Elizabethan Poor Laws allowed England to build the most stable and generous poor relief system in early modern Europe, while in many other European countries welfare provision was 'at best rudimentary'.²⁸ Larry Patriquin, who puts English social care provisions in a comparative context, also argues that while in England an extensive welfare system existed, '[o]ther European countries [...] did not have substantial assistance'.²⁹ They thus argue that only national legislation and compulsory poor taxes enable a stable welfare system. The underlying assumption then is that income from voluntary donations equals unstable income streams, and that without an enforcement mechanism for contributing to charitable causes no sustainable relief is possible.

However, this line of thought obviously does not hold for the Dutch Republic. Despite the absence of an obligatory poor tax, the early modern Dutch did manage to build a sustainable and relatively generous welfare system. As this study aims to demonstrate, although donations to charitable collections were in principle voluntary and could not be enforced by law, the secular and religious authorities were not without means to exert pressure on the population to give. Town governments, church councils and poor relief administrators were well aware that by creating the right circumstances for giving, as well as by putting pressure on the population to contribute to charitable causes they could generate high levels of generosity. They ingeniously applied a combination of organizational and rhetorical tactics to encourage people to give, which overall proved to be quite successful. This book studies both the authorities' policies in organizing collections as well as the effectiveness of these policies.³⁰

Research design

The studies published so far on the financing of poor relief in the Dutch Republic often focus on one charitable institution or on a short time period. A systematic and comparative analysis of the fundraising efforts of secular and religious authorities within early modern Dutch towns is still lacking. Much is unclear about how collections were organized, by which means the authorities tried to encourage the population to contribute, how many people donated, and how much they gave. This book aims to fill this lacuna by studying collections for the poor in several Dutch towns, and by examining both the authorities' policies in organizing charitable appeals and the population's giving behaviour. This study does by no means wish to test the reputation of generosity of the inhabitants of the Dutch Republic or to give an all-encompassing explanation for the well-developed welfare provisions within this country. Instead, it focuses on one part of the puzzle, namely on the question of how the early modern Dutch managed to finance a substantial part of their welfare system through charitable collections, given that contributions could not be enforced by law.

In order to find an answer to this question, first the authorities' policies in the organization of collections are studied. As research from a variety of disciplines – such as sociology, psychology, economics and anthropology – on charitable fundraising in present-day society demonstrates, what people donate to good causes depends on a large number of factors and can moreover be influenced. Some of these factors are connected to the charity in need of contributions, while others relate to the donors' motives and individual characteristics. With regard to organizational factors, overall people give more generously to charitable causes which enjoy public confidence, which are perceived to act efficiently, and which effectively communicate their financial needs to potential donors. Thus, reputation, trust and awareness are key components of a successful fundraising campaign. Also the way in which people are asked to make a donation determines the effectiveness of a charitable appeal. For instance, the frequency of soliciting, the size of the requested sum, and the degree of anonymity all have an impact upon people's willingness to donate.³¹

In the early modern period, secular and religious authorities were also well aware that the outcome of a charitable appeal was not an established fact, and that giving behaviour could be influenced both by the institutions' reputation and by the way collections were organized.³² As intermediaries between giver and receiver, they wished to create awareness of the importance of giving as well as trust that donations would be well-spent.

Authorities moreover tried to channel charitable contributions in the direction of causes they attached great importance to. In their policies of enabling and promoting generosity, they made use of the special character of the collection gift. Although in principle donations to collections are voluntary as well as anonymous, social pressure in this type of giving is high.³³ Especially in case of face-to-face solicitation at people's homes, collectors were aware when people failed to give, and perhaps even reprimanded misers. In churches, an eye could be kept on whether the person sitting adjacent gave. Structural failing to give probably resulted in reputational damage, especially for those who clearly could afford to miss a few coins. At times municipalities and church boards employed strategies to increase social pressure even further, as well as to lower the degree of anonymity in giving.

