

Food Banks and Food Security: Welfare Reform, Human Rights and Social Policy. Lessons from Canada?

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Abstract

In the past twenty years food banks have established themselves as one of the fastest-growing charitable industries in first world societies. As institutionalized centres or clearing houses for the redistribution of donated and surplus food they have emerged as a key frontline response to the growing problem of food poverty and inequality. As welfare states have been restructured and cut back and basic entitlements have been denied, food banks have become secondary extensions of weakened social safety nets. This paper explores the growth of food banking in Canada and analyses its role in terms of advancing the human right to food, its effectiveness in achieving food security and the extent to which it contributes to, and/or counters the increasing emphasis by governments on welfare reform policies informed by neo-conservative ideology. Food banks are examined from the perspective of their origins and purposes, institutionalization, usage, food distributed and effectiveness. The rise of food banks in Canada is concrete evidence both of the breakdown of the social safety net and the commodification of social assistance. As such, they undermine the state's obligation, as ratified in international conventions, to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food. They enable governments to look the other way and neglect food poverty and nutritional health and well-being. A possible future role for food banks in countries where they are already established lies in public education and advocacy, but their institutionalization makes this seem an unlikely course. In countries where they are in their infancy, the question of whether to support their development should be a matter of urgent public debate.

Keywords

Food banks; Food security; Welfare; Rights

Introduction

Two juxtaposed headlines in the *Guardian Weekly* (*Washington Post* section, 7-13 March 2002) highlight the current crisis of food insecurity in North America, and indeed in many first-world societies. One article, headlined "Putting a

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human face on the scandal of hunger”, is the story of relief agencies, engulfed by a largely unseen crisis, calling for more money to assist them in feeding America’s poor. The other headline reads “Reports suggest economy is growing”. In other words, in the midst of a strengthening and increasingly healthy US economy, food banks and emergency soup kitchens are failing to cope with the enormity of food poverty in their society. This is not a new phenomenon but it does invite critical policy questions about the capacity and effectiveness of voluntary and faith-based organizations—of which food banks are key players—adequately to respond to the continuing crisis of food poverty, let alone ensure food security.

In the past 20 years charitable food banks in North America, in Europe, Australia and New Zealand (Riches 1986, 1997; Poppendieck 1998; Hawkes and Webster 2000; Dowler *et al.* 2001) have emerged as significant community responses to the needs of hungry or food-insecure people. In March 2001, 2.4 per cent of the Canadian population received emergency assistance from food banks (Wilson and Tsoa 2001; CAFB 2002). This suggests food banks play a primary role in meeting the food needs of vulnerable populations and that their role in the redistribution of surplus food lies at a critical interface between food security and social policy, particularly in the relationship between health and nutrition, income security and welfare reform and the human right to food. The international rise of food banks in first-world societies raises important questions not only for food security and how best to achieve it, but also for debates about the current direction of welfare reform and social policy.

Food Security, Food Poverty and Food Banks

Food security, as defined by the World Food Summit in 1996, “exists when all people at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (Canada 1998: 5). This definition is limited in that it omits any reference to the important question of who controls the food supply and its distribution. Yet, as recognized in *Canada’s Action Plan for Food Security* (1998), it does identify three critical elements of food security: an available and reliable food supply, the importance of access to food and to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which must also be culturally acceptable (1998: 5).

From this perspective, the food bank question can be understood within the “food security box” as a debate about the merits of this particular form of surplus food distribution as a means of extending access to food in order to achieve food security. The relevant policy question is whether food banks are more effective than other community-based food programmes such as food stamps, good food boxes, collective kitchens or community gardens at meeting the food and nutritional needs of hungry people. While this is an important question it begs a more critical and inclusive policy analysis and debate about eradicating food poverty. It fails to address people’s “inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so” (Radimer *et al.* 1992). Dowler has asked the key question: “Why should such citizens

not be able to shop for food like everyone else?" (Dowler *et al.* 2001). This, of course, means that people require sufficient income in terms of wages or benefits if household food security is to be assured. Moreover, the stigma associated with charitable food banking suggests it is not a normal channel of food distribution and is a socially unacceptable way to obtain food.

