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FOOD BANKS AND CHARITY AS A FALSE RESPONSE TO HUNGER IN THE WEALTHY BUT UNEQUAL COUNTRIES

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FOODBANKING ON THE RISE

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the food injustices and inequalities felt by too many in the so-called 'Global North', particularly those in marginalized communities – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). In response, governments and the private sector have increased emergency food aid initiatives, but they have not addressed the true causes of food insecurity. Nor have they followed the lead of those experiencing food insecurity and poverty, or those communities organizing and working reciprocally to produce and distribute food sustainably. Today's persistent and climbing rate of food insecurity is a foreseeable by-product of systems that rely on 'low-road capitalism'¹ and corporate culture, systems that have a disproportionately negative impact on marginalized communities. Moving forward, countries in the 'Global North' (such as the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom), can continue to go down the same path that led us here, or they can realize and embrace a different path. The opportunity in this new path is to rebuild a more equitable society and to recognize that emergency food aid is not the solution to the structural and systemic issues that are the underlying causes of food insecurity.

In the past year, there have been striking increases in food insecurity in the Global North. In the U.K., for instance, independent food banks saw unprecedented increases in the need for emergency food parcels throughout 2020. The latest data from the Independent Food Aid Network, a network for unaffiliated food aid providers, showed a 190% rise in the number of three-day emergency food parcels distributed by 83 independent food banks from May 2020 to May 2021.² The Trussell Trust, the U.K.'s largest food bank franchise, released figures in April 2021 showing a record 2.5 million emergency food parcels distributed to people in crisis, repre-

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS |

Special thanks to R. Denisse Córdova Montes (Acting Associate Director, Human Rights Clinic & Lecturer in Law, University of Miami School of Law), Leticia Ama Deawuo (Chair, SeedChange Board of Directors), Carolynne Crawley (founder, Msit No'kmaq) and Deirdre Woods (co-chair of the Trustees, Independent Food Aid Network), for their support in reviewing this article.

PHOTO | Food Bank of Central & Eastern North Carolina

¹ Label attributed to the University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologist Joel Rogers. In a capitalist society that goes low, wages are depressed as businesses compete over the price, not the quality, of goods. So-called unskilled workers are typically incentivized through punishments, not promotions; inequality reigns and poverty spreads. In the United States, the richest 1% of Americans own 40% of the country's wealth, while a larger share of working-age people (18-65) live in poverty more than in any other nation belonging to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). For more information, please visit: www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html

² Independent Food Aid Network. (2020, December 22). *Independent*

senting a 33% increase over the previous year.³ The U.S. had miles-long queues at food pantries and soup kitchens,⁴ emphasizing the depth and reach of food insecurity. U.S. food banks provided the equivalent of 4.2 billion meals between March and November 2020,⁵ with at least 80% of them supporting more people than they did before the pandemic. In Canada, food banks struggled to stay open and meet the rising demands placed on them.⁶ In all three countries, these growing numbers of the ‚newly hungry‘ brought charitable food aid to the attention of many people for the first time. And while these emergency efforts may feed people for the moment, they do not address the reasons they must seek these services in the first place.⁷ It is clearer than ever that it is simply not possible to ‚foodbank‘ our way out of persistent food insecurity.

Accompanying this increased demand for food has been a wider, and concerning, rise in the direct funding for charitable food provision through governments. For instance, the U.K.’s Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) pledged £16 million (USD \$ 22 million) for FareShare and WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme), and for a fund for smaller food distribution charities in England.⁸ In the U.S., the Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced an additional USD \$850 million in Congressional coronavirus relief on top of standard funding for food banks. They also expanded the (now ended) Meals-to-You public-private partnership,⁹ working with the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty, McLane Global, PepsiCo, and others, to deliver more than one million meals a week to students in a limited number of rural schools closed due to Covid. In April 2020, the Canadian government announced a release of up to USD \$100 million to Food Banks Canada and other food rescue organizations through the Emergency Food Security Fund to „help improve access to food for people experiencing food insecurity due to the Covid-19 pandemic“.¹⁰ These increased funds all seek to respond to the problem of increased food insecurity. But increased food insecurity is a symptom of deeper problems, and increasing the funds to food charities does not begin to address these underlying issues.

