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Review Article

Breadlines, victory gardens, or human rights?: Examining food insecurity discourses in Canada

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Abstract

Long before the exacerbating effects of COVID-19, household food insecurity (HFI) has been a persistent yet hidden problem in wealthy nations such as Canada, where it has been perpetuated in part through dominant discourses and practices. In this critique of HFI-related frameworks, we suggest that discourses organized around the production and (re)distribution of food, rather than income inequality, have misdirected household food insecurity reduction activities away from the central issue of poverty, even inadvertently enabling the ongoing neoliberal "rollback" of safety net functions. Unlike most scholarship that focuses on the politics of food systems, or health research that insufficiently politicizes poverty, this analysis emphasizes the role of politics in income discourses. In spite of their contradictions, food-provisioning and income-based discourses are potentially complementary in their shared recognition of the right to food. Operating from the perspective of political economic theory, we conceive of the right to food as a claim not only to a resource but also to membership within political communities that envision alternatives to neoliberalism as manifested in our labour, welfare, and food systems. In this sense, the right to food offers a unifying framework that links civil society with senior governments, collective action with legal instruments, and food and income concerns. HFI reduction activities organized around the right to food may thus aim to rectify cross-cutting imbalances in political and economic power.

Keywords: Human rights; household food insecurity; social policy; welfare state

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Introduction

During exceptional times, we tend to rely on familiar narratives to reckon with uncertainty and injustice: to lend predictability to precarity; collectivity to isolation; heroism to the mundane; and generosity to want. In the COVID-19 pandemic, consider the wartime rhetoric of the "fight against COVID-19" and its attendant social symptoms, a popular one being the "fight against hunger" commonly invoked in charitable campaigns. While there is certainly merit in appealing to a sense of shared civic duty, these narratives fall short of indicting the institutions that have failed to uphold obligations to social wellbeing, nor do they address inequitable social outcomes such as food scarcity in wealthy nations.

War metaphors are reductive in their polarity—intentionally so. In the public eye, on banners at checkouts, in posts on social media, and in headlines in the news, supermarkets have been triumphantly donating to those in need, supposedly in service of "ending hunger." Yet those same grocery chains, including Loblaws and Walmart, have quietly rolled back wage bonuses to their essential workers (CBC News, 2020a), many of whom cannot afford sufficient food among other basic necessities, and had been unable to do so long before COVID-19. This is a prominent strategy through which language has been used to conceal food scarcity and construct false solutions to it not only at present, but over several decades of welfare retrenchment.

This article examines dominant narratives surrounding the condition of household food insecurity (HFI), defined in a North American context as "the inadequate or insecure access to sufficient food because of financial constraints" (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018, p. 231). We use "household food insecurity" interchangeably with "food insecurity" because financial circumstances represent the main barrier to food access for most Canadians—even though various frameworks responding to food scarcity, as we detail below, fail to reflect the centrality of income. In this sense, "food insecurity" does not necessarily represent a direct antonym to the umbrella term of "food security." "Food security" is generally defined as the condition in which "all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 1996). However, the literature in the food security field tends to emphasize the supply and distribution of food as opposed to economic access to food, which is the primary determinant of household food insecurity. This has been a point of tension and confusion that has arguably interfered with effective HFI reduction, as we will discuss later in this article.

Competing discourses

While the urgency of reducing HFI is widely accepted, the means of doing so are more contested. Due to the presence of vested interests and absence of discursive clarity, there are competing discursive representations of HFI as a "problem," each of which propose different solutions (Midgley, 2012). These differences are important because language is not a neutral medium of representation, but a mechanism for constructing social realities (Foucault, 1972). The resultant realities are often built along underlying paradigms that follow the boundaries of professional training, intellectual conditioning, personal values, and ideological dispositions (Kuhn, 1970), the last of these being emphasized in the present study. Language therefore plays a crucial role in legitimizing or discrediting knowledge, and consolidating or undermining power, for HFI-reduction activities (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019).

In this article, we examine how the problem of HFI is differentially framed and responded to in various discourses putatively responding to the issue, and critique their utility, or lack thereof, in reducing HFI. Undertaken from a structural perspective, this analysis highlights the ways in which discourse reveals and conceals the systems that produce HFI. We draw attention to overlooked frameworks that emphasize the root cause of inadequate income, using these perspectives to critically question discourses that prioritize food system issues over those of poverty. In particular, we demonstrate the contribution of a Marxist political economy approach, which situates HFI within the wider political project of neoliberalism (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). We then apply this political economy lens to another framework, the Right to Food, as a way of bridging existing disjuncture between income and food supply concerns (Rosol et al., this issue), as well as between governing institutions and civil society. Through this interpretation of the right to food, we seek to consolidate political action towards food that is sustainable, adequate, and affordable—qualities that ought to complement, rather than compromise, one another.

Household food insecurity discourses

In our analysis, we selected HFI discourses based on prevailing frameworks identified by Mendly-Zambo and Raphael (2019), loosely categorized as follows: income-based frameworks (including social determinants of health and political economy) and food-provisioning-based frameworks (including nutritionism, charitable food distribution, and the local food movement). Additional discourses that pervade or accompany both streams of frameworks include the "deserving/undeserving poor" and the right to food (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018). We have limited our discussion to the distribution, rather than production, of food, although the latter represents an equally critical branch of food justice. Responding to the current imperative for collaboration within, between, and beyond disparate food movements

(Rosol et al., this issue), we therefore recommend the right to food approach as a tool for linking HFI reduction to broader food systems change.

