

# **Rural poor relief in the coastal Netherlands: from a ‘collective insurance’ to a ‘supplement-system’ (Groningen 1770-1860)**

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## **Abstract**

Between 1770 and 1790 average real expenditure per capita on rural poor relief was a third higher than after 1795 in the market-oriented and wealthy Dutch coastal province Groningen. Already starting before 1790, population growth resulting in rising proletarianisation had been augmenting the share of potential poor, while their real wages tended to stagnate or even decrease. Because food was a very large part of their budget, poor were relatively heavily hit by the rise of agricultural prices compared to industrial prices after 1790. As the share of paupers doubled, the expenditures on poor relief per pauper halved in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. The rising fortunes of especially farmers in the same period due to increasing food prices did not translate itself in higher contributions to local poor relief.

Poverty was in the eighteenth century never far away for nearly all groups in rural society. However, in the first half of the nineteenth century social distance between rich and poor increased, diminishing the collective insurance character the poor relief system had had in the Groningen clay area. Large segments of local society were no longer able to contribute substantially to poor relief funds, while on the other hand the remaining contributors did no longer run a lot of risk to become paupers themselves in the future. For farmers the securing of the availability of a labour reserve became an increasingly important aim of the rural poor relief system. All these developments caused the financial support of individual paupers to fall to a level impossible to live from exclusively and by 1850 the local poor relief had transformed in a system of supplementing other sources of income. This system was replenished with large scale distributions of food in winter and with extensive unemployment relief works directed to the so-called unrelieved poor”.

## **Introduction**

In the last decades research has made clear that economic developments during what had been earmarked as the period of the ‘Industrial Revolution’ were much more evolutionary as historians thought in the past. Nevertheless in the long run, enormous changes were taking place from the end of the eighteenth century onwards, altering all Western societies decisively. Unprecedented population growth went together with relatively rapid technical changes and slow but rigorous shifts in local and global economic structures. Earning opportunities could change with the decade, resulting in rising fortunes for some groups, but also in growing insecurity for others.

Recent estimates suggest large increases in real income per capita in most countries (Maddison 2003), but these increases could differ per country and region, and the implied benefits were absolutely not shared equally among the inhabitants. Rising welfare mostly meant a vastly increasing use of – often more luxurious – industrial products, while at the same time the rapidly growing population resulted in a constant risk of the lagging behind of

the growth of food production, whether in quantity or in quality. It were especially these seemingly contrary developments of GDP per capita and lower class food consumption possibilities which provoked the standard-of-living debate on the consequences of the 'Industrial Revolution' on the British working class.

Complaints on rising poverty during this period of long term economic growth were of course not restricted to Great Britain as the centre of the so-called 'Industrial Revolution'. Elsewhere poverty was also a persistent problem, despite measured economic growth per capita. Main factors seem to have been falling labour opportunities due to rising population and wages tending to fall behind rising prices of first necessities as food and fuel. Increasingly, existing poverty relief systems will have come under pressure, as the institutions and their strategies and procedures originating from the previous early-modern period were no longer adequate.

*Map of the Dutch provinces in the nineteenth century showing the Groningen clay soil area.*



A lot has already been written on the drastic changes in English rural poor relief system. However, research on the development of rural poor relief systems elsewhere in Western-Europe has been limited. This paper will look at what happened in a part of the coastal area of the Netherlands during the period 1770-1860 in this respect. This region has of course some special characteristics, but is nevertheless very interesting to study. It was on the one hand

confronted with the mainly external effects of the on-going industrialisation, while it on the other hand had to cope with considerable population-growth in the first half of the nineteenth century. Main question of this paper is how the traditional rural poor relief system in the Groningen clay area developed in reaction on these large changes.

The Dutch coastal region was characterised by a commercial and capitalistic agriculture which was directed towards generating large agricultural surpluses for the huge national urban market – nowhere in the world was a larger part of the population living in larger and smaller urban settlements around 1800 – and the growing international market. Despite the importance of agriculture, and the usual near absence of other important export-oriented economic sectors, a very substantial part of the rural population worked in industry and services, mainly to satisfy local demand for artisanal products (cloths, shoes, bread, building, agricultural equipment, furniture) and other – usually imported – goods (colonial and industrial commodities), or to supply for instance medical, spiritual, educational and transport services.

In this paper I will first give an overview of the development of the standard of living in the Groningen clay area during the period 1770-1860. In the next paragraph the eighteenth century poor relief system is described, while in the following paragraph the changes in the poor relief system during the period 1800-1860 are being analysed.

### **The development of the standard of living**

After a period of a century of stagnation, and perhaps even decline of the number of inhabitants, the population of the Groningen clay area again started to grow slowly, as was in general the case in large parts of the Dutch coastal countryside (Paping 2009). This increase, however, was not accompanied by a similar rise in the number of farms. Consequently, the previously already substantial share of labourer households, increased from a quarter to about 40% in 1860 (table 1). Labourers overwhelmingly found employment in agriculture, and only to a limited extent in maintenance and building of dikes and other infrastructure, in seasonal peat digging or in diverse unskilled activities outside agriculture, like for instance in building projects (Paping 1995).

*Table 1. Estimated development of the occupational structure of household heads in the Groningen clay soil area, 1770-1860.*

	Farmers	Labourers	Industry/services	N	Population
1770	31.8%	25.5%	42.7%	9,550	47,000
1800	26.6%	30.6%	42.7%	10,723	53,000
1830	20.1%	37.0%	42.8%	14,045	71,000
1860	16.4%	40.4%	43,3%	18,807	93,000

NB: Only those heads of households with an occupation are included. Paping (1995) 66, 311-315.

Industr/services: without unskilled and semi-skilled labourers.

Labourer households did not have much land at their disposal, usually only gardens around their houses just large enough for growing some potatoes and vegetables. Only very few labourer households kept livestock (possibly a few sheep or a cow). As a result they were largely depending for their livelihood on wage income earned by the father and to a lesser extent the mother. Demand for female labour living outside the farms was extremely low during the winter half year. However, there were enough opportunities to become live-in servant for both boys and girls, mainly on farms, but also with relatively more prosperous families active outside agriculture (artisans, merchants, civil servants). As a result labourer

children in general left the parental household around the age of 13 tot 15 to start working in another household until their marriage, when they tried to start a household of their own (Paping 2005).

Labourer households, together with the poorest part of the artisans (tailors, weavers, shoemakers) and of those active in services (for instance waggoners, pedlars) formed the lowest income strata of society in the Groningen clay area (Paping 2010). It were these households which were economically the most vulnerable, and so ran the greatest risk to have to call on poor relief in case of personal disasters. Their financial reserves were very limited as their occupation did not demand for high investments in capital goods and they were mainly depending on – largely male – daily labour income for their existence.

From 1790 onwards real daily agricultural wages of those who did not live on the farm (mainly paid to married labourers) were on average falling, due to rising prices which were not offset by comparable increases in the nominal wage. Only in those years with low food prices real wages attained the ordinary level before 1794. In years of high prices, real wages fell to 70-85% of their previous level (Paping 1995, p. 206)<sup>1</sup>. After 1820 the situation for male wages slightly improved, although the effect was largely nullified by the rising seasonal (winter) unemployment in agriculture due to the low agricultural prices around 1820. Ordinary paid real female wages were after 1830 becoming lower, however, in agriculture demand for female labour during spring (weeding) and less so during harvest-time increased considerably, presumably resulting in better real income possibilities of married females and widows.

