

BACKGROUND

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Beyond the Food Bank

by Brahm Ahmadi and Christine Ahnt

“The gift whose source is justice is greater than the gift from charity.”

—KAHLIL GIBRAN

In 2002, 35 million people in the United States—the world’s richest nation and largest food exporter—worried about where their next meal was coming from.¹ The facts that over one in ten fellow citizens did not have enough food to lead an active, healthy life and that 1.26 million more families worry about food than in 2000² would compel any compassionate American to want to find a real and lasting solution to our growing hunger crisis in the U.S.

But political and business leaders and social service institutions continue to offer piecemeal and oftentimes self-serving proposals for ending hunger. The Bush administration’s latest proposal is the Good Samaritan Hunger Relief Tax Incentive Act³, which would expand tax deductions already given to corporations, farmers, and restaurants donating to food banks.⁴ The argument is that if we could salvage at least one percent of the 96 billion pounds of food Americans throw out each year, we could give it to the hungry in this country.⁵

Such proposals won’t end hunger—in fact, ending hunger isn’t really what they are about. Although food banks are a vital emergency and safety net that keeps the hunger crisis at bay by providing food to people who would otherwise go hungry, they cannot address the root causes that perpetuate and exacerbate hunger in America today. Instead, our growing reliance on food banks may distract us from finding lasting solutions to the hunger crisis.

As food insecurity has increased in the United States, the demand for food banks and the pantries and shelters they serve has also developed and expanded. In 1979, America’s Second Harvest had thirteen food bank members; now there are approximately 200 affiliates in its network.⁶

According to a twenty-five-city survey conducted by the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM), requests for emergency food grew by 17 percent in 2002 alone.⁷ In a similar study in 2000, the USCM found that demand grew by 23 percent.⁸ In both studies, 14 percent of those seeking food and help were turned away due to lack of resources—and in both studies the leading cause of hunger was unemployment or low-paying jobs, followed by expensive housing costs.

Dumping Food: Strategy for Corporate Savings

There is a dark secret behind food banks’ charitable image: they provide huge tax windfalls—and great public relations hooks—for some of the country’s most powerful food companies. Second Harvest’s affiliates distribute food to more than 50,000 food pantries and hot meal programs, which feed 23 million people each year.⁹ In 1976, the federal government gave non-chapter S corporations (those



Photo by GRuB Staff

Participants in Garden-Raised Bounty’s (GRuB) Cultivating Youth Employment Program sell organic produce they have grown.

¹Brahm Ahmadi is co-founder and co-director of People’s Grocery, Oakland, California. Christine Ahn is a Food First Associate. Research assistance for this *Background* was provided by Food First intern Alex Dryer.

that sell stock to the public and have more than fifteen stockholders) a deduction from their taxable income for donations to charities. Corporations can deduct half the difference between the product's manufacturing cost and its fair market value, with the total deduction capped at twice the production cost.¹⁰ Food companies like ConAgra and General Mills send Second Harvest their surplus food—much of it either damaged goods that would otherwise be thrown away or test products such as highly refined drinks and snacks—and reap a substantial tax benefit.

Deb Keegan, head of marketing at Second Harvest, explains their approach in obtaining donated food from corporations. "We needed to market ourselves not as a charity but as a business, because I assumed companies...give because of economics. It saves them money."¹¹ In a survey of its ten largest donors, Second Harvest found that "All companies agreed that their disposition decision was based first on economics," and 90 percent cited tax benefits, ease of the system, and reduction of disposal costs as reasons for donating.¹²

2 Neat as the system may appear, an emergency food structure based on large, mostly corporate donors' needs rather than those of hungry people is prone to certain flaws. For example, the poor nutritional content of donated food through Second Harvest has prompted criticism from its affiliate food banks, which pay transportation costs from the corporate donor location to the food bank warehouse. After ten years of being affiliated, the Food Bank of Southern California in Long Beach cut their ties with Second Harvest over items supplied, like lingerie. "At first we just laughed about it, but then we started receiving more and more things that were absolutely useless—wallpaper, glue, plumbing things, and diet aids," said John Knapp of the Long Beach food bank.¹³ Second Harvest says they have little control over what manufacturers donate¹⁴, though one positive trend should be noted. Of the 279 million pounds of food and grocery products Second Harvest received in 2003, 25.5 percent was fruits and vegetables, knocking snack foods and cookies—the longstanding number one food donation—to second with 13.6 percent. Coffee, soda, water, and other nonalcoholic beverages came in third with 11.8 percent.¹⁵