Income-based frameworks

Social determinants of health

By contrast to responses organized around the provision of food, income-based approaches directly address and foreground HFI's root cause of poverty. Chief among income-based HFI discourses is the Social Determinants of Health (SDH) framework, which recognizes that health outcomes are predominantly influenced by socioeconomic circumstances rather than lifestyle choices or community interventions (Raphael, 2016). It explicitly situates inequitable health outcomes within differential social locations, determinants of which include income, education, employment/unemployment, early childhood development, housing, social exclusion, social safety networks, health services, gender, race, disability, and food insecurity (Raphael, 2016). Since many of these markers are interrelated, food insecurity is itself determined by a number of the aforementioned factors, a primary predictor being income. As a result, the SDH literature frequently attributes food insecurity to public policies that have led to a lack of purchasing power for food (Raphael, 2016; McIntyre, 2003; McIntyre, et al., 2016a). To illustrate the inadequacy of social welfare in Canada, the average social assistance payments to a single employable adult in 2018 were a mere 47 percent of the Market Basket Measure (MBM), which defines "thresholds of poverty based upon the cost of a basket of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, and other items for individuals and families representing a modest, basic standard of living" (Heisz, 2019). In 2014, 60.9 percent of Canadian households whose predominant source of income was social assistance were food insecure, but HFI is a pervasive issue even for households reliant on employment income, which comprise 62.2 percent of the HFI population (Tarasuk et al., 2016). These statistics point to major inadequacies in both social welfare and employment wages.

Due to the strong association between household income and HFI, proposed solutions to HFI in SDH discourse focus on policy-based poverty reduction strategies. These include increases to social assistance rates, housing affordability, and the minimum wage, as well as reductions to childcare costs and the age of pension eligibility (McIntyre & Rondeau, 2009; Emery et al., 2013). As an alternative to piecemeal welfare policies and programs, SDH proponents have also advocated for a universal basic income that can reach all who are vulnerable to food insecurity on the basis of insufficient income (Tarasuk, 2017; McIntyre & Anderson, 2016; Power & McBay, this issue). The low rate of food insecurity among Canadian seniors is commonly cited as evidence for the protective effect of a guaranteed, stable, and increased income (Emery et al., 2013). According to basic income advocates, the logical course of policy action is to extend this benefit to all Canadians, regardless of age, below an income threshold (Tarasuk, 2017). By preventing diet-related diseases, costs to provincial governments

would partially be offset by reductions to healthcare expenditures (Tarasuk, 2017). However, critics argue that a universal basic income may be politically co-opted to entrench market rationalities and retrench existing social programs, particularly for vulnerable populations with diverse needs. In practice, policy decisions are at least as ideological as they are logical. Rather than appealing strictly to rationalism, as SDH discourse does, Mendly-Zambo and Raphael (2018) instead argue that policy advocacy should reflect the inherently political nature of policymaking. This is an underacknowledged consideration that is emphasized in the related framework of political economy.

Marxist political economy approach

Marxist political economy approaches situate social inequalities within structures of power embedded in networks of capitalist production (Mosco, 2009). While classical political economy concerned mathematical laws that governed the economy of the nation-state, Karl Marx's innovation was to link economic relationships with the exploitation of labour (Marx, 1859). Marxist political economy approaches have since expanded beyond issues of labour to encompass broader social relations that are organized around power, or the ability to control other people, processes, and things (Mosco, 2014). Researchers who emphasize the processual aspect of political economy tend to portray systems of economic injustice, including neoliberalism, as dynamic conditions rather than end states (Wilson, 2004). Processes of neoliberalization typically fall under two categories conceived by Peck and Tickell (2002): "rollbacks" to post-war welfare state protections, and "rollout" of institutions designed to perpetuate market logics by managing, most often by regulating (but never resolving) their social consequences.

In the present study, HFI represents a political economic product of "rollbacks" to public labour protections and social supports, as well as the "rollout" of charitable systems that have enabled corporate interests to overtake public programs. In this sense, we situate the structural contributions of SDH within the political project of neoliberalism to analyze power relations within and among corporate, public, and charitable sectors. SDH and political economy thus provide complementary analyses for examining HFI in countries with sufficient yet inequitably distributed socioeconomic resources, and deficient levels of political support, for resolving the issue.

For this study, the political economic product in question is not food as a material good, but HFI as a social condition. In industrialized nations, processes that produce food, the domain of the former, operate very differently from those which put food on the table, concerning the latter. Although Amartya Sen's (1985, 2001) work on the political economy of hunger focuses on the global South, his concept of one's "capability" to achieve wellbeing (e.g., through the ability to buy food), which is often enabled or encumbered by their sociopolitical environment, is consistent with our political economy approach. The majority of political economic analysis and

related frameworks concern food as a resource, which only tangentially relates to HFI in wealthy countries. Such analyses implicate the industrial food system, which is structured such that fruits and vegetables command higher prices than market-saturating processed foods, cereals, and junk foods (Dixon et al., 2007; Friel & Lichacz, 2010; Stuckler & Nestle, 2012; Stuckler et al., 2012). The relative accessibility of energy-rich but nutritionally inadequate food products has resulted in the proliferation of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related diseases, which disproportionately affect low-income populations (Dixon et al., 2007; Friedmann, 2012). Although healthy foods are expensive compared to unhealthy foods, the overall price of food, including fruits and vegetables, has decreased significantly since the advent of industrial agriculture—albeit at the expense of producer livelihoods and environmental resources (Hazell, 2010).