Religious and secular authorities used rhetorical means in addition to organizational tactics in an attempt to increase the revenues of church offertories and door-to-door collections. In their announcements of collections taking place, municipalities and church boards wished to convince potential donors of the need to contribute liberally. To generate high revenues, they, for example, tried to invoke a feeling of guilt or compassion with the needy collected for, promised benefactors to be rewarded for generous giving, or attempted to inspire trust in the targeted charitable causes. The notions of obligation and duty also played a central role in the poor relief discourse regarding collections. For pre-industrial societies several scholars have stressed that giving was always driven by obligation. Anthropologist Marcel Mauss states that gift giving leads to reciprocal exchange and the creation of social bonds. People give out of a sense of obligation to repay for gifts they have received.³⁴ In line with Mauss' findings, historian Katherine Lynch states that the 'modern notion of altruism' did not yet exist in medieval and early modern Europe. Instead, the 'bond between a rich giver and poor recipient of alms involved reciprocity', and charity could be described as an 'obligation based on love of God and neighbor'.³⁵ In her study on gift exchange in early modern England, Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos also emphasizes the obligatory character of the charitable act in this period, and states that it is difficult for historians to make a clear distinction between voluntary and involuntary giving.³⁶ For both secular and religious exhortations to give, this book studies what the role was of the notion of duty, and which other rhetorical methods of persuasion were used to influence giving behaviour.

Present-day sociological research demonstrates that besides organizational factors and cultural notions regarding charity, individual characteristics also influence how much a person is able and willing to donate

to a charitable cause. For instance, age, gender, education and wealth all impact on an individual's giving behaviour.³⁷ As benefactors usually remain anonymous in the archival sources, for early modern society it is impossible to make an in-depth analysis of donor characteristics. Still, sources are available which give insight into the share of the population that contributed to collections, as well as shedding light on how collection strategies influenced giving behaviour. Although early modern poor relief has often been defined as an interaction between two social groups, the elites and the poor, in the early modern Northern Netherlands a far larger part of society must have been involved in the process of charitable giving and receiving.³⁸ The Dutch Republic was the most urbanized region in Europe at the time, and has often been characterized as the first 'bourgeois society'.³⁹ At the end of the seventeenth century approximately 45 per cent of the population lived in towns and cities; in the province of Holland, the urbanization rate was over 60 per cent.⁴⁰ In these towns the middle class, a diverse group, which included entrepreneurs, small to middling traders, lower urban officials, shopkeepers and skilled craftsmen, probably constituted almost half of the population.⁴¹ Therefore, in the Dutch Republic arguably not only the elites possessed the means to contribute to the financing of charitable provisions, but the middling groups as well.⁴² Indeed, this book argues that large parts of urban society contributed to the collections.

Thus, to enable an understanding of how the early modern Dutch managed to finance a substantial part of their relief provisions from charitable donations, this book studies the organizational and rhetorical tactics used by the town councils and church boards to influence giving behaviour, as well as the population's response to the applied strategies through donations. For this analysis, four towns have been selected, namely Delft, Utrecht, Zwolle and 's-Hertogenbosch. This focus on the urban setting is motivated by both substantive and practical reasons. Firstly, the wealth of the Golden Age was concentrated in towns and cities, and also the almshouses, old people's homes and other charitable institutions about which foreign travellers wrote admiringly could be found here. Moreover, far more is known about the organization of poor relief in urban areas than in the countryside, and archival sources in villages are often less abundantly available. The reasons for choosing these specific towns are not only related to the wide variety of sources available in the archives in these localities, but also because of their geographical spread within the Dutch Republic (see Figure 1.1), as well as differences in their social composition and economic status.

Delft, to start with, was an industrial town in the province of Holland. Although it had been one of the biggest towns in the late medieval period,

Fig. 1.1: The Dutch Republic

in the seventeenth century cities such as Amsterdam, Leiden, Haarlem and Rotterdam grew much faster, and with some 24,000 inhabitants at the end of the Golden Age, Delft had become a medium-sized town. Still, Delft can be qualified as dynamic, as it was not only a regional trade centre, but its inhabitants were also actively involved in international trade. This can be seen in the fact that, for instance, one of the departments (or: chambers) of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*) was located here. Also Delft's earthenware, brewing and textile industries created employment for many of its inhabitants.⁴³ Consequently, it attracted many migrants, of whom especially the Flemish in this period gave an impulse to the textile industry and the development of the urban economy.⁴⁴

