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## Hunger and food charity in rich societies: what hope for the right to food?

Tiina Silvasti and Graham Riches

The early 1980s to mid 1990s

First World Hunger: Food Security and Welfare Politics (Riches 1997a) offered the first cross-national study of the emergence and entrenchment of food aid and charitable food banking from the early 1980s to the mid 1990s. It consists of five case studies from advanced industrial countries with developed 'liberal' welfare states: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA. All of the countries were food exporters and food secure through national production and imports, suggesting that domestic hunger could not be caused by the failure to provide sufficient food and nutrition, but rather was an issue of distributional justice and human rights – that is a fundamentally political question.

Cross-national comparative analysis exposed the intertwined character of neo-liberal social and public policy, pursued by the strengthening New Right, and concurrent government denial of increasing domestic hunger or food insecurity. Harshening and constantly more punitive welfare reform policies aimed at disciplining labour, put into practice by cutting and freezing benefits and/or tightening the rules of eligibility for allowances, not only intensified but also produced food poverty. People living outside or on the fringe of the labour market as a result of unemployment,

underemployment or low paid jobs were especially at risk to descend into situations where they could not provide adequate food and nutrition for themselves and their families. The analysis indicated that household food expenditures were the most elastic part of family budgets: often the only way for individuals and families living in vulnerable positions to be able pay all the basic necessities of life (e.g. housing, gas, electricity, medications and so on) was to limit their diets or go without eating.

In spite of alarmingly growing poverty rates governments continued to run down their welfare states and gradually dismantled social security networks. They pleaded the case of fiscal restraint and social spending cutbacks as necessary responses to the weakening economic and political power of nation states and their need to ensure international market competitiveness in the face of global labour market deregulation, economic restructuring and free trade. It led, inevitably, to the vicious cycle of further social spending cutbacks.

Work was announced to be the best social policy and welfare benefits were attached increasingly to labour market participation. The problem was that these societies were not able to generate sufficiently well paid jobs for ordinary people to earn a living wage, and many were unable to put food on the table.

With governments failing to recognise and take any effective measures to combat increasing food insecurity, space opened up for a myriad of different kinds of charity operations. Nevertheless, however strong human compassion or the moral imperative to feed hungry people, charitable

food aid as a practical and effective response to hunger and poverty presented disturbing dilemmas. For example, by substituting for, or taking over the role of failing public welfare systems, increasingly institutionalised charity food distribution programmes actually allowed politicians to neglect the problem of food poverty and, consequently, de-politicized the hunger issue. It deflected public discussion and media attention away from governmental responsibilities and the human right to food. After all, in spite of good will, charitable food aid is nothing more than a gift. It is not a collective right or entitlement that can be claimed by a hungry person or family in need of food.

Accordingly, the conclusion reached was that if food security is understood as 'the right of access to affordable and nutritious food and obtaining it in normal and socially acceptable ways (i.e. through supermarkets, corner stores, food co-operatives and so on) it must be acknowledged that charity and food banks are not part of the long term answer to hunger' (Riches, 1997c, p. 174). The book's final comment refers to the social democratic Scandinavian welfare states as an optimistic alternative and as a proof of the fact 'that hunger need not exist'.

The mid 1990s to 2014: domestic hunger - trends and issues

Has anything changed?

Now, more than 15 years later, *First World Hunger Revisited*, an expanded and updated trans-continental cross-national study of 12 wealthy nation states further exposes the deepening and damaging impacts of ever stronger neo-liberal economic ideology on the most vulnerable people in the rich world, and their right to food. With one notable exception (see Brazil) this is despite the growing global right to food debate articulated and promoted by domestic and international NGOs, the UN FAO Right to Food Unit and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

Indeed, these new national case studies may suggest little has changed. Domestic food insecurity in wealthy societies has increased in recent years particularly since the 2007-2009 global economic recession; food charity continues to expand and become more deeply entrenched; and governments continue to look the other way ignoring their obligations under international law progressively to realise the human right to adequate food.

What then are the lessons, indeed are there newly emerging trends and issues to be considered regarding domestic hunger and food charity? What is the role of public policy in terms of achieving food security for all: watching from the sidelines or taking charge? What are the possibilities for 'joined-up' food policy and progressive change informed by the RTF?

