



Rethinking Food Charity

***The Rise and Limits of Food Banks in Addressing
Food Insecurity***

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Executive Summary

Food banks have become one of the most visible responses to food insecurity in Canada and across the globe. Originally established as temporary emergency measures, they now form a significant component of the social response to poverty and hunger in many high-income countries. However, research over the past three decades has consistently shown that food banks have limited capacity to reduce food insecurity at a population level. Food insecurity is primarily driven by inadequate income and broader social and economic policy conditions rather than a shortage of food itself (Tarasuk, Fafard-St-Germain, & Loopstra, 2020).

This paper examines the role of food banks within the broader landscape of food insecurity research. Drawing on academic literature and policy analysis, it explores the origins of food banking, the factors contributing to its global expansion, and the structural limitations of charitable food redistribution as a long-term response to poverty. It also considers how the dominance of food charity can shape public and policy responses to hunger, often directing resources toward emergency food provision while other approaches grounded in food justice, community leadership, and food sovereignty operate with far fewer resources.

The purpose of this paper is not to dismiss the important role food banks play in meeting immediate needs, but to situate them more realistically within the broader food system and policy environment. While charitable food assistance provides short-term relief, meaningful reductions in food insecurity require policy responses that address the structural drivers of poverty, including income adequacy, social protection, and equitable food systems, as well as greater investment in community-led initiatives that support dignified, accessible, and locally controlled food access.

Understanding Food Insecurity

Canada is in a food insecurity crisis, which is growing at a rapid rate. In 2024, a staggering quarter of the country's population - 10 million people - were recorded as living in a food-insecure households, more than double the number recorded in 2017. Nova Scotia's rate of food insecurity is higher than the national average, with nearly one-in-three people in the province experiencing food insecurity. Almost 40% of children in Nova Scotia live in food insecure households, which is the second highest rate of child food insecurity across the country.

Household food insecurity refers to inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints. In Canada, it is measured through the Canadian Community Health Survey using the Household Food Security Survey Module, which captures experiences ranging from worrying about running out of food to going entire days without eating because of lack of money (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020).

Research in Canada and internationally has consistently demonstrated that food insecurity is fundamentally an income problem. Households experiencing food insecurity typically face

unstable employment, low wages, inadequate social assistance, or high housing costs that leave insufficient resources for food (PROOF, 2023).

Food insecurity is associated with significant health consequences, including higher rates of chronic disease, mental health challenges, and increased healthcare utilization (Tarasuk et al., 2015). These impacts extend beyond nutrition, reflecting the broader social stress and deprivation associated with living with insufficient income.

Importantly, food insecurity is not synonymous with hunger alone. Rather, it reflects a broader condition of material deprivation and economic insecurity within households.

The Origins of Food Banks

Food banks first emerged in North America in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The first widely recognized food bank was established in Phoenix, Arizona in 1967, where surplus food from grocery stores and manufacturers was collected and redistributed to charitable organizations serving people experiencing poverty.

In Canada, food banks expanded rapidly during the economic downturn of the early 1980s. At the time, they were widely described as temporary emergency measures intended to respond to short-term economic hardship (Riches, 1986). The emergence of food banks reflected a longer historical pattern in which charitable responses were used to manage the social impacts of economic instability (Poppendieck, 1998).

The establishment of Food Banks Canada (then the Canadian Association of Food Banks) in the late 1980's accelerated the institutionalization of food banks across the country, through their organizing and formalizing of a national network of food bank providers. By 1990, and in partnership with major food companies, Food Banks Canada had succeeded in establishing a national supply system of donated food for food banks through the National Food Sharing System (also known as "The Fair Share System"). Food banks transitioned from informal local grassroots efforts to provincial networks supported by designated organizations with paid staff, volunteer coordination, formal partnerships and donation systems.

Feed Nova Scotia was established in 1984 as Metro Food Bank Society, a faith-based and volunteer-staffed service with a mandate to provide emergency food relief to local food banks and meal programs. In 2002, it transitioned to become the umbrella organization for food banks across the province, and Food Banks Canada's provincial designate. Today, the organization supports a network of almost 140 member agencies – food banks and meal programs – across the province. Established partnerships are in place with large grocery retailers including Loblaws, Sobeys and Walmart. The organization's well-recognized brand and fundraising capabilities has enabled it to develop its workforce to 44 full-time paid staff, and to purchase a 30,000 sq foot warehouse to operate from. Feed Nova Scotia moves over 6 million pounds of perishable and non-perishable food across the province every year.

