

Ensuring Access to Healthy Food for All. Alternatives for Crises and Beyond

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What if we could eradicate hunger in the United States? What if we could ensure that every person in this country always has access to healthy food? What would you be willing to do to make that happen? One thing is obvious --- still you would have come to a talk and lunch at the University Club! However, do we know how to make universal access to healthy food a reality? If so, what is preventing us from taking immediate action?

You have all seen the pictures of seemingly endless lines of cars waiting to pick up food boxes at drop-off sites during the pandemic. And you've heard the stories about family hardship that became much worse because of COVID 19. Why do so many people suffer from lack of access to healthy food in such a wealthy country?

I want to say today that **there are better ways to ensure access to healthy food for all than the systems we have created in the U.S.** I want to explain three different ways to do this, based on what we've learned from the pandemic. But first I'll say some things about food security and the right to food.

Many people were struggling to make ends meet around food assistance payments and visits to food pantries well before the pandemic. Even though some folks will tell you that low-income people just are not trying hard enough, the fault doesn't lie with them. This systemic problem requires changes on multiple fronts. For example, low wages and resistance to raising the minimum wage do not allow people in many jobs to access sufficient food even when they work full-time, not to mention healthy food. Changes in our globalized economy to a dominance of service-sector, leaving behind better-paid and unionized manufacturing jobs. Low federal food assistance payments do not allow people to buy healthy food, which tends to be more expensive than high-calorie, low-nutrient food. The U.S. agricultural system is heavily subsidizing unhealthy rather than healthy food and—even worse—is rapidly degrading the natural resources necessary to provide good food to future generations. The crop that gets the most in subsidies is corn, which mostly ends up in ethanol (40%), animal feed (36%), high-fructose corn syrup, industrial products or exports. The US gave \$116.6 billion in subsidies to corn growers (mostly very large-scale) between 1995 and 2020. Farmers will still get subsidies this year, even though corn prices have gone up. But that's a problem that is somewhat indirectly related to food security!

The lack of public transportation in the U.S.—comparable to what almost every citizen of the EU or Japan enjoys—means many people cannot get to grocery stores or they have to ride multiple buses to get there. Racism has prohibited investment in Black and Latinx communities, with long-term consequences for food security in these neighborhoods. The cost of other things that families need--such as housing, energy, medical care and daycare, have gone up steadily and families sometimes face uncomfortable choices between using scarce income to buy food or other essentials.

Even before the pandemic, food insecurity—which means lack of reliable access to food needed for an active, healthy life—was around 10.5% of households nationwide, and nearly 15% of children lived in food-insecure households. The percentages were higher for Black and Latinx than white households and

children. Even though numerous organizations and well-intentioned people have been trying to reduce food insecurity for decades, it has hovered around 11-12% since the mid-1990s when we first started to document food insecurity in a systematic way. We don't have a federal strategy for how we'll eliminate food insecurity, so it's easy to think that maybe the U.S. isn't really trying to solve this problem!

Many communities experimented with new practices before the pandemic—food banks growing their own food so that clients could get fresh fruits and vegetables, setting quality standards on donations so they were not offering low-nutrient products to clients or combining health and job services with food. During COVID, we have seen the emergence of better solutions in the U.S. In addition, we can learn from other countries that are not as wealthy as the U.S. but have done a better job of making sure that children and other vulnerable people have reliable access to healthy food.

One important key to doing a better job is treating healthy food as a basic human right. The United States is the only industrialized nation that does not recognize the right to food, which was originally included in the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which Eleanor Roosevelt helped to draft. This right was further clarified in 1966 in the U.S. Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which the U.S. failed to sign and ratify. The rationale was that the market will do a better job of providing food for all than government, but this is a clear case of market failure since more than one in ten households were food-insecure even before the pandemic.

Misconceptions about the right to food abound in the U.S. Put simply, it is the right to feed oneself with dignity, from food that meets one's own cultural preferences and is produced in sustainable ways. It is not a guarantee of government handouts or a promise that you will never be hungry. Under rights-based systems, the government has the responsibility to respect and protect the right to food, such as by guaranteeing wages sufficient to allow people to buy healthy food, ensuring that decent jobs are available, and protecting children from harmful advertising about junk food. Government's responsibility to fulfill the right to food—that is, to supply food—only applies in emergency situations.