Prevalence of food poverty

The general absence of official, exact and timely data makes exploring the prevalence and causes of food poverty in wealthy first world countries challenging. At the same time there is plenty of valid indirect information available. Nevertheless, the lack of official national food security data, systematic collection and reliable time series analyses in the majority of the countries reviewed, makes the provision of comparable empirically based cross-national findings regarding the prevalence food insecurity not possible. This is itself an important finding meaning it is only possible to estimate, sometimes with great difficulty, the prevalence of food insecurity or food poverty within each country under study.

However, as each country's national data demonstrate food insecurity is widespread and increasing with only Brazil signaling significant progress in its struggle against domestic hunger. The passivity and direct reluctance of governments to collect, distribute and act upon any official data of the hunger issue confirms not only neglect but actual denial of the problem. Even in those countries, for example in Canada and the USA, where reliable information regarding food insecurity is available, the state authorities fail to take advantage of it in the fight against hunger.

Significantly, the national case studies comprising high income OECD and emerging upper income states, each of which are food secure either by internal production or import, indicate the increasing prevalence of domestic hunger and food insecurity. There is no uniform pattern of change, but surprisingly enough, the result seems to be congruent: demand for, and the supply of food aid is growing. There is strong national evidence to support this including the

rapid expansion of food aid and charitable food banking since 1997, and especially taking account of the period during and after the 2007-9 global economic recession with soaring unemployment rates, food price increases, and the accompanying austerity measures so dramatically impacting the lives of the poor. These impacts were most marked in Estonia, Spain, the UK and in the emerging economies.

In this context it is of interest that the State of Food Insecurity in the World 2013 report noted that undernourishment in developed regions, while accounting for only two percent of global hunger, rose by 15 per cent from 13.6 million in 2005-2007 to 15.7 million in 2011-2013 (FAO, 2013), doubtless a consequence of the Great Recession.

The most reliable food insecurity data are to be found in the USA and Canada. The USA's annual National Food Security Survey in 2011 classified 16.6 per cent of the population as food insecure with 17 million Americans experiencing 'very low food insecurity', which as Poppendieck states can be interpreted as the official euphemism for hunger. For the same year, Canada's national population health survey estimated that 3.9 million people, 11.6 per cent of the population, an increase of 450,000 people since 2008, were food insecure. While these two countries are further along the track in collecting reliable national food security data the reality is that in all high income countries the prevalence of food insecurity has largely to be inferred from national poverty or household expenditure data or smaller scale studies.

For example, in the UK, in the absence of systematic monitoring there are no official data on the numbers of households living in food insecurity, or in food poverty. This has to be inferred from the almost 13 million people, about 21 per cent of the population living on incomes defining them as poor. Similarly, in Spain the relative rate of poverty at the end of 2012 was 21.8 per cent. The increase has been especially pronounced in the case of severe poverty, referring to incomes below 30 per cent of the median reaching 5.2 per cent, which reflects an intensification of poverty. In South Africa household survey data suggests 21.5 per cent of households (10 million people) experience food insecurity.

At the lower range Booth cites the Australian National Health Survey (2004/05), the most recent available data, which reports a 5 per cent rate of food insecurity or one million people but judged likely to be an underestimate. In New Zealand, a recent national nutritional study between the University of Otago and the Ministry of Health reported 7.3 per cent of the population experiencing 'low food security'. In cash rich Hong Kong SAR there are no official estimates of poverty let alone food insecurity, and even Finland lacks timely official statistics of those receiving food aid.

However, there is one exception. In Brazil the RTF is a constitutional right and the state is committed to integrated policy to combat food and nutrition insecurity through the Zero Hunger strategy. As a rule income poverty is the cause of domestic hunger. Unlike in other countries of this comparison income disparities in Brazil have decreased due to implemented policies especially benefitting lower income households.



