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Food reclamation as an approach to hunger and waste: A conceptual analysis of the charitable food sector in Toronto, Ontario

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ABSTRACT

The study of the organized practice of food reclamation for charitable distribution can be situated within broader debates of hunger, poverty, social justice, ecological sustainability, and community development. In this paper, a conceptual analysis will be used to explore some of the debates surrounding the use of food reclamation as an approach to social policy and waste diversion. Focusing on the charitable food sector in Toronto, Ontario, and the work of organizations such as Second Harvest Toronto, this paper will briefly address criticisms of food reclamation in response to food insecurity and proposed alternatives to the charitable food assistance system. Although the development of alternative food security approaches that move away from donor-driven initiatives will be crucial to challenging the larger socio-economic and political factors that produce and perpetuate poverty, hunger, and the prevention of access to nutritional food, it is clear that charitable food reclamation and distribution organizations will continue to play a significant and valuable role as a food security actor within the communities they serve.

Concerns over food security can speak to a cross section of issues, such as questions of sufficient supply, accessibility, environmental sustainability, nutrition, and health. A study of the organized practice of 'food reclamation', or the use of excess or non-saleable commercial food products for charitable distribution, brings together a number of these factors, while also addressing concerns of hunger, poverty, social justice, and waste management. This article seeks to briefly explore some of the interconnections between the charitable food assistance system and practices of commercial food waste diversion. Underlying much of the food security literature is a push for the development of alternatives to food donation, to make a transition from projects that are based primarily on charity, to those that involve the use of community participation and development tools in order to provide a non-stigmatizing, alternative approach of addressing the problem of food insecurity, and to provide individuals with greater choice and control over the food they consume. Although food reclamation has been criticized for poorly addressing food insecurity and hunger at the expense of providing the food industry with a cost effective venue for 'waste' disposal, it is clear that these initiatives present a vital short-term solution to problems of waste and hunger within our communities. This article offers a brief, introductory exploration in the use of food reclamation as an approach to social policy and waste diversion, looking at the work of the Second Harvest network in Toronto, and providing a discussion on some proposed alternatives to the charitable food assistance system.

FOOD RECLAMATION AS WASTE DIVERSION?

The elimination of excess food and produce from the waste stream through charitable donation appears to correspond to a number of sustainability principles; items that would otherwise have been sent to landfill are given to those in need. It has been argued however, that such practices simply provide the food sector with an 'environmentally friendly' outlet in which to dispose of their surplus while promoting an image of corporate goodwill (Tarasuk 2001: 489). From a waste management position, food reclamation projects can demonstrate how "…a modern, wasteful society could act as one that provides a resource to others" (DBFB 1999: 10, Riches 2002: 651). Food donation programs have saved large companies such as Kraft Canada more than $100 000 in annual shipping and landfill tipping costs (Cooper 1997). Kraft Canada is also credited with launching the "National Product Return Program," a system that automatically donates products that are refused by a retailer to the closest Canadian Association of Food Banks (CAFB) receiving agency (Cooper 1997).

Locating waste diversion within a discussion of Ontario's charitable food assistance system also requires a look at the impact of policy recommendations on commercial food waste disposal. The Toronto Food Policy Council (TFPC) and initiatives such as *Food 2002* have stressed that municipal governments should provide both the incentives and proper infrastructure to support citywide waste management and composting programs that allow food processors, retailers, and the restaurant sector to dispose of their organic wastes in an effective, low-cost and environmentally-sound manner (TFPC 2000: 29, Foodshare 2007). From environmental and business perspectives, food reclamation appears to be a logical approach in tackling problems of hunger and food waste. However, a number of critics have highlighted its inability to speak to and challenge the underlying socio-economic and political factors that produce food

insecurity in the first place. Some consider food banks and reclamation organizations as providing a venue for the corporate food sector to dump damaged, past-due, and trial products without having to pay tipping fees at landfills (Johnston and Baker 2005: 316, Barndt 2002: 124). While the quality, nutritional value, and cultural acceptability of donated food are all factors that should be investigated in further detail, it is clear that as a short-term solution to problems of hunger and waste, these charitable organizations provide a valuable service for both communities in need and corporate donors.