In graph 1 calculations of the development of average real labourer family income are presented, taking into account estimated number of working days (falling for males and rising for females from 1820/1830 onwards), but leaving out income earned by possible children working as live-in servants. The graph shows again that during the period 1770-1860 the standard of living of labourers in the Groningen clay area did not really improve. More precisely their economic position was in general less in the period 1795-1855, than it had been from 1770 to 1790. Only from 1857 onwards real incomes of labourer families reached a structurally higher level. A near continuous rise started around that year which resulted in real income levels from 1880 onwards, becoming more than 50% higher than during the period 1770-1790 (Paping and Collenteur 1998).

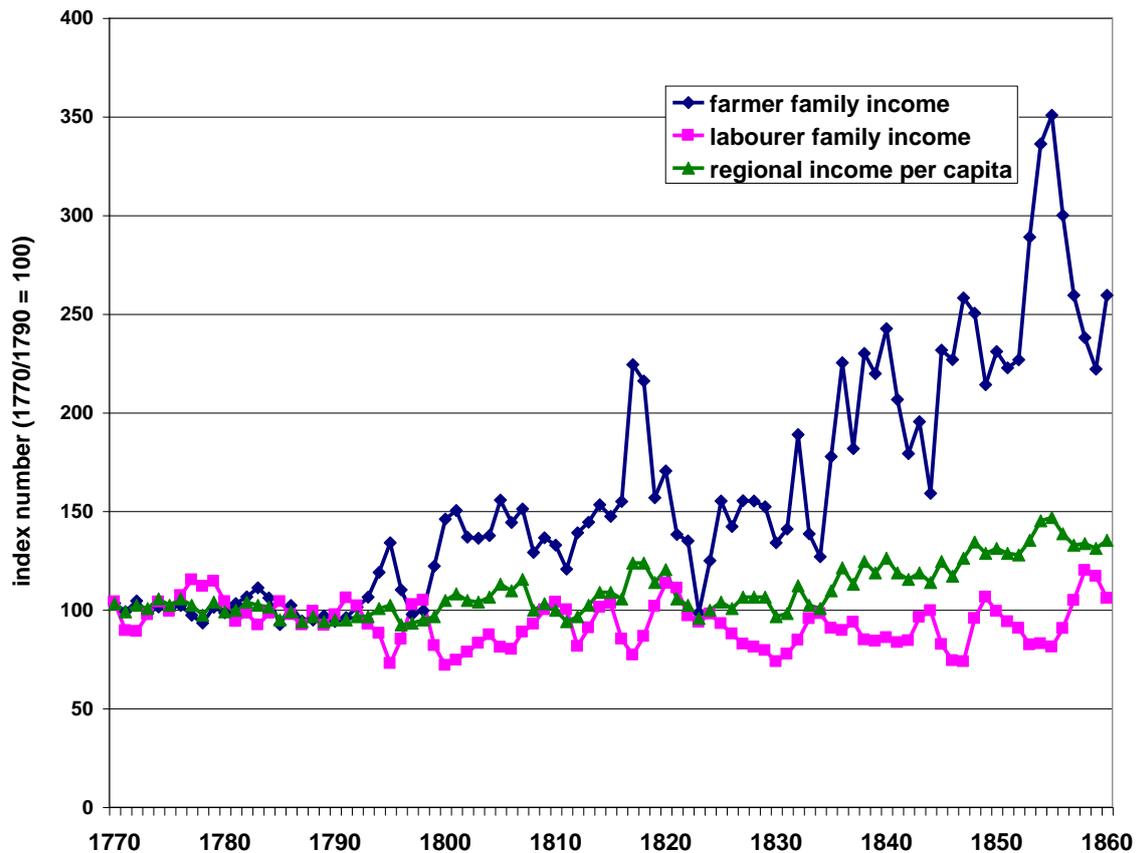
That the development of the standard of living of a main part of the rural population was not very positive, also becomes clear from estimated figures on food consumption, which only showed limited increase during the whole period 1770-1860, mainly as a consequence of rising potato consumption. Especially during the period 1790-1810 average caloric intake was low. After 1820 the average food situation again returned to the level of 1770-1780 (Paping 1995, p. 258).

Surprisingly, average real regional income per capita developed much better than the real wages of labourers, as graph 1 shows. After 1790, there were no signs of a fall in real income per capita, it might have even been temporarily slightly higher around 1805 and again around 1816. After 1830 a structural and rapid increase in per capita real income started, resulting in real income levels ending up some 40% higher in the 1850s.

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<sup>1</sup> The wages were deflated using a price index number comprising some 35 products, covering food, cloths, fuel, building and maintenance costs of houses a.o.: Paping (1995) 363-376, 396-407.

Graph 1. Estimated development of average real farmer family income, labourer family income and regional income in the Groningen clay soil area, 1770-1860.



Source: Paping (1995) 204, 217, 222, 405. Deflators: for labourer family income a price index of labourer households has been used, while for farmer family income and regional income per capita a price index of the consumption of all households has been used.

This general development has mainly to do with what happened with the real incomes of the two other important social groups present in the Groningen clay area. Firstly, the development of real wages of skilled workers in the building sector (carpenters, masons and painters) was considerably better than that of unskilled (farm) labourers. Because of important nominal wage increases, they fell less during the expensive French period (1795-1813), and after 1820 they reached an in general about 20% higher level than before 1790. If we take the incomes of skilled building workers as largely representative for the general income development of those employers and self-employed in industry and services (artisans, merchants, reverends etc) than it becomes clear that the fate of these so-called 'middle class' families was considerably better than that of the labourer households.

Much more important, however, for the general rise in real per capita income was the developments the farmers experienced. As a group they nearly halved, but at the same time their real family income increased rapidly from 1790 onwards, reaching levels of around 250% and more of their 1770/1790 level in the 1850s or even more. Real income differences augmented to an enormous extent, creating from the end of the eighteenth century onwards a very large social distance between the different socio-economic groups in the Groningen clay area. In the eighteenth century the somewhat larger farmers already formed the top of the social pyramid, however, artisans and merchants had often an economic position comparable with the smaller and medium-sized farmers. Groningen farmers as tenants usually had not been extraordinary rich.

During a period of relatively low agricultural prices in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, however, farmers managed to conclude fixed tenancy contracts with their landowners (mainly local and provincial institutions, the few remaining nobles, rich city-dwellers and rural patricians) stipulating that the land rents could never be changed anymore, and the farmer was allowed to sell or pass the land to anybody he wanted as long as the annual rent was being paid. The farmers of course had to pay considerable sums for these contracts, making them actual the effective owners of the land. This became extremely advantageous when agricultural and land prices began to rise rapidly after 1790. The right to use the land stipulated in the contracts became much more valuable than the original landownership rights (which had changed in a very secure right to receive a fixed sum annually), and in the two decades between 1790 and 1810 nearly all farmers became very rich. The more land a farmer was using, the wealthier he or she was. The fixed tenancy contracts also made it quite difficult to split farms, so the number of farms remained relatively stable despite the accelerating population growth. Nevertheless, rich larger and medium-sized farmers were usually – thanks to their enormous fortunes – capable of securing farms for their off-spring, making it difficult for children of smaller farmers to become farmer again (Paping and Karel 2011).