The rapid emergence and institutionalization of food banks as a critical player in the field of charitable and emergency food relief is at the same time a significant indicator of the prevalence of food poverty and the failure of the welfare state and the public safety net or income support programmes in first-world societies. Indeed, the growth and expansion in food banks since the early 1980s suggests on the one hand that food poverty and inequality are increasing (Robertson *et al.* 1999; Pulkingham and Ternowetsky 1996) and on the other that food banks are an inadequate response to the complex issue of social exclusion and the state's failure to "respect, protect and fulfill" the right to food. From the perspective of social policy analysis it is imperative to ask who is benefiting and why from food banking. This is particularly so in relation to current debates about welfare reform and the human right to food and all that it implies for the full realization of social justice.

This paper seeks to address these questions, reflecting on the experience of 20 years of food banking in Canada. Bearing in mind the limits of comparative social policy (Jones 1985: 5) and of the transferability of policy ideas and practices between different welfare regimes, there are perhaps lessons to be drawn from a re-evaluation of the role of food banks in Canada and a consideration of the extent to which they have become part of the problem of food poverty or one contributing to its solution. Given Canada's highly decentralized federal system, and the difficulties of generalizing about social policy and programmes which for the most part fall constitutionally within provincial domains, the food bank phenomenon is nevertheless worth examining.

In countries such as the United Kingdom where food banks are in their infancy (Hawkes and Webster 2000; Dowler *et al.* 2001), the question of whether to support their development should be a question for an urgent and informed public debate and not a question to be left to community food policy organizations and charitable foundations. In countries where they are now institutionalized, as in Europe, the United States and Canada, their potential role in public education and policy advocacy should be considered as more significant in the struggle to achieve food security than the food they provide.

Re-assessing the Role of Food Banks in Canada

Food banks can reasonably be defined "as centralized warehouses or clearing houses registered as non-profit organizations for the purpose of collecting, storing and distributing surplus food (donated/shared), free of charge either directly to hungry people or to front line social agencies which provide supplementary food and meals" (Riches 1986). However, it would be unwise to consider this description as definitive in that organizations in Canada, and indeed in other countries, which describe themselves as food banks vary in their aims and objectives, their size and scope and in their roles and functions.

Some food banks such as Toronto's Daily Bread Food Bank, the Greater Vancouver Food Bank or the system of *Moissons* in Quebec are large coordinating food collection and distribution clearing houses which provide food to emergency feeding programmes, soup kitchens or community kitchens. Others are small, local church-run social agencies which both collect donated foods and hand out groceries or provide meals to hungry people. Even the large food banks may deal directly with people needing food. Some food banks purchase foods when running low while others rely entirely on donated products. Some engage in advocacy and public education while most prefer simply to provide a charitable service of feeding the hungry. However, the fact of the matter is that food banks, however they are defined, are now big business in Canada. Indeed, it has recently been observed that while they were first established to provide emergency relief for those in need of food, "20 years later they have become an integral part of contemporary Canadian society" (Theriault and Yadlowski 2000: 206).

Origins and purposes

The origins of Canadian food banks can be traced back to the establishment of the first one in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1981. The immediate cause was the onset of a deep recession generated by a bust in the oil industry and the inadequate response of federal unemployment insurance and the provincial social assistance programme to meet the income needs of swelling numbers of unemployed people (Riches 1986).

However, the seeds of food banking had been planted in US soil as early as 1967 with the setting up of the first food bank in North America in Phoenix, Arizona. Its philosophy was "simply to marry the interests of the food industry to cope effectively with surplus, unsaleable food with those of grass roots poverty organizations" (DBFB 1999: 10). In essence, "the idea was that a modern, wasteful society could act as one that provides a resource to others" (*ibid.*).