## Primary causes

The growth of income inequality and the failure of work and social security policies to address the issue of income poverty have caused and exacerbated the issue of domestic hunger for populations at risk of food insecurity. Certainly, the general trend in this comparison is growing income inequality. As a consequence of globalization and neo-liberal economic policy there is an accelerating polarization of labour markets. The share of middle income jobs is decreasing at the same time with the increase of the number of high and low paid jobs. In addition various disadvantaged and vulnerable population groups become more often permanently surplus to the requirements of global and local labour markets. Stubborn long-term unemployment, continuous or repetitious underemployment and growing numbers of low paid jobs again force people to live in vulnerable economic situations.

Some population groups, for example Aboriginal peoples in Australia, Canada and New Zealand continue to experience 'third world' conditions, facing exorbitant food prices in rural and remote communities and deprived of food sovereignty in their traditional territories. Those excluded from the labour market, families with many children and single-parent families remain especially vulnerable and, hence, have a considerable risk of income poverty. Significantly though, as a result of recent economic and labour market policy development, including the promotion and expansion of low-paid labour markets, not even employment always guarantees a living wage and the ability to feed oneself or ones family.

However, the most common governmental claim throughout the case studies is that work is the best and/or the only right way to practice social policy even though it is self-evident that the increase of low-paid work at the expense of middle income jobs boosts poverty rates. Most of the countries have implemented neo-liberal postulates guided by 'workfare' in their social and public policies favouring privatization of social service production, social spending budget cuts and tightened benefit eligibility. This combination of labour market failure and tightening social security policy has caused difficulties for many people living precarious lives to achieve an adequate standard of living, including adequate food and nutrition. Income poverty, par excellence, is the primary cause of domestic hunger and increases the demand for food aid.

Charitable food banking as front line responses

Expansion and institutionalisation

In the countries of initial comparison (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and USA) the early 1980s and the rise of new conservatism precipitated the end of the period of expanding welfare states and urged a series of cutbacks in social expenditure. These cuts contributed to widespread hardship and impoverishment. One response to increasing social misery was the expansion and national institutionalisation of private, charitable food aid which was nourished by its growing capacity to absorb and distribute edible, but unsaleable (e.g., expiring, cosmetically unfit or

damaged) food for human consumption. This national consolidation has continued and, as Dowler notes, has been particularly marked in the UK since the 2007-09 recession where charitable food banking has rapidly emerged as a divisive food and social policy issue. The motives behind philanthropic food aid delivery are social in the first place, but awareness of the environmental impacts of food waste has also been gaining significance.

The development in the other OECD countries (Estonia, Finland, Spain) as well as Hong Kong and the emerging economies (Brazil, South Africa and Turkey) has followed the same path with blatant similarities as well as certain differences. The starting point for the rise and institutionalization of charitable food aid is usually located in economic recession joined together with cuts in social budgets. However, the processes of institutionalization, the degree of corporatization and the relationship between private and public food aid vary depending on political and cultural underpinnings in each country.

### Corporatisation

The forerunners of the corporatisation of food aid can be found amongst the Anglo-Saxon countries of the initial study with the USA, Canada and more recently Australia and New Zealand. The development in the other countries of this study lags more or less behind but, once again, parallels these earlier trends. There is little doubt that the founding of the European Federation of Food Banks (EFFB) in 1986 and the 2006 establishment of the Global Foodbanking Network (GFN)

with transnational food corporation sponsorship have been significant influences in the development work of national charitable food banking.

The EFFB works in 22 countries including Estonia, Spain and the UK. The GFN is active in more than thirty countries and in two thirds of those cited in this text including co-founders Canada and the USA; Australia, the UK and also with development activities in four of the emerging economies - Brazil, Hong Kong, South Africa and Turkey. Yet, how appropriate is globalised corporate food charity seeking to twin the issues of hunger and food waste?

Certainly, food waste is a growing ethical and environmental problem all over the first world and distributing edible but unsaleable food as food aid is one way to reduce and control the waste. At the same time corporate social responsibility is a powerful motive in terms of product branding with corporate actors seeking to gain competitive advantages by participating in charity work. Benefits include the tax deductibility of donations as well as possibilities to reduce costs for storage, transport and landfill charges. In Turkey donations to food banks in municipalities where the governing party has the majority can be a smart investment with the expectations of favourable results in receiving government contracts. According to Koc this is how food may be used for political ends.

