



[A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE ON CORPORATE FOOD AID – OCTOBER 2023]

Rights, not Charity



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AUTHORS:

Alison Cohen, Kayleigh Garthwaite, Joshua Lohnes, Martin Wolpold-Bosien

DESIGN:

Amanda G. Córdova

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A HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE ON CORPORATE FOOD AID

CONTEXT

The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare some fundamental problems with the global industrial food system. From long feeding lines snaking around city blocks, to the breakdown of agricultural supply chains and urban migrants lacking transportation to return home or land to grow their own food – these phenomena were visible to all. The precarity of millions with insufficient incomes and a lack of social protections was made especially apparent through rising rates of food insecurity.

We witnessed various responses to these converging crises. Most visible were charitable feeding operations appealing for public and private sector benevolence to secure additional food and funding. Existing emergency food aid organisations were strengthened and new ones created. Regional food banks and their network of local food charities prevented untold suffering for many families, some of whom were experiencing unemployment and food insecurity for the first time.

A second and significant response came from governments that provided cash benefits and lifted millions above the poverty threshold.

Unfortunately, many of these were short-term interventions, even as the economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis, further exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, rampant inflation, and climate change, continue to increase poverty and inequality across the world.

There was also a third response that is important to reflect on, one rooted in mutual aid and



solidarity mechanisms that have long shaped community food provisioning strategies. This took on many different forms, from community refrigerators on street corners stocked by neighbours, to large-scale social movements mobilising their advocacy structures to respond quickly and directly within their own communities.

For instance, *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, marshalled more than 170 community health clinics, thousands of rural schools serving as temporary hospitals, and dozens of MST food processing facilities throughout Brazil to produce food for families impacted by the pandemic. Farmers networked across the country grew, harvested, and processed food, distributing it monthly to their own communities as well as to families living in urban areas. More than 250,000 vulnerable households throughout Brazil were supported with farm-fresh food.¹

Amidst these varied responses to what was a sudden and steep rise in global hunger, corporate-backed food charity dominated the stage, and continues to wield outsized influence in hunger relief efforts across the world. Without a robust counter movement and narrative shift, this will further entrench emergency food aid into a troubling state of permanence.

What are the problems with corporate-backed charitable food aid?

We are witnessing the rise of a permanent state of food emergency around the world, one that is being addressed through the false promise of solidarity through corporatized food charity². Initially framed as a temporary response to address an acute need born out of the roll-back of social protection programs in wealthy but unequal countries of the Global North, corporate backed charitable food aid – and in particular the North American food banking model – is **perceived to be an attractive ‘win-win’ solution to resolving problems of surplus food, food waste, and food insecurity on a global scale.**

This dominant food banking paradigm, modelled on [Feeding America](#) and promoted via actors such as the [Global FoodBanking Network](#) (GFN), has now been exported to 76 countries, including low and middle income states on every continent. Funded by some of the **most powerful food corporations in the world**, the GFN’s new [strategic plan](#) is focused on “**expanding the presence and influence of food banks all over the world**”, an expansion that aims to further anchor corporate charity as a global strategy to feed the poor by repurposing waste from industrial food processes.

The growth of corporate food waste as hunger relief and the ongoing institutionalisation of

¹ For more examples of community solidarity responses from different constituencies and regions, see Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism for relations with the CFS. [Voices from the Ground](#), CSIPM 2020; Macías Yela, M, Amaral Burity, V. Spinola, Monsalve, S. [An Imperceptible Growth: Healthy Food and Transformative Solidarity. Right to Food and Nutrition Watch 2021](#)

² Riches, G. (2018). *Food Bank Nations: poverty, corporate charity and the right to food*. Routledge.



charitable food aid undermines UN member states' obligations under international law to respect, protect, and fulfil the human right to adequate food through coherent and comprehensive policies and programmes.³ Such failure creates opportunities for the corporate capture of public nutrition policy by framing food banking as a “win-win solution” to hunger relief, distorting the concept of solidarity. In its place emerges a “hunger industrial complex”⁴ whereby private food companies benefit from the very existence of ‘emergency’ food infrastructure via lower tax burdens, savings on waste disposal costs, price protections and the ‘halo effect’ of corporate social responsibility marketing.

Our chief concern is not with the oft uncompensated care and solidarity that front-line emergency food aid workers are driven to provide. Charitable food aid workers are concerned with meeting needs in their communities. They are not motivated by the expansion of corporate power, increased control over the food system and its profits. Indeed, many emergency food volunteers are themselves in situations of economic precarity⁵. By working to recover surplus food as hunger relief, however, those working in food banks and their local network of partners have become instruments of a corporate food regime that promises to resolve two intractable problems born out of the profit driven food system - unsustainable overproduction and endemic hunger.

³ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, [General Comment 12 - The Right to adequate food](#), 1999; FAO, [Voluntary guidelines on the right to adequate food in the context of national food security](#), 2004; UN [Special Rapporteur on the right to food | OHCHR](#)

⁴ Fisher, A. (2017). *Big Hunger: The unholy alliance between corporate America and anti-hunger groups*. MIT Press.

⁵ Dickinson, Maggie. (2020). *Feeding the Crisis: Care and Abandonment in America's Food Safety Net*. University of California Press.

Instead of addressing the root causes of poverty and advocating for policies that would check income inequality, greed, unfair labour conditions, and unsustainable agricultural practices, these corporate partners lobby national governments and infiltrate international policy **making spaces as “stakeholders” promoting the false link between food waste and food security**, and reinvesting very little in the communities they purport to serve.

It is essential that those on the front lines of these networks come together to collectively build strategies that address these problems in international fora, **in our own countries’** governments, and within our own local communities.