Utrecht, located in the centre of the Republic, and the second town in this sample, benefited far less from the prosperity of the Golden Age. Around 1500, it had been the largest town in the Northern Netherlands, and as the bishop's seat it was also an important political and religious centre.⁴⁵ However, over the course of the sixteenth century Utrecht's textile industry, which had been one of its main economic sectors, declined, after which the local markets were mainly visited by traders from surrounding areas.⁴⁶ There was no large merchant elite, but still it was by no means a poor town. Utrecht was characterized by its relatively large and wealthy elite of regional nobility, urban patriciate, civil servants and master craftsmen and their families.⁴⁷ Another distinctive feature of Utrecht's social composition was

its relatively large Catholic population, even after the Reformation. It has been estimated that in the mid-seventeenth century, some 10,000 Catholics lived in Utrecht, which was about a third of its inhabitants. In contrast, in Delft probably no more than one-fifth to one-quarter of the population stayed loyal to the Catholic Church.⁴⁸

Thirdly, Zwolle was located in the largely agrarian eastern part of the Northern Netherlands. Although its population increased quite rapidly from some 9,000 inhabitants in the 1620s to about 13,000 in the 1670s, its economic development was only limited in this period. Many inhabitants were employed in industries, such as in the production of buttons, pins, furniture and wheels. These products were mainly sold on local markets, but Zwolle's large textile industry, which experienced a boom around the 1720s, also attracted traders from other parts of the Dutch Republic. Its maritime sector also flourished in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, stimulated by the rise of peat digging in the surrounding areas, which gave an impulse to other economic sectors as well. Employment opportunities within these sectors attracted migrants from the surrounding countryside as well as from German areas, although outmigration was also substantial, with many inhabitants of Zwolle leaving to try their luck in Holland.⁴⁹

's-Hertogenbosch, located at the frontier of the Generality Lands in the South and a flourishing town in the medieval period, is the fourth town studied here. At the start of the Dutch Revolt, it had stayed loyal to the King of Spain, and it was only in 1629 that stadtholder Frederick Henry managed to occupy 's-Hertogenbosch and claim it as Dutch territory. In contrast to the regions that had joined the revolt earlier, 's-Hertogenbosch, as part of 'Brabant of the States', never obtained full rights within the Dutch Republic, and was ruled directly by the States-General. Although after its occupation, the Dutch Reformed Church became the public church in 's-Hertogenbosch and the share of the population adhering to the new faith slowly increased, a vast majority remained Catholic. From 1629 onwards, its economy gradually recovered from the period of war and stagnation, but with some 12,000 inhabitants, 's-Hertogenbosch had become one of the many medium-sized towns in the Dutch Republic.⁵⁰

Apart from these differences in economic, social and political circumstances, the four towns studied here also nicely capture the different arrangements in the organization of poor relief that existed within the Dutch Republic. Although in the sixteenth century poor relief had gradually become more centralized and rationalized, local circumstances were decisive in the extent to which municipalities increased control over social care provisions within their localities. In both Delft and Zwolle public

relief institutions were established shortly after the Reformation, in which almoners and Dutch Reformed deacons closely cooperated, monitored by urban authorities. However, in both Utrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch the role of urban authorities in organizing poor relief was much smaller. In Utrecht, the deaconry of the public church organized the majority of the distributions of money and bread to the indigent, until in 1628 a civic institution was established. Still, even then, the religious charity remained independent, and cared for poor church members without much interference from the town government, leading to semi-centralized arrangements. Lastly, in 's-Hertogenbosch no civic charities were established after the Reformation and a multitude of institutions that had already existed in the medieval period continued to care for the town's poor.⁵¹

A comparison between these four towns can be used to analyse whether differences in economic development, composition of the population, and the organization of poor relief had an impact on charitable behaviour or the organization of charitable appeals. For example, did differences in the towns' economic performance affect the population's giving behaviour? Were people more inclined to give to smaller, religiously oriented charities, or were civic relief institutions equally successful in collecting money to fund their activities? And what was the influence of the relatively large Catholic populations in 's-Hertogenbosch and Utrecht on the organization and financing of poor relief? Where possible, Amsterdam, the largest city in the Dutch Republic, and other localities on which research has already been done regarding the financing of poor relief and the organization of collections, are included in the comparative analysis.⁵²