BLACK, INDIGENOUS AND PEOPLE OF COLOR COMMUNITIES HIT HARDEST BY COVID-19

Additionally, although every community in these countries has been changed to some degree by the pandemic, its impacts have not been uniform. BIPOC communities, people living in poverty, persons with disabilities, and single mothers, are among the people whose lives have been the most violently affected. Black and Indigenous Communities have contracted the virus at extremely high rates, sometimes as high as 10 times more than non-racialized groups, as seen in Toronto, Canada. People with low incomes have been pushed further into poverty.¹¹ In the U.K., „one in 20 low-paid workers had fallen out of a job in each quarter since the pandemic struck“.¹² There is nothing inherently vulnerable about these communities, but their collective ‚vulnerability‘ has been institutionalized by state policies and structures, and their positions further marginalized by the effects of the pandemic.¹³

These hard truths of the pandemic – the ways in which marginalized communities have overwhelmingly borne the brunt of its impacts – are often erased in government messaging around COVID-19. This intentional invisibilizing of racialized, poor, and disabled people’s lived realities in mainstream narratives helps to depoliticize the problem – the problem of the pandemic, the problem of poverty, the problem of food insecurity. We cannot continue to talk about food insecurity with-

Food Bank Emergency Food Parcel Distribution in the UK February to November 2019 and 2020. Available at: [IFAN REPORT 22.12.20 FINAL.pdf?id=3360657](https://www.ifan-report.org/2022/12/20/FINAL.pdf?id=3360657)

- 3 See: www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/
- 4 Martelli, S. (2020, December 14). *Hunger spikes, demand rises for US food banks.* BBC News. Available at: www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-55307722
- 5 Himmelgreen, D. and Heuer J. (2021, February 2). *How food banks help Americans who have trouble getting enough to eat.* The Conversation. Available at: theconversation.com/how-food-banks-help-americans-who-have-trouble-getting-enough-to-eat-148150
- 6 Harvey, A. (2020, April 11). *Canadian food banks struggle to stay open, just as demand for their services skyrockets.* The Globe and Mail. Available at: www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-canadian-food-banks-struggle-to-stay-open-just-as-demand-for-their/
- 7 Butler, P. (2020, November 1). *Growing numbers of ‘newly hungry’ forced to use UK food banks.* The Guardian. Available at: www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/01/growing-numbers-newly-hungry-forced-use-uk-food-banks-covid
- 8 DEFRA. (2020, May 8). *Press release - £16 million for food charities to provide meals for those in need.* GOV.UK. Available at: www.gov.uk/government/news/16-million-for-food-charities-to-provide-meals-for-those-in-need
- 9 See: mealstoyou.org/
- 10 Government of Canada. (ND). *Emergency Food Security Fund.* Available at: www.agr.gc.ca/eng/agricultural-programs-and-services/emergency-food-security-fund/?id=1585855025072
- 11 Toronto Foundation (November 2020). *The Toronto Fall Out Report. Half a year in the life of COVID-19.* Available at: torontofoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Toronto-Fallout-Report-2020.pdf
- 12 Partington, R. (2021, January 22). *Low-paid workers in UK more than twice as likely to lose job in pandemic.* The Guardian. Available at: www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jan/22/low-paid-workers-in-uk-more-than-twice-as-likely-to-lose-job-in-pandemic
- 13 For example, in 2019, a Canadian-based study reported that Black households were 3.56 times more likely to be food insecure than white households. In the U.S., “more than 60% of counties with majority Native populations were very food insecure

out talking about colonialism, poverty, racism, capitalism, patriarchy, and ableism. While we have heard political leaders assure us that ,no one will be left behind,‘ the harsh reality is that communities are being left behind every day. Increasing the number of meals distributed by food banks does not alter this reality.

