Our Communities: Food Charity and Food Environments

By Rebecca Garofano

An acquaintance of mine recently described an experience during a visit to India that left an impression on her. During the trip, which was an interim college course titled "Food, Culture, and the Environment," she and the group visited a Sikh temple that managed to feed 30,000 individuals daily, all without a formal leadership structure. It was a community effort that overwhelmed her, in part because she felt that the cultural priorities and context that facilitated such an effort seemed so irreplaceable here in the United States.

Food Charity in the United States

Food charity in this country presents itself in many forms, both public and informal. Many of you may already be familiar with at least the notion of the omnibus referred to as the Farm Bill, passed by Congress, sometimes as if a miracle, every four to six years. After threats to cut spending, the 2018 Farm Bill managed to coordinate somewhere around $70 billion annually (80% of its total budget) for nutrition programming. The majority of this spending is allotted to the "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program," also known as SNAP. As I write this, there is an ongoing debate (technically, a lawsuit) over whether or not the current administration can restrict individual states' ability to "waive" work requirements around SNAP eligibility, a change that would remove approximately 688,000 individuals from its rolls.

Perhaps what uniquely characterizes this country, however, is a network of food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens woven through our communities. These spaces strike me as a construct of what some may refer to as the "developed world." That is to say, the cultural context that facilitates our neighborhood food charity efforts seem to be a product of western democracy, as a similar structure is also common in Europe, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.

Having recently worked as a SNAP-funded nutrition educator at the Food Bank of Central New York, I've had the opportunity to meet many excellent individuals from the eleven counties in this corner of the Empire State who manage to gather, coordinate, and distribute donated food to their most vulnerable neighbors through food pantries. Food pantries may be located in schools, community centers, college campuses, nonprofits, and perhaps most often, in church basements. Their doors may be open for food distributions once a month or daily. In some cases, they may operate mobile delivery efforts or even offer hot meals. The needs and dynamics around food pantries vary by community, particularly when comparing rural and urban neighborhoods. In most examples, food pantries are run by volunteers who care deeply and, after our conversations, leave me humbled and speechless by their commitment to what seems like an endless task: feeding the hungry.

Throughout much of the United States these food pantries are, at least in part, supplied by what are referred to as "Food Banks." The first food bank was reportedly started in 1967 by John van Hengel, in Phoenix, Arizona. With an effort to coordinate on a larger scale, John and his partners gathered discarded food from operations such as grocery stores for distribution to those in need, donating 275,000 pounds in just the first year. This model has been replicated many times over, including the 200 food banks now affiliated through the large nonprofit Feeding America. As a coordinating partner providing contracts, support, oversight, training, and a variety of other services, Feeding America provides structure and organization to food banks. In turn, via large warehouses and fleets of trucks, the food banks distribute vast amounts of food to many of the food pantry partners at very affordable costs, eventually into the hands of the 40 million people at risk of hunger living in our land of plenty.

In fact, food banks are a blend of public and private efforts. Along with donations provided through canned food drives and caring neighbors, these institutions also receive inventory from the USDA's Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Through this program, the USDA purchases commodity foods from farmers and distributes them through state and local entities. Food banks thus have access to large quantities of commodity items at a very affordable price.

This dynamic is reflective of the safety nets that characterize US agriculture policy—we subsidize farmers and direct the surplus to those most vulnerable. It's important to note that items eligible for qualification as USDA commodities are specifically defined (think corn, wheat, and soybeans) and do not include fruits and vegetables, which are labeled "specialty crops."

I'm beginning to paint a picture here that many of you may be familiar with, whether you've worked in food charity, received food charity, or think about food charity. With these different forces at play, food banks have occasionally been criticized as maintaining an "unholy alliance" (to borrow the term from Andrew Fisher), with corporations and industrial agriculture lobbyists. Some might even go so far as to say that these same corporations simultaneously pay employees low wages, participate in unsustainable food practices, and lay a foundation for the inequality that serves as a root cause for hunger. I'll leave that to you to work through more carefully.