Rather than disappearing as economic conditions improved, food banks became institutionalized as a permanent component of social welfare systems. Over time, networks of food banks and

charitable food programs expanded across North America and eventually across many regions of the world. Janet Poppendieck describes this process as the normalization of emergency food systems, where charitable responses to hunger become embedded within social policy frameworks rather than remaining temporary crisis responses (Poppendieck, 1998).

Today, over 5,500 food banks located across Canada are connected and supported by Food Banks Canada and collectively clock over 2.2 million visits per month. A mature and effective national supply system for food banks is in place, fed by large food corporations and transported across the country by national rail and truck companies. Provincially designated institutions operate in close partnership with Food Banks Canada, large grocery retailers and food manufacturers to redistribute often unsellable food to people living in poverty through their regional food bank networks. Efforts have been made to standardize and professionalize food banks through Food Banks Canada's Standards of Excellence with both national and regional capacity building funds and supports.

What was originally conceived as a temporary response to a perceived short-term hunger crisis, has become big business through a deeply institutionalized and entrenched response to food insecurity across the country.

The Global Expansion of Food Banks

Over the past several decades, food banks have emerged as one of the fastest-growing charitable responses to poverty in high-income countries. As centralized organizations that collect and redistribute donated and surplus food, food banks have become a key frontline response to rising food insecurity and inequality. Their expansion has occurred alongside the restructuring and retrenchment of welfare states, with charitable food systems increasingly filling gaps left by weakened social safety nets. In this context, food banks have come to function as secondary extensions of social assistance systems.

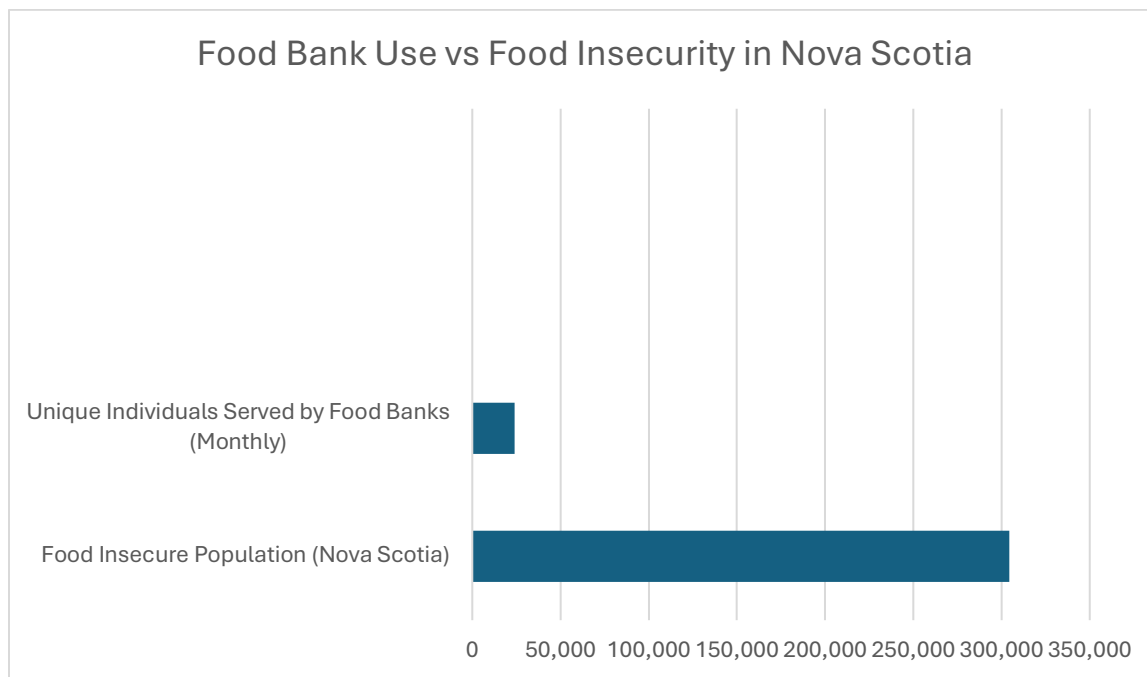
In Canada, the growth and institutionalization of food banks has been interpreted by some scholars as evidence of broader shifts in social policy. Rather than addressing food insecurity through adequate income supports, governments have increasingly relied on charitable food systems to mitigate the consequences of poverty. Critics argue that this dynamic risks normalizing food charity while allowing governments to retreat from their responsibility to ensure the human right to food. While food banks may provide immediate relief for individuals experiencing hardship, their institutionalization raises important questions about their effectiveness in achieving food security and their broader role within social policy frameworks.