These underlying truths, and the outcome they have led to, was inevitable given the realities of our current systems. The U.K., the U.S. and Canada are colonial, ,capitalist‘ countries, a shorthand label that stands for a variety of governmental arrangements that, in part, support economic systems rooted in private ownership of goods and resources. Capitalist countries differ, among other things, on the amount and nature of regulations they have, the degree of institutional political control, the type of tax system in place, and the presence and strength of a social safety net.¹⁴ The ,low road‘¹⁵ capitalist societies herein are economic structures that began on the backs of enslaved people and today continue to excessively and negatively impact BIPOC Communities. In low-road capitalist societies the regulations are low, the tax structure favors those with money, and the wealth inequality is extreme.¹⁶ A small sector of the population becomes inordinately wealthy from the labor of both low-wage workers¹⁷ and the most marginalized,¹⁸ and food insecurity is one of the prices paid for maintenance of this status quo. Under this type of system food banks reinforce these conditions, by providing emergency access to food without challenging the structures that create these inequitable conditions in the first place.

Whilst it might be easy for some – particularly those who benefit from whiteness and intergenerational wealth – to ignore these underlying imbalances during so-called normal times, inequalities in wealth, health and access to adequate nutrition are exacerbated¹⁹ during a crisis and become harder to overlook. Instead of confronting these underlying issues head on, governments have instead accepted increased food insecurity as an unfortunate reality instead of a solvable problem. This tolerance for what should be an unacceptable state of affairs further institutionalizes the reality of food insecurity. As a manifestation of this acceptance, these societies have turned to corporate partners and food banks to increase capacity rather than address poverty or societal structure. In a crisis, this does more than continue the status quo – it actively benefits those at the top and grinds down those at the bottom.

ALLIANCES BETWEEN CORPORATIONS AND FOOD AID PERPETUATE POVERTY

In all three of these nation-states, increases in the provision of charitable food have been accompanied by growing corporate partnerships.²⁰ For example, corporations donating food to food banks during the pandemic have benefitted from both tax credits²¹ and public relations boosts²² while deepening the alliance between corporations and food banks, an alliance that pre-dated and will likely outlive our current crisis. This also builds on the negative partnership between corporate greed and government safety nets that existed before the pandemic. Under this immoral accord, corporate behemoths exploit their workers, disproportionately BIPOC individuals, while overpaying top executives. This forces low-wage workers to rely on government programs for survival,²³ while freeing up corporate cash for donations for which they receive tax breaks.²⁴ In this way, these corporations are effectively creating the conditions that breed and perpetuate poverty and food insecurity.

And while many small stores have struggled over the past year, business at the large

in 2019“. A 2017 UK report found that more than half of the households participating in an emergency food program included people with disabilities, while three-quarters were experiencing ill-health and associated financial insecurity. Data collected during COVID-19 showed that one in 10 (9%) of people that were referred to food banks in the Trussell Trust network identify as Black or Black British. This is three times the rate of the UK population (3%). These numbers highlight the systemic hierarchies which have always existed, and which the pandemic has exposed.

14 The many faces of capitalism are reflected in the numerous labels assigned to different forms of capitalism, including laissez-faire capitalism, responsible capitalism, shareholder capitalism, unrestrained capitalism, oligarchic capitalism, predatory capitalism, etc.

15 *Supra* Note 1.

16 See: Pew Research Center. (2020, January). *Most Americans Say There Is Too Much Economic Inequality in the U.S., but Fewer Than Half Call It a Top Priority*. Note that there are many ways to measure income inequality, yet regardless of the methodology used, economic inequality in the U.S. is more pronounced.

17 For example, Westmoreland, one of the largest coal companies in North America, filed for bankruptcy a year after giving large bonuses to its executives. A bankruptcy judge held that the company could end health benefits for hundreds of retired miners and their families, prompting the company's lawyer to announce: "This is not the retirees' fault.... It's not the company's fault. It's just the market[.]".