While this philosophy was certainly one supported by the Edmonton Food Bank and others in Canada which quickly followed its lead, Gerard Kennedy, the first director of the Edmonton Food Bank (and now member of the Liberal opposition in the Ontario Legislature) has observed that Canadian food banking has been about more than the alleviation of food poverty or redistributing surplus food (DBFB 1999). Some food banks, and especially the Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto and the Canadian Association of Food Banks, have been powerful advocates, provincially and nationally, for the eradication of hunger. There has also been a rejection of the institutionalization associated with US food banks which employ large numbers of people and operate "in the manner of large industries, as warehouses only with complex systems of inspection and regulation" (*ibid.*: 11).

Institutionalization

However, there is evidence that food banks in Canada have themselves become institutionalized. There would appear to be three processes at work:

the creation and development of a strong national food bank organization and movement; the corporatization of food banks through their partnerships with national food companies and the media support they receive; and the increasingly significant roles they have come to play as charitable partners with governments in Canada's public safety net (social assistance), thereby contributing to the introduction and implementation of neo-conservative welfare reform.

The dramatic increase in food banks and their national organizational development suggests the creation of a new form of charitable social institution with a long-term life expectancy. In 2001, according to the Hunger-Count Survey conducted annually by the Canadian Association of Food Banks/Association de Banques Alimentaires du Canada, 632 food banks and 2,123 affiliated agencies provided emergency groceries to 718,334 people in the month of March (Wilson and Tsoa 2001: 3; CAFB 2002). While the numbers using food banks declined by 1.2 per cent from the previous year, they represent a 90 per cent increase in food bank use since March 1989. It is important to note that this survey is conducted in March each year as "it is an unexceptional month, without predictable high or low food bank use patterns" (2001: 4). The report itself comments that "food banks have become an institution rather than a temporary response to the effects of the recession as they were intended in the 1980s" (2001: 3).

The formal institutionalization of food banks in Canada could be said to date from 1988 when the Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) was established. As a national coalition of food banks it coordinates donations of food and transportation (using the donated services of transportation companies) across the country to ensure food is distributed quickly and efficiently to member food banks; provides liaison between food banks, industry and government and acts as the voice of food banks (CAFB 2002). The CAFB represents food banks serving 80 per cent of food bank recipients in Canada and receives no financial assistance from any level of government. In more recent years it has played an active role in national anti-poverty advocacy and support for a food security movement in Canada.

Perhaps, however, the critical turning point in the institutionalization of food banks was the setting up in 1995 of the National Food Sharing System when the CAFB became the sole distributor across the country of food donations from major food companies and some national and provincial marketing boards. This Fair Share System, as it is called, was supported in 1997 by 63 corporate food sponsors including companies such as Campbell Soups, Kraft, Kelloggs, H. J. Heinz and Quaker Oats. This food is then transported by rail and road across Canada to local food banks courtesy of the two national rail companies (CP Rail and Canadian National) in 40 ft shipping containers supplied by NYK Line (Canada) and Montreal Shipping and with the support of numerous truckers. In 1997 over 6 million pounds of food was distributed in this way (CAFB website 2002).

The corporatization of food banks is best exemplified by the role played by corporate partners in the activities of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank (GVFB), an organization which provides food to 25,000 people on a weekly basis. Approximately 60 per cent of the food distributed by the GVFB comes

in bulk from the food industry (GVFB website). This includes food donations from large national companies through the National Food Sharing System, from national and provincially based supermarket chains and grocery stores. Support for operational services is also provided by major companies in the transportation and communication industry as well as by the print media and commercial and public radio and television. In fact, the role played by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in sponsoring annual food bank fundraising drives, which in 2001 raised over \$140,000 for the GVFB, highlights the role played by the media in socially constructing the issue of food poverty (or hunger as it is referred to in Canada) as a matter of charity and not politics. The CBC has been sponsoring such drives for 15 years and along with the commercial media has helped shape the public perception of food banks as acceptable and necessary social agencies. Whether this is a legitimate role for the country's public broadcasting agency is a matter of some concern in light of the fact that the problem of food poverty continues to increase at the same time as Canada's system of social security is being eroded and is failing to meet minimum international standards.