Nutrition and Food Charity

It's interesting to note that as our nation's most vulnerable rely on food assistance, the burden of chronic disease is also distributed unevenly in our country, most heavily resting on the shoulders of communities with fewer resources. It's likely obvious to the readers, but what *type* of food we nourish our bodies with matters. This is particularly true as the understanding that nutritious food is preventative health care slowly inches its way towards mainstream cultural milieu. It turns out that we are, in fact, what we eat.

As a student of nutrition, I seem to spend much of my day volleying between ideas pertaining to nutrigenomics, nutrition education, food equity, and the joyful practice of

preparing and sharing food. The double burden of food insecurity and chronic disease quickly leads me down a path to consider the food environments that my culture creates, particularly for children and other vulnerable people. Perhaps you can join me in taking a moment to reflect yourself on the following questions: what are the forces at play that shape and influence available food choices, how do we understand health, why are fruits and vegetables harder to come by and afford, and how do we express ourselves and care for others through food?

The Food Bank of Central New York was the first in the nation to institute a “nutrition policy” for food donations. It might strike you as a simple concept, but at the time (approximately twelve years ago now), it was radical. Larger donating entities expected to be able to offload surplus and to have it received gratefully, even if it meant the warehouse space was disproportionally occupied by skittles and soda pop (both with a foundation of corn syrup, grouping it with the items made cheap via subsidized commodities).

As I’ve learned about this effort, what strikes me as particularly radical is how the staff at the time went about laying a foundation for this policy—by conducting research with food pantry goers themselves. Surveys were organized and observations were made. For example, what do individuals facing hunger prefer to eat? The researchers held their breath. In the end, they found that families seeking emergency food charity preferred to eat fruits and vegetables, a variety of protein sources, some dairy, and other whole foods to nourish their bodies.

With those findings they were able develop what at the time was an unpopular policy, but one that has slowly turned the tide and become a bit more mainstream, though still not necessarily representing the norm.

An Alternative Vision

Just recently I had the opportunity to visit a local farm, called “Matthew 25,” located outside of my small city in a town called Lafayette. The farm was covered in snow, but the farm manager Rick and I were able to meet in the next-door church basement for a chat.

Rick explained that as a young adult he witnessed the town’s one grocery store replaced with a dollar store. This was a common trend in the US from the 1990s onward as big players like Walmart entered the food retail market for the first time. He also described food pantry visits during periods of time when his family needed food assistance, and the experience of being met by shelves of canned and dry goods. He savored the idea of high-quality produce for people who are hungry.

In this context, Rick and his brother decided to start a farm twelve years ago, for the purpose of giving away produce and seedlings to others, an admittedly bizarre concept. They assumed it wouldn’t work, but rather similar to the vision of the Sikh temple described earlier, it somehow plods along each season with a very small budget.

At Matthew 25 Farm, the doors are open to all. There is no intake process, and visitors need not prove their income. It's important to note that the farm doesn't deliver. Instead, each week people show up, pick what they need, leave about half of their harvest for others, and take home the rest. Additionally, area food pantries send out vehicles for same-day distribution to their clients as many pantries don't have refrigeration.

During our time together Rick reminisced about his grandmother's victory garden and lamented the way that processed food is "pushed" on us. He envisioned a community that's comprised of a patchwork of gardens and where neighbors share with each other. Matthew 25 farm doesn't have much formal programming and doesn't expect those who come hungry to be immediately interested in growing vegetables, but they lead by example. It's evident that they hope to come alongside their neighbors and encourage an alternate vision of food charity, where communities grow food to care for each other.

As I learn more about the context of food charity in this country, that hope appears to me as increasingly revolutionary. It's evident that putting more fruits and vegetables on the shelves of food pantries and placing nourishing whole foods at the center of this work is a way by which to invest in the food environments of our community. This is no simple task and it's truly a different vision for our neighborhoods and culture more broadly.

Because food solidarity is a concept I would like to be accountable to, I leave myself with the following questions: as I garden in my home, how can I capture and share the surplus for my neighbor? How can I join hands with those at the front lines of this work to nourish my community?

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