Food bank visits in Canada have increased from approximately 675,000 in 2008 to more than 2.1 million in 2025, while household food insecurity rose from approximately 11% of households to 25.5% in 2024.

Notably, only 20–30% of people experiencing food insecurity in Canada use food banks. That means roughly 70–80% of food-insecure households never access a food bank. The rapid expansion of food banks raises an important question: why do food banks proliferate even when their ability to reach people and reduce food insecurity is limited? Daniel Warshawsky argues

that food banks succeed institutionally because they address multiple challenges simultaneously. They provide a socially acceptable way to redistribute surplus food, offer corporations a mechanism for managing waste, and create visible opportunities for public engagement in addressing hunger (Warshawsky, 2016).

In this sense, food banks serve several institutional functions beyond addressing hunger itself. They align the interests of governments, corporations, and charitable organizations, while providing donors and volunteers with a tangible way to contribute to addressing social problems. However, this alignment also means that food banks often operate within systems that reproduce the underlying conditions that generate food insecurity.



In Nova Scotia, approximately 29% of residents—roughly 304,500 people—live in food-insecure households. In comparison, food banks served 24,010 unique individuals during a single month of reporting. This indicates that food banks reach only a small portion of those experiencing food insecurity.

The Limits of the Food Bank Model

Despite their widespread presence, research consistently finds that food banks have limited impact on reducing food insecurity. One key reason is that food bank usage represents only a small portion of the population experiencing food insecurity. In Canada, fewer than one quarter of food insecure households report using food banks or other charitable food programs (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2012).

This means that food bank statistics significantly underestimate the true scale of food insecurity. Many households experiencing food insecurity rely on coping strategies such as reducing food intake, skipping meals, or borrowing money rather than accessing food banks. Furthermore, the supply of surplus food is inherently unpredictable and nutritionally inconsistent. Food banks

depend largely on donated products, which means they cannot reliably provide balanced or culturally appropriate food supplies.

As Tarasuk and colleagues note, food banks may alleviate immediate hunger for some households, but there is little evidence that they reduce the prevalence of food insecurity at a population level (Tarasuk, Fafard St-Germain & Loopstra, 2020).

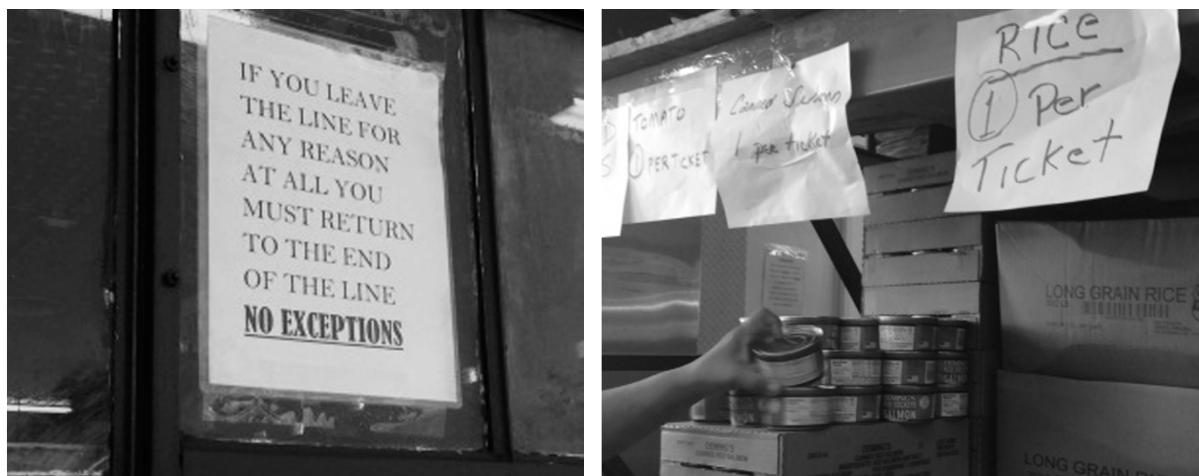
Over the past several decades, a substantial body of research has examined the limitations of charitable food systems. Since the publication of Janet Poppendieck's *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement* (1998), scholars have raised concerns about the extent to which food banks can address the underlying causes of food insecurity. Early critiques argued that emergency food programs risk normalizing charitable responses to poverty while diverting attention from structural solutions such as income supports and social policy reforms.