Not only the vast rise in fortune of the farmers, and the more limited increase in welfare of the middle class augmented social distance in the Groningen countryside in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was also the deteriorating position of the labourer households which contributed to this. Two aspects have to be mentioned in this respect.

Firstly, in the eighteenth century two third of these households still owned their own house, which, although it was usually partly financed with borrowed money, meant that they had some reserves. However, due to their bad income position it became increasingly difficult for labourers to finance their own houses. By 1862 only 37% of the labourer households owned a house, while the rest rented it, usually from farmers (Paping 1995, p. 209). Without a house, land or cattle and with nearly no other belongings these labourer household were left with no reserves in the case of any personal disaster, making a call on local poor relief much more likely for them than in the eighteenth century, a period when they had usually at least some belongings.

Secondly, for the poorest labourers real wages developed relatively bad, as they spent relatively large amounts of their budget on food. From 1820 onwards food prices had risen continuously, due to the increasing demand in the western world as a consequence of the increasing population. Prices of industrial products were on the other hand tending to fall in the long run from the end of the eighteenth century, thanks to productivity gains in the industrial sector. It was this development which made it possible for real regional income per capita in the Groningen clay area to increase in the period 1820-1860, notwithstanding labour productivity in the important agricultural sector tended to fall in the long run (Paping 1995a). Increasingly expensive agricultural products were exported, while increasingly cheaper industrial products were imported (Paping 1995, p. 223). This is exactly the price development which made the Groningen farmers so rich in this period. The poorest labourers, however, did spend only a very limited amount of money on these cheap imported products, and very much on food becoming more expensive. The poorer a family was, the higher the share of food in their budget, and the more unfavourable the effect was on their real earnings. In this way, their bad income situation made it difficult for very poor families to reap the benefits of the ‘Industrial Revolution’, although at the same they disproportionately felt the disadvantages of the same ‘Industrial Revolution’

## The 18<sup>th</sup> century poor relief as a ‘collective insurance’

In the eighteenth century poor relief in the Groningen countryside – as often elsewhere in the rural parts of the Netherland – was as task of religiously-based poor relief boards (“diaconie”). In 1809 91% of the population in the Groningen clay area was Calvinist, 4% Roman-Catholic, 3% Mennonite and 1% Jewish, with each denomination having their own boards. In every parish – usually comprising just one village with 100 to seldom more than 1,000 inhabitants – there was a Calvinist poor relief board, while the boards of other denominations usually covered several villages. The sovereign provincial government (the Dutch Republic was a confederacy) did not show much interest in poor relief. It only acted as an arbiter in disputes between different poor relief boards on who should maintain a specific pauper, and it offered some tax reductions to the boards. At first these advantages were only for the Calvinistic boards, but in the course of the eighteenth century they also accrued to the boards of dissenters. Calvinists had until the coming of the French several small other advantages, as they were allowed to collect money at every funeral, and they sometimes received the revenue of some penalties.

Despite this, there were not much differences between the poor relief boards in Groningen. Usually two to four guardians (“diakenen”) were appointed for a limited period of two years. These guardians were not only chosen from the richest farmers, but were also originating from the large group of middle class artisans and merchants. Between 1804 and 1807 the guardians of the Roman-Catholic board of Den Hoorn comprised two small farmers (9 and 10 hectare), two large farmers (30 and 42 hectare), two rich merchants and one not extremely well-to-do tailor. These guardians can be seen as more or less representative for the better half of the population. Becoming a poor relief guardian was more or less a duty for males able to read and write, to perform somewhere in a lifetime.

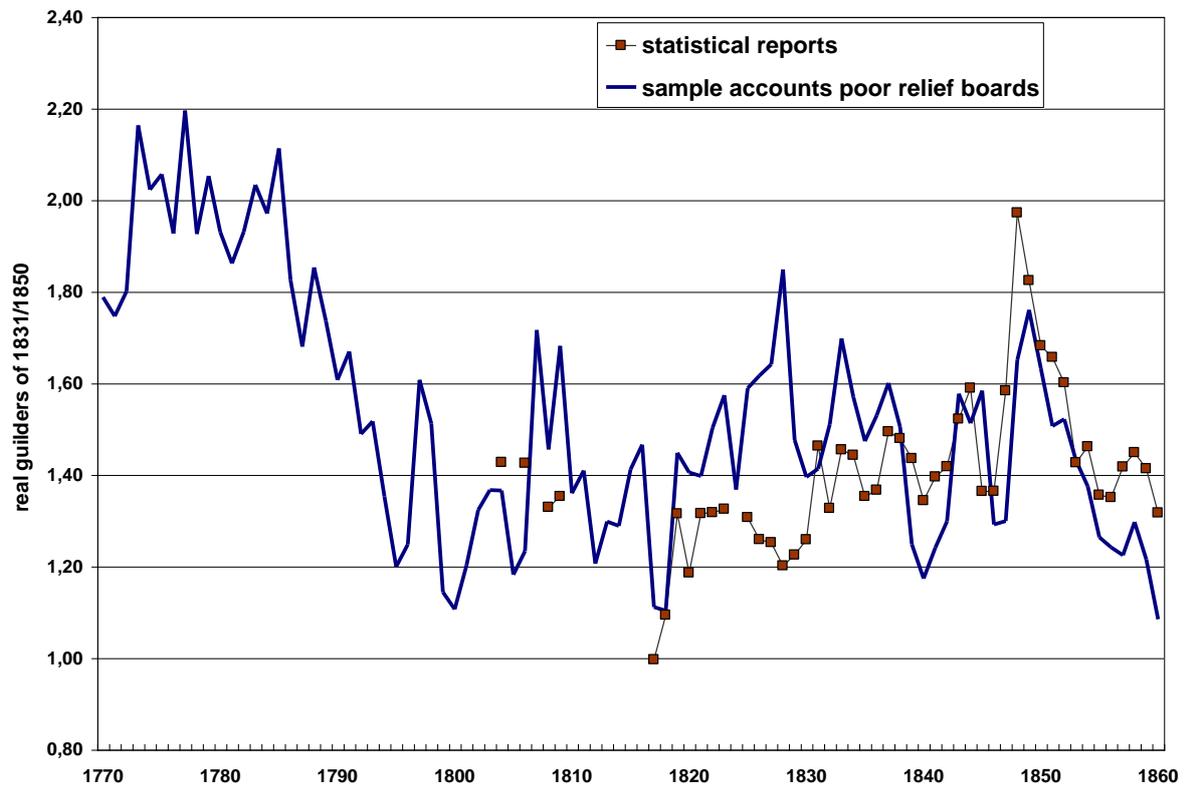
Most important source of revenue was collecting for instance in the church or via collection boxes strategically positioned in inns. Sometimes a board received a special gift of someone. There were a lot of minor sources of revenue, as for instance the letting out of a special garment over a death coffin. Poor relief boards in Groningen usually did not possess extensive properties to finance their expenditure. Ownership of land was rare. At best they had a few houses where paupers could live in, and which were sometimes rented out. Also occasional money surpluses were lent to farmers and others for an interest-rate of about 4%. However, the poor relief boards usually did not accumulate an extensive capital in this way, and some boards even had to borrow money at certain moments to finance expenditures.