In the U.S., we have two parallel systems for providing food to people who are food-insecure. The federal food assistance program is the largest by far, with programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Women, Infants & Children (WIC), and the School Breakfast and School Lunch Programs. But a large private charitable system sprang up in the '60s, with the first food bank started right here in Phoenix in 1967 by John van Hengel, who was concerned that the food pantry where he worked didn't have adequate storage space. Many more food banks started in the 1980s with dramatic cutbacks in entitlement programs such as SNAP, which meant that hunger became more obvious.

The charitable feeding system consists of food banks that store food and pantries where people pick up food. Feeding America is a network of food banks that works closely with businesses that donate surplus food, and is the largest domestic anti-hunger organization. Although the charitable system was originally set up to provide "emergency" assistance, it has become chronic, with people relying on it to get through the month after federal payments run out.

Rights-based approaches are very different from charitable approaches. They require the government to address root causes of hunger and empower people who are food insecure to create their own solutions, instead of simply providing food. They also require that food-insecure people and those whose rights have been violated be included in designing or evaluating any kind of solution.

[When Brazil adopted the right to food in its constitution under President Lula da Silva, several programs were bundled together that together almost eliminated childhood hunger and pulled 20 million people out of poverty. Between 2003 and 2009, childhood malnutrition dropped by 61%. The programs are called *Fome Zero* or *Zero Hunger* and are aimed at strengthening family farming, improving access to food, income-generating activities, and social participation. All schoolchildren receive free school meals and 30% of the food has to be procured from local farms. The women in poor families get cash payments from the government (2% of GDP goes to pay for this); the government created jobs; and the CONSEA system was set up to monitor food policies. This worked a lot like food policy councils in the U.S., but were nested at every level from cities to the national scale. They gave people opportunities to weigh in on what they want and how programs need to be improved. In 2014, Brazil was commended internationally for its great efforts in combating hunger and poverty. Food insecurity decreased by 84% in 24 years. But Fome Zero hasn't fared very well under President Bolsonaro—he eliminated the CONSEA (National Council for Food Security) system and made other cuts in public assistance. Hunger increased 43.7% in the past 5 years. This is an important example of how achievements can be reversed when people put in power aren't accountable to the public good and democratic institutions, like the CONSEA, are dismantled.]

The U.S. has never had a comparable all-out effort such as Brazil had to combat food insecurity, so we are left with piecemeal approaches of 15 different federal food assistance programs and a charitable system that tries to fill in the gaps. Many people in the U.S. are embarrassed about accepting charity but they will adamantly insist on their rights. We can contrast attitudes toward charitable food assistance with attitudes toward public education, which is considered to be a right in the U.S. Most people expect the government to make K-12 education available, and they are justifiably outraged when the schools their children attend are inadequate. Healthy food might be considered as a right, in the same way: something that must be available to everyone regardless of socioeconomic status.

Many food banks have changed their ways of operation to accommodate aspects of rights-based approaches, such as by ensuring dignity and choices for clients and making sure that using their services is less onerous. This is a great step, but I would argue that the charitable food network should not exist at all. Knowing that the charitable food network is there lulls people into believing that food insecurity is being dealt with, yet Feeding America is not in the business of eliminating hunger. It seeks donations to make sure that it can continue to provide a Band-Aid approach, instead of figuring out why people need Band-Aids in the first place and how their problems can be prevented.

We have seen some interesting, as well as troubling, developments in hunger relief **during the pandemic**. Here are a few examples from the U.S.:

- Demand for emergency food assistance from food pantries surged by around 50%, with one in four households seeking out food donations.
- The Trump Administration started offering Food Boxes, distributed through food pantries, to use surplus milk and other products that farmers were not able to sell because of lock-downs. A recent report by the Congressional Special Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis has documented what a failure this program was—very little oversight, contracts awarded to incompetent companies, use of the program for political purposes.
- The U.S. government increased SNAP allowances for all families to the maximum, and also provided stimulus checks, extended unemployment insurance and made advance payments to Child Tax Credits possible. Recently President Biden increased SNAP benefits by 25%, the largest increase ever.