In that sense, the industrial food system, notwithstanding its massive social and environmental consequences, has improved nutritional outcomes for many consumers, albeit unequally (Gómez et al., 2013). The prevalence of HFI today in spite of food affordability suggests that the limiting factor to adequate and healthy food is consumer income, which is the focus of the political economy of HFI, rather than cost, a subject of the political economy of food (Provincial Health Services Authority, 2016). In affluent and heavily urbanized countries such as Canada, household income and food production are largely separate issues. However, political economic literature about food in a global context (Friedmann, 2012; McMichael, 2009; Bernstein, 2016) tends to blur that distinction, partly because food production remains a major source of livelihoods in many regions of the global South, and poverty and malnutrition among food producers a major challenge. In the following section, we attribute the emergence of HFI in Canada, following a period of relative absence, to the growth of income inequality and decline of the welfare state in the 1980s (Power, 1999).

Given the inextricable link between income and food, we must first look to macro-scale processes that have produced the concomitant rise of income inequality, and consequently, food insecurity. Contrary to the capitalist myth of market self-regulation, widespread income inequality today is not a naturally occurring economic phenomenon, but the result of calculated and sustained political intervention. In other words, neoliberalism is just as much about regulation, that is to "roll out" state control in favour of the market, as it is about deregulation, which is to "roll back" welfare state functions and entitlements (Peck & Tickell, 2002, 2007; Rosol, 2010, 2012). Hence, it is crucial to note that inequality has not always been the status quo. Between World War II and the mid-1970s, income inequality in Canada declined in large part due to a robust Canadian social security system, which grew out of a recognition that structural forces responsible for poverty require macroeconomic state intervention (Procyk, 2014; Power, 1999). It is no coincidence that food banks were virtually nonexistent in Canadian society during this time; their subsequent proliferation indicates mounting corporate excesses and social deficiencies that have been artificially managed—in "rollout" neoliberal fashion—through charity since the 1980s (Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005). This rise of inequality, and therefore food insecurity, occurred when industrialized nations abandoned Keynesian economic principles, characterized by financial regulation and public spending, in favour of neoliberal "rollbacks" to

policies and programs that support basic financial, health, and social needs (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014).

At the federal level, welfare retrenchment was predominantly enacted through cuts to one of Canada's most important income security programs, Employment Insurance, as well as the abolition of the Canada Assistance Plan, which formerly obliged the federal government to pay for 50 percent of provincial costs for social programs (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014; Riches, 1997). The successor to the Canada Assistance Plan, the Canada Health, and Social Transfer, resulted in $7 billion in cutbacks to provincial funding for health, education, and most importantly, welfare (Riches, 1997). By downloading social program expenditures and responsibilities to provinces and territories, which do not have comparable capacity for delivering social protections, the federal government further eliminated its obligation to uphold national welfare standards (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). Beyond government authorities, we see food banks and community food programs as an extension of such subsidiarity, with governments further offloading social responsibilities onto communities and individuals. The devolution of social programs and services has been a focus of wide critique of neoliberalism in various contexts including community development and health (Ayo, 2010; Cheshire & Lawrence, 2005 MacCleod & Emejulu, 2014; McClintock, 2014).

Food-provisioning-based frameworks

Food charity

The predominant food-based response to HFI is charitable food assistance, which includes food banks, soup kitchens, and other feeding programs that redistribute excess food to vulnerable individuals. Food charity may play a role in provisional relief, but its institutional entrenchment has problematically contributed to the chronic nature of food insecurity in Canada. Contrary to the popular conception of food banks as emergency sources of aid, a growing body of evidence suggests that food bank utilization is in fact a long-term subsistence strategy for a large proportion of clients (Daponte et al., 1998; Kicinski, 2012; Holmes et al., 2018). The expansion of food banks across the country evinces not only widespread food insecurity, rates of which exceed the number of food bank users by a factor of 4.6 times (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015), but the institutionalization of the large-scale, warehouse food bank model we are familiar with today (Riches, 2018; Tarasuk et al., 2014; Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). Food Banks Canada currently runs over 644 food banks to serve more than 1 million individuals every month (Food Banks Canada, 2021). That food charity and food insecurity have become such normalized, acceptable conditions of wealthy countries is alarming: it points to a failing social safety net that food banks were not designed to compensate for and should never have to fulfill.

Critics following SDH and political economy approaches argue that food banks not only ignore, but also reinforce, the root causes of hunger (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2014; Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018). They create the illusion that we are solving HFI while leaving intact structural problems—in this case, inadequate social policies, and programs. The public approval of food banks already requires some degree of doublethink: to support their existence uncritically, as popular media tends to do, is to be complacent to the unjust conditions that make them necessary. After all, benchmarks for food bank efficacy (e.g., meals served, amount of food donated) can be inversely interpreted as metrics of a broken social safety net. If the goal is to eliminate HFI, then the aim should be to make the demand for food banks obsolete (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018).

Food banks, along with their donors, often frame food redistribution as a "win-win" for people and the environment due to its twin outcomes of feeding people and diverting food waste (Lougheed & Spring, 2020). Similar to local food movement discourse (see below), food charity discourse problematically conflates environmental and social systems by constructing false synergies between them. In addition to their limited efficacy for reducing HFI, food banks may perversely encourage wasteful food production to sustain operations (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018). Riches (2018) highlights the absurdity of using the symptom of a wasteful food system to treat a malfunctioning social safety net, which only reinforces the deficiencies of both. The redistributive nature of food charity also means that the food is typically subpar in quality and attached to social stigma—essentially "leftover food for left behind people" (Riches, 2018, p. 2; Riches, 2011; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005). In recent years, however, many food banks have attempted to increase the nutritional content of foods, along with the dignity with which they are accessed (Campbell et al., 2013). While these measures certainly improve food bank practices, they are confined to nutritional and/or community development considerations wherein anti-poverty advocacy is largely absent.