One recurring critique concerns the quality, predictability, and appropriateness of food distributed through charitable programs. Because food banks rely heavily on donations and surplus redistribution, the types and quantities of food available can vary significantly from week to week. As a result, supply does not always align with the dietary or nutritional needs or cultural preferences of the communities being served. Researchers have documented that charitable food programs frequently distribute food that is inconsistent, highly processed, or nutritionally limited (van der Horst et al., 2014).

These concerns are particularly important given the strong relationship between income insecurity and diet-related health outcomes. Low-income households are more likely to experience higher rates of chronic illness, including conditions associated with poor diet and food access (Chilton & Rose, 2009; Taylor & Loopstra, 2016). In this context, scholars have questioned whether charitable food programs, even when well intentioned, can reliably provide food that supports long-term health and nutritional well-being.

Beyond concerns about food quality, critics have also highlighted issues related to dignity and access. Emergency food systems often require individuals to navigate eligibility rules, waiting periods, and distribution schedules that may not align with the realities of people's lives. These structures can reinforce stigma and create barriers for some households experiencing food insecurity.

Qualitative research suggests that many charitable food environments remain highly regulated and can feel disciplinary or demoralizing for those seeking assistance. In their ethnographic study of food banking spaces, Lohnes and Wilson (2017) describe food distribution environments marked by long queues, strict rules, and visible scarcity, reflecting the intense pressures placed on community organizations tasked with meeting complex social needs with limited resources. These findings highlight how the lived experience of food charity can involve stigma, surveillance, and limited autonomy, raising broader questions about dignity and access within charitable food systems (Riches, 2002; Lohnes & Wilson, 2017).



Spring, Charlotte. (2024). *Thirty Years of 'Emergency' Food Aid in the US and Canada*

In *Rethinking Food Charity*, Food First Newfoundland and Labrador (2021) highlight that many people experiencing food insecurity avoid food banks altogether due to feelings of shame, rigid eligibility processes, limited food choice, and the social dynamics involved in receiving charity. The report emphasizes that food banks often operate within institutional structures that require individuals to demonstrate need, navigate rules, and accept whatever food is available, reinforcing unequal power relationships between providers and recipients. These dynamics illustrate how charitable food systems can unintentionally reproduce forms of social exclusion, even as they seek to address immediate material hardship (Food First Newfoundland and Labrador, 2021).

Warshawsky (2015; 2016) argues that charitable food systems frequently operate at a distance from the communities they serve, with decision-making often concentrated among donors, volunteers, and institutional actors rather than those directly and actively experiencing food insecurity. This dynamic can limit the effectiveness of food banking interventions and reinforce power imbalances within the charitable food system. Warshawsky therefore highlights the importance of embedding the perspectives and expertise of food-insecure individuals into the daily operations, planning, and evaluation of food programs. Doing so can strengthen accountability, improve the relevance of food access initiatives, and help shift food banking from a model of passive charity toward one that recognizes food-insecure communities as active participants in shaping solutions (Warshawsky, 2015; Warshawsky, 2016).

Observations of charitable food spaces highlight a persistent contradiction: despite decades of policy attention to hunger, food charity continues to function as an inadequate and often undignified response to food insecurity in wealthy nations (Spring, 2024). While some scholars suggest that encounters within charitable food spaces may shift volunteers' perceptions of poverty and recognize the agency of those receiving assistance (Williams et al., 2016), these dynamics are often constrained by the enduring hierarchy between giver and receiver. Even reforms such as client-choice models do not necessarily disrupt these power relations (Fisher, 2017). This underscores the need to better understand how people experiencing food insecurity navigate charitable systems that may be only one of many impersonal or stigmatizing welfare encounters (Beck, 2020). By positioning individuals experiencing hunger primarily as recipients of aid rather than participants in decision-making, charitable food systems reproduce power

imbalances that also limit the ability of those most affected by food insecurity to shape policy responses (Tarasuk, 2001; Riches, 2018).