Paupers themselves also formed an important source of income. When people turned to the board structurally, they also had to hand over all their possessions. The most valuable belongings were already sold during the life of the paupers, and after his or her death the rest followed, although some things could be handed over to other paupers. Possible inheritances of paupers were for the poor relief board, and also the wages the children of paupers earned as live-in servants went to the guardians. Nevertheless, the main sources of income were alms given by members of the local community to the poor relief board on several occasions. If a Calvinist poor relief board came into money problems, special collections were organised, and the guardians went with lists along all the houses to ask for an extra contribution. For instance in Noordhorn, a village counting approximately 550 inhabitants, out of 124 heads of households 103 promised money in this collection in 1790.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Groninger Archieven, N.H. gemeente Noordhorn, doos 7.

Graph 2. Estimated per capita real expenditures on poor relief in the Groningen clay soil area.



Explanation: Statistical reports are based on annual governmental enquiries from 1802 onwards, with small corrections for omissions, partly based on interpolation of figures for the whole Groningen countryside. The sample of accounts comprises parishes with 8-14% of the population (1770-1776, 1822-1860) and 15-19% (1777-1821). For sources, see Paping (1995) 410-412. Deflator: a price index of the consumption of labourer households.

Unfortunately, we do not have reliable information on the eighteenth century share of paupers in the Groningen clay area. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, this share was with about 4% of the population very low, just like it was in nearby rural Drenthe (Gras 1989) and some other Dutch rural districts. In the cities of Holland, and also in the capital city of Groningen the share of paupers was generally more 10%, with sometimes levels as high as 40% (Van Zanden 1985, p. 46-47; De Meere 1982, p. 48; Van Loo 1981, p. 21-24). A detailed reconstruction for the Roman-Catholic poor relief board of Bedum (about 300 members) showed a fall in the share of paupers from about 7% (1783/85), to 4% (1786/89), 2-3% (1790/1802) and 4% (1803/06), but these figures were heavily influenced by the acceptance by the board of two one-parent families with many children<sup>3</sup>. Faber (1973, p. 552-553) reports for the nearby and quite comparable countryside of Friesland slightly higher percentages, with 10% in 1714, 7% in 1744 and 6% in 1796. What we do know for rural Groningen is that the real per capita expenditure on poor relief was much higher before 1790 than ever afterwards in the next seventy years (graph 2). This high expenditure might imply that the eighteenth century share of people receiving poor relief was considerably higher than 4%. Perhaps, the ordinary average share of paupers around 1780 might have been 6% in the Groningen clay area. However, there are also indications that it was not the number of paupers, but the expenditure per pauper which had been relatively high in this period.

<sup>3</sup> Based on Groninger Archieven, R.K. Bedum, doos 1, supplemented with genealogical information.

For instance the old labourer couple Jan Jurriens and Hindrikje Lucas (marrying in 1747) was receiving more than 100 guilders a year in the period 1785-1795<sup>4</sup>, notwithstanding at least two adult daughters were still alive. Endowment of the widow Geeske Pieters in the village of Opwierde started already in 1765, thirteen years after her marriage. In the next years, her children left the house to become live-in servants. After 1773 she lived alone in her pauper cottage, being supplied with considerable amounts of butter, mutton, beef and rye bread, while she also had a garden in which she grew potatoes. In the last years of her life (1801), she moved to the house of one of her sons, a labourer, who received 75 guilders annually plus weekly bread to take care of his own mother (Paping 1995, p. 237-238). These examples might have been exceptional, as usually widows received in this period less money (10 to 25 guilders a year) supplemented with shelter and some bread and peat as fuel. However, weekly payments to paupers seem not to have been lower in the eighteenth than in the first decades of the nineteenth century, although prices definitely were higher after 1790. Also exceptionally generous support as the examples mentioned did not happen anymore in the nineteenth century.

The high expenditure per pauper in the eighteenth century was partly the result of the kind of people supported. Generally only disabled, old-aged incapable of working, widows with children, some single females, illegitimate children and young orphans received money from the still affluent funds of the poor relief boards. Most paupers were receiving allowances for long periods; temporary support of poor families with urgent short term problems was rare. It seems that most of the poorer families in local society were expected to have enough reserves to help themselves temporarily. Also the system of shopkeepers and artisans giving their customers credit for quite long periods might have offered poor households some breath in case of emergencies. Possibly, informal poor relief of the other villagers (important in Drenthe: Gras 1989, p. 145-163, see also Sleebe 1994, p. 42-43) might have played a role for the not-supported poorer households. However, we do not have much proof of this, with the exception of some reports of begging and of poor women being allowed to search for corn holders left behind after the harvest.

We already saw that having able-bodied children capable of supporting their parents financially was not a reason to refuse people assistance of the poor relief board. Even more remarkable is that in the eighteenth century some of the paupers receiving poor relief had relatively prosperous relatives. A rich farmer Rienje Harms in Garsthuizen seemingly did not find it problematic that his old and impoverished brother Sjabbe Harms had to receive bread from the board in 1788-1789. Klaas Thomas had been a well-to-do medium-sized farmer, first in Hoogemeeden and later in Wehe (25 hectare) until 1787, having three wealthy stepchildren alive; nevertheless he died as a pauper in 1792. The medium-sized farmer (about 20 hectare) and widower Sjabbe Benes in Middelstum went bankrupt in 1783, and he and his five adolescent children were supported by the poor relief board. In the second half of the eighteenth century poverty did not seem to have been far away, even for the more well-to-do. Even their financial means were usually still relatively limited and not enough to completely protect themselves and their relatives from the risk on poverty in an unknown future.

Several factors suggest that the poor relief functioned as a kind of collective or mutual insurance system in the Groningen clay area in the eighteenth century: 1. The large majority of the population contributed money to the board and in this way supplied its main income stream; 2. Guardians were recruited from a broad part of society; 3. Some of the paupers were related to the richer inhabitants; 4. The support of those few who were accepted as official paupers was often rather generous. Such a system could exist because local poor relief was usually organised on a very small scale as most Groningen villages comprised only 200 to 600

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<sup>4</sup> Groninger Archieven, N.H. gemeente Garmerwolde, inv.nr. 27

inhabitants before 1800. This meant that nearly everybody in these communities was acquainted with the relieved poor and knew what their position was. Support was only given to those who had lived for a considerable period in the specific village, had clear connections with it and were really needy. Of course, there was no formal right on receiving poor relief, however, in specific situation people could be quite sure that they would be endowed by the board. In this respect, the poor relief system created a kind of safety net for the local population. It insured them not so much against general economic disasters as harvest failures, unemployment or high prices. However, it did help in the case of personal catastrophes, especially the rigorous cutting off of revenue due to the death of a partner, serious illness and old age.