All the while corporate food industry sponsorship builds a public perception of efficiency, trust and good corporate citizenship connected to social and environmental responsibility by aligning themselves with charitable food delivery. For example in New Zealand corporate and charitable

welfare have gradually become inseparable partners allowing the government to neglect its RTF obligations. The question is once again raised as to who is really benefiting from corporatised food charity; and in practice how effective is this food charity model.

#### Relationships between food charity and public food aid

Not surprisingly, the case studies reveal a complex set of relationships existing between charitable and public food aid and the institutionalisation of food banking: usually publicly funded food aid is supplemented by donations from private sector actors like farmers, retailers, the food processing industry or individual citizens, and delivered by private sector operators or NGOs, such as civic or faith based organizations and churches. In those EU member countries (Estonia, Finland and Spain) which accepted food aid (in place between 1987 and the end of 2013) by participating in the EU's Food Distribution Programme for the Most Deprived Persons of the Community (MDP), this particular donation of foodstuff from the intervention stocks of agricultural products, accumulated as a result of over-production, offered an important basic stock for the distribution of charitable food. In this way publicly funded emergency food (EU food aid) came, simultaneously, to be used by those countries participating in the scheme, as a safety valve for the EU's agricultural and trade policies as well as for poverty reduction policies, actually, facilitating and underpinning the expansion of charitable food aid distribution.

From this perspective and taking account of the testimony of the tight interrelatedness of agricultural policy, public food aid and social security in the USA; the connections between public

food banks and the support of small scale farming in the Zero Hunger strategy in Brazil; and, for example, the corporatisation of food aid in Canada, New Zealand and South Africa charitable food aid should, in the future, definitely be understood and explored in the broader boarder context of the typically disconnected polices of social welfare, public health, agriculture, trade and environment.

This kind of contextualization exposes the dysfunctional results of prevailing policy mismatches by demonstrating the complex and often hidden relations between food, health, environment and society and by making those relations more explicit and democratically accountable – which, according to Lang et al. (2009, p. 6-8), is the primary task of researching food policy. This will also open up new perspectives on the question, who, in fact, are benefiting from the increasing entrenchment of charitable food aid? Obviously, it is not only, or even primarily, those vulnerable populations living in food poverty.

Further to the complex combination of public and charitable operations, in Brazil there are three types of food banks: those run by private corporations as part of their social responsibility programmes; those run by NGOs; and next to these, those run and supported by the public sector as part of the Zero Hunger strategy. This public 'joined-up' food policy, including a central and significant role for Bolsa Familia (the conditional cash transfer programme) is based on the understanding of food security as a public good. All food banks are governed by the same legislation concerning food safety and consumers' protection.

Against Brazil's history of high prevalence of extreme poverty, undernourishment and child mortality, public intervention to address the food system and poverty policy in the form of food banks seems to be reasonable. Importantly, the intervention includes responsibility for the selection and evaluation of the needs of the client organizations, monitoring the proper use, handling and processing of the food as well as developing and providing nutrition education, for which purpose all public food banks must employ at least one nutritionist and social worker. On the other hand, solely the existence of food banks is a sign of hunger and precarious food security for vulnerable population groups. As Rocha states, 'truly food secure Brazil will be one without food banks'.

#### Historical, cultural and religious influences

There are historical, cultural and religious factors influencing in different ways the development, social reception and institutionalisation of food aid distribution. Basically, prevailing welfare state models are grounded in different perceptions of family and public obligations in producing social security; in responding to social and material needs including the provision of welfare and social cohesion; and in acknowledging the position of women in the labour market. In Hong Kong, South Africa, Spain and Turkey there is a strong tradition of family solidarity that is supposed to meet social and material needs and provide welfare for family members. At the same time in Estonia, Kõre states families are obligated by law to help ascending as well as descending family members in need.

Practical forms of family solidarity and social care are often basically carried out by women. This arrangement is fragile in the face of modern ways of life: women's increasing labour market participation, high divorce rates, increasing co-habiting and complicated family relationships, not to mention feminised poverty strike at the roots of the model based on care given by housewives or the double burden of working women. Consequently, in recent decades the function of the family as a social safety-net has weakened throughout.