It is also increasingly evident that food banks have become "institutionalized at the level of individual household economies and community based projects" (Tarasuk and MacLean 1990). As Tarasuk points out, those seeking assistance do so repeatedly and are becoming dependent on food aid (*ibid.*). Food banks have also become an institutionalized part of Canada's system of income security programmes or public safety net. These include provincial and municipal social assistance programmes and the federally administered Employment Insurance (formerly Unemployment Insurance). Indeed, it was argued over a decade ago that food banks have become an integrated and institutionalized second tier of Canada's social welfare system (Gandy and Greschner 1989; Tarasuk and Davis 1996). Government financial aid staff and social workers frequently refer their clients to food banks as the programmes of last resort. Social assistance benefits fall thousands of dollars below Canada's low income cut-offs (the unofficial but conventionally accepted poverty lines) and fail to meet the budgetary requirements for adequate and nutritious food, to say nothing of meeting rental and other household costs (NCW 1999, 2000). There is little doubt that the view expressed in 1986 that food banks "act as the voluntary back-up to a public safety net that has fallen apart" has been confirmed (Riches 1986).

Indeed, there is government support for this view. The governments of Alberta and Quebec, in responding to the UN Committee monitoring Canada's compliance with the provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (UN 1998), stated that food banks made valuable contributions and provided an important means of resource distribution. The question to which they were responding asked if the government considered the need for food banks in so affluent a country as Canada to be consistent with article 11 of the Covenant. This article "recognises the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family including food, clothing and shelter" and "the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger" (UN 1998). Interestingly, more than half of Canada's provincial and territorial governments, including the federal government,

chose not to respond to this question, suggesting ambivalence, if not embarrassment, at the nature of the question (*ibid.*).

There can be little doubt that food banks in Canada today enjoy broad government, business and media support and a high degree of public legitimacy. They have become key institutions in the newly resurrected residual welfare state with governments relying on them as charitable partners providing feeding programmes of last resort. They permit the state to neglect their obligation to protect vulnerable and powerless people. They encourage the view that food poverty is not a critical public policy issue. They allow the corporate food industry to be viewed as responsible community partners. However, the question then arises: what relationship is there, if any, between the role of food banks as agents of surplus food redistribution in the amelioration of food poverty, the promotion of adequate nutrition and the achievement of food security? These questions will be addressed from three perspectives: food bank usage, effectiveness and consumer perspectives.

Usage

Food banks in Canada provided assistance to 1.25 million people in 1989 and more than twice that number in 1997 (Theriault and Yadlowski 2000: 208). However, these figures may well include double counting, and more reliable data were not available until the CAFB commenced its annual hunger count survey in March 1997. The most recent survey reports that in 2001, 718,334 people living in Canada (2.4 per cent of the population) used a food bank in March of that year. Some 294,516 (41 per cent) of these food bank users were children and young people under the age of 18 years despite the fact that this age group includes 25 per cent of the Canadian population (Wilson and Tsoa 2001). The CAFB estimates that almost 60 per cent of households accessing food banks were families with children. As the report itself notes, it is important to realize that in 1989 an all-party resolution in the House of Commons committed itself to the eradication of child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. What these figures suggest is that women as mothers, and particularly single mothers, are significant users of food banks and that food poverty is as much a problem for families as it is for unemployed individuals.

The majority of people (65 per cent) using food banks received social assistance (income support/provincial "welfare"), though it is notable that 7 per cent were in receipt of some form of disability benefit, 6.7 per cent were seniors and 12 per cent were employed but members of the working poor (Wilson and Tsoa 2001). A socio-demographic study of food bank users in Montreal found that 41.6 per cent lived alone and that 83.5 per cent were receiving social assistance benefits. Interestingly, over a third were well-educated and had either completed technical school or had a college or university education (Starkey *et al.* 1998). This finding is reflected in the CAFB study that "an estimated 9.6 per cent of households accessing food banks were adult students" (Wilson and Tsoa 2001: 15). Indeed, a previous study had estimated that between 1 and 3 per cent of the total enrolled student university population used food banks (Theriault and Yadlowski 2000; see

Westaway 1993: 29). Other recent studies have documented hunger among women and families (Tarasuk *et al.* 1998), schoolchildren (Campaign 2000 1999) and the elderly (Azad *et al.* 1999).

