

THE CRISIS OF FOOD SECURITY: BUILDING A PUBLIC FOOD SYSTEM



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The current world economic crisis has had disastrous consequences for hundreds of millions of people in the developed and developing worlds. Wage levels that were already inadequate have declined even further. Official unemployment rates are on the rise and millions are being forced out of the formal economy. The social safety net continues to weaken, with assistance rates – where they exist at all – falling far below the poverty line.ⁱ While stock markets rebound, the crisis of global hunger deepens. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN now estimates that a staggering 1.2 billion people go to sleep hungry each night.ⁱⁱ In Canada, tens of thousands of additional people face growing food insecurity.

Anti-hunger activists in Canada and around the world agree that hunger will be reduced when governments make a commitment to food as a basic human right.

Accordingly, many organizations have focused their actions on the need to raise incomes amongst the poorest and thereby improve food access. As long as food remains primarily a commodity, governed by the rules of the market place, the focus on income security as the centerpiece for entrenching food as a human right makes good sense. This strategic focus has generated a succession of advocacy campaigns demanding increases in social assistance and minimum wage rates. But it does face challenges that make it an incomplete solution.

The first problem is that campaigns that aim to increase assistance levels ignore the nature of the food system, which produces and sells food without any concern for nutritional quality. Diabetes, obesity and hundreds of diet related diseases now pose a serious health risk because the food system is force-feeding consumers excessive daily doses of fat, sugar and salt and insufficient vegetables and fruits. For the first time in human history, there are as many people around the world who are malnourished from

over-nourishment, as there are those who are malnourished from too little food.ⁱⁱⁱ Nutrition-based health problems are universal, but they impact disproportionately on the poor whose nutritional choices are the most limited.

Second, focusing only on increased income assumes that food security can be achieved by participating in a global food system which is increasingly unsustainable. Global agri-business demands massive fossil fuel based energy inputs and production systems which are damaging ecosystems on a scale which has already become a full blown crisis. It is also unsustainable because industrial food production has displaced or marginalized farmers who are no longer able to compete in the market place. In the process, millions of farmers and their families in the global South have lost the means to feed themselves.

Finally, despite determined efforts, campaigns to achieve food security through increased income security have met limited success in softening the hearts and loosening the purse strings of governments. In failing to advance the broader case for universal food security, our movement has missed a strategic opportunity to build an alliance of farmers, health advocates and low income activists, supported by a much wider segment of the general public who could all be engaged in building a new food system.

As we consider new initiatives to achieve food security, we can learn from other social movements, who for over two centuries have successfully entrenched basic human rights in the creation of public institutions to meet social needs including public education, public healthcare, public infrastructure, public housing, public libraries and public transit. Perhaps it is time to call for a public food system that would provide funding, policies and an institutional framework to make food a right by supporting farmers in producing healthy food for the local market at subsidized rates?

Let's take the example of public transit. Though we live in a society in which the private automobile dominates, policy planners have long understood that for environmental and social reasons, a viable public transit system is essential. In most cities, government spending subsidizes riders' contribution at the fair box. Public transportation can only grow and be expanded through the partnership of users and government. A public transportation system is good for the environment and for all transit users. But it is particularly beneficial for low income riders, who face limited transportation alternatives. The future of transportation for low income people and the society as a whole depends upon the continued "decommodification" of transportation options through the development of continued public transportation.

Using the public transportation analogy, a public food system – built on principles of sustainability, quality and enhanced access – could ensure universal availability of a range of locally produced healthy food essentials at a very low price.

We are just at the beginning of imagining what a public food system might look like, though there are some exciting global and local examples that can inspire future initiatives.

For over two decades, India's Kerala State maintained a successful universal program in which rice and a variety of grains were available through all food stores at fixed low rates, while the government paid farmers a stable higher market rate for these items.^{iv}

Applying this model, the Ontario government might choose a few key healthy and locally produced products including, for example, apples, carrots, cheddar cheese, broccoli, tomatoes, potatoes, soy beans, squash, garlic, beets, carrots. Farmers would be paid the full price for these goods and the foods would be made available through all food outlets at a set low amount, perhaps even as low as 20 cents a kilo. Leaving aside the cost of this program for a moment, such an initiative would send the message that the Ontario government was serious about making food a right, promoting local food production, boosting the nutritional quality of Ontarians diet and seriously reducing hunger.