The globalisation of the corporate food bank model

International law requires that states respect, protect, and fulfil the right to adequate food at all times, using the maximum of their available resources for its progressive realisation. The obligation to fulfil includes policies and programs to facilitate access to land and natural resources, such as agrarian reforms, decent income through social protection, and to provide direct humanitarian assistance in situations of emergencies, including through international cooperation.

From a human rights perspective, humanitarian food assistance is an important *temporary* tool for governments to meet their obligations particularly in times of crisis, always aiming to **re-establish affected communities’ ability to nourish themselves**. However, across the Global North, and increasingly elsewhere, food banking and its public-private institutional arrangements have grown into a highly problematic, permanent response to food access failure - a fixed state of emergency that benefits the profit motives of the private food sector⁶.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for example provides food to vulnerable households under The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). For over forty years these public funds have largely benefited entrenched U.S. agro-food interests mitigating risk for large agricultural producers and food manufacturers rather than prioritising the needs of low-income households.

Further, the corporate sector leverages the food banking capacity subsidised by the TEFAP program to offload retail and manufacturing food waste into food banking networks. This practice lacks accountability, transparency, or democracy with regards to the types of foods provided, and the costs associated with revaluing corporate food waste by a largely underpaid or voluntary workforce. Across Europe, the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD) plays a similar supplementary role in local initiatives to provide food aid and **basic material assistance across the continent**. Over €3.8 billion was earmarked for the FEAD for the 2014-2020 period.

Tax laws are increasingly shaped to accommodate and incentivize food corporations to **“donate”** their excess, further eroding state obligations to fulfil the right to food and

⁶ Lohnes, J. (2021). *Regulating Surplus: Charity and the legal geographies of food waste enclosure*. Agriculture and Human Values. 38(2), 351-363

reproducing a food system that requires a permanent state of food emergency to effectively function.

What does a human rights perspective mean in this context?

Human rights are an essential tool to overcome all forms of intersecting discriminations, social exclusion, exploitation, or marginalisation. In particular, a right to food analysis of food access failure must focus on the structural causes and the systemic drivers of their acute and enduring economic, social, and political vulnerabilities.



When people in a wealthy country go hungry, it is because of discrimination. When people in highly unequal societies do not have access to the resources to adequately feed themselves, it is because of social exclusion. When people cannot afford healthy food due to inadequate salaries, it is because of exploitation. This is why a human rights approach is essential. The fact that hunger and malnutrition mostly affect people living in poverty, and rarely elites, points to food insecurity as a manifestation of extreme inequality and marginalisation, both within countries and among them. Revaluing food waste cannot be an adequate solution to these deep-seated structural problems.

The growing demand for humanitarian responses to food insecurity through the food banking economy indicates that state policies and institutions are systematically neglecting their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to adequate food.

The most insidious feature of the corporate-based charitable food aid model is the joining up of two very different issues: surplus food and hunger. Food banks have become partners with, even dependent upon, the very corporations that benefit financially from overproduction, as well as from abysmally low government-protected minimum wage policies and

grossly inadequate social security benefits. Instead of addressing the root causes of poverty and advocating for policies that would check corporate greed, the **narrative that the “hungry will always be with us” and “charity is the only solution” is increasingly normalised.** Highly visible charitable food endeavours reinforce the idea that people in need are sufferers, not citizens; recipients, not rights bearers.

The growth of institutionalised charity contributes to this process and undermines the work of securing the right to food and its attendant bundle of human rights.

Strategies and policies for true solutions

Corporations and governments are promoting and codifying a false link between food waste and food security. Together, they have ignored and exacerbated deeper structural problems associated with overproduction and food waste, created new financial incentives to uphold dysfunctional industrial models of food production, and captured charity as another vehicle to consolidate corporate control of the food system. This interdependence between public and private charitable food provisioning is a failed response to ensure food security for all, with its **entrenchment undermining the state's obligations to fulfil the human right to adequate food** - and it must be challenged.

Solutions consistent with human rights require public policies that address and overcome structural food access barriers that people face. Food and nutrition policies should be designed to overcome the need for emergency food, by ensuring that food is consistently adequate, available, accessible and sustainable. If surplus food redistribution infrastructures are required to meet this goal, these should be destigmatized, universally accessible, connected to regional food provisioning systems and governed by local community development interests and goals, not those of distant corporate actors.

Most importantly, states must develop and implement effective income based social protection, economic, and sectoral policies and programs that realise the right to food along with other intersecting rights to health, social protection, housing, living wages, and education.

Public policies must also include effective regulation of corporate food monopolies to hold them accountable, ensuring that businesses fully comply with labour standards including the provision of living wages, formal employment contracts and allow for independent trade unions. Lawmakers must also end the practice of tax evasion and loopholes. Finally public food policies must also meaningfully invest in community-based food systems that can sustainably and equitably nourish everyone regardless of their income or social status. Only then will all people begin to realise their economic, social, and cultural rights and be enabled to feed themselves and their families in dignity.



Rights not Charity

There is an urgent need to expose false solutions to hunger and poverty as rates of household food insecurity continue to increase across the world following the pandemic and geopolitical and climate shocks. We have many examples of mutual aid and solidarity mechanisms that are effective and dignified ways of ensuring that people have access to food, housing, healthcare and land, yet such initiatives remain under-resourced and marginalised in public policy fora.

While these and other civil society formations engage with the state to challenge unchecked power of corporate interests, and denounce public policies that violate human rights, they are also building people-centred collective responses and counter-narratives that model alternative public policies rooted in social justice including income-based solutions. Social movements for food sovereignty are pre-figuring a world that is shaped by bottom-up organising, restorative justice, agroecology and regional food and farm systems. We encourage these movements to consider this collective call to action now, Rights not Charity!

Read the document, reflect on its contents and send us your comments!

Visit our websites at:

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