At the same time, given that Canada's poverty rate in 1998 was 16.8 per cent (NCW 2000) and that the National Population Health Survey reported 2.4 million Canadians experienced "compromised diets" (i.e. food insecurity) in 1998/9 (Che and Chen 2001) it is reasonable to assume that food banks are in fact underutilized.

People access food from food banks in a number of ways: either directly from the banks or their outlets (pantries, depots, churches) which involves standing in queues and receiving on average a 3–4 days' supply of groceries every month, or through meals provided in a variety of agencies such as soup kitchens, shelters and hostels, school meal programmes and community kitchens. Nor is access always assured. The CAFB March 2001 survey reported that nearly 40 per cent of food banks restrict food bank use employing a variety of rationing devices: closing early, turning people away and giving less. They also resort to additional fund raisers and community appeals and buying food (Che and Chen: 9). The bottom line is that food banks are supply-dependent and must frequently ration scarce supplies of donated foods.

Volume of food distributed

The volume of food distributed is one measure of the work of food banks, and provides one picture of their scale of operation and their potential effectiveness. In 1999 Second Harvest, the largest food bank umbrella organization in the United States distributed 458 thousand tonnes (1,009 million pounds) of non-perishable processed food through 50,000+ agencies, to 26 million people (Hawkes and Webster 2000). Total food distributed including perishable and prepared food, perishable produce and agricultural surplus supplied by other agencies amounted to approximately 660 thousand tonnes. In the same year the European Federation of Food Banks (EFFB) distributed 116,000 tonnes of food products through 13,200 associations to 2.2 million beneficiaries (EFFB website, 2002). In the UK 3,195 tonnes of food (8 million meals on an annual basis) were redistributed by a variety of agencies including one food bank which contributed 20–27 tonnes of food (*ibid.*).

The amount of food collected and distributed by food banks in Canada has not been systematically recorded. However, it is clear from CAFB reports and that of the Greater Vancouver Food Bank that the amounts are far from insignificant. In terms of volume the CAFB and its members expected to distribute over 45,248 tonnes of food (100 million pounds) in the twelve months from April 2002 (CAFB website, 24 April 2002). In 1997, it reported that the National Food Sharing System, endorsed by the Food and Consumer Products Manufacturers of Canada and representing more than 170 companies with national brand products, distributed 6 million pounds (2,715 tonnes) of non-perishable food across the country. To place this in a local perspective the Greater Vancouver Food Bank distributes 5 million pounds (2,262 tonnes) of food annually. It reports providing 45 tonnes

(100,000 pounds) of food to 25,000 individuals each week. On an individual basis, this translates into 4 pounds of food per person or a little over half a pound of food per day, though this says little about the nutritional benefits of such foods. Some 9,000 people, of whom a third are children, receive the food in the form of hampers and 16,000 individuals (a 45 per cent increase compared to 2001) access this food through meals provided by a variety of social agencies (GVFB website).

In March 2001, 91 food banks reported serving a total of 1.9 million meals across Canada. However, this was considered an underestimate as research assistance to track the meal usage was not available and in the previous March 2.7 million meals were reported served. As the CAFB points out, "these figures reflect a fraction of the meal programmes in Canada" (Wilson and Tsoa 2001). In 2000 the GVFB reported serving 250,000 meals on a monthly basis or 970,000 pounds (438 tonnes) of food to thousands of people living in Downtown Eastside, Vancouver's and indeed Canada's most impoverished community (GVFB website).

Effectiveness

Despite the significant, some might argue overwhelming, numbers of people receiving emergency foods, and the massive volume being distributed, what evidence is there that food banks are effective? Many food banks would rightly claim that their purpose is not to solve the problem of food poverty in Canada, but rather to provide emergency relief. Their function is ameliorative and should be judged in that light. At the same time it has been argued that food banks can fulfil important health prevention functions, a role which it is suggested has been "completely unrecognised by public health authorities" (Therault and Yadowski 2000). "Food banks", it is asserted, "can play an important role in feeding the poor. In the case of indigent children, the food bank intervention can be crucial in promoting healthy development; indeed, it may well contribute to reducing occurrences of costly, chronic health problems" (*ibid.*). Yet it is difficult to make the case that food banks are an appropriate response to food poverty or that their ameliorative functions or contributions to nutritional well-being are meeting with success.