While in the next chapter the whole spectrum of charitable institutions operating in the Dutch Republic is briefly introduced, the rest of this book focuses on outdoor relief institutions. These charities, offering assistance to the poor and needy living in their own homes instead of in institutions such as orphanages or hospitals, were not only responsible for organizing the major part of poor relief, but as shall be seen were also the main recipients of collection revenues. Additionally, some attention is given to orphanages, which often also organized public charitable appeals. Mutual aid within the guild system, where members had to pay a contribution for fellow members in need, is not included, because the payments were obligatory and unaffected by external factors.⁵³

In total, a period of more than two hundred years is studied, from the emergence of the Dutch Republic in the 1580s, through its decline in the eighteenth century, until its fall in the 1790s. Although the earliest archival material studied is from the 1570s, most sources start at the beginning

of the seventeenth century. This enables a long-term analysis, in which comparisons can be made between, for example, periods of economic prosperity and stagnation, and between war and peace situations. Because in the Batavian-French period (1795-1813) interesting changes occurred, in, for example, the political and religious situation, the time span is slightly expanded beyond the Dutch Republic's existence, until around 1800, to see how this influenced poor relief policies and giving behaviour.

The sources available in the archives of these four towns are diverse, and are studied both quantitatively and qualitatively. For example, longitudinal series of financial data of religious and secular charitable organizations provide insights into the way poor relief was financed, the importance of collection revenues in this respect, and the shifts therein throughout the early modern period. Account books of both public relief organizations and different religious communities, such as Dutch and English Reformed, Lutheran, Walloon, Remonstrant and Catholic charities are studied. For some civic organizations account books have been preserved for a period of more than 150 years, which enables a long-term analysis of the sources from which they funded their activities and the importance of charitable giving. For religious denominations other than the public church, samples have been taken from the financial data.

Poor relief administrators not only registered in great detail which types of revenues they had at their disposal, and how much they spent on charitable distributions and on other items of expenditure, but also how much was collected on different occasions. Collection lists often specify the date the collection took place, the charitable purpose, how much money was raised, whether open plates were used, and – regarding church collections – the type of service and sometimes the officiating minister. As a result, how much people gave to different purposes and under different circumstances, and how successful the authorities' methods were in stimulating high levels of generosity can be studied. For some localities it is also possible to examine the influence of wealth on charitable giving by linking collection registers, in which a breakdown of revenues per town district is given, to tax records in which the same division is made. Moreover, in both Delft and Zwolle, account books of poor relief institutions have been preserved in which collection yields are specified per type of coin. These registers not only reveal whether small or large coins were put into collection bags and boxes, but also provide insight into the stability of collection gifts, and can even be used to estimate the share of the population that contributed.

Another important source, next to financial data, are the minutes and resolutions of municipalities, church boards and poor relief organizations,

which provide insights into the authorities' policy in organizing collections. How often did collections take place, who went door-to-door, for what causes did the city council permit collections, when and for what reasons were requests to collect rejected? Public decrees announcing collections taking place and instructions drawn up for the collectors are also used to answer these questions. Moreover, the announcements as well as sermons on charity are studied for an analysis of both existing ideas on poverty and charity, and different rhetorical methods used by authorities in trying to persuade people to give lavishly. All these sources combined, enable an analysis of both the policy considerations of civic and religious authorities in the Dutch Republic regarding charitable collections, as well as the response of the early modern town-dwellers.

The composition of this study is thematic. To start with, chapter 2 deals with the organization of poor relief in the Dutch Republic, and explains to which institutions people could turn if they needed assistance, and how responsibilities were divided between religious and secular authorities. It presents the main charities in Delft, Zwolle, Utrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch as well as the context in which they operated. Next, chapter 3 focuses on the financing of poor relief. It analyses which sources of income were available to relief institutions, and how important collection gifts were in this respect. It adds to the existing literature by providing a longitudinal and comparative analysis of five charities over a period of almost 200 years. While chapters 2 and 3 focus on poor relief in general, the following three chapters specifically deal with charitable collections. Chapter 4 examines the organizational tactics used by the authorities to encourage higher levels of generosity, while chapter 5 analyses the rhetorical tactics applied in civic and religious exhortations to give. Chapter 6 moves on to study the donors to collections as well as their donations, in order to scrutinize how the population responded to the collection strategies. Finally, chapter 7 sums up the different findings of the previous chapters and answers the question posed above of how the early modern Dutch managed to fund a substantial part of their poor relief system from collection gifts.