SECOND HARVEST TORONTO

As the largest food bank organization in the United States (Hawkes and Webster 2000, cited in Riches 2002: 655), an estimated 23.3 million low-income citizens rely on the Second Harvest network for emergency food services annually, with 68% of all food shelves receiving services from Second Harvest (Verpy and Smith 2003: 6). In Canada, Ontario is the province with the greatest percentage of food bank recipients (Irwin et al. 2007: 17). Second Harvest Toronto has been able to respond to this demand through the free delivery of over 5 million pounds of donated perishable and non-perishable food per year, to over 250 social service programs throughout the Greater Toronto Area (Second Harvest 2008). Donors to Second Harvest include; the Ontario Food Terminal distribution centre, 30 local Loblaws stores (Canadian Grocer 2002: 29), restaurants, hotels, health care facilities and universities, while some recipients include; emergency food banks, homeless and women's shelters and community meal programs (Second Harvest 2008). While Second Harvest began by collecting leftover meals from caterers and restaurants, most of its products today are received from the food processing sector (Canadian Grocer 2002: 29). Unlike a food bank, Second Harvest does not warehouse donated food, but instead, distributes items within 24 hours of having collected it (Second Harvest 2008). Although some industry donations are of market quality, the majority of donations are categorized as 'surplus' that cannot be retailed (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005: 177) which includes unprofitable agricultural crops, excess food from events and the food service sector, and products that are mislabeled, discontinued or considered 'imperfect'.

FOOD RECLAMATION AND QUESTIONS OF 'ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY'

In 2005, Second Harvest was awarded the prestigious Green Toronto Award for Environmental Leadership by helping to divert food from the waste stream, efforts which have been estimated to save the city of Toronto approximately $300 000 annually (Second Harvest 2008). In its 2006/2007 Annual Report, Second Harvest President Cameron Bramwell and Executive Director Zoë Cormack Jones stressed the organization's commitment to "…sav[ing] the environment by diverting food from landfill" (Second Harvest 2007: 3). They highlight that although Second Harvest Toronto originally began in 1985 as a temporary solution to hunger, "…there will always be people in our community who need help, and there will always be food that would otherwise go to waste…" (Second Harvest 2007: 3). Second Harvest's ability to speak to concerns of environmental sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and waste reduction is a strategy that has successfully attracted donors who reap the benefits of

displaying a commitment to social and environmental justice while reducing their surplus and disposal costs.

A visit to Second Harvest Toronto's website displays a clear emphasis on the waste management savings that large companies can achieve through the donation of surplus food, savings that have been recorded to reach "…upwards of thousands of dollars per month" (Second Harvest 2008). The website also makes explicit that under protection from Ontario's *Donation of Food Act* 1994, donors "… who in good faith donate or distribute fresh food" are not liable for any health and safety risks associated with donation (Second Harvest 2008; Teron and Tarasuk 1999: 383; Tarasuk and Eakin 2005: 178). Removing the liability associated with donation is encouraging for potential donors who seek to efficiently dispose of their surplus without having to deal with additional responsibilities or costs on the basis of their donated goods.