As noted earlier, findings from the National Population Health Survey (1998/9) revealed that 2.4 million Canadians (8.4 per cent) of the population had to compromise their diets because of lack of money. In other words they were unable to obtain the variety or quantity of food they wanted and/or they did not have enough food to eat (Che and Chen 2001: 13). The study reported that "about 20% of economically disadvantaged people use food banks" (Campbell and Desjardins 1989; Badun *et al.* 1995, cited in Che and Chen 2001). The NPH survey also "found that 22% of respondents in food insecure households had sought help from food banks, soup kitchens or other charitable agencies in the past year (19% reported occasional use; 3% used food assistance often)." The majority using food banks reported receiving food mainly towards the end of the month (Che and Chen 2001: 19).

Furthermore, a recent study assessing the food insecurity and nutritional vulnerability of a sample of 153 women of families using food banks in

Toronto in 1998 found that “seventy percent of the women reported some level of absolute deprivation, despite using food banks” (Tarasuk and Beaton 1999). The authors draw the inescapable conclusion that “while charitable food assistance may have alleviated *some* of the absolute food deprivation in the households studied, it clearly did not *prevent* members from going hungry” (*ibid.*: 112). In light of the accumulated evidence that food banks have become the institutionalized and poor cousin of an increasingly enfeebled welfare system which itself is unable to address people’s basic food needs (Vozoris *et al.* 2002; DC/CNC-BC 2001), it is highly unlikely that charity alone can adequately feed the hundreds of thousands of hungry Canadians, let alone address their nutritional well-being in other than *ad hoc* and socially unacceptable ways.

In assessing the effectiveness of food banks it is important also to consider consumer perspectives. Based on the little that has been recorded on this subject in Canada it is fair to say there are divergent views. Swanson has rightly pointed out that “the Code of Ethics of the Canadian Association of Food Banks states that everyone has ‘the right to their daily sustenance’ and pledges that members will organize activities to ‘bring about the greatest degree of personal dignity possible.’ The Code also states that members should ensure that they do not ‘reduce the impetus of improvements to government social assistance programs’ and that they will bring the ‘greatest attention possible to the problems of hunger and of food surplus’ ” (Swanson 2001: 144). Some food banks, as Swanson herself writes, live up to these commitments, treating people with respect and campaigning on social justice issues.

The Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto is a good example of this. It is the largest food bank in Ontario and is continually to the fore working to build a strong food security movement and campaigning, in the face of federal and provincial cutbacks, for adequate social assistance benefits, affordable rents, social (public) housing and national child care programs. A review of as yet unpublished data from a recent survey of Daily Bread Food Bank users (2001) suggests that many food bank recipients are highly appreciative of the service provided and of the attitudes of the staff. Some do, however, have criticisms of the food they receive—it is not sufficient, lacks variety, is not the most nutritious food and so on. Indeed, the key criticisms are directed at the government in terms of inadequate social assistance housing and the public lack of support.

Yet, an earlier 1991 study of food bank users’ attitudes towards being on the receiving end of charity suggests that not all food banks are as highly regarded as Daily Bread. The study, conducted by End Legislated Poverty, a Vancouver-based anti-poverty organization, interviewed food bank recipients about their attitudes to a US-organized charity event in the city which raised \$70,000 “to take the left-overs from the tables of the rich to feed the poor” (Hobbs *et al.* 1993: 94). Questions were also asked about how people got treated at food banks, about food quality and quantity and what it was like to wait for handouts. Typical responses were statements such as: “You know there’s a lot of hostility here. They demean you, they yell at you, they treat you like children, and they have this attitude, you know, that they are better than you because they’re volunteering”, or “There should be a variety of

foods because this is a multicultural centre”, or “The food here is nothing special . . . well, damn awful actually”, and “It’s degrading to make people stand in line-ups to beg for food” (1993: 98–100). Swanson’s conclusion about such attitudes and behaviours seems incontestable: they amount to poor-bashing (Swanson 2001: 140).