- More people started growing their own food or joining Community-Supported Agriculture farms, where the risk of a bad harvest is spread across all of the customers instead of being borne only by the farmer. Farmers who do CSAs instead of selling just wholesale or retail tend to do much better, and they usually appreciate the regular contact with customers. Interest in local food has surged during the pandemic, partly because people tended to trust local providers.
- A program called Land Share started up in Maine, where people with land to spare connect with people who want to grow their own food or grow food for others. Many organizations have encouraged gardeners to grow more food and donate it to pantries.
- A woman in my town started a program called The Giving Fridge. In it, donated food and prepared meals from local restaurants were distributed to people who needed food. Non-perishable items were simply left on a table outside the storefront where people could pick them up, and prepared meals from restaurants were put in the refrigerator. Local donations or purchases of honey and potted plants from the Giving Fridge supported the program. Community fridges have popped up all over the country, where people who have too much food can share with neighbors who don't have enough. Volunteers stocked these fridges with food close to its sell-buy date, collected from supermarkets.
- In Vermont, the Everyone Eats restaurant program started up, with restaurants receiving \$10/meal from the state to prepare hot meals from local ingredients for people in need. Restaurants would have gone out of business without this program, or laid off many of their workers, and farmers, whose markets had also been disrupted, benefited as well.
- All K-12 children in Vermont started receiving free School Meals in 2020, with costs reimbursed by the Department of Agriculture. This took away the stigma of applying for free- and reduced-cost meals or not having enough money to pay for lunch. This program has been extended through this school year.

What other countries have done during the pandemic is even more impressive, because in many instances people had much less in the way of resources to share.

- In Palestine, the Union of Agricultural Work Committees assisted nearly 10,000 families with hygiene kits, vegetable seedlings, and food parcels.
- In Newfoundland, Canada, the Fish, Food, and Allied Workers Union facilitated a blockade to divert out-of-province crab from entering the local processing plant, until safe working conditions were guaranteed and fair prices were negotiated.
- In India, Thailand and the Philippines, workers' organizations and community-supported organizations are collecting donations through direct public appeals and setting up community kitchens and deliveries of food and necessities.
- In many rural areas, people have revived barter systems to meet their needs. For example, rice-for-fish exchange schemes between farmers and fisher folk in Thailand; rice and millets for vegetables, corn for cattle feed in exchange for milk, rice husk for fish feed in exchange for fish in India; and bartering consumer goods for food in the Philippines through online platforms set up by individuals.
- In Brazil, the Landless Rural Workers Movement has been providing food and medical care in collaboration with student youth groups. They create "*Cestas Verdes*" (or "Green baskets") full of healthy food from the Landless Rural Workers Movement and from an organic food cooperative. The baskets are delivered by municipal social services institutions, which have access to the information of people in social vulnerability. With the baskets, the youth also deliver a flyer with information about prevention habits during the pandemic, including what to do if women are experiencing domestic violence, as well as recipes for the food they are receiving. So young people are helping to stimulate healthy food habits,

talking about daily problems, helping to share small farmer's production and enabling people in situations of social vulnerability to eat nutritious food.

These pandemic-relief programs fall into three categories:

- First, charitable donations distributed through food pantries, and various programs to increase the amount of food that pantries can distribute. Often these are given without any restrictions to whomever showed up. Examples of charitable relief were the Trump-era Food Boxes.
- Second, expanded federal or state food assistance, based on the recognition that food needs can't be met solely through charity and the government is ultimately responsible for ensuring access to healthy food. Examples of this approach are increased SNAP and the Everyone Eats restaurant workers and low-income support program in Vermont.
- And third, mutual aid or solidarity—neighbors helping neighbors (and sometimes extending that help to communities they didn't know personally). Sometimes the aid is in the form of food or other goods, and sometimes to help workers achieve their rights, such as in the example of unionists in Canada who set up a blockade until adequate health protections and wages were available for fish-processing workers. We have all seen aid given in short-term crises such as famines, but many of these mutual aid programs have persisted for nearly two years now. Some, such as the Community Fridges, seem to be permanent.

While some of these programs repurposed food that would have been wasted otherwise, the solution to hunger is not feeding hungry people food waste. The large amounts of food wasted in this country and hunger are separate problems—the first is largely due to overproduction. People who lack food deserve the same kinds of choices and access to healthy food as the wealthy. The right to food applies to everyone, and does not set up a tiered system of rich people who get one kind of food and poor people who get another.