Colonialism, Race, and the Limits of Food Charity

Canada's food charity landscape must also be understood within the broader historical and political context of settler colonialism. Canada is a settler-colonial state in which European settlers established political, legal, and economic systems on lands long inhabited by Indigenous peoples, prioritizing settler access to land and economic development while undermining Indigenous sovereignty and food systems. These structural dynamics continue to shape contemporary experiences of food insecurity. Scholars argue that charitable food aid offers neither food security nor the capacity for marginalized and racialized communities to feed themselves with dignity (de Souza, 2019).

Prior to colonization, Indigenous communities across what is now Canada maintained complex food systems grounded in relationships with land, water, and community governance. Colonial policies—including land dispossession, the reserve system, forced displacement, environmental disruption, and restrictions on hunting, fishing, and harvesting—systematically undermined these food systems and the sovereignty that sustained them. As a result, many Indigenous communities today experience disproportionately high rates of food insecurity. Scholars argue that charitable food assistance is an inadequate response to these conditions, as it does little to address the colonial processes that disrupted Indigenous food systems in the first place (Riches, 2018; Morrison, 2011).

Reliance on food charity risks further obscuring Indigenous rights to land, self-determination, and food sovereignty. Rather than positioning Indigenous communities as recipients of charitable food aid, researchers and Indigenous food sovereignty advocates emphasize the importance of restoring access to land, supporting Indigenous-led food systems, and advancing policies that recognize Indigenous rights to harvest, produce, and govern their own food systems (Morrison, 2011; Côté, 2016).

Research consistently shows that Black and racialized households are significantly more likely to experience food insecurity than white households, reflecting broader patterns of economic marginalization and systemic discrimination (Tarasuk et al., 2020; Statistics Canada, 2023). Despite these disparities, charitable food systems often frame hunger as a generalized social problem rather than one shaped by racial inequality.

Scholars have also noted that the predominance of whiteness within many food charities and alternative food initiatives can limit their accessibility and cultural relevance for racialized communities (Guthman, 2008; Reese, 2019). As a result, while food banks may provide short-term relief, they rarely address the structural conditions that produce racialized food insecurity in the first place.

“Better Foodbanking?”

In response to long-standing critiques of charitable food systems, many food banks have introduced programmatic changes intended to improve dignity, choice, and nutritional quality for those accessing assistance. These efforts, sometimes described as “better foodbanking,” attempt to move beyond basic emergency food provision by incorporating elements of community food security, health promotion, and client-centered service design.

For example, some food banks have diversified their programming to include initiatives such as pop-up grocery markets, cooking and nutrition education, and community gardens. Research on food banking initiatives in Washington, D.C., describes how one food bank introduced monthly “healthy grocery markets” in schools and adult learning spaces, published seasonal food calendars and culturally translated recipes, and used a demonstration kitchen to support cooking education for community partners (Vitiello et al., 2015). In addition, warehouse systems were redesigned to prioritize fresh produce distribution, and community gardens were developed following consultations with food bank clients. Similar approaches have emerged in Canadian cities.

In Toronto, organizations such as North York Harvest Food Bank and The Stop Community Food Centre have incorporated community gardens, community kitchens, and food literacy programming alongside traditional food distribution. These initiatives aim to create spaces where people can cook together, access culturally appropriate foods, and participate in food system activities beyond emergency food provision. Daily Bread Food Bank has also introduced mobile fresh food markets and community food access programs designed to improve access to fresh produce in neighbourhoods experiencing high levels of food insecurity. These types of initiatives reflect efforts to link charitable food distribution with broader goals related to health, food literacy, and community capacity building (Allen, 2010; Saul & Curtis, 2013).

Such approaches can represent meaningful attempts to improve the experience of accessing charitable food and to move toward more dignified and participatory models of service delivery. However, scholars have also noted important tensions within these reforms. Some critics argue that programs focused on nutrition education, gardening, or food skills can risk framing food insecurity as a problem of individual behavior rather than structural inequality, or may reflect the priorities of activists and donors rather than the communities they seek to support (Guthman, 2008; Slocum, 2006). Others point out that while community-based food initiatives may strengthen local engagement, their scale and reach are often limited relative to the structural drivers of food insecurity such as low income, housing costs, and labour market precarity (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; Blake, 2019).