Yet, in Spain during the current economic recession family solidarity has reactivated providing the main strategies facing the crisis and, hence, confining the need for charitable reactions although, as de Armiño writes, there is a strong tradition of charity and almsgiving within the Catholic regime in Southern Europe, which could be understood as a form of 'uncritical solidarity' with the poor. Also as Tang, Zhu and Chen make clear, within Taoism and Buddhism, the beliefs by which many Hong Kong citizens are influenced, almsgiving is cherished providing a strong cultural underpinning for food charity yet at the same time permitting government to avoid its public responsibility for addressing significant issues of food poverty. In Turkey, again, legalising food banking in 2004 provided a legitimate venue for re-establishing traditional Islamic culture and the practice of almsgiving and, hence, contributed to charitable reaction to domestic hunger.

On the contrary, quotidian charity or voluntary work does not belong within the Lutheran cultural heritage (e.g., in Scandinavia). Instead there has been a long standing and firm commitment to the



public responsibility of society towards its citizens, based on a strong democracy and a determination to reduce poverty, inequality and vulnerability.

The intricacy and policy dilemmas of public-private partnerships in distributing food aid multiply, when taking account of different kinds of understandings of the nature and practice of the aid. In many of the case studies school meals, for example, are interpreted as food aid and they are directed especially at children living in vulnerable families. In Finland, Silvasti and Karjalainen note there has been universal free school lunch since 1948. Although the history of free lunches can be traced to the years of severe poverty after World War II, today free school meals are considered a universal entitlement without any connection to food aid, and with no talk of charitable food aid, unlike, for example, in Canada, New Zealand and the USA.

In Brazil eradicating hunger is seen primarily as a government responsibility. Yet, food charity sustains some of the donations to NGO-based food banks. Strong public support of 'cidadania', roughly translated as 'participatory citizenship', drives the civic activity for participation in initiatives such as food banks. 'Cidadania' means that to be part of Brazil, people have not only rights but also responsibilities. At the same time when people increasingly expect the government to protect their rights, they are also aware of a duty to participate. Hence, there is little reluctance to accept charity operations along with government intervention in the food system, particularly in areas to address social inequities.

In the case of South Africa, Hendriks and McIntyre write that the African National Congress inherited in 1994 a country with a rapidly industrializing economy and deep inequality entrenched by longterm institutionalized racial discrimination. In addition, the social impacts of HIV have been dreadful producing a new variant of famine. The epidemic is a catastrophe to which resilience was weak after Apartheid's legacy: institutionalized inequality, gendered poverty, perpetuated deeply-rooted patriarchy, pernicious governance and transparency problems causing and exacerbating food insecurity and hunger. Although food security is enshrined in South Africa's constitution, the possibilities to claim the RTF are feeble. Food security policy puts forward food safety nets by focusing on food assistance in various forms, including cash transfers, subsidized feeding programmes and redistribution of wasted food. However, this has produced intertwined guises of social protection and 'corporate social responsibility' that encourage food charity responses.

To make the general view even more complicated, in the post-socialist transition countries such as Estonia, organized charity, like faith-based care, was prohibited by law during the Soviet regime, there is an urgent pursuit to revive democracy and civil society, which of course includes charitable organizations. This kind of recent political history may favour charitable solutions beside or even at the expense of demands for public responsibility, especially in the context of globally prevailing neo-liberal economic hegemony.

The conclusion here is that the paths to addressing domestic hunger are multiple: different but increasingly enfeebled welfare state models; charitable and/or corporately sponsored food banks; community based food provisioning; public-private food aid; state dependence on degrees of family obligation or cultural or religious heritage. Yet whether 'joined-up' or acting alone such

approaches cannot safeguard vulnerable people in severe economic distress from hunger and food insecurity. The key to avoiding hunger is not charitable food aid but the eradication of income poverty. Yet the emergent and converging trends favour food transfers in place of cash transfers.

### Social construction of hunger as a matter for charity

Achieving a living wage policy and ensuring the adequacy of social security benefits when charitable food aid is on offer is enormously difficult. When charities win an increasing presence and ever more positive reception in the mass media, they are also gaining a stronger backing from public institutions including recognition and support from society. The media's role in constructing the public image of charity operations, for example by promoting massive charity rallies visibly supported by celebrities is significant. For example the CBC, Canada's nationally funded public broadcaster has for years sponsored food bank drives across the country. When public funds are used in this way, little wonder that addressing domestic hunger is seen as a matter for charity.