So what have we learned so far from the pandemic, about how to ensure healthy food for all?

First, the charitable food assistance network works hard and fills a gap, but simply cannot provide adequate food for people during crises that affect food security. The federal programs in total are at least ten times larger.

Second, federal food assistance increases and stimulus payments prevented a huge increase in food insecurity in 2020. Despite predictions that we would see a big jump in food insecurity due to the pandemic, the proportion of households that were food insecure in 2020 didn't change significantly from 2019.

However, Black and Latinx food insecurity increased—Latinx household food insecurity increased from 15.6% in 2019 to 17.2% in 2020 and non-Hispanic Black household food insecurity from 19.1% to 21.7%. We still have a big problem with inequity in this country.

Third, states had creative solutions to keeping workers employed while also providing healthy meals to low-income people, such as the Everyone Eats Program.

Fourth, food supply chain disruptions affected everyone and continue to ripple through the system, but often local food systems weathered the challenges better than national and international food chains. Demand for local food shot up because people trusted food from short supply chains more, and also wanted to support local producers.

Fifth, we have been forced to recognize just how important healthy food is. People who were malnourished, including those with diet-related diseases, have been far more likely to have adverse outcomes from COVID or require hospitalization.

This isn't surprising really because we've known for a long time that good nutrition helps to boost immunity and the ability to heal from diseases.

And sixth, communities cared for their own vulnerable people in impressive ways. For example, mutual aid societies sprang up, bridge programs were created to provide food for children and their families between the time that summer feeding programs stopped, and school-year programs started. **While the government is ultimately responsible for respecting, protecting and fulfilling human rights, "communities of care" are often the first step in providing food to people in need.**

The question I want to leave you with is, How can we institutionalize lessons from the pandemic so that people continue to benefit from them?

1. First, we need to understand and address the root causes of hunger, as rights-based approaches emphasize. We should not keep dealing only with symptoms, but deal with the causes of hunger. These are poverty, deepening inequality, racism, structural barriers to getting healthy food such as inadequate public transportation and unregulated capitalism without fair taxation that would provide the money to public coffers to pay for taking care of the most vulnerable people.
2. Second, we need to move toward rights-based food systems and the recognition of healthy food as a human right, not a privilege. If people are empowered and have the tools and resources they need, most want to work to provide for their families. But people get discouraged when there aren't enough jobs, or no jobs that pay decent wages. We all suffer when only the wealthiest among us can choose healthy food, and children suffer the most because of the lifetime impacts of poor nutrition: poor school performance, social and emotional problems, poor growth.
3. Third, we need to increase social protection for vulnerable people (elderly, those with disabilities, those with mental health conditions, those who are unable to work, children). In particular, children deserve nutritious universal free school meals. We need to fight back against efforts to water down nutritional standards—sometimes this is the only full meal that a child receives all day, and good nutrition sets a lifetime pattern for health. Social safety nets are part of governments' obligations under the right to food, but they must be non-discriminatory and implemented in ways that protect clients' dignity.

Craig Gundersen, a scholar at the University of Illinois who works on food security, estimates that the U.S. could adopt a Universal Basic Income approach to food security that would cost our country \$564 billion but virtually eliminate food insecurity. He suggests giving SNAP benefits to all households up to 400% of the poverty line (about \$100,000 for a family of four). To put this in perspective, the size of this universal basic income program would be substantially less than the over \$5 trillion that the U.S. spent on stimulus packages during COVID. We might also compare it to the \$770 billion recently approved for the National Defense Authorization Act. It's a matter of priorities: food security—especially for our children—should be part of how we think about national security, because our nation depends on a productive workforce, nourished by a sustainable food supply.

4. And fourth, we should recognize, honor and support community efforts to provide care to vulnerable people. Ideally, these programs have paid staff and aren't just run by volunteers. They create community and ties of solidarity that are just as important as the food they provide.

In conclusion, by moving toward rights, not charity, we can protect our most vulnerable citizens and ensure a better future for all. While charity may begin from genuine care, it is temporary and does not empower people to create their own solutions underpinned by the social contract between people and our government.

Please see Angie Rodgers' response and commentary under the Linda Haskell Memorial Master Class archives.