Although many farmers have been suspicious of subsidies, which have been used to restrict market access, things are changing.

Recently Bette Jean Crews, the President of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture asked "why we subsidize health, education and roads but not food." She said farmers need more money for their products and if doesn't come from what people pay in the grocery store, it will have to come from tax dollars through subsidies.^v

Another new initiative, Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS)^{vi}, a goods and services program promoted by Ontario farmers, is making the case that farmers should be paid for the important role they play in environmental management, thereby making farm stewardship more economically and environmentally viable without the full cost being borne by consumers.

Canada's marketing boards, now under threat from the World Trade Organization, arguably kept prices of key foods stable and relatively low for generations, while guaranteeing adequate incomes for farmers.

Imagine that the Ontario government distributed \$100 of "Public Food Vouchers" to every adult each month, redeemable at grocery stores or farmer's markets for Ontario-produced unprocessed foods such as vegetables, fruits, meats, cheeses, beans and grains. And then the vouchers could be taxed back on a graduated sliding scale from those with higher incomes.

The strategy for public food can take its cue from other major public services which are simultaneously universal but constructed to serve lower income communities. It will be important that public food initiatives avoid targeted or stigmatized programs like the U.S. Food stamp program.

Brazil's Zero Hunger program, has done a great deal to reduce hunger, increase market share for small farmers by creating public food programs such as universal student nutrition programs and "sacalao markets"^{vii}, open air public markets operated by the municipal government where food is half the price charged in markets run by the private sector. The Brazilian experience points to the potential for Canadian anti-hunger activists to build a multi-faceted social movement around a program for a public food system.

Public food policies are currently strongest at the local level. Food activists have successfully convinced local governments to allow community gardening in parks and in the yards of social housing, and farmer's and community markets operate on public land, paying only minimal rates. Student nutrition programs provide low cost subsidized food for school aged children.

FoodShare's Good Food Box^{viii} program sells high quality fresh produce at reduced rates through community drop offs that are open to people of all incomes. Customers purchase produce at wholesale prices, while overhead costs are covered by individual donations and government grants. Another FoodShare program, Good Food Markets, delivers the same produce and reduced prices to community organizers who then operate their own community markets in low income neighbourhoods, facilitating piece-by-piece access at an even lower price point.

These programs build on strong traditions from around the world in which it is understood that student nutrition, community gardens and community markets merit public measures to reduce prices and enhance access to healthy food.

The fight to narrow the gap, to raise basic income levels deserves the continued support of all who care about social justice. At the same time, there is an important opportunity to launch a new campaign that could address the triple crisis of the food system – food and income, food and health, food and agriculture – with the goal of creating a new public food system.

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Esurio: Journal of Hunger and Poverty, **1(2)**, December 2009
Printed in Canada

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End Notes

ⁱ *Myth of the Global Safety Net*, Jan Breman, *New Left Review* #59
September/October 2009 <http://www.newleftreview.org/?view=2800>)

ⁱⁱ (<http://www.mediaglobal.org/article/2009-06-27/global-hunger-affecting-12-billion-according-to-fao>)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Escaping Hunger, Escaping Excess*, Gary Gardner and Brian Halweil, *World Watch*, June 2000 <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/488>

^{iv} *Impact of Subsidized rice on food consumption and nutrition in Kerala* , Shubh K Kumar,) <http://ideas.repec.org/p/fpr/resrep/5.html>

^v http://www.am920.ca/news.php?area=details&cat=6&art_id=7095

^{vi} <http://www.deltawaterfowl.org/alus/index.php>

^{vii} www.envireform.utoronto.ca/conference/local-food/cecilia-rocha

^{viii} <http://www.foodshare.net/goodfoodbox01.htm>