Nutritionism and behavioural approaches

Some discourses based on nutritionism, characterized by a focus on biophysical health outcomes in individuals, frame food insecurity as a matter of consumer choices, dispositions, and competencies (Labonte, 1993). Accordingly, behavioural approaches focus on promoting "food literacy" and "healthy lifestyle choices" through health education, skill development, and counselling (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). Such strategies may enhance knowledge about food, but this is not a determinant of HFI. In a study of national data from the Canadian Community Health Survey (Huisken et al., 2016), adults in food insecure households did not report lower food preparation skills or cooking ability than those in food secure households, and neither variable predicted HFI when demographic characteristics were accounted for. This study makes clear that the capital in short supply is not food knowledge, but socioeconomic resources, notably money, time, and facilities for preparing food (Power, 2005; Raine, 2005).

In spite of these barriers, numerous studies have shown that low-income households already demonstrate immense resourcefulness in preparing food on a budget (Tarasuk, 2001; Douglas et al., 2015; Desjardins, 2013; Dachner et al., 2010; Engler-Stringer, 2011). Such findings call into question the suitability of nutrition initiatives designed for HFI reduction, many of which are predicated upon the condescending notion that food insecure individuals lack the motivation or skill to cook healthy foods. This stereotype is perpetuated by healthy eating proponents who fetishize the preparation of meals from scratch—an ideal that holds little relevance to HFI (McLaughlin et al., 2003; Fisher, 2017). Mclaughlin et al. (2003), for instance, did not find an association between the frequency of meals prepared from scratch and the severity of HFI in a sample of women seeking charitable assistance. The effect of consumer choice on HFI is ultimately negligible in light of structural limitations to those choices.

By placing responsibility for dietary outcomes on the individual, albeit with periodic acknowledgements of financial constraints, the behavioural approach follows the neoliberal strategy of blaming the victim for their circumstances of poverty. By doing so it decontextualizes and depoliticizes food insecurity (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). Based upon the nutritional framework to HFI, food insecurity tends to become a matter of nutritional imbalance rather than social inequality—a physiological, rather than political, pathology. Even if nutrition programs successfully produced behavioural changes, an outcome for which there is little evidence beyond modest and short-term improvements (Loopstra, 2018), they do not address various other social determinants of health in which HFI is embedded, the primary one being income. By contrast, nutritional discourses informed by SDH perspectives, such as those produced by Dietitians of Canada, frequently advocate for poverty reduction measures. However, governments, charitable organizations, and communities are inclined to ignore these recommendations in favour of politically "neutral" nutrition initiatives (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019).

Local food movement

Sometimes overlapping with nutritional programs are community-based initiatives belonging to the local food movement, including community kitchens, gardens, meals, and grocery distribution services. They typically span multiple objectives such as sustainability, community development, wellbeing, and food distribution—all of which may intersect, and inadvertently interfere, with HFI reduction. Although local food initiatives have traditionally catered to privileged social groups, many programs now aim to provide local, healthy foods to food insecure individuals (Heynen et al., 2012; Gottlieb & Fisher, 1996; Allen, 1999). That they are commonly presented as ethical antitheses to food banks is a claim that we support but also question.

However, we mainly direct this critique to initiatives that do not critically engage with poverty, recognizing that many networks of mutual aid already do—Habib (this issue) being a case in point. Much of this critical work is informed by frameworks such as community food

security and food sovereignty. Although their means often overlap with those of the local food movement, and can be co-opted in that regard, they are distinguished by their end goal of social justice, which includes economic access to food. Further, we cannot understate the significance of communities that facilitate dignified access to food if not at the population scale, then on a personal basis. As we will later argue, these are the very relationships through which we centre the "human" in rights.

In our view, the utility of community food initiatives lies in improving social inclusion, an essential element of collective action to be discussed later in this article. Nevertheless, a wide body of research suggests that community food programs are structurally limited in their capacity to alleviate material food deprivation (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; Tarasuk & Reynolds, 1999; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013; Raine et al., 2003; Tarasuk, 2001; Seed et al., 2014; Wong & Hallsworth, 2016). In a study of low-income families in Toronto, for instance, Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk (2009) found that community food programs failed to reach those who were most vulnerable and were not associated with increased household food security even among participants. There are several explanations for their inability to reduce HFI. First, program capacities are often constrained by insecure and/or insufficient resources such as funding, volunteers, and jurisdiction, particularly in underserved neighbourhoods (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013; Tarasuk, 2001). Second, program participation is limited by personal circumstances such as physical ability, time, money, and energy, which are often in short supply for target populations (Loopstra, 2018; Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2013; Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009). Therefore, community food programs paradoxically require a baseline level of livelihood stability that food-based activities can enrich, but never establish absent structural welfare supports. By retaining a focus on food, community initiatives—by definition—fail to address the underlying cause of HFI: poverty (Power, 1999; Tarasuk, 2001; Hamelin et al., 2011).

Even if they produce or provide adequate food at low or no cost, community food programs—existing precariously themselves—can never eliminate the uncertainty with which participants access food in the absence of real purchasing power. The conflation of food supply and inadequate income also highlights the importance of scale differentiation: while local food production may improve food security for the region or community, it does not necessarily percolate down to households which experience food insecurity for reasons largely external to the food system. Despite impacting dietary outcomes on an individual and irregular basis, community initiatives largely fail to match the pervasive and persistent scale of HFI. Counterintuitively, *household* food insecurity is a *population* health problem that generally demands public policy interventions (Tarasuk, 2017). These centralized solutions are prioritized within income-based frameworks, which are discussed later in this article.