Moreover, the present-day development in the UK offers an alarming example, when government denial of the hunger issue has turned not only to acceptance but to endorsing, enshrining and encouraging growing charitable emergency food systems without any signs of commitment to meet political obligations to respect, protect and fulfill social and economic human rights, such as the RTF. This trend contradicts strikingly with the widespread governmental denial of hunger: officially there seems to be no problem, but, nevertheless, there is a persistent tendency to accept

charitable action as successfully managing the problem. This demonstrates the ways by which the food banking model familiar from North America is gaining an international foothold more generally, and as promoted by the GFN. Ironically, given that the United States has never ratified the ICESCR and the human right to adequate food, it is the US food charity model which is being exported to countries whose governments have committed themselves to progressively realising the RTF.

Superficially, charitable and corporate food aid delivery appears to be effective. This ostensible effectiveness offers national governments a way to 'outsource' the political risk of domestic hunger. It does this in two ways by 'downloading' or 'downstreaming' its RTF obligations and responsibilities to lower levels of governments and local authorities; and secondly by supporting the neo-liberal social policy response to food poverty which pushes responsibilities for structural societal problems onto charities and individual citizens.

These developments have been promoted by the corporatisation of charitable work and positive media attention with the result that hunger has been socially constructed as a matter for charity instead of an issue requiring the priority attention of the governments. At the moment there is no political will, except in the case of Brazil, or serious impulse for any large-scale public outrage about the stubborn and even increasing extent of food poverty in the rich first world countries. Hunger has been effectively de-politicised not only as an issue of fair income distribution but also as an issue of fundamental human rights. The effectiveness of charity in addressing the issue is assumed, but is this the case?

## Effectiveness

The case studies clearly indicate that in spite of the positive image of the effectiveness of charitable food aid fed by the mass media and by the national and international central organisations of food banking there are, in practice, many problems: charitable responses are constrained by limited resources including the lack of donated food; ad hoc and uncoordinated provision; the continuous risk of withdrawal of corporate partners; dependence on the availability of volunteers and personnel; the accessibility and availability of food aid; geographical coverage and strategic directions; and frequently the lack of choice for food bank recipients.

Furthermore, food assistance is often provided based on more or less vague criteria decided by the charity agencies or even individual voluntary workers, not equally on the basis of a universal right for all citizens. Perhaps of most significance is the fact that food bank data underestimates the prevalence of domestic hunger or food insecurity in national settings thereby undermining attempts to generate income security policies informed by the right to food.

In Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA, for example, emergency food services are unable to meet the growing demand of food: food banks run out of food. Although the high public profile of charity food aid gives the impression that charity is a sheet anchor for people in need, as Riches and Tarasuk remind us, in Canada only 20-30 per cent of people experiencing food insecurity seek food assistance. Even among people facing severe food insecurity, food bank usage is very low and

when children are at risk of food deprivation, only one-third of families seek food bank assistance. There are several potential barriers to access charity food aid: limited operating hours, long queues, ineligibility for assistance, lack of information about available services and inadequate or unsuitable assistance. Also as noted by O'Brien in New Zealand fear of degradation may hinder people to accept food aid as happens in New Zealand, when some parents ask their children not to attend free school breakfast because they experience it as stigmatising.

From a public health perspective it is of the essence that many of those people receiving food aid have special dietary needs because of, for example, allergies, obesity and diseases like diabetes, arterial hypertension or cardiovascular diseases to say nothing of the scourge of HIV/Aids, particularly in the case of South Africa. Food charity is not designed to meet such dietary and nutritional requirements suggesting unaddressed public health issues of significant magnitude. Moreover the lack of possibility to choose one's own food may result in dependence on food of poor nutritional quality and thus be damaging for all recipients.