18 For example, Mylan's CEO Heather Bresch raised the price of life-saving EpiPens more than 400% while her compensation climbed from \$2.5 million in 2007 to almost \$19 million in 2015.

19 Menon, R. (2020, December 29). *Covid-19 and the Nightmare of Food Insecurity*. The Nation. Available at: www.thenation.com/article/economy/covid-hunger-inequality/

20 See: Egan, M. (2021, January 26). *America's Billionaires have grown \$1.1 Trillion Richer During the Pandemic*. CNN Business. Available at: edition.cnn.com/2021/01/26/business/billionaire-wealth-inequality-poverty/index.html

21 In the U.S., under the Federal Enhanced Tax Deduction for Food Donation, businesses can deduct up to 15% of net income for food donations.

22 Fisher, A. (2020, April 22). *The COVID Crisis Is Reinforcing the Hunger Industrial Complex*. The MIT Press Reader. Available at: thereader.mitpress.edu

est retail companies has boomed – the same corporations that lobby against minimum wage increases, break up unions, and refuse to provide paid sick days are profiting off of this global pandemic.²⁵ In the U.S., under the Federal Enhanced Tax Deduction for Food Donation, businesses can deduct up to 15% of net income for food donations. These companies have passed none of the extra profit onto their lowest paid frontline workers, and even those given ‘hazard pay’ during the pandemic have rolled back these programs while CEOs receive millions in salary.²⁶ The end of hazard pay not only put these monies back in the pockets of shareholders and corporate elites, it also undermined racial, ethnic, and gender equity as BIPOC communities and women are overrepresented among the retail frontline workforce. These companies position themselves as the ‘benevolent employer’ with initiatives like hazard pay and food waste donations while they continue to exploit workers’ rights behind the scenes, effectively driving the pandemic’s disproportionate impact on BIPOC and low-wage workers.²⁷

It is no coincidence that those being forced deeper into poverty and food insecurity themselves predominantly work along the food chain – migrant farm workers, meat-processing warehouse workers, and grocery store workers.²⁸ These ‘frontline heroes’ risking their lives to put food on tables across the Global North are struggling to feed themselves and their families as a result of this corporate culture of exploitation.

These arrangements allow governments to further sidestep their responsibilities, and it also contributes to an unfortunate public perception. Not only do the people who volunteer in and donate to food banks often mistakenly feel that they are helping to solve the problem, it also focuses their gaze on the immediate symptoms of the problem, instead of the root causes of the problem itself. It is crucial, then, that emergency food provision is not framed as ‘the’ solution to those in the Global North. It is time to stop focusing on band-aid charity responses and time to begin focusing on the structures that drive food insecurity, and to shift away from top-down responses that further embed social inequities.

MUTUAL AID AND COMMUNITY RECIPROCITY AS A ‘TRUE SOLUTION’ TO HUNGER

Realizing a holistic human right to adequate food and nutrition can shift the conversation beyond food access and charity, and also uncover solutions that strike at the systemic root causes of hunger and poverty. In the same way that the causes of food insecurity were palpable long before the COVID-19 outbreak, the responses to the increased need for food and income during these times are also not ‘new’. Grassroots organizations and their communities, and global social movements, have a long history of organizing and responding to the needs of those seeking food and income – from mutual aid to solidarity brigades, to increased household and community food production. There is now a resurgence of communities organizing around mutual aid – a set of principles guiding the interdependent, horizontal and collective care extended to those who are in community with one another. These actions are embedded in reciprocity, a practice which has long been the bedrock of Indigenous wisdoms and a means of survival for Black communities. Indigenous Communities’ cosmic understandings of the world are rooted in the obligation to preserve the abundance that is intrinsic to life, including for the coming generations. These worldviews are recorded among the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg in the Northeastern part of Turtle Island with ‘The Dish With One Spoon’ *Wampum*.²⁹ The notion of ‘a common pot’, a bountiful dish that nourishes an entire community equally, ensures that its people not just survive but thrive with dignity.³⁰

mit.edu/the-covid-crisis-is-reinforcing-the-hunger-industrial-complex/
Note that Smithfield, a large pork producer and the target of lawsuits detailing environmental racism, has garnered favorable press for donating millions of pounds of protein to food banks during the pandemic.