In general, there were four important reasons why it was attractive for inhabitants to support this system financially, though they are in reality difficult to distinguish: 1. The personal feeling of doing something good for others out of charity; 2. Showing that one was contributing considerably to poor relief funds will have increased social prestige, while refusing to do so might have lowered one's standing; 3. The inclination to support a basic provision which might be important in the future for oneself or one's relatives; 4. As local communities were small, there will have been strong social pressure to contribute to collections and others.

Clearly, the richer a household was, the more it contributed to local poor relief. Especially this becomes clear when analysing the collection on funerals. When a rich person was buried the revenue was much higher than in the case of a poor man or woman (Paping and Zuiderhoek 1993). A list of gifts in Noordhorn in 1809 shows that there was a very large correlation between the amount given and the local tax assessment.<sup>5</sup> Working with a list, was a smart strategy of guardians, as in this way other villagers could easily see how much everybody had given.

### **Towards a 'supplement system': 1790-1860**

Despite the falling standard of living and the increasing number of labourer households the share of paupers relieved by the poor relief boards remained consequently very low in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (graph 3). Graph 2 showed that according to our sample of book keepings of poor relief boards real expenditure per capita had fallen significantly compared with the period 1770-1790. It seems that the limited revenue restricted the guardians from accepting that many new paupers became dependable of the support. On the contrary, possibly they even became more strict in deciding who to endow regularly with money and goods. However, consistent with the collective insurance idea they kept on being quite generous to that small group who was supported. Per pauper (young and old) they spent an equal value of 50 to 60 daily wages a year in the period 1800-1825 (table 2). At the same time the share of paupers became as low as 3% around 1815. Despite the economic situation the guardians were very reluctant to support able-bodied males and females and their families. They even seemed to have been stricter in accepting members of their original target group. The rising importance of the potato – which could be easily grown in house gardens – and the flourishing agriculture – which created more demand for labour in summer – might have made it easier for widows with children and old-aged to meet ends without support.

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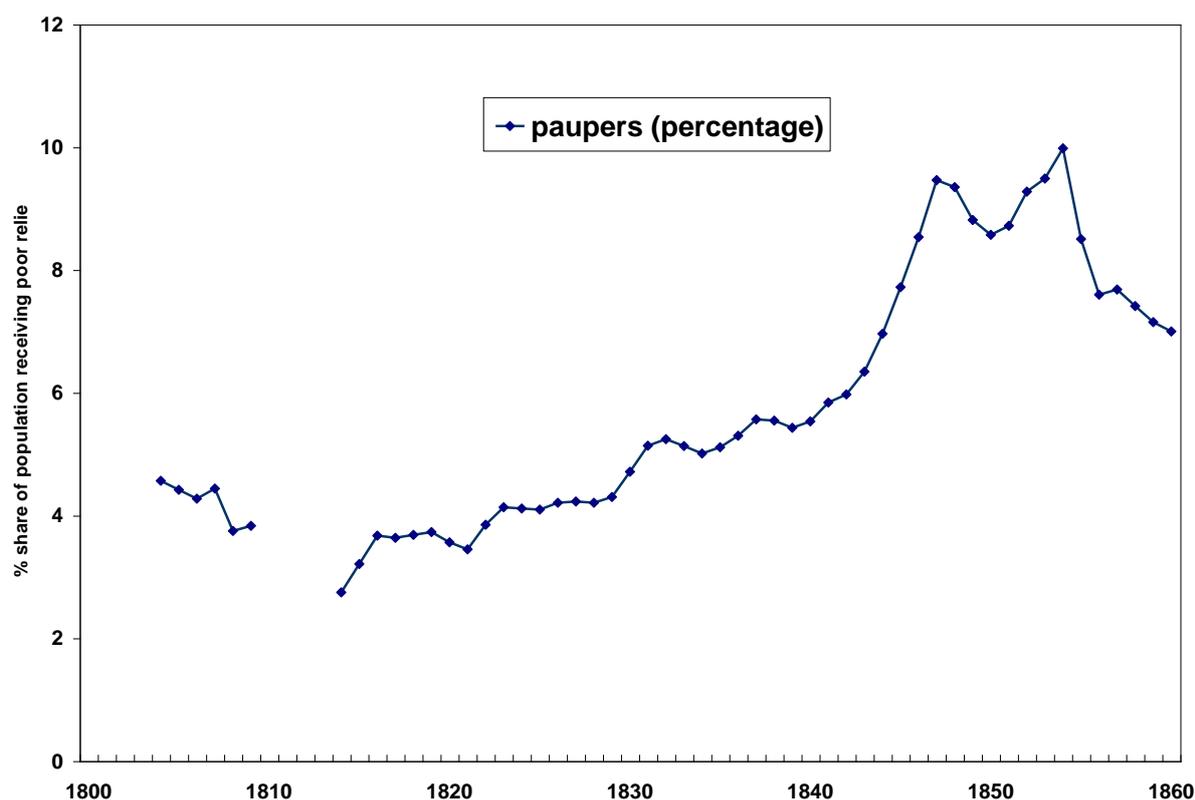
<sup>5</sup> Out of 89 persons 75 were identified on both lists: resulting in  $r^2$  of 0.67 ( $t = 12.1$ ) of both sums. Those who did not pay any tax gave only little, while nearly all those paying very high taxes contributed. The tax was levied on income and wealth: Paping (2010).

Table 2. Average expenditure per pauper converted into wages of able-bodied male farm labourers, 1802-1860.

1802/1809	60		1836/1840	42
1817/1820	54		1841/1845	34
1821/1825	51		1846/1850	28
1826/1830	48		1851/1855	25
1831/1835	43		1856/1860	24

The deterioration of the financial position of the local poor relief boards was a consequence of the changing economic situation in the French period. With the fall in standard of living not only of labourer households and many artisans and petty tradesmen, less and less people were inclined to generously contribute to the local collections. In 1809 in the village of Noordhorn – comprising by that time 667 inhabitants or approximately 150 households – only 87 households contributed to a special collection, mainly farmers and those more well-to do middle class families. This contrasts sharply with the numbers of 1790 reported earlier, when 103 out of 124 households gave money in this village with then about 550 inhabitants.

Graph 3. Development of the share of paupers relieved in the Groningen clay soil area, 1802-1860 (percentages).



Source: based on annual governmental enquiries. For specific sources, see Paping (1995) 410-411.

Around 1800, due to their unfavourable economic condition, labourers, indigent artisans and other relatively poor families did no longer feel capable of contributing to an institution which was especially meant for them. The resulting financial gap was clearly not counterbalanced by the farmers, who although their real and nominal incomes had risen enormously in this period were apparently not prepared to raise the sums they were acquainted to give. Their rising

welfare created a much larger social distance in the villages and will have decreased the personal interest farmers had by a well-functioning poor relief system and this made contributing more a matter of custom and of pure charity.

