

The Human Rights, Participatory Growth, and Poverty Eradication Program

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Draft Proposal:

From Farms to Food Banks:

A Needs Analysis and Overview

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Introduction

Common perceptions of hunger tend to encapsulate it as a phenomenon of the global South, negating its growing pervasiveness in Northern countries like Canada. The recent 2008-2009 economic recession has rendered many Canadians unable to support themselves, increasing the numbers of those suffering from hunger across the provinces (Oliphant et al, 2010). In March 2010, food banks in Canada assisted a staggering 867,948 people, a 9 percent increase from 2009, and the highest level of food bank usage on record (Food Banks Canada, 2010). In fact, over the last two years, food bank use in Canada has risen by an unprecedented 28 percent (Food Banks Canada, 2010). Many of these individuals are faced with food insecurity as a result of mass job losses and cuts to employment hours (Mikkonen and Raphael, 2010). In particular, as Ontario emerges from the economic downturn, many in the Greater Toronto Area continue to struggle (Oliphant et al, 2010). Toronto's jobless rate has been stuck in the high range of 9.0-9.5 per cent over the past six months (Recession Relief Coalition, 2010). Such indicators point to the relationship between income and hunger. For all of those who require assistance, it is low income that brings them to a food bank (Food Banks Canada, 2010). In other words, hunger is perpetuated by poverty, and food banks continue to bear the pressures associated with this increased need.

Increased Pressure - A Growing Need

Food banks have seen a significant shift in the last ten years. First perceived as a temporary, emergency response to static levels of hunger, it has now shifted to represent an indispensable tool for responding to increasing poverty and hunger (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994). Following the recession, in particular, mounting demands have been placed on

these institutions. Last year, half of all food banks had to make the tough decision to cut back on the amount of food provided to each household in 2010, comparable to only 15% of all food banks in 2008 (Food Banks Canada, 2010). Furthermore, one in every ten food banks, or 12 per cent, had to actually turn away individuals and families requiring assistance (Food Banks Canada, 2010). In Toronto, such strains were heightened by over 997 000 food bank visits of the 1 187 000 Greater Toronto Area visits between April 2009 and March 2010 (Oliphant et al, 2010). A striking 15 per cent increase in overall client visits from 2009 to 2010 occurred across the Greater Toronto Area (Oliphant et al, 2010).

In response to this increased need, Toronto food banks, along with other food banks across Canada, account for 57 per cent of those reporting buying more food than usual, up from 32 per cent in 2008, before the recession hit (Food Banks Canada, 2010). Even with public outreach, 35 per cent of Canadian food banks report running out of food (Food Banks Canada, 2010). There is a clear need to match the recent increased demand on food banks with an increased supply of food.

The Food Bank Diet

In typical food bank arrangements, including those in Toronto, users are allotted a basket of goods filled with items dependent on the types of donations received by the food bank (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994). A typical client hamper includes: dry pasta, rice or macaroni; pasta sauce; soup; juice; cereal; canned meat; peanut butter; eggs; dry beans; cookies; milk; and bread (Fort York Food Bank, 2010). Limited choice rests in the hands of actual food bank users, a most distressing and disempowering experience for these clients (Toronto Food Policy Council, 1994). The Stop Community Food Centre facilitated a social experiment in

which participants from the media were challenged to subsist on a typical food bank diet for three days. Responses described the experience as likely to result in “the spirit... giv[ing] before the body” (Roberts, 2010). Moreover, the availability of fresh produce in such distribution systems is sporadic. The aforementioned “Fort York Food Bank food selection guidelines” does not account for the need for fresh fruits and vegetables in a healthy diet. As such, this denotes the lack of formalized guidelines as it relates to the distribution of food by food banks and similar institutions. The current approach to increasing levels of hunger across Toronto provides an incomplete solution to the problem, concentrating efforts and resources solely on increasing quantity of food without the simultaneous recognition of nutrition.

The immediate consequence of this situation is the persistence of hunger, malnutrition and the overall poor health status among food bank users. In turn, it is crucial to recognize that poor health at the individual level has broader social and economic ramifications for society as a whole.

Health Implications of Hunger and Malnutrition

Hunger and malnutrition have tremendous effects on physical as well as mental well-being of the individuals. First, with regard to physical health effects, the insufficient intake of food and nutrient requirements is detrimental to the immune system and thereby increases susceptibility to infections. Particularly, insufficient consumption of fruits and vegetables can increase the risk of chronic diseases such as cancer and cardiovascular disease (Che and Chen, 2003). It has been documented that individuals who suffer from food and nutritional deprivation are more likely to experience hunger pangs, depletion of energy, fatigue and illness as well as Type 2 diabetes and obesity (Lightman et al, 2008).