Furthermore, the local food movement's terms of empowerment—"autonomy," "self-sufficiency," and "agency" in food production—paradoxically overlap with neoliberal idioms of self-reliance, even as they portray communities that are ostensibly more equitable. The co-option of empowerment perpetuates a wider pattern of downloading social services to communities, and responsibility over household circumstances to individuals in neoliberal regimes (McClintock,

2014; Pudup, 2008). To illustrate, Rosol (2012, 2018) examines the contradictory ways in which urban gardening, originally conceived as a grassroots movement, both reinforces and resists neoliberalism. In her case study of community gardens in Berlin, the voluntary sector may have furthered the retrenchment of public services, and the exclusion of lower classes (Rosol, 2012) —much like food banks have done, and even more covertly.

In spite of such tensions, it is worth noting that reducing food insecurity through food production can be highly effective in other contexts. Food insecurity in many Indigenous communities, unlike in the general Canadian population, is tightly entwined with the food system. Self-sufficiency in food acquisition is especially important for northern Indigenous communities amid a lack of food affordability due to distance from markets; the uncertain effectiveness of the federal food subsidy program, *Nutrition North Canada;* diminishing access to traditional foods; and not least the imperative for decolonization (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018). Even in these environments, however, financial resources are essential for accessing food through market channels *and* traditional foodways, which returns to the central problem of inadequate income (Pirkle et al., 2014). In the global South, smallholder food production is a firmly established poverty reduction strategy, one that is heavily featured in development discourses (Patel, 2009). According to Lipton (2005), virtually every instance of mass poverty reduction in modern history, documented in Western industrialized countries and fast-growing Asian countries, began with increases to employment income through increased productivity on family farms. Nevertheless, this idea has limited applicability to urban areas in industrialized countries due to a limited land base, lack of natural resources, declining agrarian labour force, and industries that have shifted away from agriculture (Bernstein, 2014). In cities, community-level initiatives mainly offer *food-provisioning*-based responses to the *income*-driven problem of HFI, and therein lies their inadequacy as solutions (Collins et al., 2014). If communities lack control over the social safety net at large, we ought to consider how they can support those who fall through their cracks while illuminating, rather than obscuring, these chasms. In this special issue, Lloro & Gonzalez (this issue) and Habib (this issue) offer compelling ways of doing so through relational networks that not only provide material support to people in need, but more importantly, render visible the injustices they face.

Food environments

Recurring among food-provisioning-based discourses is the concept of *food environments*, which concerns the relationship between built and social environments and dietary outcomes within a community or region (Glanz et al., 2005). It operates from the idea that food choices and nutritional status are influenced by one's physical, economic, policy, and sociocultural surroundings. The term encompasses a broad range of factors including geographic proximity; food access and availability; food promotion and pricing; food labelling; nutritional composition of foods; and the retail environment (Lana & Guest, 2017). Among the discourses discussed

previously, the food environments approach frequently overlaps with the nutritionist framework, due to its emphasis on consumer behaviour, as well as the local food movement, because of its community scale. In food environments literature, the term "food deserts" is frequently used to describe regions with low access to affordable and nutritious food, typically occurring in low-income areas (Lewis, 2015).

This phenomenon—most studied first in the U.K. and then the U.S.—is less applicable to Canadian cities, where retail food outlets do not tend to cluster in wealthier neighbourhoods (Black, 2015). Instead, Canadian literature suggests that central urban areas, containing inner city neighbourhoods, may have even better food access than those that are more affluent or suburban (Apparicio et al., 2007; Black et al., 2011). While this minimizes the marginalizing effect of uneven development on HFI overall, low-income populations residing in more affluent neighbourhoods or suburbs may still face additional barriers to acquiring food in the form of longer distances to food outlets, inadequate public transit, and lack of access to a private vehicle (Black, 2015). Although geography may exert some influence on food insecurity outcomes, poverty remains the overriding determinant of HFI in most cases.

While research into Canadian food environments is still in its early stages of development, Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk (2010) found that neighbourhood characteristics did not affect household food security among low-income families residing in Toronto. For these families, high rates of food insecurity still occurred in regions with good geographic food access, and it was not mitigated by proximity to food retail or food programs. By contrast, food insecurity was directly associated with household demographic factors including income and income source. Although neighbourhoods with low perceived social capital were associated with the risk of food insecurity, this effect became negligible once household demographic factors, including income, housing, education, household type, and immigration status, were accounted for. These findings reinforce the link between HFI and household, rather than neighbourhood characteristics.

Food environments discourse, particularly with reference to food deserts, is often presented in the form of maps that elucidate spatial disparities in socioeconomic conditions, but ultimately pathologize place instead of systemic inequalities relating to urban development and the distribution of wealth. Shannon (2014) suggests that the omission of political economic factors in maps often has real-world implications for regulating hunger under the façade of political neutrality. As a spatial, rather than political, problem, food deserts become something that can be solved using superficial solutions, such as building a supermarket, without redress to conditions that produce scarcity within neighbourhoods (Shannon, 2014), and much more importantly, households.

In food charity and local food discourses, the neoliberal solution at work may not necessarily be the blatant symbol of a supermarket, but a more savoury one of food banks and "community food assets" including community gardens, community food markets, and community kitchens. Simply placing food resources, even ones that are low- or no-cost, within vulnerable neighbourhoods does not redress the problem of fundamentally deficient incomes.