At the same time there is also evidence to suggest that food bank users have come to accept charitable food assistance as a necessary part of their food coping and provisioning strategies (Tarasuk and Beaton 1999) and as an accepted community resource (Starkey *et al.* 1998). This is despite the fact that, as Tarasuk notes in her survey, “the vast majority (84%) of women described feeling shame, embarrassment, degradation and humiliation at this first visit” to a food bank (Tarasuk and Beaton 1999).

Perhaps there are two conclusions to be drawn from these studies about the effectiveness of Canadian food banks. Whatever the degree to which some food banks are appreciated by those who use them, there is little evidence on the basis of the foods already received that they ameliorate food poverty, prevent hunger or contribute to nutritional well-being. The structural causes of food poverty are not addressed by surplus food redistribution. At the same time, however much food banks enable governments to offload their welfare responsibilities, it is critical that food banks themselves should not be held responsible for statutory neglect. The documented evidence of 20 years of food poverty and food banking in Canada points rather to the massive failure of welfare reform policies and the abandonment by the federal and provincial governments of their international obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food (Riches 1997; see also Dowler *et al.* 2001).

Welfare Reform and the Commodification of Social Assistance

The rise of food banks in Canada during a period of increasing economic growth, labour market restructuring and widening income inequality (Kitchen 1995: 266; Pulkingham and Ternowetsky 1996: 4) prompts policy questions which move the debate about their effectiveness beyond questions of surplus food redistribution and the role of charity. The fact is that Canada along with many OECD countries has in the two decades since 1981 engineered a profound shift in federal and provincial social policy towards market-driven, neo-liberal concepts of social welfare. There has been a retreat from the welfare state and the modest social rights established in the period 1966–73 towards a welfare environment marked by the re-commodification of social benefits and the collapse of entitlements (Lightman and Riches 2000). The influence of US-style welfare reform has become marked in terms of a return to residualism, privatization and charitable or faith-based responses to the meeting of basic human needs.

The growth of food banks in the early 1980s was the warning sign of what was in store. They provided concrete evidence of the breakdown of Canada’s social safety net, particularly the federal unemployment insurance programme and provincial social assistance (Riches 1986). In the 1990s the newly elected Liberal federal government, committed to the elimination of a

significant fiscal deficit and a private sector-led recovery based on a free trade agenda with the United States, embarked on a programme of social security reform. This entailed reducing unemployment benefits, introducing stringent eligibility criteria and renaming the programme Employment Insurance. This reflected the new market mantra that social security was no longer a “passive” programme of entitlements and benefits but an “active” set of policies placing responsibility on beneficiaries to move back, or be moved, into the labour force.

The federal government also sought to limit its financial support to provincial social assistance programmes and in 1996 scrapped the 30-year-old Canada Assistance Plan (CAP). Since its introduction in 1966 CAP had provided federal cost-shared dollars to the provinces and territories on the condition that they provide assistance to all people judged to be in need (in other words they could not be required to work in order to obtain assistance); that they establish appeal tribunals; and that claimants from out of province were not debarred from receiving social assistance (NCW 1995). Under the new block funding formula of the Canada Health and Social Transfer, introduced in 1996, the provinces are no longer required to provide assistance on the basis of need and the right of appeal no longer stands. While the provinces still receive transfer payments for social assistance they are now free to allocate such funding as they see fit between health care, post-secondary education and social welfare. As a consequence, a welfare reform agenda of work-fare and learn-fare has been introduced, most noticeably by neo-conservative administrations in Alberta, Ontario and British Columbia.

Welfare reform has successfully undermined the idea of universality and collective social rights. Key features of the new reforms include the privatization of welfare administration, increasingly stringent eligibility criteria, the reduction of already inadequate benefits, requirements regarding work, job searches and training programmes and, most recently, in British Columbia, the lifetime denial of benefits to anyone convicted of welfare fraud and the restriction that claimants are only permitted to receive benefits for two years out of five. So much for the human right to food.