Impacts on Children

Despite the overall negative health impacts of hunger and malnutrition, their effects are found to be age-specific, with particularly detrimental developmental consequences for children. The insufficient intake of micronutrients that are critical for child developmental stages can stunt growth and impair mental as well as intellectual development (Che and Chen, 2001). For example, iodine deficiency can cause growth retardation, while vitamin A deficiency can result in poor vision and even blindness. Malnutrition has also been associated with lack of attentiveness and overall diminished learning abilities of the children. The severity of child hunger and malnutrition lies in the resulting irreversible developmental consequences that persist throughout their lives (World Watch Institute, 2000).

Impacts on Adults and the Elderly

For adults and working-age individuals, hunger and malnutrition are often associated with the adoption of unhealthy coping strategies, including smoking, excessive alcohol consumption, and physical inactivity. This increases the incidence of cardiovascular diseases and ironically obesity (Raphael, 2003).

In addition, the elderly, who do not have access to sufficient amounts of nutritious food, suffer from the loss of muscle mass and strength, which can lead to disability and loss of independence. Malnutrition among aging individuals also further weakens the immune system, thereby increasing their susceptibility to pneumonia and other life-threatening infections (Che and Chen, 2001).

Impacts on Psychological Well-being

Not only do hunger and malnutrition have damaging physical health effects but they are also damaging to psychological well-being. Such conditions of material deprivation result in an

increased sense of uncertainty, insecurity and powerlessness, all precursors of emotional distress (Lightman et al, 2008). Plus, poor mental health often aggravates physical health problems and can lead to unhealthy coping strategies (Raphael, 2003).

Social Implications

In line with the aforementioned detrimental health effects of hunger and malnutrition, research has shown the correlation between poor health and persisting poverty (Raphael, 1999). On the one hand, poor health prevents individuals from engaging in productive activities that generate income. On the other hand, poverty deprives people from access to essential requirements for a healthy life. This vicious circle generates a combination of health inequality as well as income inequality, thereby deteriorating the social health of society. This has been articulated by Raphael as, “Some societies with greater numbers of low income people begin to show a spillover effect by which the health of those not living on low incomes begin to deteriorate as well,” (Raphael, 2003, p. 11). The underlying mechanism of this situation has been explained by Kawachi and Kennedy: “economic inequality contributes to the deteriorating of what has been termed social capital, or the degree of social cohesion or citizen commitment to society,” (CSJ Foundation, 2002, p. 10).

Economic Implications

The economic costs of hunger, poor health, and poverty are enormous. In Ontario, poverty related to health care issues cost the public \$2.9 billion annually. In addition, the lost federal and provincial income taxes from loss of productivity add up to \$1.3 billion to \$1.6 billion (Ontario Association of Food Banks, 2008, p. 16).

Gender Implications

Since food and nutrition within a household are typically a female domain, there is evidence that women compromise their own dietary and nutritional requirements for their children's benefit. A research report by the Canadian Medical Association found that women who live in disadvantaged circumstances in Canada exhibit dietary intakes below recommended levels. However, their children do not because the women sacrifice their food intake to provide for their children (McIntyre, 2003). This increases the nutrition-related health risks for women, positioning them as a particularly vulnerable group.

As indicated, hunger and malnutrition have significant impacts on the well-being of individuals and the functioning of society. Such negative effects are on the rise due to increased levels of hunger in Toronto. Ironically, this is occurring alongside staggering amounts of food waste.

Food Waste - Systematic Inefficiencies

According to a 2007 study by Statistics Canada, "an estimated 38 per cent of food available for retail sale is wasted annually in Canada," (Statistics Canada, 2009). This waste speaks to systematic inefficiencies at every level of Canada's food production model. This highly inefficient method of production has negative implications for the environment. The production of produce depletes the soil, uses pesticides and herbicides (unless organic) and if irrigated, uses large amounts of water. If this produce is not harvested and consumed, its cultivation is a huge waste of valuable resources. Conventional systems of agricultural production have a particularly significant environmental impact because they produce high-volumes of negative by-products, including chemical run-off (Pearson, 2007). With growing concern around the preservation of resources, the need to be efficient with the use of all crops produced becomes paramount.

While 51 per cent of this waste occurs after food has been purchased, 9 per cent is also wasted in the field (Statistics Canada in Gooch et al, 2010). While changing consumer practices is necessary to reduce waste overall, this requires long term changes to consumption habits. However, immediate steps can be taken to reduce the entirely plant-based waste in field. As articulated in previous sections, a lack of access to fresh produce is a primary cause of poor health for those who rely on food banks. The distribution of produce that is currently wasted has benefits that are twofold. Utilizing this produce would provide food bank users with access to fresh produce and reduce the amount of produce wasted in the field.