Moreover, these resources often fail to reach those who need them the most for reasons unrelated to proximity, namely their lack of basic necessities such as income, time, housing, and childcare (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2009; Loopstra, 2018).

The Deserving and undeserving poor

The distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, referring to the idea that some economically marginalized groups deserve assistance more than others, pervades both income- and food-provisioning-based discourses. These categories originate from early-modern conceptions of idleness as a sin, with New England colonists providing aid only to those whose destitution resulted from unpreventable circumstances (Fisher, 2017), as well as the Victorian concept of less eligibility, which mandated that welfare should never exceed lowest wage labour in order to discipline the labour force and exert downward pressure on wages (Riches, 2018). Such attitudes converged in Canada, which owes its ideological heritage to both sides of the Atlantic, and have in recent decades found new life in punitive welfare policies across wealthy Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Riches, 2018). They also prevail in popular media, which differentiates between people in poverty through no fault of their own, and those who are supposedly to blame for their circumstances. Such assignment of blame belongs to the neoliberal rhetoric of individualizing societal liabilities, as previously illustrated in the nutritionist framework, and limiting social obligations to those who have succumbed to these liabilities. The "deserving" poor typically comprise children, families, people with disabilities, older adults, and veterans, whereas their so-called "undeserving" counterparts consist of people who use drugs, single mothers, and others with perceived personal flaws or poor lifestyle choices (Fisher, 2017).

Although anti-hunger advocates generally resist these categories, they inevitably invoke them to appeal to popular opinion and political pragmatism. Media produced by food banks, for instance, often feature images of children and families, while anti-poverty discourses sometimes fixate on child poverty (Fisher, 2017). Not only does this do a disservice to people unfairly portrayed as the "undeserving poor," hiding substantial portions of the population, it also casts a victimizing, emotionally manipulative gaze on the "deserving poor" (Fisher, 2017). Whether through shame or pity, both groups are essentially rendered voiceless.

Assortative assistance to select groups may advance HFI reduction in some respects while perpetuating inaction in others. Provincial and federal policies reflect biases towards "deserving" subsets of the population, as evidenced by elevated income assistance for families and older individuals. Although rates of food insecurity are higher among households with children under the age of 18, the majority of food insecure households (43 percent) consists of single adults without children (Tarasuk, 2017; Tarasuk et al., 2016). Poverty reduction initiatives that target households with children, which are typically cornerstones of provincial poverty reduction strategies, therefore miss a large proportion of the food insecure population. BC's first

poverty reduction strategy, for instance, aims to reduce child poverty by 50 percent by 2024, compared with its reduction target of 25 percent for the general population (Government of Canada, 2018). Although the poverty reduction strategy represents an important step towards HFI reduction, the child poverty target could have applied to the population at large. For Canadian seniors, Old Age Security and Guaranteed Income Supplement payments have been very effective at protection against HFI; due to its success, SDH proponents argue that this basic income model should extend to everyone below a defined income bracket, regardless of age (Tarasuk, 2017). Canada's National Poverty Strategy promises new supports for families, low-income seniors, individuals suffering from mental illness, low-income workers, and individuals seeking employfment (Government of Canada, 2018). This is an encouraging development given that all these groups are vulnerable to poverty and food insecurity. Noticeably absent, however, are unemployed individuals who are unable to work, carrying on a tradition of punishing under-participation in the labour market. While discourses and policies relating to food insecurity should recognize needs and vulnerabilities specific to demographic groups, they should not discriminate on the basis of whether target populations "deserve" assistance or not. Everyone, after all, deserves to eat; it is a basic human need, and as some argue, a human right.

The right to food

If conservative media portrays the "undeserving" poor as entitled, they are ironically correct in the sense that everyone should be entitled to adequate and nutritious food, not least in affluent countries such as Canada. The right to food was originally developed on the international stage, beginning with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, which states that "everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and wellbeing of himself and of his family, including food" (United Nations Human Rights, 2010, p. 7). This right was then reinforced at the 1996 World Food Summit, in which heads of state and governments recognized "the right of everyone to have access to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to adequate food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger" (FAO, 1996, para. 1). Thereafter, it was further defined by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) in 1999 as "the right [of] every man, woman, and child, alone or in community with others, [to] have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement" (United Nations Human Rights, 2010, p. 2). Although human rights discourse is generally directed towards the global South, former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, highlighted its renewed relevance to the global North during his visit to Canada in 2012 (De Schutter, 2012), drawing scrutiny to wealthy nations that have ignored the basic entitlements of their citizens, who are left unacceptably reliant on charitable food banking (Riches, 2018).

A common misconception about the right to food is that it is synonymous with the right to be fed, which entails the provisioning of food—something that food charity can accomplish to

some extent. Rather, it describes state obligations to allow people to feed themselves with dignity, whether through producing or purchasing food:

> Individuals are expected to meet their own needs, through their own efforts and using their own resources. To be able to do this, a person must live in conditions that allow him or her either to produce food or to buy it. To produce his or her own food, a person needs land, seeds, water, and other resources, and to buy it, one needs money and access to the market. The right to food requires States to provide an enabling environment in which people can use their full potential to produce or procure adequate food for themselves and their families. (United Nations Human Rights, 2010, pp. 3-4)

As we can see from the quotation above, it is more feasible for governments in wealthy nations to provide "money and access to the market" than it is for them to provide "land, seeds, water, and other resources," especially in urban environments. At the same time, the latter approach is central to supporting both foodways and livelihoods in many Indigenous, rural, and global South communities. Both pathways to procuring food are equally significant if we are to ensure access to food that is adequate, sustainable, and equitable; only then can societies be truly food secure. In this regard, the right to food reconciles different, sometimes competing, means toward the shared objective of food justice.

