

From Charitable Food to Food as a Human Right
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SLIDE ONE:

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Founded in 2001, currently 80 organizational members

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SLIDE TWO:

What we'll talk about today:

- Explore how describing/defining the problems we're trying to solve affects the work we do to make change in the world
 - Use the "Food Systems Change Continuum" tool as a way to dissect the "who, what and how" of different approaches to food systems change
 - Explore the barriers and opportunities to adopting a rights-based lens to eradicating hunger
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SLIDE THREE:

According to the USDA ERS report published yesterday, the prevalence of food insecurity increased from 2022 to 2023 – from 12.8 percent of households (17 million) to

13.5% (18.0 million households. And when we compare it to the rate in 2021 at 10.2% - just three years ago – this steady increase is alarming. Especially when we consider that food banking is more robust than ever as a charitable industry.

To quote Marion Nestle, expert on nutrition and health and author of *Food Politics*: “What’s especially tragic is the reversal of the pandemic decline in food insecurity. Pandemic income support and higher SNAP benefits did exactly what they were supposed to. They reduced poverty. Congress, in its infinite wisdom, stopped those benefits. The results are entirely predictable. These, alas, are political choices.”

Food banks continue to occupy a mythic role in the popular imagination as the primary way in which needy people get food and the best way to help fight hunger, with more than 51 percent of all food access programs relying entirely on volunteers.

Since the March 2020 outbreak of COVID in the U.S., we have witnessed the private charitable food system pushed to its limits.

For the first time since the Great Depression, the issue of hunger in the U.S. arguably became discernible to all. News stories across the country showed miles-long lines of cars and people snaking around sidewalks and car parks to receive pre-packed boxes and bags of food.

Food insecurity and its attendant issues, such as poor health related to racial disparities, were front and center in the public dialogue as growing numbers of “newly hungry” people during COVID found themselves accessing emergency assistance as a result of job loss – especially those who could not work remotely -- delayed stimulus checks and other disruptions to income.

Bottom line: Despite the heroic efforts of those working and volunteering for charitable food access, hunger in the U.S. continues to rise.

Sources:

Rabbitt, M.P., Reed-Jones, M., Hales, L.J., & Burke, M.P. (2024). Household food security in the United States in 2023 (Report No. ERR-337). U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service

<https://www.foodpolitics.com/about/>

SLIDE FOUR:

Nearly half a century after the first food bank opened its doors, the US has failed to solve its hunger problem while the food banking model proliferates in the U.S. and is exported to countries around the world. The reliance on “emergency” sources has become chronic.

The public perception that hunger can be solved with improved food access, especially by capturing food waste, serves to ignore the role of other systemic root causes of hunger such as low wages, corporate control of farming, and the legacy of racial oppression.

By simply defining the problem as hunger, the approaches have been largely limited to ACCESS (capturing and distributing corporate food waste) and PROTECTING GOVERNMENT NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS.

By defining the problem as hunger, charitable food distribution has become normalized.

SLIDE FIVE:

What are the contradictions in our current food system? What are the true and false narratives that have come to define the way we approach food insecurity? What happens when we pull the curtain back and look a little closer at some of our assumptions?

Sources:

<https://blog.ucsus.org/alice-reznickova/how-big-food-corporations-take-advantage-of-snap/>

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2020/05/new-household-pulse-survey-shows-concern-over-food-security-loss-of-income.html>

Joshua Lohnes, [The Contested Politics of Food Banking in the United States](#)

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41055-022-00099-y>

<https://wfpc.sanford.duke.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2022/05/Survey-COVID-19-Pandemic-Impact-on-Hunger-Relief-Organizations-DukeWFPC-WhyHunger-April2022.pdf>

SLIDE SIX:

The Food Systems Change Continuum

This continuum is not really linear. Many organizations and actors could be doing any of these things at once. We're not all moving at the same pace in every community. Context matters.

This is the journey that many people working on anti-hunger strategies are on, and it's important to keep challenging assumptions that keep us in a charitable model.

Let's start with some definitions:

Food charity: Food is rescued, redistributed or donated (typically through food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens) to feed and/or nourish people who are food insecure.

Food Justice is achieved by removing the structural inequities that exist within our food and economic systems such that our food system is inclusive, community-led and participatory.

Food sovereignty is a food system in which the people who produce, distribute, and consume food also control the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution. This stands in contrast to the present corporate food regime, in which corporations and market institutions control the global food system.

The food systems continuum tool leads us to ask ourselves and our communities how we can support a shift from a charitable approach to food access towards a world where food is available and accessible to everyone in dignified and self-determined ways?

It leads us to explore the strategies that we can amplify, support and advocate for that will support this shift from charity to sovereignty?

SLIDE SEVEN:

Let's start with a shared assumption of values and vision: The purpose of our food system should be to produce food, health, and well-being.