23 Rosenberg, E. (2020, November 18). Walmart and McDonald’s Have the Most Workers on Food Stamps and Medicaid, New Study Shows. Seattle Times. Available at: www.seattletimes.com/business/walmart-and-mcdonalds-have-the-most-workers-on-food-stamps-and-medicaid-new-study-shows

24 For more information on the corporation response to food insecurity during the Covid pandemic, including USD \$10 million to organizations helping increase food access, please visit: walmart.org/how-we-give/walmart-orgs-response-to-covid-19

25 Abdelbaki, R. (2020, May 10). *For the Owners of Loblaws, Ripping Off Canadian Workers Is a Family Business*. Jacobin. Available at: www.jacobinmag.com/2020/10/loblaws-westons-coronavirus-workers

26 Melin, A. (2021, May 13). *Kroger, Blasted for Ending Hazard Pay, Gave CEO \$22 Million*. Bloomberg. Available at: www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-05-13/kroger-blasted-for-ending-hazard-pay-gave-its-ceo-22-million

27 Kinder, M., Stateler, L., and Du, J. (2020). *Windfall profits and deadly risks: How the biggest retail companies are compensating essential workers during the COVID-19 pandemic*. The Brookings Institute.

28 Chen, Y-H., Glymour, M., and Riley A., et al. (2021). Excess mortality associated with the COVID-19 pandemic among Californians 18–65 years of age, by occupational sector and occupation: March through October 2020. *PLoS ONE* 16(6): e0252454. Available at: doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0252454

29 Wampum are traditional shell beads used by Indigenous communities in the Western North Atlantic crafted into belts that are used to tell stories. For more information, please visit: www.onondaganation.org

30 Brooks, L.T. (2008). *The common pot: the recovery of native space in the Northeast*. University of Minnesota Press.

COVID-19 has made visible the necessity and strength of mutual aid models of community-care and self-actualization for communities most impacted by social and economic inequities. These models of solidarity and reciprocity are necessary for survival in times of crisis. And their history of *susus* (community-led savings associations deeply rooted in African histories) support groups today: tradespeople that educate one another, farmers that share seeds, neighbors that grow vegetables in a community lot, and families who shop at cooperative grocery stores. These are examples of what a ‚true‘ solution to ending food insecurity could look like, and „a powerful vision of an alternative society – one in which we are no longer imagined as individual brands, consumers, entrepreneurs in endless competition, but a collective connected by compassion, cooperation, and the spirit of participatory democracy“.³¹

This pandemic has elevated mutual aid and models of community reciprocity,³² abiding through the organizing efforts of women of color,³³ into our collective consciousness. These avenues may lead to true food sovereignty and power building, even if they are the bane of societal structures that require divisions, resource extraction and control over labor. While COVID-19 has been a significant threat to our public health, it has also breathed life into contemporary forms of community reciprocity. Going forward, community leadership, together with structural changes at the state level – income-based approaches, right to housing, decent and fair wage work – need to be prioritized in order to make sure that we build a system that is truly inclusive and does not leave anyone behind, while taking care of one another in the meantime. This may be the only true foundation of a self-determined and just society where everyone has the right to live with dignity and abundance.

31 Whitley, M. (2020, July 14). *Why 'Mutual Aid'? – social solidarity, not charity*. Open Democracy. Available at: www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/why-mutual-aid-social-solidarity-not-charity/

32 Sitrin, M. (Ed.). (2000). *Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid During the Covid-19 Crisis*. Pluto Press.

33 Fernando, C. (2021). *Mutual aid networks find roots in communities of color*. abc news. Available at: abcnews.com/US/wireStory/mutual-aid-networks-find-roots-communities-color-75403719