The right to food also carries, and potentially connects, varying conceptualizations of justice and its operational agents. Riches (2018) and Poppendieck (this issue) argue that the right to food is not a voluntary matter of charity, but a legal obligation enacted through public policies—drawing crucial attention to their contemporary neglect. Further, Riches (2018) sees the right to food as a legal contract for which the State is a "primary duty bearer" to be held accountable by international entities such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESR), the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (OPESCR), the FAO Right to Food team, the UN Human Rights Council, and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food. This is where our analysis diverges slightly from Riches's approach, which may rely too heavily on legal mechanisms that inadequately serve social justice in practice. By framing rights as claims that are "actionable through courts," Riches (2018) assumes the impartiality of legal systems that may function to preserve, rather than resist, systems of oppression such as neoliberalism. But if Riches criticizes the de-politicization of hunger, political solutions are unlikely to lie within institutions that maintain a façade of objectivity, yet under which market logics continue to undermine public entitlements. International coalitions, even those functioning to uphold human rights, contain sets of countries engaged in neoliberal trade networks (e.g., OECD countries) that have contributed to labour exploitation worldwide. While we generally agree that the State should be the main guarantor of rights, and international bodies an important source of public accountability, we envision grassroots movements to be more significant sources of political pressure. These

movements may operate very effectively through community food programs, even though many of these programs have neglected the politics of poverty thus far—likely due to the voluntary sector's inevitable reliance on precarious funding and public support. Gardens and goodwill are politically palatable; anti-poverty advocacy is not.

By comparison to Riches's (2018) emphasis on national and international law, Fisher (2017) assigns more significance to the role of civic mobilization. From his perspective, the right to food inadequately accounts for citizen pressure occurring outside of the government sphere, but nevertheless represents an important educational and organizing tool. He advocates for increasing public participation particularly among economically marginalized communities, who are often "missing from the table" regarding conversations about hunger and poverty. That way, Fisher (2017) argues, "they begin to see themselves as actors in their own lives rather than being acted upon" (p. 3). Perhaps the missing ingredient in HFI reduction, as in food systems reform, is agency—a value that underlies the right to food. And yet, food insecure people cannot fully enjoy freedom from political exclusion until they receive that from want, which returns to the centrality of welfare supports (e.g., income assistance, childcare, housing) that enable, more broadly, the right to a dignified life.

Civic participation in the right to food

Given the limits to jurisprudence, and the underutilized potential of civil society, we propose more participatory approaches to the right to food. Politically empowering civil society, without offloading welfare responsibilities onto it, is necessary for counterbalancing the primary authority, that human rights discourse has traditionally placed on senior governments. Conceived as public entitlements, social and economic rights require social institutions, namely nation-states, as guarantors—the very establishments that have been instruments of systemic oppression and/or exclusion throughout history. Just as World War II ushered in a new recognition for universal human rights, so did it generate stateless individuals whose rights were unrecognized and violated in the absence of social citizenship (DeGooyer, 2020). Their unprotected claims to human rights are what Arendt (1951) terms the "right to have rights," a concept that retains contemporary relevance not limited to statelessness (e.g. refugees, migrants), but also to social groups that have been otherwise excluded from social protections and civic participation (e.g. sex workers, homeless individuals), or most saliently, to people (e.g. Indigenous populations) whose claims to their land, livelihoods, and culture have been systematically violated by the state. In recognizing the "right to have rights," DeGooyer (2020) conceives of human rights not necessarily as ends in themselves, nor as resources that one possesses, but as an ongoing negotiation for social inclusion in political communities and ultimately, the policymaking realm. In this paper, we invoke this conceptualization to connect civic mobilization with state accountability for HFI reduction.

DeGooyer's (2020) interpretation of rights also responds to the risk of homogenizing diverse social circumstances in internationalist human rights discourse, which tends to essentialize the human condition. While rights are certainly universal, and hold widespread appeal in that regard, they must also attend to social differences, inequalities, and vulnerabilities including ones produced by systems of oppression that pervade institutions tasked with guaranteeing human rights. Neoliberalism, the focus of the present paper, represents only one branch of deep-rooted injustice: it intersects with other oppressive forces such as colonialism, racism, and patriarchy, to produce social disparities in income and food access. To illustrate, disproportionately high rates of food insecurity occur in Canadians households led by Black (28.9 percent), Indigenous (28.2 percent), or lone mother (33.1 percent) individuals, compared with the national average of 12.7 percent (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). This is one example in which social of determinants of health research illuminates structural injustices that drive inequitable HFI outcomes.

For those who have been alienated from society, then, grassroots movements potentially offer important spaces for affirming their inalienable yet unfulfilled rights. As congregational sites for food insecure individuals and people who care about them, community food programs are well-positioned to amplify diverse voices in collective action towards the right to food. Hence, the role of civil society is not necessarily to assume the state's obligation to reduce HFI, but to hold it accountable to that obligation. But even within civil society, communities may yet be exclusive, defined by who belongs and who does not. Members of civil society, then, are responsible for reckoning with our terms of social inclusion and the power that those terms afford, whether in low-barrier settings for all or safe spaces for specific vulnerable groups.