Based on this shared vision of a food system, what does a shift from one point to another along the continuum look like in terms of:

- (1) desired goals/what's the problem/what are we trying to solve for
- (2) main actors/who are the main actors/entities involved
- (3) Theory of or strategy for Change/ what needs to happen to bring about the change in the problem
- (4) Outcomes and results/ what are the indicators that our response is working

SLIDE EIGHT:

Food Charity → → Food Justice → → Food Sovereignty

Problem	Hunger	Food Insecurity	Nutrition Insecurity	Economic Insecurity	Resource Inequality	Food is devalued (commodity) / food producers and eaters are
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						disenfranchised and devalued
Main Actors	Volunteers / 'the poor' / private and faith sector	Private donors / public programs / children / education / agriculture	Public health / people with diet related and chronic disease	Labor / food chain workers / farmers / working poor	BIPOC / urban agriculture / youth / values-based markets	Social movements / eaters / food producers
Strategy for Change	Respond and react	Build and develop	Fix and maintain	Redevelop and reform	Educate and liberate	Dismantle and transform
Results / Outcome	Food access / hunger reduction / relieve moral safety valve	Pounds of food / number of people / \$\$ spent	Nutritious food / health outcomes	Living wages / fair market value / affordable food	Racial equity / land availability / fair market value	People who produce, distribute and consume food also control the mechanisms and policies of food production and distribution

SLIDE NINE:

Let's look at Right to Food as another point along the continuum AND as a tool or strategy that can help us move closer to food sovereignty. The NRtF CoP is seeking to understand, develop and implement the Right to Food as a narrative change, organizing and advocacy tool. It's tricky because the U.S. is one of a handful of nation-states that have not ratified the UN treaty that includes the Right to Food. That treaty is called the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and it defines the right to food in the following way: "The right to adequate food is realized when every person, adults and children, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement."

The Right to Food sees the **problem** as: policies and laws lack coordination and intersectionality **across food, ag, health, labor and the environment.**

Actors are social movements, people as rights holders and governments as duty bearers.

Strategy: We look to transform the current food system into one where food is simultaneously available, adequate, sustainable, and self-determined for people at all times.

Results: The right to food would mean people have sufficient income to buy food; they have access to a robust social safety net when necessary; and/or they can produce their own food for home consumption or for sale.

SLIDE TEN:

The Right to Food is both the right to be free from hunger, AND the right to have sustainable access to food in a quality and quantity that is sufficient to satisfy one's dietary and cultural needs. This schematic depiction of the right to food demonstrates that all these conditions must be met at the same time for the Right to Food to be fully realized.

What do each of these elements mean in the U.S. food system context:

- Available
 - For purchase at stores or markets, or by growing, harvesting or producing food for yourself, family or community
 - This means governments need to make sure policies and practices support people to access adequate food in their areas
 - For example, by building and maintaining good roads and transport routes
 - Supporting conditions for farmers, fishers and food producers to thrive
- Accessible
 - Physically and economically
 - This means people should have good enough incomes and working conditions, wages and assistance from government so that they can afford adequate food with dignity and choice.
 - It also means that food should be accessible to everyone, regardless of where they live, what their race or social status is, or any physical barriers they may face.
- Adequate
 - Safe - free from harmful substances

- Nutritious - for every stage of life
- Culturally and socially appropriate - in line with our cultures and accessible in ways that are socially accepted in a particular culture
- This means: the type of food we're talking about is food that supports our wellbeing - meets our needs physically, emotionally and culturally
- Sustainable
 - Available, accessible and adequate for present and future generations
 - Food system should be designed in a way that is safe for the planet now and in the future
 - This means our current food production needs cannot outweigh those of the future

Underpinning values of human rights are in the circle outside, and at the center is Agency or Participation or Self-Determination.

- Agency / Self determination
 - Right we all have to be involved in deciding what the food system looks like, and who it benefits

SLIDE ELEVEN:

The question we often get asked is what difference the right to food would make to our current levels of food insecurity. What value does the Right to Food add to the current strategies and tools we are using to address the disparity our society experiences in terms of who is food and nutrition insecure and who is not.

- Strengthens democracy because it requires people to be active participants in decision making and creating accountability mechanisms. It helps us to strengthen our civil society.
- The right to food as an organizing and narrative change tool requires that we dig down below the roots to identify the root causes of food insecurity, unearthing structural barriers and political choices.
- Pounds of food and number of people are insufficient metrics in measuring progress towards ending food insecurity. And yet those are the predominant metrics we use in the stories we tell about our work.

- Finally, by looking at the structural barriers and political choices at the root of food insecurity, we can better identify what the appropriate accountability mechanisms are and who to hold responsible.

SLIDE TWELVE:

In closing, I want to emphasize that framing food as a human right is not an end in and of itself. It's just the beginning. And that dismantling food banking overnight is irresponsible in a world where food insecurity is on the rise.

However, framing food as a human right is a shift in the way we've been organizing, in the kinds of stories we tell about our work to donors and volunteers and requires that we share a vision of a food system that nourishes people and the planet by producing food, health and well-being for everyone, now and in the future.

Hunger is a problem that is solvable because, in a democracy where people embrace their responsibility and rights as citizens, hunger is a political issue.

The National Right to Food Community of Practice is a place where we're supporting each other to progressively realize the right to food – in a variety of ways and at a variety of scales. Please join us!