Welfare reform has resulted in the re-commodification of social assistance based on the Poor Law principle of less eligibility and the idea that the only legitimate claim to such benefits is when the claimant has an established commitment or relationship to the labour market. In other words, people's entitlements to income support, and thereby to food security, are directly related to their capacity to sell their labour power as a commodity in the market place. As Esping-Andersen has pointed out, this means that “people's rights to survive outside the market are at stake” (Esping-Andersen 1990: 35). The commodification of welfare rejects the notion that the state has a legitimate role in addressing basic human needs including the right to food and to be free from hunger. In Canada, the scrapping of CAP has set the social policy clock back a generation to residual times. It also represents state endorsement of the public legitimacy of charitable food banks as the programmes of last resort in the fight against food poverty. However, if, as the evidence suggests, the issues presented by food poverty are beyond the resources and good will of the food banks it is important to consider an

alternative agenda. While food banks themselves may not have solved the problem of either food poverty or food security in Canada they may have a role to play in advancing a political response.

Food Security and the Human Right to Food

Food and food poverty are political questions (Robertson *et al.* 1999) and as Dowler *et al.* (2001) have argued “solutions to food poverty go beyond welfare transfers or health services to include issues of basic human rights, sustainable development, health inequalities and social inclusion”. As a question for social policy food security is about the courses of action and social arrangements whereby society provides for the individual and/or collective welfare of its peoples (Titmuss 1974; Jones 1985). Food as a human right is clearly an important way of reframing the debate about food poverty and suggests an agenda for action which goes beyond the welfare/human capital responses which Dowler has discussed in relation to the United Kingdom (Dowler *et al.* 2001).

From a human rights perspective there is in Canada a certain irony to the question of what to do about food poverty and food security. While the human right to food lacks constitutional entrenchment in Canada in that neither the Canadian Bill of Rights (1960) nor the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) contains explicit language setting out the human right to food (Robertson 1990: 195), Canada, along with the majority of the world's nations but excluding the United States, has historically acknowledged this right. As long ago as 1976 the federal government, supported by the provinces, ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights thereby committing itself in international law to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food. It has also since that time ratified the International Convention of the Rights of the Child (1992) and signed the World Declaration on Nutrition (Rome, 1992), the recent World Declaration on Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995) and the Declaration on World Food Security (Rome, 1996). It has also, in conjunction with community partners, introduced Canada's Action Plan for Food Security (1998) setting out agendas for both domestic and international action. It also committed itself to full participation at the World Food Summit held in Rome in June 2002. The problem has been that “the treaties to which Canada is a party are not self-executing. Their incorporation into domestic law is dependent on implementing legislation” (Robertson 1990: 205).

Despite this lack of implementation, the human right to food would appear to have legs both in terms of public education and political advocacy. Human rights have become a well-articulated discourse and a significant challenge to transnational corporate power in and between countries of the North and South. Food security itself is central to global debates about poverty, environmental sustainability, social justice and democracy itself. Who is controlling the world's food production and supply is a critical question now receiving significant international attention. Within Canada the human right to food and its application to issues of food poverty is now on the agenda of an emerging Canadian food security movement and is being

addressed in academic courses, food policy councils, community nutrition organizations, municipal community-based food security networks as well as by the Canadian Association of Food Banks. There is as well a growing public awareness that food issues are political questions providing an opportunity to explore the interconnectedness of issues of poverty, health and nutrition, the environment (agriculture and fisheries) and social justice. The proclamation of the Toronto Food Charter in June 2001 is one example of how the public debate about food security is being reframed and advanced at the municipal level.

In conclusion, it is clear that the evidence of two decades of food banking in Canada confirms it as an inadequate response to food poverty while allowing governments to look the other way and neglect hunger and nutritional health. Food banks are confirmation of the re-emergence of the residual welfare state and sit at the interface between critical questions of public health, welfare reform and social policy. While they have in some measure played a role in raising community awareness of food insecurity, it remains to be seen whether they will become a part of the solution to food poverty. This will only occur if they use their public legitimacy to critique the new welfare residualism and advocate a rights-based approach to the achievement of food security for all. Given their institutionalization as part of Canada's system of social welfare, this is an unlikely prospect.

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