Food banks implementing these reforms must also navigate complex relationships with donors and corporate partners. Many charitable organizations attempt to improve food quality and dignity while still relying heavily on surplus food donations, creating tensions between meeting client needs and maintaining donor relationships (Lohnes, 2020; Fisher, 2017). As a result, while “better foodbanking” initiatives can enhance client experiences and outcomes in important ways, they generally do not alter the deeper social and economic inequalities that produce food insecurity in the first place.

Balkwill (2021) suggests that the focus on “better foodbanking” risks avoiding the deeper structural drivers of food insecurity. Although some organizations have introduced client consultations to improve programs, he notes that these processes often overlook users’ concerns about intrusive data collection and inadequate welfare and housing supports. In his view, meaningful change would require food banks to confront the policy and economic conditions that sustain food insecurity rather than focusing solely on improving charitable provision.

Recent efforts within the sector also aim to strengthen the operation and accountability of existing food banks. In Canada, Food Banks Canada has introduced the Standards of Excellence, a national accreditation framework designed to improve governance, food safety, equity practices, and the overall client experience across the network. The program represents a significant investment in the professionalization and oversight of the charitable food system, establishing clearer expectations for how food banks operate and serve their communities. Efforts to strengthen food bank operations may improve service delivery, but they also risk further entrenching emergency food programs as a normalized component of social support systems.

Institutional Dependence

Another important dimension of food banking is its institutional dependence on both the state and the private sector. Many food banks rely on government funding to support infrastructure and operations, while also depending heavily on corporate donations of surplus food. This creates a hybrid model in which charitable organizations operate within broader economic and policy systems that shape the conditions of food insecurity.

Warshawsky describes this relationship as a form of institutional symbiosis: food banks help corporations manage food waste while corporations help sustain food banks through donations and partnerships (Warshawsky, 2016). While these relationships provide important resources, they can also shape how food banks communicate about the causes of food insecurity and the types of solutions that are considered politically feasible.

Research examining charitable food redistribution has increasingly questioned the assumption that redirecting surplus food creates a “win-win” solution to both food waste and food insecurity. Caraher and Furey (2017) argue that while corporate food donations can provide valuable resources for charitable organizations, these arrangements also serve corporate interests and do little to address the underlying drivers of either food waste or food insecurity. In their view, charitable redistribution systems operate within the same market structures that produce both problems, limiting their capacity to meaningfully resolve them.

Riches (2018) similarly notes that the growth of food banks internationally reflects a broader shift in how societies respond to poverty and food insecurity, with charitable systems increasingly supplementing — and sometimes substituting for — public social protection measures. Warshawsky (2015) situates this trend within a broader transformation in governance, suggesting that responsibility for addressing food waste and food insecurity has increasingly been transferred from governments to private sector actors and philanthropic organizations. While corporate philanthropy plays an important role in supporting food banks, Warshawsky

argues that these arrangements are shaped by the profit-driven structures of the global food system itself, creating inherent tensions within charitable food models.

In practice, many large-scale food redistribution programs operate through partnerships with major retailers and food manufacturers. For example, FareShare in the United Kingdom is a member of the Global Foodbanking Network and has expanded significantly through corporate-supported infrastructure and supply partnerships (Riches, 2018). Organizations such as Second Harvest in Canada have developed national infrastructure to collect and redistribute surplus food from retailers, manufacturers, and food service providers to charitable organizations. In addition to coordinating food recovery, these organizations have also produced research and data on food waste in Canada, positioning food rescue as both an environmental and social solution. For example, Second Harvest's national studies on food loss and waste have helped quantify the scale of surplus food available within Canada's food system while promoting redistribution as a strategy to divert edible food from landfills and support community organizations. While these efforts have increased the efficiency and scale of food recovery, they also illustrate the growing institutionalization of surplus food redistribution as a central feature of the charitable food system.

The corporatization of food charity produces a self-reinforcing cycle: food banks become reliant on the very systems that generate inequality, ecological harm, and food insecurity, while corporate actors benefit from tax breaks, public praise and an effective waste management system without having to address the social and environmental consequences of their practices. This cycle diverts resources, political will, and public imagination away from transformative, community-led, rights-based food movements, and policy solutions that could affect real and tangible change.

Another area of critique within the literature concerns the constraints that charitable food organizations face when engaging in policy advocacy related to poverty and food insecurity. Many food banks rely heavily on financial contributions, food donations, and logistical partnerships from large corporations, particularly major grocery retailers and food manufacturers. While these partnerships provide essential resources for charitable food distribution, they can also create tensions when food banks consider advocating for structural reforms that may challenge corporate interests within the food system.