The ineffectiveness of food charity work is hidden by a growing degree of public legitimacy promoted by positive mass media attention. In the USA charitable food banks, Poppendieck comments, are only a small part of the country's federally funded food assistance programmes, yet they command disproportionate public recognition in addressing the hunger problem. In the everyday realism of the general public, charitable operations are easily understood as practical, common sense responses, based on human compassion, to the immediate and every day issue of domestic hunger; and particularly so in times of tightening social budgets and gradually ever more

damaged social security safety nets. As has been argued 'the ideology of philanthropy inhibits serious critique' (McMahon, 2011).

However, despite sincere intentions, charitable organisations cannot guarantee the universal right to adequate food and nutrition. In the end, in the quest of national food security, only the state is able to guarantee funds and resources and to ensure that these are permanently and without stigmatisation available for all.

Public policy informed by the right to food

Possibility of RTF approaches and 'joined-up' food policy

The majority of authors express no hope for the possibility of progressive national politics and its capability to solve the hunger issue within the context of prevailing neo-liberal economic policy. Consequently, looking to and trusting the role of international human rights law and, hence, RTF approaches is not unexpected. Yet, the possibility of RTF approaches providing an alternative agenda for moral, legal and political action informing 'joined-up' food, agricultural, public health, income and social policy as a key strategy directed at resolving the issue of food poverty in wealthy first world societies, also seems to lie in the distant future.

There are few signs of serious political commitments to develop 'joined-up' food policy that might offer alternative approaches to achieve universal food security inclusive of disadvantaged and vulnerable populations. Brazil, though, offers some hope with the strength of political will demonstrated by their government. In most cases, however, as in Canada, Estonia and Finland, even a coherent national food policy is lacking and the domestic RTF approach is fairly unknown being connected primarily with global hunger in public debate.

#### Alternative roles for key stakeholders in achieving just and sustainable food systems

As the case studies indicate the increasing need for and supply of charity food aid underlines the crude non-compliance of the majority of wealthy states to 'respect, protect and fulfill' the right to food for vulnerable people. All governments, which have ratified the ICESCR in their role as primary duty bearers, are required to act in domestic compliance with their obligations under international law to ensure food security in their own countries. Yet there is little or no evidence signaling compliance.

The RTF implies a framework of national law which moves beyond policy guidelines to legislative action. It also implies the development and adoption of coordinated national plans, strategies and tools to advance and ensure the development of 'joined-up' food policy including the setting of targets, benchmarks and indicators, monitoring, justiciable remedies and all actions necessary to secure a just and sustainable food system. Governments have been continually reminded of these



obligations not only through the periodic reviews undertaken by the UN's Committee on Economic and Social Rights but as a result of country missions undertaken by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. The Special Rapporteur's work is primarily directed at the Global South but increasingly rich nation states would benefit from his advice.

The evidence of this book suggests governments first need to prioritise social protection policies in their national food policy, income security and social welfare debates. Critical for guaranteeing the RTF as universal right is the political will to adopt the ICESCR into domestic law. While the right to food is a legal approach and basically an individual human right, the politics to ensure its advancement and enshrinement in domestic constitutional law necessitates engaging the political process and the politics of the public-private divide. Significantly the RTF is also an economic, social and cultural right and, and as such, a collective right. It reflects a commitment to the universal, interdependent, indivisible and interrelated inseparability of all human rights and the obligations of government as the primary duty bearer to ensure its collective and progressive realisation.

Despite the overall lack of willingness by governments to take charge and accept public accountability for widespread domestic hunger within their countries, the corporate sector and civil society including vulnerable people themselves are vital and relevant stakeholders in the processes which enable people to feed themselves with dignity within just and sustainable food systems.

The corporate sector is a particularly strong, many would argue, dominant stakeholder in the field of food security. The current corporate food system produces huge amounts of waste, which reveals the unforgivable inefficiency of the system. However, the solution to the ethical and environmental problem of food waste should not be organizing a secondary food market in forms of charitable food delivery to distribute wasted, unsaleable food free for residual citizens outside the primary market. Instead the primary market and prevailing food system needs to be rationalized, reorganized and made more effective.