HEALTH AND SAFETY CHALLENGES FACED BY THE CHARITABLE FOOD SECTOR

Although health concerns over the quality of donated items have prompted many food receiving charities to improve their methods of food handling, the sorting of items is a resource intensive task that is often performed by volunteers (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003: 1508). The health risks associated with the consumption of donated food, especially perishable goods and ready-made meals, suggest a need for a stricter system of food inspection. Whether this responsibility should be borne by the donors or the charitable agencies remains under question. To date, the possibility of such a proposal seems unclear, and from the charities' point of view, the refusal of certain items could potentially reduce future donations if companies were required to invest resources into the sorting and inspection of food items (Tarasuk and Eakin 2005: 183). While a study of food sorting procedures would provide a useful contribution to this discussion, it is an issue that has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature reviewed, and goes beyond the scope of this particular article. It is difficult to judge if the responsibility of determining whether donated food is 'safe' should be placed in the hands of the donors, receiving and distributing agencies, or individual consumers. Though donors and charities should be held responsible to some degree over the quality and safety of the products distributed, consumers should also be provided with as much nutritional information as possible regarding available products, in order to judge for themselves whether particular items are appropriate for consumption.

CRITICISMS OF FOOD RECLAMATION AS A RESPONSE TO FOOD INSECURITY

Although food banks have traditionally represented a key response to problems of food poverty and inequality (Riches 2002: 648), the ad-hoc nature of items collected and distributed through donation makes it difficult to meet recipients' nutritional needs (Irwin et al. 2007: 17). Many food banks and reclamation services like Second Harvest would rightly claim that their purpose is not to solve the problem of food poverty in Canada, but to provide 'temporary emergency relief' (Riches 2002: 656). Because these

services are typically designed to provide a supplement to the dietary needs of its clients, the importance of the quantity and quality of food provided is reduced (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003: 1509). Diversifying food selection is necessary to be able to distribute foods that are not only suitable for special dietary needs, but are also more 'culturally appropriate' to the communities being served (Verpy and Smith 2003: 13). In responding to the needs of ethnically diverse communities, increasing the diversity of donors through targeted food drives has been suggested as a way of collecting larger quantities of 'culturally appropriate' foods (Verpy and Smith 2003: 14).

In asking "Who is serving whom? Are food banks serving the corporate food donors?," Mark Winne of the New Mexico Food and Agriculture Policy Council argues that food banks "became increasingly adept at securing food- no donation was too small, too weird, too disgusting, or too nutritionally unsound to be refused" (2005: 204). In a commentary provided to *Agriculture and Human Values*, he criticizes how Second Harvest and similar food security groups have seemingly changed the focus of their mission statements from prioritizing a desire to end hunger, to a need to manage food waste (2005: 204). Winne suggests that we "…move away from the use of surplus, donated or wasted food to feed the hungry, and come to the realization that the food system is geared to overproduce and it is not the responsibility of consumers or food justice workers to reduce that waste" (2005: 205). Although the social and political limitations of addressing poverty and hunger through food reclamation have been established, practical alternatives remain uncertain (Johnston and Baker 2005: 317). At the centre of these debates is the question of where food reclamation fits within a comprehensive social policy. If a number of currently missing system components were actually in place and responded to the criticisms raised, would reclamation make better sense as an approach to food insecurity?

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO FOOD INSECURITY

The neo-liberal transfer of federal and provincial responsibilities from the public to the private sector forces many cities, including Toronto, to assume public responsibility for food security in relying on the efforts of food banks and other charity-based approaches to address the problem of hunger (Johnston and Baker 2005: 320, Curtis 1997: 207). Anti-hunger advocates are seeking longer term solutions to food insecurity (Winne 2005: 204) that are not based in charity, stressing how the concept of 'charity' can be destructive in the way it depoliticizes hunger and poverty, and how it divides members of society as 'donors' and 'grateful recipients' (Welsh and MacRae 1998: 14). Others have suggested that cash donations may be a possible solution, allowing food bank organizations to purchase fresh, healthy food according to the community's demand (Barndt 2002: 124, Verpy and Smith 2003: 14). Drewnowski and Barrat-Fornell highlight that food security could be achieved through legislative and policy approaches that involve a reduction in food costs, and a restructuring of agricultural subsidies and food assistance programs (2004: 167). Generally, a discussion of various alternatives to food reclamation would normally require a much more detailed analysis than what is offered here within the scope of this brief article, it is also important to note that

continuing to draw links between food reclamation and agricultural policy may lead to the development of other promising approaches in addressing concerns of food security.