In Canada, where the grocery sector is highly concentrated among a small number of dominant retailers, corporate partnerships play a significant role in supporting food bank operations through donations, fundraising campaigns, and surplus food redistribution. At the same time, these same corporations have been criticized for practices such as price coordination, rising food prices, and labour conditions that contribute to economic insecurity among low-wage workers. This dynamic can create a complex advocacy environment for food banks that depend on these corporate relationships while also seeking to address the broader structural conditions that produce food insecurity.

Researchers have noted that governance structures within charitable food organizations may further complicate advocacy efforts. Corporate representatives often sit on food bank boards or serve as major donors, creating potential tensions when organizations consider supporting policy

reforms related to wages, labour protections, food pricing, or corporate regulation. In such contexts, food banks may face implicit pressure to focus their public messaging on charitable responses to hunger rather than policies that directly challenge the economic practices of major food system actors.

As a result, the institutional relationships that sustain the charitable food sector can sometimes limit the extent to which food banks engage in advocacy aimed at transforming the economic conditions that produce food insecurity. While many organizations increasingly recognize the importance of addressing structural drivers of hunger, the sector's reliance on corporate partnerships illustrates the broader political tensions embedded within contemporary charitable food systems.

Toward Food Justice Approaches

Over the past four decades, food banks have become the dominant charitable response to food insecurity in Canada and other high-income countries. What began as a temporary emergency response in the early 1980s has evolved into a highly institutionalized system of food redistribution embedded within civil society, corporate philanthropy, and public policy (Riches, 2018; Poppendieck, 1998). As food banks have expanded in scale and visibility, they have increasingly shaped how communities, donors, and policymakers understand hunger, often positioning charitable food assistance as the natural or inevitable response to food insecurity.

Scholars have argued that this normalization of food charity can depoliticize hunger and obscure the structural drivers of food insecurity. Poppendieck (1998) describes emergency food programs as a “moral safety valve,” allowing societies to respond compassionately to visible need while leaving the underlying causes of poverty largely unaddressed. Similarly, Riches (2018) contends that the institutionalization of food banking reflects broader shifts in welfare states, where reductions in income supports and social protections have been accompanied by the growth of charitable food systems. In this context, food banks risk functioning as substitutes for rights-based approaches to food security rather than as temporary emergency measures.

The dominance of food charity therefore has implications not only for how hunger is addressed but also for how it is imagined. As emergency food systems become embedded within social and philanthropic infrastructures, communities may come to see food banks as the primary or only viable response to food insecurity. Scholars have noted that shifting beyond this paradigm requires both policy change and a broader reorientation of public understanding toward approaches grounded in social rights, income security, and community food system development (Riches, 2018; Tarasuk, 2017).

Nick Saul, former executive director of The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto, has argued that charitable food responses must evolve beyond emergency relief. Reflecting on the role of food banks, Saul notes that “food banks were never meant to be the solution; they were meant to be temporary” (Saul & Curtis, 2013). In response, The Stop developed the community food centre model, which integrates food access with advocacy, skills development, dignity, and community participation in shaping local food systems. Eric Holt-Giménez argues that “food banks feed people today, but they do little to challenge the structural causes of hunger” (Holt-

Giménez, 2017). In contrast, solidarity-based models frame food access as a collective responsibility rooted in rights, dignity, and empowerment rather than benevolence. Solidarity models often embrace horizontal governance, reciprocal exchange, and democratic participation, fostering political consciousness and community resilience (Levkoe, 2015).

Mutual aid networks, which grew rapidly during the COVID-19 pandemic, exemplify this shift, providing food and other necessities through decentralized, community-led systems that explicitly challenge hierarchical charity (Spade, 2020). These networks have been particularly important in marginalized communities, where they function as mechanisms of both survival and political resistance, often emerging from long-standing traditions of Black, Indigenous, and immigrant community organizing (Heynen, 2009; White, 2018). For instance, Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives across North America reclaim traditional ecological knowledge and collective stewardship practices as alternatives to corporate and charitable food provisioning, asserting food as an inherent right tied to land, culture, and self-determination (Grey & Patel, 2015; Morrison, 2011).