As mentioned previously income poverty is the main reason for food poverty. In fact, as Dowler observes, the food system itself is infamous for its low wages, insecure part time jobs and zero-hour contracts affecting especially women as well as a tendency to promote unhealthy food at bargain prices. Moreover, in the USA the dependence of anti-hunger groups on philanthropic contributions from retailing giants has raised questions. For example, Wal-Mart's pledge in food and cash grants is a small contribution compared to the billions that American taxpayers spend subsidising Wal-Mart, whose salaries are so small that many of the employees qualify for SNAP and Medicaid. Evidently, an end to hunger requires living wages, adequate benefits, and full employment. However, these policies are not in the immediate corporate self-interest.

The case studies do reveal, however, an emerging possibility for those civil society actors, both domestic and international, campaigning on food security and food poverty and justice issues, and those working for alternative affordable, ethical and sustainable food production to combine their forces. The key issue here is that people should be enabled to feed themselves in ways they see fit, so as to achieve wellbeing and potential for themselves and the planet. In any case, the present

state of first world food insecurity is an indication of the unfortunate way capitalist markets meet the basic needs of human beings. There is no lack of food or even money, but lack of distributional justice.

## Conclusion

The picture of first world hunger today presented in the case studies reveals a number of converging general trends: increasing demand for and supply of food aid; the entrenchment of charitable food delivery and food banking in both high income and emerging economies; deepening and expanding corporatisation of food charities through different kinds of partnerships; an increasing presence and unconditionally positive reception in the media producing, as a kind of side effect, increasingly stronger backing from public institutions including support from society for such charity; a failure to acknowledge the ineffectiveness of the food charity model; and a lack of political will for active public debate seeking collective and publicly accountable solutions to domestic hunger and food insecurity. The right to food does not appear to be on the agenda

Only Brazil seems to be diverging from the general development by having clear politically set targets and benchmarks for the fight against hunger and is actively pursuing the development and practice of 'joined-up', integrated policies connecting food, public health, income and social policy, not to forget a progressive understanding of the meaning of agricultural policy. In the other countries, for example, serious shortages in data collection concerning hunger and food insecurity

including general lack of official monitoring, reliable statistics and time series indicates not only neglecting the problem but also denying it.

Indeed, it seems that no-one and nothing, not even the Scandinavian regime, can be safe from the mindset of the New Right. Consequently, despite all the effort and numerous international covenants the right to food is still a distant goal waiting for to be fulfilled. Food charity, on the contrary, seems to be truly vigorous.

It is also evident that the pathways to domestic hunger and to charitable responses for food poverty are multiple. Individual case studies clearly prove that increasingly dismantled welfare state regimes, reliance on family solidarity/obligation or cultural/religious heritage as such cannot guarantee adequate food and nutrition to vulnerable people living in severe economic distress. There are naturally differences in stages of economic development between the OECD countries and emerging economies in light of different economic and political histories. In Brazil, South Africa and Turkey the socio-economic point of departure after the mid 1990s has been much more severe with high rates of extreme poverty, undernourishment and infant mortality for example. Yet, the rapid economic development measured by GNP growth, as also in Estonia and Hong Kong, has not benefited all the people in these countries. Instead they are adopting, not to say eagerly, charitable food aid as a solution for the distress of the most vulnerable, indicative of convergence with the model entrenched in the first world.

The key to avoiding hunger, however, is not institutionalizing charitable or corporate food aid but the eradication of income poverty. Hence, a wealthy national economy by itself is not deliverance, whereas fair income distribution is. Eventually, only the state is able to guarantee funds and resources for basic social security and to ensure that it is permanently, universally and without stigmatisation available for all people in real need.

In the future the multitude of understandings, practices and socio-political frameworks of public-private and third sector charitable activities and mixtures of them will offer important themes for studies in the field of the RTF. Also, in order to expose the dysfunctional results of prevailing policy mismatches, there is an urgent need, now and in the near future, to explore the hidden relationships and functions of food aid within the wider context of the typically disconnected policies of income security, social welfare, public health, agriculture, trade and the environment.

Further studies aside, the problem of first world hunger today is that it is both an immediate and long term issue of distributional justice and human rights and a fundamentally political question demanding the priority attention of governments. The hungry poor deserve action now. To repeat the words of Louise Arbour, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, ' there will always be a place for charity, but charitable responses are not an effective, principled or sustainable substitute for enforceable human rights guarantees' (2005, p. 8).