2 Organizing poor relief

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the inhabitants of 's-Hertogenbosch were at least three times per week at their homes requested to donate to charitable causes. The Nine Blocks, which were district-based organizations, went door-to-door weekly, and collectors for a relief institution supporting poor people detained in the gatehouse made their rounds through town even twice per week. On a less regular basis the Civic Orphanage held public collections in the streets as well, and in the late eighteenth century its Catholic counterpart was allowed to visit the homes of church members to ask for financial contributions. Thus, a variety of relief institutions existed, with different tasks, privileges and responsibilities. This implies that before fully focusing on the phenomenon of charitable collections, it is important that we first examine the way in which poor relief was organized. This will enable a better understanding of, for example, which types of charitable institutions existed, to what extent religious minorities were taken care of or had to organize their own relief, and what role town governments played in providing social care. Due to the decentralized political system and the high level of urban autonomy, large differences existed in this respect. In the Dutch Republic, poor relief was organized at a local level, and a variety of arrangements were in place in the different cities, towns and villages. At times almoners appointed by urban authorities were in full control, while in other localities secular and religious poor relief administrators worked side by side or the churches took responsibility to care for the poor outside of their own communities. This chapter explains the poor relief arrangements that existed in Delft, Zwolle, Utrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch, to provide an insight into the multiform ways in which social care was organized.

Reforming medieval social care

The Middle Ages had already seen the establishment of a multitude of institutions providing relief for those in need. Churches and monasteries initially took the lead in organizing social care. According to canon law, parishes were obliged to assist the poor, and priests had to spend a part of the parish income on charitable distributions.¹ Christian duties included feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, comforting the sick, visiting the imprisoned and burying the dead.² Church officials also preached that giving to the poor would bring

the benefactor eternal salvation. As the rich donated alms to the poor, the poor needed to pray for the donors' souls, thereby shortening the rich man's time in purgatory. According to some scholars, this specific attitude towards care for the indigent, in which charity was not only meant to alleviate the suffering of the destitute, but perhaps more to improve the donor's position, helps to explain the far from coherent and often unsubstantial medieval poor relief provisions. Donations did not even always fully benefit the poor, but were often partly used to organize masses to pray for the benefactors' souls after their death.³

From the twelfth century onwards, increasing urbanization stimulated a process of laicization of poor relief and the founding of innumerable hospitals, orphanages and almshouses. Municipal control over welfare provisions also increased in this period, although it was usually limited to monitoring existing institutions and anti-begging legislation.⁴ Nonetheless, the care these relief institutions provided was fragmented and unspecialized as a rule. Widows, orphans and poor families as well as beggars and vagrants could ask for alms from the different charitable institutions that existed. From the fifteenth century onwards, the care for the wandering poor was restricted, and hospitals became more specialized, offering support to a specific group, such as the elderly or the poor or the sick. For example, St Job's hospital in Utrecht was established as a general hospital, but later concentrated on people suffering from smallpox or venereal diseases.⁵ The care for the outdoor poor was often the territory of *Heilige Geestmeesters* (Holy Ghost Masters) or *armenmeesters* (masters of the poor), who provided them with some bread, clothes and small sums of money on a weekly, or less regular basis. Their distributions were far from sufficient and sometimes even ineffective; for instance, if the distributions were more extensive in spring than in winter, when it was most needed.⁶

In the early sixteenth century, charitable institutions increasingly proved unable to tackle the problem of poverty. In the late Middle Ages, through increased urbanization and proletarianization, the European population gradually became more vulnerable to economic hardship, and wealth was less equally distributed within society.⁷ The relatively wealthy Low Countries also became more socially polarized in this period, and it has even been stated that, due to the relatively developed markets, the differences between rich and poor were sharper in this region than elsewhere in Europe.⁸ In the city of Leiden, for example, the part of the population that was categorized as too poor to pay taxes increased from 13 per cent in 1529 to 40 per cent in 1545.⁹ Another indication of growing poverty is the Gini coefficient (a measure used to indicate the distribution of wealth within society, with