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### THE RIGHT TO FOOD IN THE US: THE NEED TO MOVE AWAY FROM CHARITY AND ADVANCE TOWARDS A HUMAN RIGHTS APPROACH

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One in six households in the United States (US) report that they struggle financially to put food on the table.<sup>2</sup> Advocates have largely framed this far-reaching problem as one of hunger, rather than poverty.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, approaches to ameliorate it have generally focused on capturing food waste, distributing food through charitable organizations, and defending existing (and inadequate) government programs that provide 95% of the available nutrition assistance through a patchwork of entitlements in uncoordinated pieces of legislation.<sup>4</sup>

But the human right to adequate food and nutrition, as recognized in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR),<sup>5</sup> does not only stipulate that governments must provide food when needed. Governments must also ensure that food is available, accessible, and adequate for all. They must support opportunities and processes at the individual and community level to self-determine food and nutrition security with dignity and with an emphasis on prioritizing the most marginalized populations, rather than allowing corporations to control these decisions. In the US, women (particularly single mothers), children, adolescents, workers living in poverty, older people, people of color, migrants, LGBTQIA individuals<sup>6</sup> and persons with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity and poverty.

The US has famously declined to ratify the ICESCR, and continues to give primacy to civil and political rights over economic, social, and cultural rights (ESCR), even though social movements have long called for the fulfillment of the full spectrum of human rights. Framing the hunger problems in terms of the right to food could potentially serve as a catalyst for systemic change that addresses poverty as a root cause of food insecurity. It would also help hold the US government accountable when it fails to respect, protect and fulfill the right to food for all. The US food justice movement has a critical role to play in this regard: in addition to supporting community-led initiatives aimed at ensuring self-sufficiency and self-determination, it must also call for a 'joined up' food policy, that is, a national, comprehensive, and integrated food policy that respects the interdependence of human rights and addresses the too often disconnected but interrelated policies of social welfare, public health, agriculture, trade, and the environment.<sup>7</sup>

National food policy should not depend on voluntarism and charity, yet food banks occupy a mythic role in the popular imagination, with millions of citizens participating as volunteers at food pantries, collecting canned goods, and raising funds

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2 Food Research and Action Center. *How Hungry is America?* Washington: FRAC, 2015. Available at: [www.frac.org/pdf/food\\_hardship\\_2014.pdf](http://frac.org/pdf/food_hardship_2014.pdf).

3 Fisher, Andy. *Hunger, Inc.* Forthcoming.

4 Bread for the World. *Fact Sheet Churches and Hunger.* Washington: Bread for the World, 2013. Available at: [www.bread.org/ol/2013/engagement/downloads/churches-and-hunger-fact-sheet.pdf](http://www.bread.org/ol/2013/engagement/downloads/churches-and-hunger-fact-sheet.pdf).

5 Anderson, Molly. "Working Toward the Right to Food in the USA." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2013): 89-90. Available at: [www.rtfn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rtfn-watch.org](http://www.rtfn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rtfn-watch.org).

6 This umbrella term refers to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer, intersex, or asexual.

7 Riches, Graham and Tiina Silvasti. *First World Hunger.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

through religious institutions and civic groups. While food banks attempt to educate donors about making changes, the allure of charity is a ‘national pastime.’<sup>9</sup> Anti-hunger advocates are forced to defend the eroding social safety net, and lament that there is not sufficient political will for comprehensive anti-poverty legislation. The cultural values of individualism and self-reliance have also favored a charitable response rather than a community-driven or rights-based approach. The public perception that hunger can be solved through charitable aid must not be allowed to absolve the US government from its obligation as a human rights *duty bearer* to create a comprehensive and coherent food and nutrition policy that respects, protects and fulfills the human right to adequate food and nutrition of all *rights holders*, especially those most socially marginalized.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, after nearly a half-century of food banking in the US, most food banks recognize that an ever-increasing demand for their services is simply not sustainable. Changes are needed and underway, and include intentional shifts in re-framing hunger to address systemic causes of poverty, and to fulfill the right to food as well as food sovereignty, and/or the right of producers and consumers to determine food production and policies. Two examples follow.

In rural Bellingham, Washington (Northwest US), the Community to Community (C2C) organization is attempting to create a new economic model entirely; specifically, a self-governing solidarity economy center led by farmworkers, including migrants and immigrants. Seeing cheap farm labor as propping up an extractive and exploitative neo-liberal economic system that was first built on slave labor, members are committed to “redefining power in order to end settler colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy in their external and internalized forms.” Through organizing campaigns, farming cooperative development, political education, mentorship, and solidarity with international movements, C2C is attempting to create an alternative to a system that “officially, legally, and compassionately keeps people poor.”<sup>12</sup>

In urban Detroit, Michigan (Northeast US), the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) works collectively to address the community’s own needs through community self-determination and cooperative economies. In the face of the intentional disinvesting in and destabilizing of Black communities—through land loss, exclusion from small business loans, predatory lending and advertising, violence, etc.—there has also been a long history of African-American resilience and cooperative development. Coming out of the Black liberation movement, the founders see human rights as intrinsically part of the definition of food justice and the overall movement for social justice. Recognizing that the “logic of capitalism supersedes the rights of people,” DBCFSN seeks to empower communities to thrive as an alternative to that system.<sup>13</sup>

The above organizations and many others are envisioning and building new solutions rooted in and for their communities. Cumulatively, these projects are part of a wider movement to address racial, social, and economic injustice, the effects of neo-liberalism, the realities of climate change, and a broken food system. These community-driven alternatives to charitable food distribution must be complemented by a comprehensive national food program that respects, protects and fulfills the human right to adequate food and nutrition. Within this, the US government must fulfill its obligations to the food insecure and hungry without depending on charity, and also respect and protect social justice of diverse communities in exerting sovereignty and/or self-determination over their own local food systems. This emerging movement for self-determination in community-based food systems must bring together these front-line alternative approaches with a comprehensive and integrated food and agriculture policy that ensures the right to nutritious food obtained through dignified means.

8 Food banks in the US are formed by charitable or non-profit organizations to acquire and redistribute food to low income groups vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger. See: Powers, Jessica. *A History of Emergency Food in the US*. Prezi, 2015. Available at: [prezi.com/v-76nrp83de2/?utm\\_campaign=share&utm\\_medium=copy](https://prezi.com/v-76nrp83de2/?utm_campaign=share&utm_medium=copy).

9 Poppendieck, Janet. *Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement*. New York: Penguin Group, 1998.

10 International Human Rights Clinic. *Nourishing Change: Fulfilling the Right to Food in the United States*. New York: NYU School of Law, 2013. Available at: [chrcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/130527\\_Nourishing-Change.pdf](https://chrcj.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/130527_Nourishing-Change.pdf).

11 Other examples can be found at: Powers, Jessica, and Theresa Snow. *Beyond Bread: Healthy Food Sourcing in Emergency Food Programs*. New York: WhyHunger, 2014. Available at: [www.whyhunger.org/getInfo/showArticle?articleId=3674](http://www.whyhunger.org/getInfo/showArticle?articleId=3674).

12 Guillen, Rosalinda (C2C). Personal communication, March 24, 2015.

13 Yakini, Malik (DBCFSN). Personal communication, March 24, 2015.