After 1815 the share of official paupers again began to slowly increase, presumably due to the rising demand for support resulting from the relative increase in the share of labourers in the rural population (table 1). However, the poor relief boards did not have the funds available to support these rising number of paupers in the same way as they used to do. Financial problems of poor relief boards became pressing, and they often tried to shift the responsibility of paupers to other boards. With the continuously slowly rising share of paupers in population, the support per pauper became increasingly less generous in the twenties and thirties of the nineteenth century, as both table 2 and graph 4 show.

Presumably, it was the potato who partly filled the gap which was in this way created in the budgets of the paupers relieved. Receiving maintenance became one of several coping income strategies of the poorest households. For instance, females and old-aged could also earn money through weeding a few months, an activity which had become more important due to a shift from livestock farming to arable farming which was taking place, while at the same time arable farming was intensified (Priester 1991).

Boards were less inclined to take over the responsibility of complete households, and the pauper's belongings now usually remained in their own hands. Relieved widows with older children working as live-in servants kept their wages themselves and did no longer hand them over to the poor relief board. In this way less money went through the hands and accounts of the poor relief guardians (also lowering expenditures) and the responsibility of the pauper families for their own livelihood increased. Other austerity measures were that during the second quarter of the nineteenth century in a lot of the bigger villages paupers (usually old-aged, widows and single females) increasingly were collected in large poorhouses, where they could live cheaply, ate mainly from the produce of the garden and possibly could do some work like spinning and knitting. The other aim of these poorhouses – also sometimes called workhouses – was to make demanding poor relief less attractive for potential paupers and stimulate them to find other possibilities to survive.

The strategic choice to not support able-bodied males and their families meant that poor relief boards could not play a role in lessening the effects of short run economic crises on the means of existence of the working class. It was the provincial and municipal government that took responsibility in this respect. During the French period enormous institutional changes took place in the Netherlands. The provinces lost their sovereignty, but still kept some responsibilities. Locally municipalities were created in the beginning of the nineteenth century consisting of several villages and with normally at least 1,000, but mostly 2,000 to 3,000 inhabitants. In this way the scale of local institutions was enlarged considerably, not even taken into account the consistent about 1% annual population growth from the 1790s onwards.

In economically disastrous years provincial decrees went out summoning the newly created municipalities to take initiatives to provide for the so-called “unrelieved poor”. This happened in the years of 1816-1817 when prices sky-rocketed; in the years 1821-1822 when winter unemployment was extremely high, as a consequence of the rapid fall of agricultural prices, stimulating the farmers to economize on less essential work in the winter; and in the years 1829-1831 when the harvest failed, and both unemployment and prices were high. Special collections and distributions (mainly of food) were organised during two or three months in winter, reaching with some 10-20% of the population considerably more people than the religious poor relief boards. In a few municipalities these collections were organised every year (partly replacing traditional begging of labourers on new years day, which became prohibited), while in most municipalities they ceased to exist in better years. One of the main

aims of these temporary contributions was to prevent the “unrelieved poor” to become official paupers and help them through the winter.

Official municipal civil poor relief boards came into being from 1827 onwards, that in first instance, however, only played a negligible role in relieving poor. They had to kind of supervise the numerous religious poor relief boards, sometimes gave them municipal subsidies and they could act upon calamities. Only in very special cases they themselves supported individual paupers which no other board wanted to relieve, for instance because of their behaviour. From 1830 onwards there were also a few private initiatives experimenting with unemployment relief works in winter, often hammering boulders (for new roads) or cleaning flax, but also sometimes spinning or knitting.

However, after 1831 matters seem to have improved, and emergency measures for the “unrelieved poor” proved no longer necessary. The unemployment situation in agriculture improved slightly, although agricultural prices only slowly increased, partly because the intensification already mentioned. The shift towards labour intensive arable farming meant that more labour was demand from spring the autumn. A disadvantage was that the diminishing livestock farming had needed labour the whole year through. What was left of the work for livestock farming was mainly done by live-in servants working on annual contracts. Consequently, married labourers found only employment in the threshing of grain or in investment activities to improve the land during winter. As the last work mostly involved digging and cleaning ditches, labourers were massively laid off during periods of frost. Nonetheless, labourer households could save enough of their relatively good earnings in summer to get themselves with the help of an extensive stock of potatoes through the winter in this period.

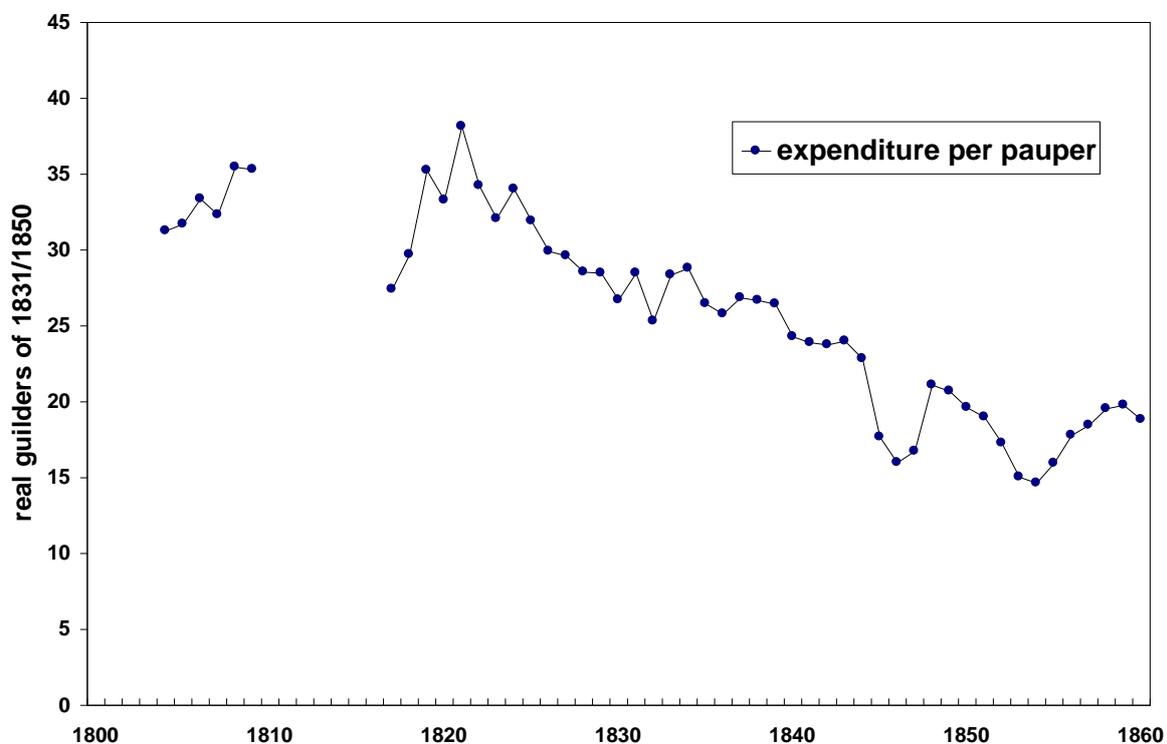
Everything changed with the potato blight in 1845. The near complete failure of the potato harvest in that and the following year, left labouring households but also indigent artisans and others without any food reserves in winter. The religious poor relief boards who already had continuously diminished their support per pauper in the last three decades, were not in a financial position to help these families. They also did not fit into their target group, as their problems were not created by individual disasters, but were caused by macro-economic developments. Nevertheless, the number of paupers relieved by the boards increased considerably as graph 3 shows, to reach an unprecedented peak of more than 10% in 1847. The disappearance of the potato together with the harvest failure of rye and wheat in 1846 had destroyed the previous survival strategy of potential paupers, making a request to the poor relief board for a lot of the old aged, slightly disabled and one-parent households belonging to the traditionally relieved groups inevitable. Part of the strong rise in paupers, however, was the consequence of the civil poor relief boards beginning to accept the support of paupers which were refused by the traditional religious poor relief boards. They possibly accepted people (and especially households comprising males capable to work) more easily.