The relevant policy question is whether food banks and food reclamation and distribution organizations are more effective than other community-based programs at meeting the food and nutritional needs of marginalized groups (Riches 2002: 649). The focus on the development of local and community strategies to address issues of poverty and hunger is a frequent theme within discussions of food security. At the community level, the goal has been to develop long-term strategies that are based on the use of community development approaches, which can include; community and school gardens, farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and collective kitchens (Tarasuk 2001: 490). Connecting a discussion of urban food security to principles of sustainability, it can be argued that when individuals are more aware of the processes involved in how food makes its way from the field, to the table, and to the trash, that they gain a greater sense of appreciation for the food system as a whole, and how it ultimately impacts our health and environment. Despite their potential however, it is clear that the success of similar programs depend not only the development of infrastructure to support it, but also the commitment and participation of community leadership and members; processes that may often be difficult to coordinate.

Underlying many alternative approaches to food reclamation is the idea that individuals should have greater control, choice, and responsibility over the food they consume. When I think of the need to create more non-charitable alternatives to food procurement, I do not have to look much further than my own campus food bank. Similar programs have been established at a number of universities across Ontario, with the aim of providing 'emergency food assistance' to students on a limited budget. While these programs certainly have their merit, it is questionable as to how many students actually frequent or are willing to admit that they use these services, especially in consideration of the often negative connotations are associated with 'food banks', and the fact that these initiatives are often organized and run by their peers.

Government licensing of community-run food discount stores that are similar to Goodwill have been suggested as an option (Barndt 2002: 124), with the goal of creating a non-stigmatizing alternative to food banks (Foodshare 2007). 'Good Food Box' programs, organized by food security organizations such as Food Share in Toronto, offer the delivery of fresh produce to thousands of individuals and families in Toronto at an affordable rate. Thrift food store franchises like Almost Perfect in the Greater Toronto Area, carry products that may not meet factory standards because of overstock or damages in packaging, and are instead sold to the public at highly discounted prices. While these options do not necessarily challenge the larger socio-political factors that perpetuate poverty and hunger, they do normalize and provide a less stigmatizing way for individuals to acquire food. By organizing these services like a mainstream grocery store, or advertising programs as a product that clients can purchase, gives individuals a greater sense of ownership and control over their food, and in the case of Food Share's Good Food Box program, the knowledge that their money is helping to support local community programs or charitable organizations.

CONCLUSION

In many urban centers, right-wing municipal governments support a charity based approach to hunger (Johnston and Baker 2005: 320). However, emergency organizations are restricted by their reliance on volunteers, and on the availability of food industry surpluses (Curtis 1997: 210). While a brief review of literature highlights the limited availability of usable 'surplus' food to address hunger, some have argued that as food producers and retailers increase the efficiency of their operations, it is likely that there will eventually be a decline in the amount of excess food that is available for donation (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003: 1513). Despite improvements in efficiency however, the dependence on just-in-time delivery, central warehousing, and the practices of the commercial food service industry will continue to produce food 'waste'. The question remains how food reclamation fits within the context of food security, and how it can be used to more appropriately address concerns of hunger, poverty, and waste. The idea of commercial food 'waste' being collected and distributed to 'needy and marginalized' communities and individuals is a problematic concept that has been widely criticized and countered by the development of alternative food security approaches. It is obvious that from a number of community development, business, and sustainability perspectives, that organizations like Second Harvest Toronto play useful and valuable roles as food security actors within the communities they serve by offering the temporary emergency food services that they have been designed to provide. Creating alternative approaches that move away from the donor-driven, charitable tradition of food banks will be crucial to challenging the larger socio-economic and political factors that produce and perpetuate poverty and hunger. Further investment should be made in reorienting programs, enabling better access to a wider variety of food and fresh produce, in order to provide a food system that gives individuals a greater sense of choice, control, and pride over the food they consume.

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