Corporations' donations to the food bank system also buff their public image, diverting attention away from their violations

of food safety, labor, and environmental regulations and other bad behavior. For example, the three largest meatpacking companies—ConAgra, IBP, and Excel—are all major food donors whose slaughterhouse working conditions are unpleasant and dangerous. Heavy machinery and a mandate to keep production as high as possible combine to produce a high rate of injuries—injuries that are too often overlooked by foremen, or that result in the termination of the worker.¹⁶

The federal government, even while slashing antipoverty programs, also donates millions of pounds of food per year bought from big agribusinesses to protect them from plummeting prices due to overproduction. In 1981, the *New York Times* reported that the federal government was storing 777 million pounds of nonfat dry milk, 544 million pounds of cheese, and 274 million pounds of butter at a cost of \$36 million a year to store the surplus dairy. This triggered public outrage that led the government to donate 30 million pounds of cheese to food banks.¹⁷ (That year President Reagan and Congress cut one million people from the Food Stamp Program.) Since then, food banks have become another facet of an agricultural policy that supports the largest growers through major subsidies while extinguishing small family farmers in the U.S. and globally.¹⁸

Focus on Charity: A Distraction from the Root Causes of Hunger

Poverty, not scarcity, is a key reason why over 23 million Americans seek emergency food each year. In 2003, another million slipped below the federal poverty line, according to the latest U.S. Census report, bringing the total to 35.8 million people.¹⁹ Thirteen million American children have to skip a meal daily because their parents—many of whom work—can't afford to buy sufficient food for their family in addition to rent, utilities, medical care, and transportation.

Because people no longer grow their own food, they are entirely dependent on an unjust corporate food industry that continues to underserve low-income people. As food production and distribution is increasingly consolidated in a few corporate hands and governed by corporate-dominated market forces, the working poor, with shrinking buying power and no means of producing

food for themselves, have less and less access to a variety of healthy foods.

In such a scenario, food pantries, soup kitchens, and school lunch and breakfast programs provide food for people without sufficient income. The crisis of millions of hungry Americans doesn't get solved. Rather, recipients get locked into a cycle of dependency. The sheer numbers of people chronically dependent on "emergency" food services perpetuates the need for their existence, and fuels their expansion.

Food banks now play a key role in addressing the chronic low income of 23 million Americans. But our government-subsidized food aid system is simply applying a band-aid to economic insecurity. Food banks were set up to provide emergency food—not to supplement low incomes month after month.

Alternative Approaches to Ending Hunger

It is time to look beyond food banks to find solutions to this country's hunger crisis. A more robust and more equitable food system is needed to expand alternatives to food give-away programs—wholesale or subsidized food outlets, community gardens and kitchens, and alternative buying clubs could as easily be government subsidized.

Throughout history many people have been able to produce sufficient food for themselves, even though they may have been poor. Poverty and hunger do not necessarily correlate when a poor person has the ability to produce food. A contemporary example of this historical truth is Cuba, where people are poor but have significant access to food through local production, with easy access to seeds, fruit trees, and technical assistance. This effort has succeeded in Cuba because of strong governmental support. In the U.S., grassroots organizations are springing up to help poor Americans produce their own food, often with little or no government support. Here are a few:

- **The Homeless Garden Project** in Santa Cruz County, California, employs and trains homeless people within a community-supported organic garden. Clients receive a steady wage, learn and practice organic agriculture, and get to take food from the garden to feed themselves.



Photo by GRuB Staff

GRuB youth tending to a raised bed on their farm, where they grow, harvest, and package organic salad greens and cut flowers for their families and for sale.

- **The Victory Gardens Project** in New Jersey brings volunteers from urban communities in New Jersey to work on a two-acre farm in Athens, Maine. The food grown on the farm is brought back to those same inner-city community groups in New Jersey. The Victory Gardens Project shows that a lot of food can be produced by volunteer urbanites on a small number of acres with the technical assistance of a real farmer. The farm grows over 12,000 pounds of produce in a single summer.
- **Garden-Raised Bounty (GRuB)** in Olympia, Washington builds 100 free raised-bed vegetable gardens per year in the backyards of low-income residents, empowering them to grow food right at home. For each household, GRuB builds three raised beds and a bean trellis and provides all the necessary inputs, such as soil and seeds. A full-time coordinator provides technical

assistance to the home gardeners and helps trouble-shoot. Since 1993, GRuB has built over 1,300 gardens and hundreds of local residents now have fresh vegetables without having to spend their limited income.