Measures on a massive scale were being taken to help the so-called “unrelieved poor” during the harsh period 1845-1847. In the clay area at least 40 committee’s were active in distributing food to the destitute during the winter and spring. Things were especially bad in the beginning of 1847 when winter unemployment was also relatively high due to the harvest failure, while food prices reached extreme peaks, leaving the poorest parts of population without possibilities to feed itself (Paping and Tassenaar 2007). Although food prices decreased again in the next years, some of the families who had been temporarily relieved, were accepted by the poor relief boards from 1847 onwards, which resulted in a lasting higher share of paupers. It were mainly the civil poor relief boards which were responsible for this, and only until after the Crimean War of 1853-1856 with its very high food prices the share of official paupers began to fall again to about 7%, still significantly higher than before 1845. This last decline, however, was partly the effect of the new poor-law of 1854 which tried to

forbid the subsidizing of religious poor relief boards by municipalities. The consequence was that many Calvinist poor relief boards restricted their expenditures to official church-members, and were refusing to support those who were only baptised and clearly were less involved in the church. Part of these paupers were taken over by the civil poor relief boards.

As the religious poor relief boards did not have the money to take care of all the new paupers, they lowered the support in real terms to about half the level of the first quarter of the nineteenth century (graph 4 and table 2). Generating enough sums through collection under the local inhabitants proved to be increasingly difficult. Many poor relief boards had become dependent on municipal subsidies. For instance in Winsum the annual subsidy rose from 450 guilders in 1835 to 1,640 guilders in 1851, making the government responsible for nearly 60% of the total expenditures on poor relief. In this way private charity through collections was replaced by forced contributions via the municipal taxes on wealth and income.

Graph 4. Estimated real expenditure per pauper relieved, 1802-1860 (guilders of 1831/1850).



Source: based on annual governmental enquiries. For specific sources, see Paping (1995) 410-412. Deflator: a price index of the consumption of labourer households.

The decline in contributions to the religious poor relief boards was caused by a falling interest of the local population as the collective insurance character diminished. The large social distance and rising fortunes of the more well-to-do in the local society (especially the farmers) made poor relief no longer a case of personal interest. The chance that they and their relatives ever would become dependent on poor relief seemed negligible. In the meantime as economic differences enlarged personal relations between for instance farmers and labourers weakened. Also the scale of the villages had increased because of population growth, lessening again the ties between rich and poor. Consequently, the contribution of money to poor relief boards became more and more a case of pure charity. On the other hand, revenues of poor relief boards fell because the standard of living of those groups who might claim poor relief in the

future was not well enough, to substantially contribute to the collection, a process already starting around 1800.

The rising distance between poor and rich becomes also visible in the discourse over the origins of poverty. For instance, the municipal government of 't Zandt listed in 1851 five reasons for the rise in poverty which had taken place.<sup>6</sup> Firstly, children of the lower class did not attend school persistently: if they could earn a little they were kept at home. Secondly, the lower class neglected decent upbringing of their children; Thirdly as servants had become less a part of the household of their master (for instance they did no longer eat with the family), and did whatever they wanted in their spare time, this resulted in spoiling their wages on unnecessary things instead of saving the money; Fourthly, indecent behaviour resulted in many very early marriages; Fifthly, the building of tiny houses to be rented out to poor people in 't Zandt. Only after presenting this long list of arguments mainly blaming the poor themselves for their situation, there was the suggestion that the failure of the potato harvest and the dearth of rye, barley, peas and beans could have played a role also.

The discussion on poverty in The Netherlands was completely monopolized by prevailing "laissez-faire" liberal views. This was even the case in the in this period frequently founded organisations to fight poverty, in the Groningen countryside mainly dominated by notables and rich farmers. Reasons for poverty were according to these commissions abuse of alcohol, early marriages, insufficient thrift and lack of work (Boschloo 1989). That especially high prices and low real wages could have been the main reason for the problems of the poorest part of the population was not accepted, as this would have been an argument to raise these wages. According to liberal views the level of wages should be left to the market forces.

Rather inconsistently, these arguments not mainly resulted in initiatives to raise the morality of the lower class, but in temporary food support and unemployment relief works. In the fifties it became increasingly usual for municipalities to have permanent private commissions organising food distributions to help the "unrelieved poor" through the winter months. The extent of these distributions differed considerably between municipalities: Delfzijl in 1852-1854 6%, Scheemda in 1856 8%, Beerta in 1855-1856 25%, and both in Nieuweschans in 1856, Finsterwolde in 1851-1852 and Nieuwolda in 1851-1856 about 15% of the population received support (Paping 1995, p. 290-293). Unemployment relief works in municipalities also became ordinary in this period, supplying work during the winter months to 5% to 20% of the heads of households. The many initiatives for relief works in exactly this period of the Crimean War, did not have so much to do with rising winter unemployment, because in these prospering years for agriculture this was not the case. It were the higher prices and consequently low real wages combined with the still relatively meagre produce of potatoes which constituted the biggest problem for the labourer families and made the winter months very difficult for them.

Generally, in the fifties of the nineteenth century some 15% to 25% of the population was getting additional support during winter, and formed the large group of what was called the "non-relieved poor". These high percentages are also reflected in the governmental support of primary school children. In the fifties the municipalities paid the school fees for 20% to sometimes even more than 40% of all the children, because their parents were destitute.

Food distributions and unemployment relief works were mainly financed with contributions of the rich part of the population. These measures were very good instruments to preserve a substantial labour reserve, which the Groningen agriculture needed in the busy summer months. They had two related advantages above the traditional poor relief system. Firstly, a much larger part of the working class was reached, including able-bodied labourers.

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<sup>6</sup> Groninger Archieven, Provinciaal Archief, Gemeenteverslag 't Zandt, 1851.

Secondly, these kind of measures were much less costly per pauper than the original system. Also, they did not run the risk of turning into structural long term support of people, which often happened in the religious poor relief system. In this way, the Groningen farmers in the middle of the nineteenth century had the same kind of rational cost-saving approach as English farmers while executing the Speenhamland-system in the beginning of the nineteenth century (compare Boyer 1990).