Alternative food systems - such as food cooperatives, community-supported agriculture (CSA), community fridges, urban farms, and cooperative grocery models - also position food security within broader struggles for social and economic justice. These initiatives seek to democratize food governance, shorten supply chains, reduce corporate power, and promote ecological sustainability (Gottlieb & Joshi, 2010; Alkon & Agyeman, 2011).

Food sovereignty movements, particularly those inspired by La Vía Campesina, push this further by advocating for community control over food production and distribution, challenging global capitalist food regimes, and centering the rights of farmers, workers, and consumers (Patel, 2009; Holt-Giménez & Shattuck, 2011). In urban settings, community-led food justice organizations demonstrate how grassroots food initiatives can serve as platforms for racial justice, economic democracy, and ecological restoration (White, 2011; Reynolds & Cohen, 2016).

Solidarity, mutual aid, and alternative food-system models reflect a growing movement - particularly strong among younger generations - toward replacing charity with justice-oriented responses. Such models not only meet immediate food needs but also build collective power, challenge structural inequities, and offer more sustainable, rights-based pathways for addressing the root causes of food insecurity (Levkoe, 2015). As the limitations of charitable food aid become increasingly apparent, especially amid economic crises and climate instability, research suggests that these justice-oriented alternatives represent viable and necessary models for the future of equitable food access.

Conclusion

One of the key impacts of corporate philanthropy being seen as a response or solution to food insecurity is that it depoliticizes hunger and overshadows community-led movements asserting the right to culturally appropriate, ecologically sustainable, and locally controlled food systems (Riches, 2018). The scale of funds that flow through the food bank sector in Canada and abroad, either directly from the public or through corporate donations and sponsored drives, reveal the monetary impact of a widely held perception that food insecurity can be addressed through

charity. While the food banking industry continues to grow, arguably more just access models of service across the country and province operate on fractional budgets and constantly scramble for funds to keep operations afloat.

Reconsidering how philanthropic and public resources are distributed across the food insecurity landscape may be an important step toward expanding the range of responses available to communities. While emergency food support continues to play a role in addressing immediate need, greater investment in community-led and structurally oriented food initiatives could help create pathways toward more equitable and sustainable food systems.

Operating within broader neoliberal governance structures, food banks often face significant constraints in pursuing transformational change. However, research suggests that these limitations can be partially addressed through multi-scalar alliances and coalitions that connect food banks, community organizations, researchers, and advocacy groups (Spring, Garthwaite & Fisher, 2022). These networks can help share knowledge, mobilize public awareness, and coordinate strategies aimed at addressing the systemic drivers of food insecurity while continuing to respond to immediate need. International examples include initiatives such as Closing the Hunger Gap in the United States and the Independent Food Aid Network in the United Kingdom, which support food banks seeking to engage more directly with structural anti-poverty advocacy (Williams et al., 2016; CFCC, 2017).

In Canada, organizations such as Food Secure Canada, provincial food policy councils, and coalitions advocating for income security and food justice are working to shift the conversation from charitable food provision toward systemic solutions. In recent years, several Canadian food banks and food bank networks have also begun engaging more actively in policy advocacy around poverty reduction, housing, and income supports, recognizing that these structural conditions ultimately determine food security outcomes.

At the same time, these efforts unfold within a global food system shaped by powerful corporate actors and long-standing traditions of charity and philanthropy as responses to inequality (Williams & May, 2022). In Canada, food banks have become deeply embedded within social support systems, distributing hundreds of millions of pounds of donated food annually while continuing to rely heavily on corporate food surplus and philanthropic contributions (Food Banks Canada, 2023). While these partnerships enable large-scale food distribution, they can also reinforce the framing of food insecurity as a problem of food supply rather than inadequate income.

Emerging international alliances—including initiatives such as the Global Solidarity Alliance for Food, Health and Social Justice—have begun challenging this narrative by advancing a rights-based approach to food and advocating for policies that address the root causes of poverty (Lakhani, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic further revealed the critical role of government supports in preventing widespread food insecurity, highlighting the limits of charitable responses and underscoring the importance of structural policy interventions such as income supports, housing policy, and social protections (Saad-Filho, 2020; Berg & Gibson, 2022).

These developments suggest that while food banks will likely continue to respond to immediate need, lasting progress toward food security and food justice will depend on broader social and economic policy change and a growing public willingness to imagine responses to food insecurity beyond charity.

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