Locating the Source of Waste - Regulations and Overproduction

Multi-faceted reasons exist for why so much food is wasted in Canada. In particular, strict quality regulations by large grocery stores and overproduction contribute to produce that is wasted in field. Aesthetics are a central focus of modern grocery store operation. Large grocery store chains now operate under the assumption that consumers will only buy produce that is uniform in shape, colour and size. Concluding this has led store franchises to create strict regulations about the produce that they will purchase from farmers to stock their shelves. These regulations are neither based on the taste nor nutritional value of produce; they are based purely on cosmetic qualities. In his book *Waste: Uncovering the Global Food Scandal*, Stuart provides the example of a lettuce farmer who states that, “15-20 per cent of his lettuces are [wasted] because they are either the wrong colour, too small, not perfectly round or slightly damaged, or because they have a bit of earth on them (Stuart, 2009, p. 118). This example highlights how strict regulations imposed by grocery stores has led to high quality produce being wasted for failure to meet aesthetic standards. Much of this could immediately be redistributed to increase access to produce for food bank users.

Strict grocery store requirements have exacerbated another common cause for crop surpluses - overproduction. Overproduction is standard practice for many farmers because agriculture is an inherently unpredictable undertaking. Crops are highly susceptible to unusual weather conditions, disease, and other inconsistencies that exist in nature. This leads many farmers to plant more crops than they expect to need as a safety net. When nothing unusual happens to a crop, this leads to a surplus. As well, farms under contract with large grocery stores have produce quotas to fill. Overproduction occurs to meet both the quantity and the quality requirements of a quota (Stuart, 2009). The surplus produce that is not sold to the grocery stores is left in the field because it is not financially worthwhile for the farmer to harvest it. The combination of strict regulations and overproduction are significant contributors to the amount of produce that is wasted in Canada annually.

Historical Solutions - Gleaning

Historically, excess produce that remains after harvest has been left for the poor to collect. This practice of collecting produce left after harvest, known as gleaning, dates back to biblical times (Badio, 2009). As British laws were passed to create individual property rights, gleaning was eventually outlawed. Gleaning has never had a significant place in Canadian agriculture but its potential is increasingly being explored. Recently, gleaning has seen a revival as groups in civil society seek to make use of produce left in fields and improve food access for everyone in society. While fundamental changes to Canada's food production system are needed to reduce the amount of waste produced, gleaning is a grassroots initiative that can make a significant impact. If such laws as Bill 78 are passed by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, which aims to provide a tax rebate to farmers for 25% of the wholesale value of their produce when donated to Ontario food banks we can hope for greater ease in institutionalizing and

scaling up gleaning activities to reduce waste and provide healthy food to those in need in our communities (Baily, 2010).

Conclusion

One of the main reasons that this waste is not being utilized, as stated by Stuart, is due “...not [to] the availability of quality food, but the availability of funds to redistribute it,” (Stuart, 2009, p. 221). This is largely because the social, economic and environmental benefits of redistribution may not be obvious at first glance. But upon closer inspection, produce redistribution has the potential to reduce pressures on food banks, mitigate health costs associated with hunger and malnutrition, and diminish environmental impact. By connecting local food producers and food banks these positive social changes could be realized.

Project Overview

Objective

This project intends to foster an ongoing partnership between existent Toronto food banks and the local farming community. The main goal is to secure sustainable infrastructure aimed at providing Toronto food banks with fresh produce. Further objectives include:

- 1) Reducing the pressure placed on food banks as a result of the recent increased demand for food
- 2) Widening food bank user access to fresh produce
- 3) Utilizing an excess of local farm produce currently wasted

Description

At this stage, due to pending input from boundary partners interested in participating in our project, we can only provide a limited description of our initiative. We anticipate further specificity at a later stage in the project.

Infrastructure

Fresh produce requires proper storage in order to maintain freshness and nutritional value. Our project thus requires both refrigeration facilities and cool, dry locations. As such, this plan recognizes the need for refrigerated trucks for transport of produce.

We will enhance existing inventory management systems to accommodate the additional food sources our project aims to provide. We propose to create a categorization system for the produce. This will assist the involved food banks in accounting for this additional produce in their inventory systems. To make this process easier, we suggest providing inventory sheets at every collection and drop-off point.

To maintain the supply and quality of produce, a regular distribution system from original sources of collection to intended client destination will be needed. The steps involved in this process are transporting the produce from farms to storage and distribution centres, and from there, to local food banks.

Human Resources

The successful coordinating of this project depends on a reliable volunteer base to collect produce. We propose to mobilise secondary school students in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). As a requirement for their high school completion, every student is expected to fulfil 40 hours of community service, making them a continuous source of reliable volunteerism.

Challenges

- 1) Building and up-keeping adequate infrastructure

- 2) Sustaining a reliable volunteer base
- 3) Maintaining farm involvement
- 4) Securing funding

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