Both these temporary measures, and the relieve of larger groups with smaller sums by the poor relief boards fitted into a movement towards a kind of “supplement-system”. Official and unofficial poor relief became only one of several sources of income for a large group of poor. Positive consequence for the farmers was that all people relieved in theory were available for the labour market when they were needed. The defining of the poor as immoral and the suggestion that they were themselves solely responsible for their situation, shows how much the rich farmers had drifted apart from their labourers. They absolutely had no idea of what it meant to be a labourer anymore, although they did understand that the winter without any source of income constituted a serious problem for their employees. Only in a limited number of municipalities (Bierum, Loppersum and Uithuizermeeden) farmers chose to take their responsibility by dividing unemployed labourers over the different farms during the winter months in the period 1853-1856 (Paping 1995, p. 115), instead of sending their labourers to municipal unemployment relief works.

Several factors played an important role in the drastic shift in poor relief from a kind of collective insurance to a “supplement system” in the Groningen clay region. Firstly, the stagnation of even decline in the standard-of-living in the working class after 1790 caused large groups in society to no longer contribute to the funding of the poor relief board. In this way the collective character of the previous system was undermined. Secondly, the rise of the potato and the increasing demand for labour of females, disabled and old-aged during the summer due to rising importance of arable farming generated more income possibilities for potential paupers, making it less necessary to support them with large sums of money. Thirdly, the involvement of the main contributors to the generous traditional poor relief system – the farmers and the well-to-do middle classes – lessened, because of their growing fortunes and the accompanying enlargement of the social distance between rich and poor. This effect was strengthened by the rising scale of the local communities, partly due to population growth, but also because of the shift from the organisation on village level to the organisation on municipal level. Fourthly, the strong rise in demand for agricultural labour in summer meant on the one hand an irregular spread of the earnings of labourers creating temporary problems to provide in one’s own livelihood. On the other hand, it was exactly this peak demand which made it attractive for farmers to create institutions to help their labourers through the winter, creating in this way a labour reserve to secure that there were enough labourers in summer.

### **Concluding remarks**

Beneath the surface, major developments in rural poor relief were taken place in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the very market-oriented and relatively wealthy Dutch coastal province of Groningen. The share of paupers relieved structurally increased from 4% to 10% of the population. This was mainly the consequence of two economic developments: Firstly an ongoing process of proletarianisation (increasing labour class) greatly augmented the share of vulnerable people which potentially could become poor. Secondly, wage and price developments resulted in a stagnation or even a persistent fall in real earnings of the poor. Because food was a very large part of their budget, poor were heavily hit by the general

relative increase of agricultural prices compared to industrial prices, due to the slowly evolving 'Industrial Revolution'.

The consequence of the last development was also a weakening of the economic position of the poorest parts of rural population, resulting in a diminishing of capital reserves and a growing vulnerability for personal, though also for general economic crises. In the special case of Groningen this development was reinforced by a shift from livestock farming – generating a more continuous demand for labour through the year – to increasingly labour intensive arable farming with a high peak demand for male and female workers. However, for poor women this shift also had positive consequences, inasmuch as the demand for (usually married or widowed) female agricultural labourers heavily increased in the summer half of the year. The rising importance of potatoes in the diet, which could be easily grown by a poor family themselves, also broadened the means of existence.

On first sight, the local religiously based institutional system of numerous poor relief boards itself changed only to a limited extent in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it was supplemented by a system of poor relief by the municipal government, which around 1845 rapidly increased in importance. Despite this extension, the original rural poor relief system came under a continuously increasing pressure due to a rising demand for assistance as a consequence of the rising share of poor in population. The most important strategy to deal with this was a lessening of the contribution per pauper in real terms, especially after 1825/1830. As a consequence average allowances fell to such a low level that it was impossible to survive of it only. Poor relief developed in a system of supplying greater or smaller supplements to other sources of income, which sources – as mentioned – had increased in this period.

This system of supplying supplements to other revenues of around 1850 was in great contrast to the previous system of 1800-1830, when paupers received at least twice as much gifts. Poor relief of the local churches might have been even more generous before 1790. The average real expenditure on rural poor relief per capita in Groningen was about a third higher between 1770 and 1790 than it was after 1795, although there is some reason to suspect that in the first period the number of people receiving poor relief was substantially larger. Between 1770 and 1800 rural poor in Groningen seemed to have been rather well-fed, well-housed and well-clothed. They comprised mainly of old-aged, disabled, orphans and poor widows with young children, in total perhaps 5% of the population. Poor relief was usually organised by the middle class inhabitants of the villages (medium-sized farmers, artisans, merchants), not so much by the rural elite, and an overwhelming majority of the population really contributed to its income in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a substantial part of the poor were indeed originating or related to the more prosperous rest of the community, the distance between poor and non-poor was still relatively small, which might have been the reason for the generous supporting policy. For many inhabitants poor relief was not far away. Although, not that well institutionalised, local poor relief in this period functioned as a kind of collective insurance system against personal hardships. Four important reasons for inhabitants to support this system financially can be mentioned, though they are in reality difficult to distinguish: 1. charity reasons; 2. social prestige; 3. supporting a basic provision which might be important in the future; 4. social pressure to contribute.

A reason for the diminishing of the collective insurance character of poor relief in Groningen already around 1800 can be found in significant socio-economic changes taking place by that time. Due to the very high agricultural prices farmers became very rich in the French period, while the real earnings of both the labourers, the artisans and most of the others of the substantial non-agricultural middle-class decreased or stagnated. Exactly in the same period, the real expenditure on poor relief fell significantly, despite signs of growing poverty, implying a fall in revenues. Even the expenditures in nominal money stagnated,

suggesting that farmers despite their much larger earnings did not increase their contributions to the poor relief, while other groups even economized on this outlay.

So, presumably, it was the redistribution of income accelerating after 1790 which partly undermined the original poor relief system. The rapidly increasing differences in rural wealth resulted also in a greater social and personal distance between the rich and the poor. For very rich farmers, it became difficult to imagine that they also would run the risk to become supported by the poor relief board. Consequently, as the main potential financial contributors of local poor relief, they did not have any interest in a generous alms-system. It might be even just the other way around, as the move to a supplement system secured a rise in potential labour supply, a labour reserve the farmers needed during the busy summer half year. However, suggesting such strategic behaviour of the farmers is not necessary to explain the developments after 1830. Just by not increasing their financial contributions in real terms, the growing labour class and the stagnating standard of living of the poorest parts of the population inevitably had to result in a system of giving only supplements on other revenues to paupers.

Nevertheless it has to be stressed that some aspects of the 'collective insurance against personal hardships' character of poor relief did not disappear. Religious poor relief institutions remained very reluctant to support persons who were unemployed because of general economic reasons, or who had budgetary problems due to high prices. When there were real large general economic disasters like extremely high agrarian unemployment (around 1820), the potato blight in (1846-1847) and the high prices during the Crimean War (1853-1856), than temporary extraordinary support was organised for the "non-relieved indigent", usually by the government. In these special circumstances sometimes up to a quarter of local population received food supplements to get them through the winter. One could say that these temporary initiatives made it possible that the idea that able-bodied labourers should not receive structural support from the official poor relief institutions still could prevail.

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