Ideally, communities should continue to produce or provide food for those in need; however, they must also leverage their position to draw awareness to, rather than conceal, the neoliberal state's perpetuation of this need in society. Habib (this issue) and Lloro & Gonzalez (this issue) have demonstrated powerful ways in which volunteering undertaken on a relational, rather than paternalistic, basis may mobilize critical solidarity towards systemic change. These examples show that policies may be institutional, but their social consequences are personally experienced, and understood by others through interpersonal interactions. In this sense, the right to food engenders not only state obligations, which are meaningless if unfulfilled, but our social responsibilities and relations to one another. As with representations of HFI, human rights are socially engineered and enforced; they are neither inherent nor inevitable, but insisted upon collectively. According to Poppendieck (this issue), "they do not exist in the abstract but are created by human beings and human institutions." We cannot lose sight of the humanity behind food justice, nor the inhumanity of food insecurity.

Conclusion

From competition to collaboration

This article has aimed to delineate and critique several competing HFI frameworks and, pointing out the lack of discursive consensus, to clarify their suitability for reducing HFI. The link between income and food insecurity is well-established, with proven social policy solutions, in HFI research. Yet the majority of discourses, especially those that have captured public attention, inaccurately or unsuitably redefine the problem within the contexts of consumer behaviour, food systems, or food redistribution, and misdirect responses accordingly. To shift these narratives, we have highlighted food insecurity's context of poverty, as examined in social determinants of health discourse, and even more structurally, its underlying politics of neoliberalism, conceptualized using a political economy approach (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). These factors are frequently overlooked because hunger reduction initiatives enjoy popular support only if they appear politically benign—as community gardens, cooking workshops, soup kitchens, and food banks generally do.

Tellingly, food charity organizations tend to employ the term "hunger" instead of HFI. This has the effect of evoking an embodied feeling that is universally understood, while disembodying that feeling from the socioeconomic circumstances of the household (National Research Council, 2006; Riches, 2018). Although the viscerality of hunger may inspire action in civil society, such action is often directed towards charitable initiatives that perpetuate, rather than reduce, HFI. Following in the American tradition of framing social change in militaristic terms, reflecting the origins of food bank institutions, charitable initiatives use the phrase "fighting hunger" in public communication to evoke notions of an unending battle against an ambiguous enemy (Fisher, 2017)—or even against the victims themselves. Hunger thus becomes something that everyone, regardless of politics, can rally behind in isolation from its social, economic, and political drivers. This phenomenon, the counterproductive public support for food charity, is what Riches (2018) calls "uncritical solidarity." This is not to implicate well-intentioned members of the public, but rather to indict the powerful institutions and interest groups maintaining the conditions that produce HFI. Hence the need for critical dialogue, as invited by this special issue, between labour, welfare, and food movements that may collaborate, rather than compete, to counter systemic food-related inequities (Rosol et al., this issue).

Fighting against hunger, or for rights?

The militaristic rhetoric of "fighting hunger" is especially fitting considering the "hunger-industrial complex" that food bank operations have spawned. Take, for instance, General Mills's $5 million "manufacture to donate" food bank initiative in the midst of the pandemic (Amick, 2020). The initiative was rolled out just as their profits increased by 19 percent to $688 million

(Painter, 2020)—capital accrued at the expense of its essential workers' safety and livelihoods. Much like the military-industrial complex, a mutually beneficial alliance has formed between anti-hunger groups and corporations (Fisher, 2017), with food bank warehouses serving as barracks armed with perishable donations. Due to the profitability of this arrangement, neither party is truly interested in ending what they are purporting to fight, implicitly perpetuating, and expanding worldwide. Such is warfare—whether against hunger, terror, drugs, or the like. Just food futures, we envision, are ones that are compassionate rather than combative.

Befitting its martial milieu, COVID-19 now augurs diverging wartime outcomes with no easy victories for HFI reduction, much less "win-wins" for reducing food waste and hunger. One branch leads to further corporate entrenchment and welfare retrenchment in the continued "fight against hunger," as evidenced by the Canadian government's $200 million in contributions to food banks (Rabson, 2020). Even more notoriously, the federal government granted a now defunct contract with WE charity for a student grant program, awarded through personal connections to the Prime Minister (CBC News, 2020b). These actions evince the state's neoliberal tendency to offload public programs and entitlements to private interest groups. Another, more optimistic, trajectory potentially points towards renewed attention to human rights, reminiscent of the post-World War II era, when public programs grew out of recognition for the basic entitlements of citizens; when food banks were non-existent in Canada. In this vein, the Canada Emergency Response Benefit and Canada Recovery Benefit programs, which have essentially provided a basic income to all who have lost employment during COVID-19, represent an important, albeit incomplete, step towards restoring the post-war welfare state. But before romanticizing the past, we must acknowledge the exclusionary nature of human rights in practice, even when social policies were much more robust. Hence the need for a more participatory approach to human rights for which the "right to have rights" is a precondition. If this foremost right cannot be met by nation-states, which only selectively recognize the rights of their residents (and non-residents), it might be realized by political communities that confer social citizenship to those whose rights have been denied, and who experience HFI as a consequence.

As we have demonstrated, HFI reduction will require a concerted effort from all sectors of society, which hold unequal levels of culpability for, and authority over, HFI. In turn, HFI reduction is but one component of food justice, a project that extends far beyond consumer access to address inequitable and unsustainable supply chains as a whole. Implicit in this wider goal is the understanding that adequate and nutritious food is a human right. The right to food thus offers a unifying framework for cultivating underdeveloped synergies, such as between civil society, governments, and international institutions, or between labour, welfare, and food systems. Meanwhile, it also informs critical analysis of false linkages, such as that between food waste and hunger, or corporate interests and public policies. In critical solidarity, unlike in the "fight against hunger," there are no military heroes (certainly not General Mills), but rather allies to humans who carry inalienable rights, including the right to food.

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