- Recognizing that many young people in America are also food insecure and without access to healthy and affordable food, many organizations in the U.S. focus on educating and employing young people to grow food for themselves and their communities. Some notable organizations working to connect food, urban gardening, and young people include the **Food Project** in Boston, Massachusetts; **Added Value** in Brooklyn, New York; **Growing Power** in Milwaukee, Wisconsin; **Neighborhood Nutrition Network** in Gainesville, Florida; **Na Po'e Hoa 'Aina** in Pahoia, Hawaii; and **People's Grocery** in Oakland, California.

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Resources

Here is contact information for some of the alternative programs mentioned in this Backgrounder:

The Homeless Garden Project

P.O. Box 617
Santa Cruz, CA 95061
(831) 426-3609
www.homelessgardenproject.org

Victory Gardens Project

RFD 1, Box 6025
Athens, ME 04912

Garden-Raised Bounty

711 State Avenue NE
Olympia, WA 98506
(360) 753-5522
www.goodgrub.org

The Food Project

P.O. Box 256141
Dorchester, MA 02125
(617) 442-1322
www.thefoodproject.org

Added Value

305 Van Brunt Street
Brooklyn, NY 11231
(718) 855-5531
www.added-value.org

Growing Power

5500 West Silver Spring Road
Milwaukee, WI 53218
(414) 527-1546
www.growingpower.org

Na Po'e Hoa 'Aina

P.O. Box 1051
Pahoia, HI 96778
(808) 966-6423
www.interpac.net/~plntpuna/npha/

People's Grocery

820 Wood Street
Oakland, CA 94607
(510) 763-0328
<http://peoplesgrocery.org>

People have the basic human right to sufficient, healthy food. Poverty deprives millions of Americans of their right to food, and a food system that honors only corporate profit is not the solution to the problem of hunger in the U.S. Food banks may be needed to provide emergency food, but they are not the solution to hunger either. In many localities, new kinds of programs and paradigms that support food self-sufficiency and promote the human right to food are flowering, and these must be supported and expanded. We can urge our elected officials to fund programs that promote self-sufficiency. The goal of self-sufficient local food production can only be achieved with strong government support. In addition to these programs we need living wage jobs, universal healthcare, and affordable housing. The already overstretched web of food pantries and soup kitchens that serve food industry leftovers will never end hunger in America.

Notes

- 1 Mark Nord, Margaret Andres, and Steven Carlson, "Household Food Security in the United States, 2002," *Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report* Number 35, Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Program, United States Department of Agriculture and Economic Research Service, October 2003, 16.
- 2 Emily Gersema, "USDA: Number of Hungry Families Rising," Associated Press, October 31, 2003.
- 3 America's Second Harvest, 2003 Annual Report, 1.
- 4 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011120.html>
- 5 America's Second Harvest, 2003 Annual Report, 1.
- 6 http://www.secondharvest.org/site_content.asp?s=7
- 7 U.S. Conference of Mayors, Sodexo Hunger and Homelessness Survey 2003, http://www.usmayors.org/uscm/news/press_releases/documents/hunger_121803.asp.
- 8 U.S. Conference of Mayors, "17th Annual Conference Survey of Hunger, Homelessness Documents Increase in Current Demands," http://www.usmayors.org/uscm/us_mayor_newspaper/documents/12_17_01/hunger_homeless.asp.
- 9 America's Second Harvest, 2003 Annual Report.
- 10 Janet Poppendieck, *Sweet Charity*, New York: Penguin Books, 1998, 161.
- 11 Poppendieck, 160-1.
- 12 Poppendieck, 161.
- 13 Marina Dundjerski, "A Troubled Food-Bank Network," *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, March 23, 1995, 42.
- 14 Dundjerski.
- 15 America's Second Harvest, 2003 Annual Report, 31.
- 16 Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*, New York: Perennial, 2003, 174-5.
- 17 Poppendieck, 88.
- 18 For the effects of U.S. agricultural policy on small farmers around the globe, see Anuradha Mittal, "Giving Away the Farm: The 2002 Farm Bill," *Food First Backgrounder*, Summer 2002.
- 19 Bread for the World, "U.S. Poverty Increases Third Year in a Row," http://www.bread.org/hungerbasics/census_data_2003.

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